

## Breaking the glass ceiling: How 21st century women have excelled in leadership

Samantha Runyararo Musekiwa<sup>1</sup>, Joyce Previledge Chigodora<sup>2</sup> and Paul Nemashakwe<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1&2</sup> Department of Information Technology & Innovation, Catholic University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe

<sup>3</sup> Department of Business Management & Innovation, Catholic University of Zimbabwe, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56293/IJMSSSR.2025.5615>

IJMSSSR 2025

VOLUME 7

ISSUE 3 MAY – JUNE

ISSN: 2582 – 0265

**Abstract:** The proverbial ‘glass ceiling’ has long symbolised the invisible barriers that impede women’s advancement to top leadership positions within organisations, despite their abilities, qualifications and past achievements. Recent studies have underscored the positive impact that female leadership has had on organisational performance and societal well-being. The 21st century has seen an increased number of women breaking the proverbial glass ceiling and excelling in various sectors and endeavours. This paper explored how these women have broken the glass ceiling and excelled in leadership, the challenges they have faced and the role that organisations can play to support them. Research has consistently shown that diverse leadership teams, which include women, are more likely to generate innovative solutions and ideas. Studies show that companies with diverse leadership teams perform better financially and have stronger corporate governance. Despite progress, women continue to face invisible yet formidable barriers in leadership. Unconscious bias, societal expectations, and outdated organisational structures can hinder their advancement, forcing them to navigate a labyrinth of challenges. Irrespective of the barriers, women across the globe have employed various strategies to break the glass ceiling, with case studies illustrating their effectiveness in both developed and developing countries. Organisations have a critical role to play in promoting women's leadership by creating an enabling and inclusive environment that fosters diversity and offer equal opportunities for both genders.

**Keywords:** Glass ceiling; leadership; women; women’s leadership

### 1. Introduction

Metaphorically ‘glass ceiling’ has long symbolised the invisible barriers that impede women’s advancement to top leadership positions within organisations, despite their abilities, qualifications and past achievements. Recent studies underscore positive impact that female leadership has had on organisational performance and societal well-being. Women are not just breaking the ceiling glass but also contributing immensely to the reshaping of effective leadership styles and practices in the modern discourse. 21st century women have been highly recognised for leadership qualities which emphasises collaboration and inclusivity (Catalyst, 2021).

These transformational qualities have become increasingly essential in navigating the complexities of contemporary organisational innovation and performance. Boniol (2019) has highlighted that health sector organisations with female leaders have seen significant improvements in health outcomes, innovation, ethical practices and financial stability. Furthermore, research has also shown that companies with higher female representation in executive positions experience enhanced financial performance and governance; suggesting that gender-diverse leadership teams yield substantial advantages (Nguyen, 2020).

Although notable positive changes have been realised when it comes to women leadership in the 21st century, challenges which include persistent gender biases and societal expectations still remain. For instance, the UK’S FTSE 350 companies are projected to miss the target of having women occupy 40% of top executive roles by the end of 2025, with women holding 35, 3% of senior leadership positions as of 2024 (Raval, 2025). This shortfall highlights the ongoing need for deliberate strategies and policies to promote gender diversity in leadership. Nevertheless, as initiatives promoting diversity and inclusion gain momentum, women are leveraging these opportunities to excel in leadership, re-configuring traditional norms and encouraging these opportunities to excel in leadership positions (Beneish, 2019).

The paper will explore how 21st century women have broken the proverbial glass ceiling and excelled in leadership. The discussion will commence by explaining the concept of the proverbial glass ceiling in the context of

leadership and giving examples of women who have broken the glass ceiling and excelled in leadership in their respective areas. This will be followed by an outline of the importance of women's leadership in the 21st century. The paper will also look at some of the notable barriers that have militated against the advancement of women in leadership. Having looked at the barriers, the paper will proceed to discuss strategies women have used to break the glass ceiling. The discussion will conclude by looking at the role organisations play in promoting leadership by women.

