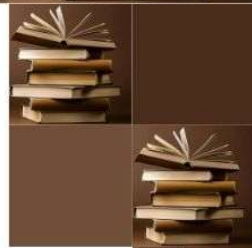
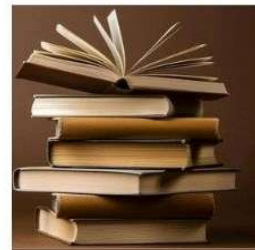


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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

DANIEL JAMES



ASDF UK

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Table of Contents

CHAPTERS	PP
A Study on Career Self-Efficacy and Industry Readiness Among Generation Z Graduates: A Quantitative Study <i>Mrs. K. Lakshmi, Dr. A. Meenakshi</i>	1 – 5
Beyond The Glass Ceiling: Informal Organizational Networks, Perception Bias and The Old Boys' Club as Hidden Barriers to Women's Leadership Advancement – A Conceptual Review <i>Devi Nair R</i>	6 – 13
Determinants of Successful Startup Ecosystems: A Comparative Global Perspective <i>R. Pushpam, Dr. V. Geetha, G. Durga Devi</i>	14 – 20
Digital Leadership in The Era of Artificial Intelligence: Transforming Organizational Decision-Making <i>Dr. N. Vivek</i>	21 – 29
Resilience And Entrepreneurial Success in The Digital Economy: A Study Among Women Entrepreneurs in Southern Districts of Tamil Nadu <i>Dr. Anbuoli P</i>	30 – 36
Survey On Spectrum Sensing For 6G Networks <i>Pandeeswari. G, Velmurugan. M</i>	37 – 41
Sustainable Finance and ESG Integration in Modern Banking: An Indian Perspective <i>Praveen Asokan, Kokula Krishna Hari</i>	42 – 60
Technology Adoption and Digital Transformation: Drivers of Organizational Performance in The Digital Economy <i>G. Durga Devi, Dr. V. Geetha, R. Pushpam</i>	61 – 67
The Gig Economy, Remote Work, and Digital Transformation: An Economic Analysis <i>Mrs. Poongodi P</i>	68 – 75
The Startup Ecosystem in The Age of Artificial Intelligence: Opportunities, Challenges, And Future Prospects <i>Dr. P. Mangayarkarasi</i>	76 – 80

A Study on Intuitionistic Soft Set Topological Spaces <i>Balamurugan, Dr. A. Arivu Chelvam</i>	81 – 87
Adoption Of Digital Transformation Practices by Business Organizations in Madurai City <i>Dr. M. Sakthivel</i>	88 – 94
Artificial Intelligence and green innovation: driving sustainable business transformation <i>Dr. A. Nixon Jesuraj</i>	95 – 99

Beyond The Glass Ceiling: Informal Organizational Networks, Perception Bias and The Old Boys' Club as Hidden Barriers to Women's Leadership Advancement – A Conceptual Review

Devi Nair R

Research Scholar, Department of Management Studies, Madurai Kamaraj University

ABSTRACT

The persistent underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions continues to challenge organizations despite substantial progress in education, workforce participation and gender diversity initiatives. Traditional explanations of the Glass Ceiling have primarily focused on structural barriers such as discriminatory promotion practices, occupational segregation and work–life balance challenges. While these factors remain important, they do not fully explain the continued exclusion of many competent and qualified women from leadership positions in contemporary organizations. This chapter examines the role of informal organizational networks, perception bias and the “Old Boys’ Club” as hidden mechanisms that influence women’s leadership advancement. Drawing upon Glass Ceiling Theory, Social Role Theory, Leadership Labyrinth Theory and Organizational Culture Theory, the chapter argues that leadership outcomes are shaped not only by formal organizational systems but also by informal networks, sponsorship relationships, workplace narratives and gendered interpretations of behaviour. Particular attention is given to leadership double bind, attribution bias and reputation formation processes that influence perceptions of competence and leadership potential. The chapter further integrates international and Indian evidence to demonstrate how invisible barriers continue to affect women’s representation in leadership. An integrated conceptual framework is proposed to explain the interaction between formal structures, informal networks and perception-based processes in sustaining the Glass Ceiling. The chapter concludes that organizations seeking genuine meritocracy must address both structural and cultural barriers to ensure equitable leadership advancement.

