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Gender and Leadership: An Inclusive Approach to Organizational Effectiveness

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Abstract

Leadership in the twenty-first century is undergoing a significant transformation as organizations increasingly recognize the importance of human-centered, inclusive, and collaborative approaches to leadership. This shift has brought renewed attention to gender and leadership, particularly to leadership approaches that emphasize human-centered values traditionally associated with feminine leadership. Feminine leadership has emerged as a powerful paradigm and does not refer exclusively to women leaders, rather it encompasses qualities such as empathy, authenticity, emotional intelligence, collaboration, and holistic decision making that can be demonstrated by individuals of any gender. Contrary to traditional leadership models that prioritize hierarchy, competition, and control, the feminine or contemporary leadership focuses on relationship building, collective growth, employee well-being, and sustainable organizational development. The chapter explores the gender-based leadership perspectives, analyzes contemporary literature on women in leadership, and discusses the growing prominence of women leaders in India. The chapter indicates the relationship between gender and leadership, examining how societal expectations, organizational structures, and psychological factors influence leadership styles, opportunities, and outcomes. While leadership effectiveness is not inherently determined by gender, research shows that gendered stereotypes, institutional biases, and structural inequalities continue to shape who attains leadership roles and how leadership behaviors are perceived. Drawing on various scholarly studies and reports, the chapter highlights the benefits of diverse leadership styles contribute to innovation, employee well-being, organizational effectiveness, sustainable development and create inclusive organizational cultures. Particular attention is given to the Indian context, where women are increasingly assuming leadership roles despite persistent structural barriers. The chapter concludes by arguing that the future of leadership lies in integrating

traditionally masculine and feminine leadership qualities to foster gender-inclusive leadership ecosystems that contribute to organizational excellence and societal progress.

Keywords: Gender-based Leadership, Traditional Leadership, Women Leaders, Collaborative Leadership, Authentic Leadership, Feminine Leadership, Diversity and Inclusion, Organizational Effectiveness.

Introduction

Leadership has traditionally been associated with characteristics such as authority, competitiveness, rationality, and hierarchical control. For decades, these qualities were considered essential for organizational success and became deeply embedded within corporate, political, and institutional leadership models. However, the rapidly changing global environment characterized by technological disruption, workforce diversity, sustainability challenges, and increasing demands for employee well-being has prompted a reassessment of leadership practices.

In response to these changing realities, feminine leadership has gained prominence as an alternative and complementary leadership approach. Feminine or contemporary leadership does not refer exclusively to women leaders but rather encompasses leadership qualities traditionally associated with feminine values including empathy, collaboration, inclusivity, intuition, emotional intelligence, and holistic thinking. These attributes are increasingly recognized as critical competencies for navigating complex organizational environments.

Leadership is increasingly understood as a collective journey rather than an individual pursuit of power. True leadership involves empowering others, fostering collaboration, and creating environments where diverse voices can thrive. Organizations that embrace diverse leadership styles are often better equipped to foster innovation, employee engagement, and long-term success. The emergence of feminine leadership reflects a broader shift toward people-centered management practices that prioritize meaningful relationships, collective decision-making, and sustainable growth. As societies continue to strive toward gender equality and inclusive development, understanding the significance of feminine leadership becomes essential for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

Gender-based Leadership

Gender-based leadership refers to the examination of how gender influences leadership styles, opportunities, perceptions, and effectiveness within organizations and institutions. Historically, leadership positions have been dominated by men,

resulting in leadership norms that largely reflected masculine characteristics such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and centralized decision-making.

Recent studies suggest that leadership effectiveness cannot be solely attributed to gender but rather to the diverse qualities and competencies individuals bring to leadership roles. Research increasingly demonstrates that women leaders often exhibit strengths in communication, collaboration, empathy, conflict resolution, and participatory decision-making.