## **2. Understanding the glass ceiling in leadership**

The glass ceiling is a metaphor that refers to the invisible barrier women and minorities experience from rising to upper rungs of the corporate ladder, especially when pursuing managerial and executive roles, regardless of their achievements or qualifications (Espinosa & Ferreira, 2022). This metaphor captures the subtle yet powerful forces of discrimination, stereotypes, and institutional biases that are often difficult to identify and mitigate. Historically, women have been relegated to subordinate roles across various sectors, deeply ingrained into cultural biases that existed within organisations. Throughout the 20th century, they began to make inroads into leadership positions, particularly in the workforce during World War II. However, despite these advances, systemic barriers persisted, leading to gender disparities in leadership roles (Eagly, 2016).

The 21st century has seen an increased number of women breaking the proverbial glass ceiling and excelling in various sectors and endeavours. Angela Merkel served as the Chancellor of Germany from 2005 to 2021, becoming one of the world's most powerful women and a pivotal figure in international politics. Her pragmatic leadership style and consensus-driven approach enabled Germany to navigate various crises, including the Eurozone crisis and the refugee crisis (Hoffmann, 2021). Prominent women like Mary Barra, the Chairperson and CEO of General Motors (GM) broke barriers in the male-dominated automotive industry, focusing on innovation and gender inclusivity in leadership. Under her leadership, GM has made significant advances in electric vehicle production and fostering a workplace culture conducive to women's success (Odeh, 2022).

Divine Ndhlukula, the founder and managing director of SECURICO Security Services, a leading security company in Zimbabwe revolutionised the male-dominated security industry by providing professional services and creating employment opportunities, particularly for women. Her leadership has earned her recognition as one of Africa's most successful women by Forbes. She has also received numerous awards which include the Empretec Entrepreneur of the Year and the Zimbabwe Institute of Management's Manager of the Year awards (Maenzanise, 2019).

Another notable woman leader who has done exceptionally well in the legal fraternity is Justice Rita Makarau. Justice Makarau has held numerous high profile positions which include being the first woman Judge President of Zimbabwe, a Judge of the Supreme court of Zimbabwe, Executive Secretary of the Judicial Services Commission of Zimbabwe and Chairperson of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. As a result of her exceptional service and reputation, she was appointed as an acting Judge of the Supreme Court of Namibia in April 2023. Divine and Rita are not an exception in Zimbabwe as there are other notable women who have broken the glass ceiling and excelled in leadership in their various endeavours. These include Tsitsi Dangarembga, a writer, filmmaker, cultural activist and social entrepreneur; Natalie Paida Jabangwe, the former CEO of Ecocash Zimbabwe and Jestina Mukoko, a human rights activist and director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project.

On the African continent, exceptional women who have broken the glass ceiling and excelled in leadership in their various areas include Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Miriam Makeba, Wangari Maathai and Joyce Banda. This list is not exhaustive as there are many African women who have and continue to do exceptionally well in different fields. These women have succeeded due to a combination of passion, education, resilience, mentorship, support and progressive policies that have allowed them to rise through the ranks. Many of these individuals have demonstrated exceptional leadership skills, exemplified by their high emotional intelligence and ability to build and manage diverse teams. These traits are essential for effective leadership in the complex and dynamic 21st-century global environment (Eagly, 2019).

## **3. The importance of women's leadership in the 21st century**

Women's leadership has become a central focus of discussion in the 21st century, especially with growing calls for gender equality and the recognition of women's contributions across various sectors. Over the past decade, there has been increasing acknowledgment of the importance of women in leadership positions for fostering inclusive, innovative, and resilient societies (Krivkovich, Field, Yee, McConnell & Smith, 2024). While both developed and developing countries have made progress, disparities remain in opportunities, representation, and policy implementation (Kallon, 2021). This section explores the significance of women's leadership in the contemporary era, highlighting key areas of impact and contrasting trends in developed and developing nations.

