

Women in Leadership: Institutional Barriers, Organizational Culture and Pathways to Greater Representation

Muhammad Shahid Malik¹

Abubakar Nauman Ul Haq²

¹ Advocate Lahore High Court, Lahore, Pakistan. E-Mail: mshdmalik@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5264-048X>

² Chevening Scholar/ Deputy Prosecutor General, Govt. of Punjab, Pakistan. E-Mail: kaziabubakar@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper is a student review of women's representation in organizational and public leadership. It tries to keep three kinds of claim apart: what published data show, what theories propose, and what policy writers recommend. The empirical picture is mixed but not mysterious. Women's share of national parliamentary seats rose from 11.3 percent in 1995 to 27.2 percent in early 2025 and 27.5 percent in early 2026, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2025, 2026). Cabinet posts headed by women stood at 22.4 percent on 1 January 2026 (UN Women, 2026a). In enterprises, the International Labour Organization reports that women hold about three in ten managerial jobs, 27 percent of board seats, and 6 percent of CEO roles (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2025). Those figures are not evidence that women lack leadership ability. Meta-analytic work on leadership style finds small average differences, with women slightly more often rated as transformational (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). Theories of role congruity, tokenism and gender stereotypes offer one way to read the gap between ability and occupancy (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kanter, 1977; Heilman, 2001). Pathways discussed later—recruitment rules, sponsorship rather than mentoring alone, work–family policy, and electoral or board quotas—are treated as interventions with uneven records, not as moral slogans. Developing-country settings are not treated as a lagging version of the same story. Legal scores from Women, Business and the Law show that rights on paper and rights in practice still diverge.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received **21-07-2026**
Accepted **09-09-2026**
Published **10-10-2026**

KEYWORDS

Women in leadership; gender and organizations; role congruity; tokenism; political representation; quotas; work–family policy

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Muhammad Shahid Malik
mshdmalik@gmail.com

CC BY-NC 4.0 © 2026 The Author(s). Published by JuriSocial Research Center Private Limited. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



<https://doi.org/10.68740/jjss23>

Introduction

It is easy to write about women and leadership as if the problem were a shortage of ambition. That sentence shows up in speeches more than in the studies this paper was able to check. What the published record actually shows is more ordinary and more institutional. Women are close to half of many entry-level professional roles and a much smaller share of the rooms where budgets, parties and boards are decided (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2024; ILO, 2025; UN Women, 2026a). The drop is visible in both public office and private management. It is not the same drop in every country, and it is not well explained by a single personality trait.

This paper is written as an MPhil- or early-PhD-style review. That means it stays close to sources that can be opened, it hedges where the evidence is thin, and it does not pretend to settle debates that are still live in the journals. Leadership here means formal authority in organizations and in public institutions—managers, executives, parliamentarians, ministers—not informal influence in a family or a neighbourhood, which would need a different literature.

Three distinctions run through the pages that follow. First, representation is not the same as style. A chamber can add women members without changing how leadership is practised. Second, barriers can be legal, organizational or cultural, and they do not always move together. World Bank legal-equality scores can rise while cabinet shares stall (World Bank, 2024; UN Women, 2026a). Third, recommendations are not findings. Quotas, mentoring programmes and parental leave are policy tools. Whether they work depends on design and on the setting, which is why the later sections try to keep that door open rather than shut.

Research Problem

The problem this paper takes up is the persistent under-representation of women in senior organizational and public leadership relative to their presence in education and in many labour markets. IPU and UN Women data show parliamentary shares still far from parity after three decades of formal commitment since the Beijing Platform for Action (IPU, 2025; UN Women, 2026a). ILO enterprise research describes a “leaky pipeline” and “glass walls” that concentrate women in support functions rather than in profit-and-loss roles that usually feed the top jobs (ILO, 2019, 2025).