The study by Zakiah, Ansar, and Ohan (2025) highlights that gender-inclusive leadership positively contributes to organizational innovation, employee well-being, and institutional performance. The authors argue that organizations benefit when leadership opportunities are accessible to individuals regardless of gender and when diverse perspectives are incorporated into the decision-making processes. The study provides a comprehensive examination of how gender-inclusive leadership contributes to organizational effectiveness.

Historically, leadership roles have been socially constructed as masculine. Men were perceived as natural leaders due to traits associated with dominance, decisiveness, and assertiveness, while women were often associated with caregiving, emotional sensitivity, and support roles. These perceptions influenced hiring practices, promotion pathways, and leadership expectations across political, corporate, and social institutions.

As a result, women have been underrepresented in leadership positions, despite being equally capable of performing leadership roles. Gender-based leadership therefore moves beyond simplistic comparisons between men and women, focusing instead on creating equitable opportunities and recognizing the value of diverse leadership approaches.

The growing emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion has brought gender-based leadership to the forefront of organizational research. Contemporary studies increasingly demonstrate that leadership effectiveness is not determined by gender itself but by the diverse perspectives, competencies, and leadership approaches that individuals bring to organizations. The literature highlights that gender-inclusive leadership contributes significantly to organizational innovation, employee engagement, institutional effectiveness, and sustainable development.

Gender Stereotypes and Leadership Perceptions

Despite progress in gender equality, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles worldwide. In 2020, women held only 29% of senior management positions globally (Thornton, 2020), with representation decreasing at higher organizational levels (Mercer, 2020). A substantial body of research has linked this disparity to persistent gender stereotypes that align leadership with masculine traits such as assertiveness and dominance, while associating femininity with communal

traits such as warmth and nurturance (Schein, 1973, 2001; Koenig et al., 2011). These stereotypes contribute to structural barriers such as the glass ceiling (Cotter et al., 2001) and systematically disadvantage women in leadership selection and evaluation processes.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that men are more likely than women to prefer male leaders and to penalize female applicants in hiring and promotion contexts (Bosak and Sczesny, 2011). Even when female leaders display equivalent performance, they are often evaluated more negatively in terms of competence, influence, and leadership potential (Heilman and Haynes, 2005). These patterns are commonly interpreted through the lens of gender stereotypes held by decision-makers.

Despite significant advancements, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions globally. Studies continue to reveal barriers such as unconscious bias, limited mentorship opportunities, work-life balance challenges, and societal expectations regarding caregiving responsibilities.

However, much of the existing literature relies on explicit measurement approaches that ask participants to rate predefined traits, potentially obscuring subtle or implicit forms of stereotyping. To address this limitation, the present approach combines explicit and implicit methods to capture both the content and evaluative structure of leadership stereotypes.

The literature reveals that women continue to encounter significant structural barriers, including unconscious bias, patriarchal organizational cultures, unequal promotion opportunities, and limited access to leadership networks. These challenges persist despite growing recognition of the benefits that women leaders bring to organizations.

Importantly, contemporary scholarship increasingly rejects the notion that leadership traits are inherently gender-specific. Instead, effective leadership is viewed as a combination of diverse competencies that may be demonstrated by individuals regardless of gender. Consequently, organizations seeking sustainable growth and innovation must focus on creating inclusive cultures that value diverse leadership styles and provide equitable opportunities for advancement.

The reviewed literature therefore supports the broader argument that gender inclusiveness in leadership is not merely a matter of social justice but a strategic imperative for organizational excellence, innovation, and long-term sustainability.

Embrace Diverse Leadership Styles from Masculine to Feminine

Modern leadership requires balancing traditionally masculine and feminine leadership qualities. Masculine leadership styles are often characterized by authority, decisiveness, competition, and hierarchical control, whereas feminine leadership emphasizes collaboration, empathy, flexibility, and relationship-building.

Rather than viewing these approaches as oppositional, contemporary leadership theories advocate integration. Effective leaders adapt their style according to situational requirements while maintaining authenticity and inclusivity.