Keywords: *Glass Ceiling, Women in Leadership, Informal Networks, Old Boys’ Club, Organizational Culture, Leadership Double Bind, Gender Bias, Career Advancement*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, women have achieved remarkable progress in educational attainment, professional qualifications and workforce participation. Nevertheless, their representation in senior leadership positions remains disproportionately low across industries and sectors. The persistence of this disparity has attracted considerable attention from scholars, policymakers and organizational leaders who seek to understand why qualified women continue to encounter barriers to leadership advancement.

The Glass Ceiling is commonly defined as the invisible barriers that prevent qualified women from advancing to senior leadership positions despite possessing the necessary competence, experience and credentials (Wirth, 2001; Powell & Butterfield, 2015). Although women increasingly enter organizations in large numbers and achieve success at lower and middle management levels, their representation declines significantly at higher levels of leadership. This pattern suggests that factors beyond formal qualifications influence leadership advancement.

Traditional explanations of the Glass Ceiling have emphasized structural barriers such as discriminatory promotion practices, occupational segregation, unequal access to developmental opportunities and work-life balance challenges. While these explanations remain relevant, they do not fully explain why gender disparities persist even in organizations that publicly advocate diversity, inclusion and merit-based advancement.

Organizations frequently describe themselves as meritocratic institutions in which promotions and leadership opportunities are awarded based on competence, performance and potential. However, organizational decisions are rarely influenced solely by formal systems. Alongside official structures exist an informal organizational system consisting of networks, relationships, perceptions, workplace narratives and unwritten norms. These informal mechanisms often shape access to information, visibility, sponsorship and leadership opportunities.

Among the most influential informal mechanisms is the phenomenon commonly referred to as the “Old Boys’ Club.” Although not a formal organization, it represents informal networks through which influence, information and opportunities are exchanged among individuals occupying positions of organizational power. Access to such networks frequently enhances career progression, while exclusion may limit advancement opportunities regardless of competence or performance.

This chapter argues that the persistence of the Glass Ceiling cannot be fully understood without examining the influence of informal organizational networks, perception bias and workplace narratives. By integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, the chapter develops a conceptual understanding of how invisible organizational mechanisms contribute to women’s underrepresentation in leadership positions.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Glass Ceiling Theory

The concept of the Glass Ceiling emerged to describe invisible barriers that prevent women and other underrepresented groups from advancing to senior organizational positions. Unlike formal discrimination, these barriers operate through subtle organizational practices, cultural expectations and decision-making processes that disproportionately disadvantage women. Glass Ceiling Theory suggests that leadership advancement is influenced not only by individual merit but also by structural and cultural barriers embedded within organizations.

2.2 Social Role Theory

According to Social Role Theory, gender stereotypes influence expectations regarding leadership behaviour and effectiveness (Eagly, 1987). Men are traditionally associated with traits such as assertiveness, authority and independence, whereas women are associated with nurturing and relationship-oriented characteristics. These expectations influence how leadership behaviours are interpreted and evaluated within organizations. Consequently, identical behaviours may receive different evaluations depending on the gender of the individual displaying them.

2.3 Leadership Labyrinth Theory

Eagly and Carli (2007) argued that women navigate a leadership labyrinth consisting of multiple interconnected obstacles rather than a single barrier at the top of the organizational hierarchy. These obstacles include gender stereotypes, unequal access to influential networks, limited sponsorship

opportunities and biased evaluations. The Leadership Labyrinth perspective provides a comprehensive understanding of women's leadership experiences by recognizing the cumulative nature of barriers encountered throughout their careers.

2.4 Organizational Culture Theory

Organizational culture refers to the shared assumptions, values and norms that guide employee behaviour and decision-making (Schein, 2010). Informal networks, workplace narratives and unwritten rules are important components of organizational culture. These cultural mechanisms influence who receives visibility, who gains access to influential decision-makers and who is perceived as leadership material. Consequently, organizational culture plays a significant role in shaping leadership outcomes.

INFORMAL NETWORKS AND THE OLD BOYS' CLUB

Informal networks frequently influence access to opportunities, information and organizational power (Kanter, 1977). Employees who are integrated into influential networks often benefit from greater visibility, sponsorship and access to strategic assignments, whereas those outside such networks may encounter hidden disadvantages despite comparable competence and performance.