The problem is not only numerical. Role-congruity theory argues that leadership roles are still widely typed as agentic, while women are still widely expected to be communal, so the same behaviour can be read differently depending on who performs it (Eagly & Karau, 2002). That is a theoretical claim with a large supporting literature; it is not a claim that every selector is biased in the same way. The paper treats it as a framework, not as a completed proof for every workplace.

A related problem is measurement. Parliamentary shares are counted in public. CEO shares are counted less often and with different samples. ILO’s 6 percent CEO figure and WEF’s C-suite drop are both useful and not interchangeable (ILO, 2025; WEF, 2024). A review that pretends there is one global leadership percentage would be tidier and less honest. The problem, then, is also how institutions count success. Cabinets can look more balanced while the heavy portfolios stay patterned (UN Women, 2026c). Boards can add women directors while executive committees stay thin. Counting only the most visible room will flatter the trend.

There is a further problem about voice. Representation can rise without agenda change. That possibility is discussed in quota research and should stay on the table (Krook, 2009). This paper is mostly about occupancy of leader roles, not about whether occupancy produces particular statutes. Occupancy still matters because it is the official target of thirty years of international text (IPU, 2025). The two questions should not be collapsed.

Research Questions and Objectives

Four questions organise the review. How has women's representation in public and organizational leadership changed, and what do current official series actually show? Which institutional and cultural mechanisms are most consistently documented as barriers? What does research say about recruitment, promotion, mentoring and work-family arrangements? Which legal and policy interventions have a published record, including in developing-country settings?

The objectives follow those questions. The paper assembles official numbers that can be cited. It reviews a short set of theories without turning them into slogans. It distinguishes empirical findings from recommendations. And it places developing-country evidence in the same frame rather than in an appendix.

Literature Review

The literature sits in several rooms that do not always talk to each other. Political science tracks seats, cabinets and quotas. Organizational psychology tracks stereotypes, evaluation and style. Sociology of work tracks numbers in groups and informal networks. Development agencies track legal texts and labour-force gaps. A student review cannot join all of those rooms into one theory. It can at least stop them from talking past one another.

On style, Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and van Engen (2003) meta-analysed 45 studies of transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership. They found that women leaders were, on average, somewhat more transformational and more likely to use contingent reward. Men were somewhat more likely to use management-by-exception and laissez-faire behaviours. The authors were careful to call the differences small. They also noted that the styles on which women scored higher had, in other research, been linked to effectiveness. That last step is an inference from two literatures, not a direct test that women are better leaders in every setting. This paper keeps that caution.

On prejudice toward female leaders, Eagly and Karau (2002) set out role-congruity theory in *Psychological Review*. Perceived mismatch between the female gender role and the leader role, they argued, produces two kinds of disadvantage: women are seen as less fitted to leader roles in the first place, and leader-like behaviour is valued less when a woman performs it. Heilman (2001) made a related argument about descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes. Descriptive beliefs about what women are like, and prescriptive beliefs about how they should behave, can lead to devaluation of performance, denial of credit, or penalties for competence. Again, these are theoretical accounts supported by experimental and field studies. They do not say that competence is irrelevant, or that men never face bias.

Kanter's (1977) work on proportions is older and still cited for a reason. In skewed groups, where tokens are under about 15 percent, visibility, isolation and role encapsulation become more likely. Later research confirmed many of those dynamics for women in male-dominated settings, while also showing that the story is not gender-neutral: men who are numerical tokens in female-typed jobs do not usually face the same package of costs (see the subsequent literature summarised in tokenism reviews). The paper uses Kanter for the organizational-culture section, not as a complete theory of power.

On careers, Ibarra, Carter and Silva (2010) used Catalyst survey evidence on high-potential employees to argue that women were often over-mentored and under-sponsored. Mentors give advice. Sponsors use their own capital to create openings. In their follow-up, mentoring predicted promotion for men more clearly than for women. That finding is from one large corporate sample, not from every sector. It is still one of the more careful published warnings against treating a mentoring programme as a promotion policy.

Political-science work on quotas, including Krook (2009), treats candidate-selection rules as institutions that can be redesigned. Quotas spread widely after the 1990s. They do not all look the same, and they do not all produce the same seat shares. The later policy section comes back to that.