Research suggests that women are often associated with transformational and democratic leadership styles. These styles emphasize:

- Collaboration and participation
- Empathy and emotional intelligence
- Team empowerment
- Mentorship and development of subordinates

Such approaches are linked to positive organizational outcomes, including employee satisfaction, engagement, and innovation.

Though, men are more frequently associated, on average, with transactional or task-oriented leadership styles, characterized by:

- Goal-setting and performance monitoring
- Reward and punishment systems
- Directiveness and structure
- Emphasis on efficiency and output

However, it is important to note that these differences are not absolute, and individuals of any gender may adopt any leadership style.

Women Leaders in India

India has witnessed a steady rise in women occupying leadership positions across business, politics, science, education, and social development. Increased educational attainment, economic participation, and changing social norms have contributed to greater female representation in leadership. This perspective is reflected in the leadership legacies of Indian pioneers such as Savitribai Phule, Ela Bhatt, Kamla Bhasin, Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, Ritu Karidhal, Sudha Murty, Indra Nooyi and many others.

However, the KPMG Women Leadership in Corporate India Report (2024) highlights that only 12 percent of C-suite positions are occupied by women. Factors such as unconscious bias, work-life balance challenges, limited mentorship opportunities, and societal expectations continue to hinder women's advancement. Despite these obstacles, women leaders are increasingly recognized for bringing diverse perspectives, collaborative problem-solving skills, and long-term strategic thinking to organizations.

The KPMG Women Leadership in Corporate India Report (2024) identifies key dimensions influencing women's leadership advancement including

representation, leadership aspirations, skill development, inclusive opportunities and organizational culture. The report emphasizes support, empowerment, and amplification as key strategies for advancing women into leadership positions and strengthening organizational performance. The report identifies five critical dimensions for advancing women leaders:

- Current representation of women leaders
- Leadership aspirations and barriers
- Leadership skill development
- Inclusive leadership opportunities
- Organizational culture and equity

India's Best Workplaces for Women 2023 Report highlights organizations that successfully create inclusive, equitable, and supportive work environments for women. The findings emphasize the importance of flexible work arrangements, leadership development programs, mentorship opportunities, and diversity-focused organizational cultures.

Recent global research highlights a significant shift in leadership expectations. Studies indicate that individuals increasingly value traits such as empathy, collaboration, flexibility, and integrity over dominance, aggression, and control. John Gerzema and Michael D'Antonio (2013) in *The Athena Doctrine* revealed that people across diverse cultures consistently identified traditionally feminine traits as essential for effective leadership, success, morality, and happiness.

Leadership studies have demonstrated that organizations increasingly require leaders who can navigate complexity through collaboration, emotional intelligence, and long-term thinking. Research indicates that organizations with gender-diverse leadership teams often outperform their competitors in financial performance, innovation, employee engagement, and customer satisfaction. The findings reflect a broader societal movement toward more inclusive and human-centered leadership models.

Women leaders frequently bring strengths associated with feminine leadership including empathy, collaboration, communication, and long-term thinking. However, these qualities are valuable not because they belong exclusively to women, but because they contribute to more effective leadership overall. The future of leadership is unlikely to be defined by rigid hierarchies or dominance-based models. Instead, it will be shaped by leaders who can balance strength with compassion, ambition with inclusivity, and strategy with humanity.

Institutional Initiatives Supporting Women Leadership

Numerous national and international institutions support women's leadership development.