The concept of the Old Boys' Club describes informal networks through which information, opportunities and influence circulate among a relatively small group of organizational insiders. Membership within such networks often provides access to senior leaders, strategic discussions and career-enhancing opportunities. Employees excluded from these networks may find themselves disadvantaged despite possessing similar qualifications and experience.

Sponsorship represents another critical mechanism influencing leadership advancement. Unlike mentorship, which focuses on guidance and advice, sponsorship involves active advocacy. Sponsors use their influence to recommend employees for leadership opportunities, strategic assignments and promotions (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Because sponsorship frequently occurs through informal relationships, unequal access to influential sponsors can create significant disparities in career progression.

ORGANIZATIONAL NARRATIVES, REPUTATION FORMATION AND GENDERED PERCEPTIONS

Organizations continuously generate narratives about employees through formal discussions, informal conversations and shared experiences. Over time, these narratives contribute to the formation of professional reputations that influence perceptions of competence, credibility and leadership potential. Importantly, such reputations are not always based solely on objective performance measures. They may also reflect assumptions, stereotypes and repeated interpretations of behaviour.

The influence of organizational narratives becomes particularly significant in the case of women leaders. Leadership behaviours displayed by women are often interpreted differently from identical behaviours displayed by men. A male manager who maintains professional distance and focuses primarily on results may be viewed as disciplined and committed, whereas a woman exhibiting similar behaviour may be perceived as distant or unapproachable.

This phenomenon contributes to what scholars describe as the leadership double bind (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women are often expected to demonstrate both competence and warmth simultaneously.

Assertiveness may enhance perceptions of competence but reduce perceptions of likability, while collaborative behaviour may increase likability but diminish perceptions of authority. As a result, women frequently navigate a narrower range of acceptable leadership behaviours than men.

Similarly, attribution bias influences how success and failure are interpreted. Research suggests that men's achievements are more likely to be attributed to competence and leadership ability, whereas women's achievements may be attributed to external factors such as favourable circumstances or interpersonal relationships (Williams, 2014). Such biases can undermine perceptions of leadership capability and contribute to the persistence of gender disparities in senior management positions.

Unlike traditional studies that primarily emphasize structural barriers such as discriminatory promotion practices, occupational segregation and work-life balance challenges, this chapter argues that informal organizational networks, perception-based mechanisms and organizational narratives collectively constitute an invisible architecture that sustains the contemporary Glass Ceiling. By integrating insights from Glass Ceiling Theory, Social Role Theory, Leadership Labyrinth Theory and Organizational Culture Theory, the chapter provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding how hidden organizational processes influence women's leadership advancement.

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Women's participation in the Indian workforce has increased significantly over the past few decades as a result of improvements in education, professional training and economic opportunities. Despite these developments, representation of women in senior leadership positions remains comparatively low. The Indian context therefore provides an important setting for understanding how formal progress does not always translate into leadership equality.

Recent reports indicate gradual improvement in women's representation at the board level. Deloitte's Women in the Boardroom: A Global Perspective (2024) reported that women occupied approximately 18.3 percent of board positions in Indian companies. Although this represents progress compared with previous years, the figure remains below the global average. More importantly, representation at the board level has not been matched by equivalent representation in executive leadership roles.

Data from Prime Database Group (2025) revealed that women account for only about 5 percent of Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director positions in India's listed companies. Women also remain underrepresented in executive directorships and key decision-making committees. These findings suggest that while organizations may comply with regulatory requirements relating to board diversity, women continue to face challenges in accessing positions associated with strategic authority and organizational influence.

The persistence of these disparities indicates that factors beyond qualifications and experience influence leadership advancement. Organizational culture, sponsorship opportunities, access to informal networks and gender-based perceptions continue to shape career trajectories. Vohra,

Sud and Bhayana (2024) observed that although women's participation on boards increased following regulatory interventions, meaningful inclusion in positions of influence remained limited. Similar findings have been reported in studies examining women's leadership experiences across Indian organizations.

The Indian experience therefore reinforces the central argument of this chapter. Formal equality initiatives and diversity mandates may improve representation, but they do not necessarily eliminate invisible barriers. Informal networks, organizational narratives and perception-based mechanisms

continue to influence access to leadership opportunities. Consequently, understanding women's leadership advancement in India requires attention not only to formal structures but also to the informal processes through which influence, credibility and organizational visibility are distributed.