Official series sit beside this academic work rather than inside it. IPU and UN Women supply the political counts. ILO supplies enterprise and management counts. The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law project supplies legal-framework scores and, in later editions, measures of supportive systems and enforcement (World Bank, 2024, 2026). Those sources are not theories. They are inventories. The review uses them as inventories.

One more literature note is needed so the review does not sound more certain than the journals. Leadership research has a long argument about whether style differences are real, small, or an artefact of the roles people are allowed to occupy. Eagly and colleagues (2003) worked with people already in leader roles, which is the fair comparison and also a selected comparison. Women who reach those roles are not a random draw. Small style differences in that selected group tell us something about incumbents. They tell us less about people who were never selected. The barrier literature is the place to look for that second story (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001).

Public-leadership research has its own selection problem. Women who enter cabinets often receive social portfolios (UN Women, 2026c). Studies that then compare "women ministers" with "men ministers" without noting the portfolio mix will mix the person with the job. The literature review therefore treats assignment as part of representation, not as a footnote.

Leadership and Gender

A first empirical point is modest. When men and women occupy similar leader roles, average style differences in the 2003 meta-analysis were small (Eagly et al., 2003). That undercuts two popular sentences at once: that women lead in a completely different way, and that they lead in exactly the same way. Small average differences can still matter if selectors expect a narrow script.

A second empirical point is about occupancy, not style. ILO figures put women at roughly 30 percent of managerial positions, 27 percent of board seats and 6 percent of CEO posts (ILO, 2025). WEF analysis of LinkedIn data described women as about 46 percent of entry-level roles and well under a quarter of C-suite roles, a "drop to the top" of more than twenty percentage points (WEF, 2024). Those two sources use different methods and should not be glued into one fake pipeline. They point in the same direction: the share of women falls as formal authority rises.

A third point is political. On 1 January 2026 women held 27.5 percent of national parliamentary seats and 22.4 percent of cabinet posts heading ministries (IPU, 2026; UN Women, 2026a, 2026b). Twenty-eight countries had a woman as head of state or government; 101 countries had never had one (UN Women, 2026b). Portfolio assignment remains patterned. Women ministers are more often in gender, family and social-inclusion briefs than in defence, interior, justice or core economic briefs (UN Women, 2026c). That is an empirical description of assignment, not a claim about preference.

Historical Patterns

The long political series is clearer than most organizational series. IPU's thirty-year review recorded a rise from 11.3 percent of parliamentary seats in 1995 to 27.2 percent in 2025 (IPU, 2025). That is a large change in historical terms and a slow change against the Beijing target language of the mid-1990s. The same review noted that the number of countries with at least 30 percent women in lower or single chambers rose from five in 1995 to 71 in early 2025, while countries with under 10 percent fell from 105 to 20 (IPU, 2025).

Recent years have been flatter. IPU described 2024, a heavy election year, as the slowest annual gain since 2017. The 2025 election cycle produced another 0.3-point global rise, to 27.5 percent on 1 January 2026 (IPU, 2026). Women Speakers fell from 23.7 percent to 19.9 percent in that year (IPU, 2026; UN Women, 2026b). Progress and stall can sit in the same decade. Figure 1 plots the official 1995, 2025 and 2026 anchors rather than inventing a smooth annual line.