- **CII Centre for Women Leadership:** The CII Centre for Women Leadership promotes women's participation in leadership roles through advocacy, research, capacity-building programs, and policy recommendations. The Centre works toward increasing gender diversity in organizations and fostering inclusive leadership practices across sectors. The Centre promotes women's leadership through networking opportunities and leadership development programs.
- **ALIGN Platform:** The ALIGN Platform provides research and policy resources focused on transforming gender norms and advancing women's leadership globally. The Platform serves as a global knowledge platform focused on understanding and transforming gender norms. It provides evidence-based research, policy recommendations, and collaborative resources that support gender equality and women's leadership advancement.
- **PRIME Database:** The PRIME Database supports evidence-based policymaking by providing data on gender equality and women's representation. The Database provides data and evidence related to women's leadership participation, and gender equality initiatives. Such databases support policy development and organizational benchmarking for diversity and inclusion efforts.
- **NITI Aayog:** NITI Aayog promotes women's empowerment through entrepreneurship, education, workforce participation, and leadership development initiatives. NITI Aayog has actively promoted women's empowerment through initiatives focusing on entrepreneurship, workforce participation, leadership development, education, and financial inclusion.
- **Ministry of Education:** The Ministry of Education has played a critical role in expanding educational opportunities for women, thereby strengthening the leadership pipeline across sectors.
- **World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index:** The World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index measures disparities across economic participation, education, health, and political empowerment highlighting both progress and continuing inequalities. The Index measures disparities between men and women across economic participation, educational attainment, health, and political empowerment. The Index has consistently highlighted persistent gender gaps globally while demonstrating the economic and social benefits of gender equality. The Forum's leadership studies further emphasize the growing importance of empathy, collaboration, communication, and long-term thinking in contemporary leadership.

- **International Labour Organization:** The ILO advocates gender equality in employment, leadership representation, equal pay, and inclusive workplace practices worldwide. The International Labour Organization advocates gender equality in employment, leadership representation, equal pay, and inclusive workplace practices. Its research consistently demonstrates the positive relationship between gender diversity and organizational performance.

Gender-Inclusive Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness

Studies by Zakiah, Ansar, and Ohan (2025) emphasize that inclusive leadership fosters innovation, employee well-being, and institutional effectiveness. Similarly, Isnaini (2023) suggests that leadership effectiveness should be evaluated based on competence and outcomes rather than gender-based assumptions. Contemporary research increasingly demonstrates that gender-inclusive leadership contributes positively to organizational performance. The research findings reinforce the importance of creating environments where diverse leadership styles are recognized, valued and supported. Organizations with diverse leadership teams often experience:

- Enhanced innovation and creativity
- Improved decision-making quality
- Higher employee engagement
- Stronger organizational adaptability
- Better stakeholder relationships
- Greater financial performance
- Increased social responsibility

The future of leadership will be shaped by increasing complexity, diversity, and interdependence. Organizations require leaders capable of navigating uncertainty while maintaining trust, engagement, and innovation. Rather than privileging masculine or feminine approaches exclusively, future leadership will depend on integrating the strengths of both. Leaders who combine strategic thinking with empathy, accountability with compassion, and performance with people-centered values will be best positioned to succeed. The future lies in transcending traditional gender stereotypes and embracing a balanced model that integrates both masculine and feminine strengths.

Conclusion

Gender and leadership remain deeply interconnected, not because leadership ability is determined by gender, but because social norms, organizational structures, and cultural expectations continue to influence leadership opportunities

and perceptions. The rise of feminine leadership reflects a broader transformation in leadership theory and practice, emphasizing empathy, collaboration, authenticity, inclusivity, and emotional intelligence as essential competencies for contemporary organizations.

Research consistently demonstrates that organizations benefit when leadership opportunities are accessible to individuals regardless of gender and when diverse perspectives are incorporated into decision-making processes. Inclusive leadership contributes not only to gender equality but also to innovation, organizational effectiveness, employee well-being, and sustainable development.

By fostering inclusive cultures, empowering women leaders and recognizing diverse leadership styles organizations can create more resilient institutions and contribute to broader social progress. The rise of feminine leadership represents a significant evolution in leadership theory and practice. As organizations confront increasing complexity, uncertainty and demands for inclusivity leadership models grounded in empathy, collaboration, authenticity and emotional intelligence offer valuable pathways toward sustainable success.

Feminine leadership does not replace traditional leadership approaches but complements them by introducing qualities essential for modern organizational effectiveness. By embracing diverse leadership styles, empowering women leaders, and fostering inclusive cultures, organizations can achieve greater innovation, resilience, and social impact. The future of leadership lies not in dominance and hierarchy but in collaboration, compassion, and shared human progress.

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