INTEGRATED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The discussion presented throughout this chapter suggests that the Glass Ceiling should be viewed as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of structural, cultural and perceptual influences. Traditional explanations focusing exclusively on organizational policies and procedures provide only a partial understanding of leadership disparities.

The conceptual framework proposed in this chapter identifies four interconnected dimensions influencing women's leadership advancement.

The first dimension consists of formal organizational mechanisms, including recruitment practices, promotion systems, performance evaluation procedures and leadership development programmes. These mechanisms are intended to promote fairness and merit-based advancement.

The second dimension consists of informal organizational mechanisms, including the Old Boys' Club, sponsorship networks, informal relationship structures and access to organizational information. These mechanisms influence visibility, influence and career opportunities in ways that may not be formally documented.

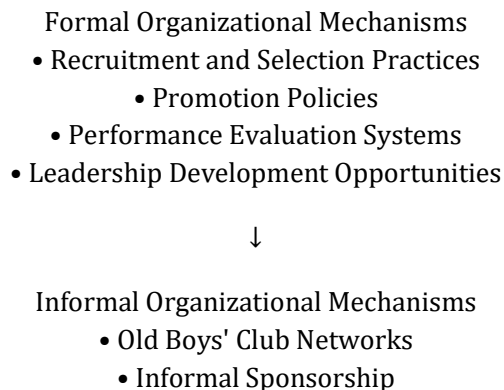
The third dimension involves perception-based processes. Organizational narratives, reputation formation, leadership stereotypes and gender-based expectations influence how employees are evaluated and perceived. These perceptions frequently shape leadership decisions and career opportunities.

The fourth dimension consists of psychological and social outcomes such as leadership double bind, attribution bias, reduced visibility and lower perceived leadership potential. These outcomes contribute to the persistence of gender disparities in leadership positions.

The framework suggests that women's underrepresentation in leadership is not the result of a single barrier. Rather, it emerges through the cumulative interaction of formal structures, informal relationships and perception-based processes operating throughout an individual's career. Understanding these interactions is essential for developing effective organizational interventions.