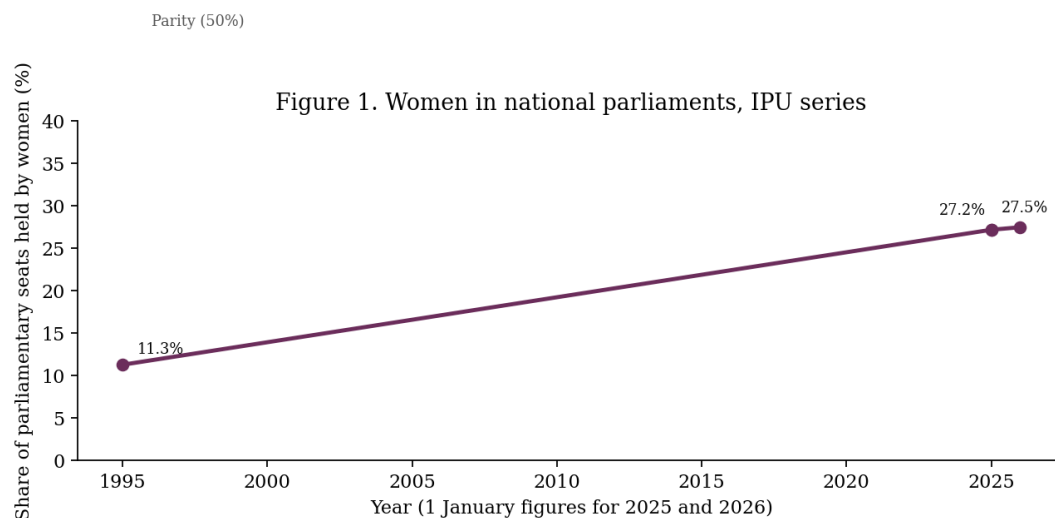


Figure 1. Women in national parliaments at selected official IPU dates: 11.3 percent in 1995, 27.2 percent on 1 January 2025, 27.5 percent on 1 January 2026 (IPU, 2025, 2026). The dotted line marks 50 percent.

Organizational history is harder to draw as one line because comparable global board and CEO series do not go back as cleanly to 1995 in the sources used here. What can be said from ILO’s enterprise surveys is that glass ceilings and glass walls were already visible in the 2013 and 2017–2018 survey waves, and that they remain the official vocabulary in the 2025 research brief (ILO, 2019, 2025). The historical pattern, so far as these sources allow, is expansion in middle management with much slower change at the very top.

Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers are rules, procedures and resource allocations that do not need a hostile individual to keep producing uneven outcomes. Candidate-selection rules in parties are one example. If lists are assembled in rooms where incumbents protect safe seats, women’s entry depends on whether those rooms are required to open them (Krook, 2009). Corporate promotion systems that reward uninterrupted tenure and P&L experience are another. ILO describes glass walls that keep women under-represented in operational and profit-and-loss posts that usually feed executive pipelines (ILO, 2019, 2025).

Law is an institution as well. Women, Business and the Law 2024 reported a global average legal-framework score of 77.9 out of 100 under the older 1.0 index, with many high-income OECD economies at or near 100 and no South Asian economy above 90 (World Bank, 2024). The 2026 edition, using a wider lens, stressed that laws, supportive systems and enforcement are not the same thing. Average scores were reported as 67 for legal frameworks, 47 for supportive frameworks and 53 for enforcement perceptions, and the report stated that no economy had secured all legal rights needed for women’s full economic participation (World Bank, 2026). Those numbers do not measure boardrooms directly. They measure the legal weather in which careers are built.

Working-time norms and meeting cultures belong here too, even when they are unwritten. If leadership work is organised as if someone else is available at home in the late afternoon, the rule is institutional even when it is not printed. The work–family section returns to that point with more care.

The claim here is only that institutions can encode an old household division of labour without naming it.

Party institutions deserve a separate sentence because public leadership does not begin at the oath. It begins at nomination. Where nominations are controlled by incumbents, the institution is the gate. Quotas try to change that gate (Krook, 2009). Where nominations are formally open but campaign finance and violence remain uneven, the gate is simply earlier. IPU's slow recent gains after a heavy election year are consistent with gates that did not move much (IPU, 2025, 2026). That is an institutional reading. It does not require a claim about voter taste, which this paper did not independently measure.

Public-administration career systems can be institutional barriers of a quieter kind. Seniority rules, transfer policies, and unwritten expectations about field postings can collide with care responsibilities even when the statute is equal. WBL's gap between legal frameworks and supportive frameworks is one official way of naming that collision (World Bank, 2026). A ministry can be legally open and still organised as if leaders have no dependents.