Research has consistently shown that diverse leadership teams, which include women, are more likely to generate innovative solutions and ideas (Woetzel et al., 2015). Women bring unique perspectives and problem-solving approaches that enrich decision-making processes. A study by McKinsey & Company (2020) found that companies with greater gender diversity are 25% more likely to have above-average profitability. In developed countries, organisations in sectors like technology and finance have increasingly recognised the importance of gender-diverse leadership. For example, large corporations such as Facebook, Google, and Apple have introduced initiatives to promote women into executive roles to drive innovation (Woetzel et al., 2015). Conversely, in developing countries, innovation led by women is often seen in grassroots initiatives and entrepreneurship. Women leaders in Africa and South Asia have pioneered community-driven solutions in areas like agriculture and microfinance. For example, the Grameen Bank, founded in Bangladesh, has supported millions of women entrepreneurs, demonstrating the power of female-led innovation (Grameen Bank, 2020).

Studies show that companies with diverse leadership teams perform better financially and have stronger corporate governance (Dawson, Kersley & Natella, 2016). Also, gender-balanced leadership fosters economic growth, reduces income inequality, and enhances corporate social responsibility. Furthermore, research has consistently shown that gender-diverse leadership teams lead to better financial performance and innovative decision-making (Catalyst, 2021). Diverse leadership teams, including women, bring varied perspectives that lead to better-rounded decision-making. Women leaders tend to approach problems differently, fostering creativity, innovation, and strategic thinking that drive business success (Woetzel et al., 2015).

Women's leadership tends to correlate with better corporate social responsibility and community engagement (Beneish, 2019). When women assume leadership positions, they inspire and empower other women and girls, fostering greater gender inclusivity in communities and workplaces. Their presence in decision-making roles challenges traditional stereotypes and paves the way for future generations to aspire to leadership positions (Zahidi, 2021). They often prioritise employee well-being, mentorship, and work-life balance, leading to higher employee satisfaction, retention, and productivity (Marks, 2024).

Zimbabwean women leaders have indeed been instrumental in championing human rights and gender equality. Organisations like Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) have played a pivotal role in empowering women to speak out against issues affecting their lives. WOZA's efforts have been recognised globally, including receiving the prestigious Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award in 2009. This award is a testament to the organisation's tireless work in promoting female leadership and community involvement in addressing societal challenges (Mapuva, 2013).

In recent years, Zimbabwe has made strides in promoting gender equality. The country adopted a constitution in 2013 that provides for equal representation of women and men in all positions (Chitamba, 2017). However, despite this progress, women's participation in leadership and politics remains low, with only 35% representation in parliament, 16% in local government, and 11.5% at cabinet level (ibid). However, organisations such as UN Women Zimbabwe are working tirelessly to address these disparities and promote gender equality. Their efforts focus on ending violence against women and girls, promoting women's leadership and political participation, and supporting women's economic empowerment.

Women in leadership contribute to social and economic progress by advocating for policies that promote equality and social justice. It has been noted that countries with higher female political representation tend to have better outcomes in health, education, and economic equality (Buss, Andler & Tiberius, 2025).

In developed countries, policies that support women in leadership have led to progressive social reforms. Scandinavian nations, for instance, have implemented gender quotas and generous parental leave policies that empower women in both corporate and political leadership (OECD, 2020). These measures have contributed to narrowing gender disparities and improving overall economic productivity. However, most developing countries still face structural obstacles that hinder women's leadership progressional impact on social and economic progress. In Zimbabwe, for example, although women have been instrumental in advocating for gender-based violence (GBV) policies and educational reforms, challenges such as inadequate funding and patriarchal mindsets continue to hinder the full realisation of their leadership potential (Chitamba, 2017).

Women in leadership roles have a profound and transformative effect on both society and business. Their influence extends across economic growth, workplace culture, innovation, social development, and governance. This impact is evident in various ways, including improved decision-making, enhanced corporate performance, and societal progress toward gender equality and inclusivity. Research suggests that women tend to adopt transformational leadership styles, emphasising collaboration, empathy, and ethical decision-making (Eagly, 2016). These qualities contribute to higher employee engagement and improved organisational outcomes. These leadership approaches have been shown to drive productivity and job satisfaction. Societies with higher levels of female leadership experience better economic growth and social well-being prioritising social issues such as education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation. This ultimately contributes to improved community welfare and national development (Kallon, 2021).