Figure 1

Integrated Conceptual Framework of the Invisible Glass Ceiling



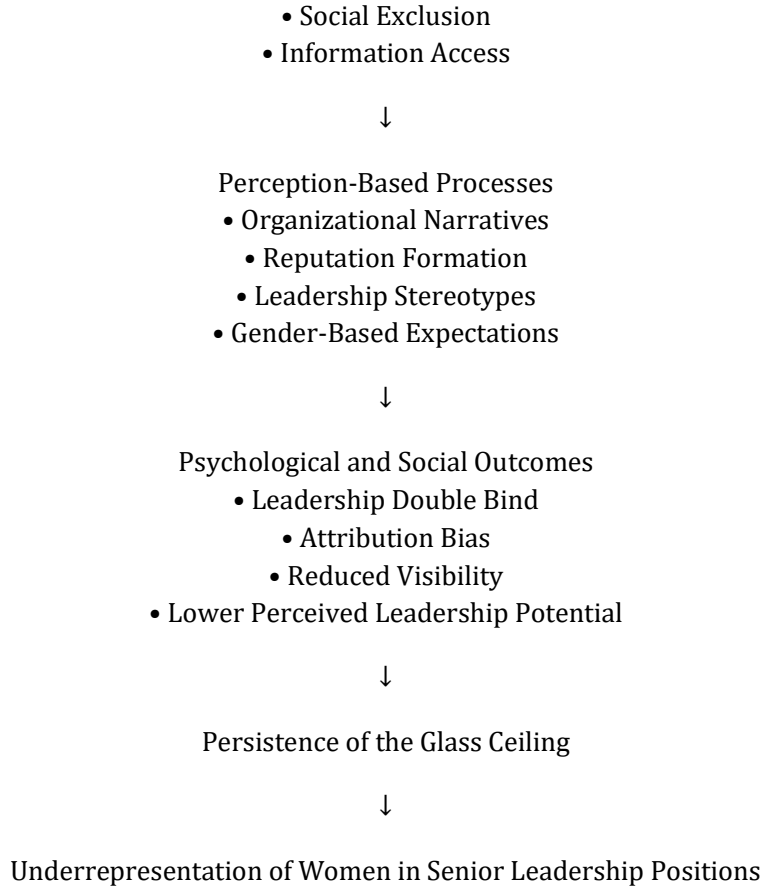


Figure 1 summarizes the integrated conceptual framework proposed in this chapter. The framework suggests that women's underrepresentation in leadership positions is not the result of a single organizational barrier. Rather, it emerges through the cumulative interaction of formal organizational structures, informal networks, perception-based processes and gendered interpretations of leadership behaviour. These factors collectively influence visibility, sponsorship opportunities, reputation formation and assessments of leadership potential, ultimately contributing to the persistence of the Glass Ceiling. Ultimately, organizations seeking inclusive and effective leadership systems must move beyond symbolic diversity initiatives and examine the informal mechanisms through which opportunities, influence and credibility are distributed. By fostering inclusive cultures, transparent decision-making processes and equitable access to sponsorship and networks, organizations can create environments in which leadership advancement is determined by competence, contribution and potential rather than by gendered expectations or informal power structures.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The arguments presented in this chapter have important implications for organizational leaders and human resource professionals.

First, organizations must recognize that formal equality does not automatically guarantee equal outcomes. Diversity initiatives should therefore extend beyond policy development to include examination of organizational culture and informal networking structures.

Second, leadership identification and succession planning processes should be made more transparent. Organizations frequently rely on subjective assessments of leadership potential, which may unintentionally reflect stereotypes and existing perceptions. Clear evaluation criteria can help reduce the influence of unconscious bias.

Third, organizations should strengthen mentoring and sponsorship programmes. Research consistently demonstrates that sponsorship plays a critical role in career advancement. Structured sponsorship initiatives can help ensure that talented women receive visibility and access to leadership opportunities.

Fourth, organizations should actively promote inclusive networking opportunities. Since informal networks frequently influence career progression, organizations should ensure that opportunities for relationship building are accessible to all employees rather than concentrated within exclusive groups.

Finally, awareness programmes addressing unconscious bias, attribution bias and gender stereotypes should be incorporated into leadership development initiatives. Such interventions can encourage managers to evaluate employees based on competence and contribution rather than assumptions and perceptions.

CONCLUSION

The underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions remains one of the most persistent challenges confronting contemporary organizations. Although substantial progress has been achieved in education, workforce participation and formal equality measures, leadership disparities continue to exist across sectors and industries.

This chapter argued that understanding the persistence of the Glass Ceiling requires moving beyond traditional explanations focused exclusively on structural barriers. Drawing upon Glass Ceiling Theory, Social Role Theory, Leadership Labyrinth Theory and Organizational Culture Theory, the chapter demonstrated that informal organizational processes play a critical role in shaping leadership outcomes.

Particular attention was given to the influence of informal networks, the Old Boys' Club, organizational narratives, sponsorship relationships, leadership double bind and attribution bias. These mechanisms frequently operate beneath the surface of formal organizational structures, influencing perceptions of competence, credibility and leadership potential. As a result, women may encounter barriers that are not explicitly documented in policies but nevertheless affect access to opportunities and advancement.

The integrated conceptual framework proposed in this chapter highlights the interaction between formal organizational systems, informal relationship networks and perception-based processes in sustaining leadership disparities. The framework suggests that genuine meritocracy requires organizations to address both structural and cultural barriers simultaneously.

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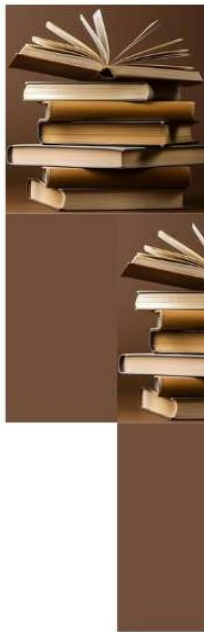
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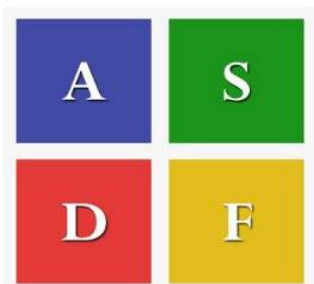


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483 Green Lanes, London N13 4BS

India | Thailand | South Korea | United Kingdom

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