Organizational Culture

Culture, in the sense used here, is the set of taken-for-granted stories about who looks like a leader. Role-congruity theory predicts that those stories will bite hardest where the leader role is most strongly typed as masculine (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Heilman's (2001) review argued that even competent performance can be discounted or punished when it violates a prescriptive stereotype. That is a different mechanism from "women do not apply." It is about how applications and performances are read.

Kanter's (1977) token dynamics describe what culture can feel like when numbers are low. Heightened visibility can turn ordinary mistakes into proof. Isolation from informal networks can cut off the information that promotion actually uses. Role encapsulation can push women toward a narrow set of acceptable parts—the helper, the specialist, the exception. Later work found that these costs are tied to status, not only to percentages. The practical implication is still useful. Culture change that never changes numbers leaves tokens carrying the culture on their own.

ILO's language of leaky pipelines is a cultural finding as much as a structural one, because pipelines leak at decision points: sponsorship, stretch assignments, who is imagined as CEO material (ILO, 2019). Culture is not a fog that cannot be studied. It shows up in those decisions. This paper does not have new interview data. It can only say that the published mechanisms are consistent enough to take seriously.

Culture also shows up in what is joked about and what is unthinkable. That sentence is not data. The data version is portfolio assignment and feeder-job assignment (UN Women, 2026c; ILO, 2019). When women leaders cluster in human resources, communications, gender and family briefs, culture has already done some sorting before the final vote or the final board paper. Changing the photograph on the annual report without changing that sorting is a cultural non-event dressed as progress.

There is a temptation to treat culture as softer than law. The theories used here do not. Role incongruity is about evaluation, which is an organizational act (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Token dynamics are about group composition, which is a headcount (Kanter, 1977). If culture is only discussed in values workshops, the mechanisms in the literature have been missed.

Recruitment and Promotion

Recruitment and promotion are where culture becomes a file. If shortlists are built from current networks, they will resemble those networks. If "potential" is inferred from confidence in a meeting style that some groups have been trained to perform, the inference will look like merit and still be patterned.

ILO's 2019 global enterprise survey, covering about 13,000 firms in 70 countries, reported that beneficial effects of gender diversity were described by respondents as beginning around a 30 percent share of senior management, and that a majority of firms were below that threshold (ILO, 2019). The same work described the decline of women's share as grade rises. That is not a law of nature. It is a description of how promotion systems were functioning in that sample.

WEF's 2024 discussion of leadership hiring suggested that the share of women among leadership hires had eased after earlier gains (WEF, 2024). Hiring rates are not the same as stock representation, and LinkedIn coverage is not a census. The cautious reading is that pipeline repair is reversible. Promotion policy that is only a campaign year will not hold a line.

A student paper should not invent a single "best" recruitment rule. What the sources support is more limited. Transparent criteria, structured evaluation, and attention to which jobs are treated as feeder roles are the interventions most consistent with the barrier literature (Heilman, 2001; ILO, 2019). Whether a given firm does those things is an empirical question that this review cannot answer firm by firm.

Work–Family Structures

Work–family structure is not a private lifestyle choice when leadership jobs are designed around an assumed extra adult at home. Official gender-gap tools treat childcare, leave and safety as part of the legal and policy environment for women's economic activity (World Bank, 2024). That framing is useful because it keeps the issue inside institutions rather than inside individual virtue.

The evidence in the sources used here is stronger on the existence of a penalty associated with care than on a single estimate that can be copied into every country. OECD gender-wage-gap statistics show persistent median pay differences, which are related to, though not identical with, leadership gaps (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], n.d.). ILO reporting for G20 labour markets continues to treat participation gaps and wage gaps as unfinished, even where some Brisbane-goal progress was recorded (ILO & OECD, 2024).