Companies with women in leadership positions tend to build stronger connections with consumers, particularly in industries targeting female audiences. A gender-diverse leadership team enhances a company's reputation and fosters trust with customers (Espinosa & Ferreira, 2022). Additionally, women leaders are more likely to champion corporate social responsibility initiatives, ensuring businesses operate ethically and sustainably. As such their leadership fosters a culture of integrity, transparency, and accountability, which strengthens corporate reputation and fosters sustainable success (Beneish, 2019).

In politics and governance, women leaders bring a unique perspective that enhances policy-making. They are more likely to advocate for policies related to social justice, child welfare, healthcare, and education. Countries with strong female representation in leadership positions tend to experience lower levels of corruption and more effective governance (Chitamba, 2017). Women leaders, particularly in local governance and non profit organisations, play a critical role in grassroots development. They implement policies and programmes that address the needs of marginalised groups, ensuring that communities have access to essential services and resources (World Bank, 2023).

Women in leadership positions play a crucial role in challenging traditional gender norms and empowering future generations. As more women ascend to leadership roles, they break down barriers for other women and girls, inspiring them to pursue leadership careers. According to the Kallon (2021) female leaders serve as role models, encouraging greater gender equality in both public and private spheres. In developed nations, the visibility of female leaders in high-profile positions has contributed to shifting societal perceptions. The election of Kamala Harris as the first female Vice President of the United States of America in 2020 marked a significant moment in challenging historical gender norms in politics (Raval, 2025).

Although developing countries have witnessed slower progress due to deep-rooted cultural barriers, women leaders such as Liberia's former president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf have paved the way for increased female participation in governance, demonstrating the power of representation in reshaping gender expectations (Chitamba, 2017). The presence of women in leadership normalises the idea of women holding power, shifting cultural attitudes toward greater gender balance. As more women succeed in leadership, societal norms gradually evolve to support equal opportunities for men and women (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

Women leaders are known for their strong crisis management skills, often demonstrating a balanced approach to handling risks and uncertainties (Chitamba, 2017). They often demonstrate a collaborative and inclusive leadership style, which is particularly valuable in crisis situations (Catalyst, 2021). Their emphasis on collaboration and long-term strategy makes them effective in navigating businesses through challenges. Studies indicate that female leaders tend to focus on empathy, consensus-building, and community resilience which are critical attributes in



times of crisis (Eagly, 2019). For example, New Zealand's former Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, received global acclaim for her empathetic leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic (Choi, 2020).

In developed countries, the response to COVID-19 illustrated the effectiveness of women-led governments in crisis management. Germany's Angela Merkel and Taiwan's Tsai Ing-wen were praised for their data-driven, decisive responses that minimised fatalities and economic disruption (Mayer, 2021). Likewise in developing countries, women leaders have played an essential role in community-driven crisis responses. For example, Zimbabwean female leaders in the health sector have led grassroots initiatives to improve healthcare access and COVID-19 awareness, despite limited resources (Chitamba, 2017).

Women's leadership is crucial in fostering peace, stability, and national reconciliation, especially in conflict-prone regions (Kallon, 2021). Women bring collaborative approaches that are essential for conflict resolution and social cohesion. In developed nations, women have played pivotal roles in diplomatic peace negotiations. For instance, women were integral in brokering peace agreements in Northern Ireland during the Good Friday Agreement process (Buchanan, 2019). Nevertheless, in developing countries, women's leadership in peace building is often seen at the grassroots level. For instance, Zimbabwe Women's Coalition (ZWC) has been an active force in pushing for democratic reforms and peaceful political transitions, demonstrating the role of women in stabilising fragile political environments (Kallon, 2021).

#### **4. Barriers to women's leadership advancement**

Despite progress, women continue to face invisible yet formidable barriers in leadership. Unconscious bias, societal expectations, and outdated organisational structures can hinder their advancement, forcing them to navigate a labyrinth of challenges (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013). From stereotyping and lack of mentorship to unequal pay and limited opportunities, these obstacles can stifle women's potential and deprive organisations of diverse perspectives. Understanding these barriers is crucial to unlocking the full potential of women leaders and fostering a more inclusive and equitable workplace culture. The following section discusses some of the barriers that women face as they try to advance in their leadership journey.

##### **4.1 Societal and cultural expectations**

Women face significant challenges in advancing to leadership positions due to deeply ingrained societal and cultural expectations (Buse, 2013). These barriers manifest in various ways, including gender stereotypes, traditional gender roles, workplace biases, and resistance to female authority. Societal norms often associate leadership with traits traditionally attributed to men, such as assertiveness and decisiveness, while women are expected to be nurturing and communal (Eagly, 2016).

Women who exhibit strong leadership behaviours may be perceived as aggressive or unlikable, leading to negative evaluations in the workplace (OECD, 2020). These stereotypes create a 'double bind', where women must balance expectations of warmth with the necessity of being authoritative to lead effectively (Heilman, 2007). Cultural expectations persist in assigning primary caregiving responsibilities to women, thereby constraining their capacity to pursue leadership opportunities and career advancement as highlighted by Hewitt (2019).

In some cultural contexts, there is a deeply ingrained belief that men are more suited for leadership than women (Eagly, 2016). This resistance can manifest in workplace discrimination, exclusion from leadership networks, and skepticism about women's abilities to lead (Koenig, 2011). Women who challenge these norms may face backlash, making it even more difficult to gain acceptance in leadership roles (OECD, 2020).

In many societies, women are expected to prioritise family responsibilities over their careers, which can lead to career interruptions and slower professional advancement (Williams, 2013). The expectation that women should take on the majority of household duties also contributes to the 'second shift', where they must juggle both professional and domestic responsibilities (Dogutas, 2024). Therefore, balancing professional ambitions with societal expectations of motherhood and caregiving responsibilities remains a major challenge (Williams, 2013). Organisations often lack policies that support work-life balance, such as flexible work arrangements or parental leave, disproportionately affecting women's career progression (Buss et al., 2025). These challenges contribute to

the 'leaky pipeline', where talented women exit the workforce before reaching leadership levels.

#### **4.2 Lack of role models, mentorship and sponsorship**

Furthermore, the lack of female role models, mentorship and sponsorship results in underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (Smith, 2020). Mentorship and sponsorship are crucial for professional advancement, yet women often find themselves in environments where these opportunities are scarce. The absence of female role models in leadership positions can discourage young women from aspiring to leadership roles (Buse, 2013). Moreover, mentorship often leads to sponsorship, which provides critical advocacy for women, but gender biases can limit these relationships' effectiveness. Without mentorship and sponsorship, women often struggle to access high-level career opportunities and leadership networks, which are crucial for advancement (Catalyst, 2021). The absence of women in decision-making positions reinforces the perception that leadership is a male-dominated space.

#### **4.3 Workplace discrimination and bias**

Discrimination in the workplace manifests in numerous forms; from pay gaps to promotion inequalities. Studies have shown that women tend to receive fewer mentorship opportunities compared to their male counterparts, and when they do receive mentorship, it is often less effective (Fletcher, 2018). Workplace cultures often favor male leadership styles like the autocratic leadership style thus hierarchical and task oriented, making it more difficult for women to be promoted (Koenig, 2011). Implicit biases influence hiring and promotion decisions, with studies showing that identical qualifications are evaluated more favourably when associated with male candidates (Espinosa & Ferreira, 2022). Moreover, the 'glass ceiling' phenomenon continues to limit women's upward mobility, particularly in male-dominated industries (Smith, 2020).

### **5. Strategies women have used to break the glass ceiling**

Women across the globe have employed various strategies to break the glass ceiling, with case studies illustrating their effectiveness in both developed and developing countries. The following section illustrates some of the notable strategies that women have used to advance in leadership in the 21st century.

#### **5.1 Networking and mentorship**

To counteract the challenges posed by a lack of mentorship, women have turned to structured networking programmes. Organisations such as LeanIn and Ellevest Network create platforms for women to connect, share resources, and offer mentorship to one another (Williams, 2013). Research has shown that in both developed and developing countries, networking and mentorship have proven essential for women's career advancement (Buse, 2013). For instance, in the United States of America, organisations like LeanIn.org have facilitated mentorship programmes that connect women with experienced leaders, significantly improving their chances of promotion (Williams, 2013). In India, initiatives such as the Women's Leadership Programme by the Indian School of Business have focused on mentoring women in business, resulting in increased representation in leadership roles (Gidlund, 2017).

#### **5.2 Education and skills development**

Education remains a critical strategy for women seeking to advance their careers. Women are increasingly equipping themselves with the education and skills necessary to thrive in leadership roles. Pursuing higher education and specialised training has proven essential for breaking through ceilings that have historically restricted women (Kirkman, 2017). In developed countries, women are increasingly pursuing higher education degrees, which correlates with higher representation in senior management positions (Choi, 2020). For example, a study showed that women with advanced degrees in the U.S. were more likely to hold executive roles compared to those without (Gidlund, 2017). In developing countries, programmes aimed at increasing girls' access to education, such as the Malala Fund, have shown positive outcomes in women's empowerment and leadership opportunities (Espinosa & Ferreira, 2022).

### **5.3 Developing assertive communication skills**

Being assertive and developing effective communication skills at the workplace plays a major role in empowering women to advocate and stand for themselves in organisations. Research indicates that women who engage in negotiation training are more successful in securing promotions and higher salaries as they foster their existence and recognition in organisation (Hannah-Riley, 2019). For example, a case study in a multinational corporation revealed that women who participated in negotiation workshops were promoted at higher rates than those who did not (ibid). This trend was also observed where women were encouraged to voice their opinions in community and workplace settings, leading to increased leadership roles.

### **5.4 Advocacy for gender inclusiveness and policy change**

Women leaders have begun advocating for policies that promote gender inclusivity within organisations, such as parental leave, pay equity, and anti-discrimination regulations. By increasing awareness of the advantages of diverse leadership, these advocates aim to reform workplace cultures and legislative frameworks to support women's advancement (Smith, 2020). Women advocacy has led organisations to implement diversity and inclusion initiatives which have led to improved female leadership representation. For instance, a tech company in the U.S. that set specific diversity goals reported a notable increase in women promoted to senior positions (Choi, 2020).

### **5.5 Work-life balance strategies**

Flexible work arrangements have become increasingly important for women balancing professional and personal responsibilities. In the U.S, the normalisation of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic benefited many women, allowing them to manage family obligations while maintaining their careers (Raval, 2025). In countries like Brazil, companies that offer flexible working hours have reported higher retention rates among female employees, demonstrating the effectiveness of this strategy (Neto, 2020).

### **5.6 Resilience and persistence**

Resilience is a key trait that women have cultivated to overcome barriers. Studies show that women who persist in the face of challenges are more likely to achieve leadership positions (Kirkman, 2017). For example, a case study in a European company highlighted that those women who faced initial setbacks but continued to seek promotions eventually succeeded in reaching executive positions (Kelan, 2018). In developing countries, women who have overcome societal and cultural barriers to pursue careers often serve as role models, inspiring others to follow suit (Kirkman, 2017).

## **6. Role of organisations in promoting women's leadership**

Historically, organisations have been shaped by patriarchal values and norms often marginalising women from leadership roles. Despite the challenges of gender bias, work-life balance and mentorship constraints, most women have risen to the highest heights of leadership. This has been facilitated by both domestic policies and international frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Since the turn of the century, women's participation in politics, business and social initiatives is now more visible, with many women leaders emerging as influential figures (Wiersema & Mors, 2023). Organisations have a critical role to play in promoting women leadership by creating an enabling and inclusive environment that fosters diversity, offer equal opportunities for both genders, initiate leadership development programmes tailored for women and promoting flexible work arrangements and family support policies. The following section discusses some of the strategies that organisations may employ to advance the leadership of women.

### **6.1 Gender diversity policies and inclusive work environments**

Organisations such as Microsoft, IBM and Cisco Systems have taken significant steps towards promoting women's leadership by implementing gender diversity policies aimed at fostering inclusive workplace cultures (Catalyst, 2021). This includes establishing clear metrics for diversity within leadership positions and holding leaders accountable for inclusivity. Furthermore, organisations that implement gender diversity policies see

improvements in innovation, employee satisfaction, and financial performance (Woetzel et al., 2015). In Norway, the government implemented a quota system requiring that 40% of board members in publicly listed companies be women (Gidlund, 2017). This policy has led to a significant increase in female representation in corporate leadership. Similarly, in South Africa, initiatives aimed at promoting women in leadership positions within the public sector have resulted in greater visibility and influence for women in governance (Boniol, 2019).

## **6.2 Leadership development programmes for women**

Many organisations have now understood the urgent necessity for leadership development programmes specifically for women leaders. These initiatives often focus on skill-building, mentorship, and networking, specifically tailored to women's experiences. Companies like Deloitte and PwC have made significant strides in creating programmes that elevate women leaders (Marks, 2024). One notable example is PepsiCo's Women's Leadership Programme, which provides mentorship, sponsorship, and targeted training to women aspiring to senior roles. This initiative has significantly increased female representation in PepsiCo's executive leadership (PepsiCo, 2021).

## **6.3 Flexible work arrangements and family support policies**

Flexible work arrangements have become increasingly important in supporting women's leadership. Organisations that offer flexible hours, remote work options, and family support policies tend to attract and retain more women in senior positions (Hewitt, 2019). Beneish (2019) indicates that work-life balance is a critical factor in women's career progression. Companies offering flexible work arrangements, childcare support, and parental leave help women remain in leadership pipelines.

Organisations need to allow for remote and hybrid work models which allow women to work from home, reducing commuting burdens and increasing productivity. Organisations that take their employees' work-life balance seriously by availing flexible hours to accommodate different schedules and responsibilities, as well as job-sharing opportunities to promote adaptable work schedules stand to benefit more (Hewitt, 2019). In order to attract more women in leadership positions, contemporary organisations should provide comprehensive family-friendly benefits which include paid parental leave for mothers, fathers, and adoptive parents, along with childcare support such as on-site facilities and resources for off-site care. The aim as argued by Beneish (2019) is to support employees during various life stages and responsibilities and foster a healthy balance between work and personal life. During the COVID-19 pandemic, companies adopted flexible work initiatives, resulting in higher retention rates among female employees and significantly improved job satisfaction among working mothers, as reported by the World Economic Forum (2022).

## **6.4 Gender parity in leadership**

Despite progress, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles across various sectors. The 2021 Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum revealed that, at the current pace, it will take nearly 135 years to achieve gender parity in leadership roles (Hoffmann, 2021). As such, organisations should accelerate the adoption and implementation of gender parity policies so as to increase the number of women leaders. In both developed and developing countries, organisations and governments have implemented gender quotas to accelerate progress. Norway, for instance, mandates that at least 40% of corporate board members be women (OECD, 2020).

## **7. Concluding remarks**

Despite commendable progress, women remain underrepresented in top executive positions and political offices. The technology, finance, and energy sectors still show significant gender gaps in leadership roles with a mere 7.4% of Fortune 500 CEOs being women led as of 2021 (Catalyst, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed worsened existing disparities, particularly in Zimbabwe and Africa, where women have shouldered a disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities. However, looking ahead, women are likely to find greater opportunities for leadership roles due to increasing advocacy for equity and more organisations recognising the value of diverse leadership. Technology and remote working conditions may also yield new pathways for women



to ascend to leadership roles, as geographic barriers diminish.

Breaking the glass ceiling requires a multifaceted approach involving policy changes, workplace reforms, and societal shifts in gender norms. Organisations must actively promote gender diversity, mentorship, and equal opportunities. Women should continue pursuing education, networking, and advocacy to strengthen their leadership presence. By fostering an inclusive culture, societies and businesses will benefit from the diverse perspectives and leadership styles that women bring to the table. While significant barriers to women's leadership persist, there are promising avenues for change.

Organisations, policymakers, and society at large play crucial roles in dismantling the glass ceiling. To promote gender diversity and inclusivity, organisations should implement comprehensive policies that address the unique challenges and barriers faced by women in the workplace. This includes enhancing mentorship programmes that pair aspiring women leaders with experienced mentors, providing guidance, support, and valuable industry insights. Additionally, organisations should encourage flexible work practices, such as telecommuting, flexible hours, and job-sharing, to improve work-life balance and increase retention and advancement opportunities for women in leadership roles. Investing in targeted leadership development initiatives, such as training programmes, workshops, and networking events, can also help women enhance their leadership skills, build confidence, and expand their professional networks. Finally, organisations should advocate for legislative change and support policies that address systemic gender disparities, promoting a culture of inclusivity, respect, and equal opportunities for all employees. By actively pursuing these strategies, organisations can bridge the gap for aspiring women leaders, foster more inclusive workplaces, and drive business success through diverse perspectives and talent.

## References

1. Beneish, M. Y. 2019. *Journal of Business Ethics*, pp. 235-253.
2. Boniol, M, M. M. 2019. World Health Organisation.
3. Buchanan, R. T. 2019. *Journal Political Science Review*, 40 (3).
4. Buse, K. D. 2013. *Maanagement Review*, 28 (6), pp. 246-266.
5. Buss, M., Andler, S. & Tiberius, V. 2025. *The Leadership Quartely*, 36 (3).
6. Catalyst. (2021). *Why Diversity and Inclusion Matter: Financial Performance*.
7. Chitamba, P. 2017. Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network.
8. Choi, S. 2020. *Harvard Business Review*.
9. Dogutas, A. 2024. *Social and Cultural Researchers Journal*, 10 (20), pp. 19-38.
10. Eagly, A. S. 2016. *Harvard Business Review Press*.
11. Eagly, A. H. 2019. *The Oxford Handbook of Leadrship and Organisations*, pp. 673-694.
12. Espinosa, M. P. and Ferreira, E. 2022. *Journal of Applied Economics*, 25 (1), pp. 37-57.
13. Fletcher, J. 2018. *Harvard Business Review*.
14. Gidlund, A. 2017. *The Norwegian Gender Quota Law and its Effects on Corporate Boards*. Master in Finance Thesis. Umea University.
15. Hannah Riley, B. T. 2019. *Academy of Management Journal*, 62 (6).
16. Heilman, M. E. 2007. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 74 (3) , pp. 629-645.
17. Hewitt, B. R. 2019. *Harvard Business Review*.
18. Ibarra, H., Ely, R. J. & Kolb, D. M. 2013. *Harvard Business Review*.
19. Kelan, E. 2018. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 29 (10), pp. 1723-1743.
20. Kirkman, B. L. 2017. *Management Research Review* 40 (3), pp. 318-333.
21. Koenig, A. E. 2011. *Psychological Review*, 137 (4) ,pp. 616-642.
22. Krivkovich, A., Field, E., Yee, L., McConnell, M & Smith, H. 2024. McKinsey & Company.
23. Maenzanise, J. 2019. *Madam Manager, Jungle WP*.
24. Mapuva, J. 2013. *Journal of Africcan Studies and Development*, pp. 261-270.
25. Marks, A. 2024. *Women in the boardroom: A global perspective*. 8th Edition. Global Insights.
26. Mayer, C. H. 2021. *Positive Psychology*.
27. McKinsey & Company. 2020. *Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters*. McKinsey & Company. New York.
28. Neto, A. C. 2020. *Revista Pensamento Contemporaneous Administracao*, 14 (2), pp. 1-17.

29. Nguyen, N. N. 2020. *Journal of Business Ethics*, pp. 257-276.
30. Odeh, G. 2022. George Washington University.
31. OECD. 2020. *Women Leadership: Progress and Challenges*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
32. PepsiCo. 2021. Women Inclusion Network (WIN).
33. Raval, A. 2025. *Financial Times*, February 25.
34. Williams, Z. 2013. *The Guardian*.
35. Smith, J. 2020. *Journal of Women in leadership*, 5 (1), pp. 10-22.
36. Dawson, J., Kersley, R. and Natella, S. 2016. Credit Suisse Research Institute, pp. 1-52.
37. Kallon, E. 2021. United Nations Sustainable Development Group.
38. Wiersema, M. & Mors, M. L. 2023. *Harvard Business Review*. 17 November 2023.
39. Woetzel, L., Madgavkar, A., Ellingred, K., Labaye, E., Devillard, S., Kutcher, E., Manyika, J., Dobbs, R. & Krishnan, M. 2015. McKinsey Global Institute. 1 September, 2015.
40. Zahidi, S. 2021. World Economic Forum.