Policy recommendations in this area—paid leave that is not only maternal, childcare, and working-time reform—are recommendations. They rest on a theoretical and comparative argument that care work is unevenly distributed and that leadership systems ignore that distribution at their own cost. This paper does not have a new causal model. It records the institutional claim and the official data that make the claim hard to dismiss.

Gender Stereotypes

Stereotypes are the cognitive side of the same problem. Descriptive stereotypes say what women and men are thought to be like. Prescriptive stereotypes say what they should be like. Heilman (2001) argued that both can block ascent: the first by making competence harder to see, the second by making visible competence costly. Role-congruity theory is the leadership-specific version of that argument (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

It is important not to over-claim. Stereotypes vary by culture, class and race. They change. They do not explain every failed promotion. Experimental studies that hold performance constant and vary only gender information are the cleanest evidence that evaluation can shift with gender cues. Field studies are messier. A responsible review reports both the strength of the laboratory tradition and the difficulty of measuring the same effect in a live promotions committee.

Stereotypes also shape self-assessment and application behaviour. That loop is often described as women "not leaning in." The sources used here do not support treating self-assessment as the main cause. If evaluation systems already read the same behaviour differently, telling individuals to perform

more confidence is a weak policy (Heilman, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002). The paper therefore keeps stereotypes in the institutional chapter, not in a chapter about personality.

Mentoring and Networks

Mentoring is the intervention organizations reach for first, because it is cheap to announce. Ibarra, Carter and Silva (2010) used Catalyst's high-potential surveys to show why that reflex can disappoint. Women in their sample were not short of mentors. They were short of sponsors with enough organizational clout to create jobs. Mentoring in 2008 predicted later promotion for men in that sample more clearly than for women. Lateral moves were offered to both groups; for women those moves more often replaced promotion rather than leading to it.

Networks are the informal version of the same mechanism. Kanter (1977) already described isolation from the networks where information and trust move. If after-hours circles and old-school ties remain the place where stretch assignments are born, formal mentoring will not reach that room. The empirical claim is limited: access to high-status ties is patterned, and patterned ties feed patterned promotions (Ibarra et al., 2010; Kanter, 1977).

A policy distinction follows. Mentoring programmes can still help with skill and with isolation. They should not be counted as promotion policy unless they change who is willing to spend capital on a candidate. That sentence is a recommendation built on one major corporate study and a long sociological tradition. It is not a finding from a new survey of public-sector ministries.

Legal and Policy Interventions

Legal interventions range from constitutional equality clauses to electoral quotas, board quotas, anti-discrimination statutes and care policy. CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action supplied the international script after 1979 and 1995. Seat shares moved, as Figure 1 shows, without reaching parity (IPU, 2025).

Quotas are the most studied political tool. Krook (2009) treated them as reforms of candidate selection, not as decorations. Reserved seats, party quotas and legislative candidate quotas work through different party systems. IPU's long view is consistent with the claim that many of the countries now above 30 percent used some form of quota or other special measure, though this paper does not reprint a full country-by-country quota inventory that it did not independently recode. The theoretical caution is the same as Krook's: adoption is not implementation, and seat gains are not automatic feminist outcomes.

Corporate board quotas in parts of Europe are a parallel experiment. OECD commentary has noted rising female board shares in member countries and an EU target of 40 percent for certain directors by 2026 (OECD reporting summarised in secondary indices). This paper cites the direction of travel from official and ILO board figures—ILO's 27 percent global board share remains well below that European target (ILO, 2025)—without inventing a single OECD average that it could not lock to a primary table in the time available.

Women, Business and the Law adds a different policy lesson. Raising a legal-framework score is not the same as building childcare, transport safety or enforcement capacity (World Bank, 2024, 2026). Interventions that stop at statute will look successful on one dashboard and weak on another. That is an empirical warning from the Bank's own three-pillar presentation, not a political aside.

International Experiences

International variation is wide enough to kill simple cultural stereotypes. IPU regional figures for 2025–2026 put the Americas at the top of parliamentary representation among regions that held

renewals, with Europe also comparatively high, and the Middle East and North Africa much lower (IPU, 2025, 2026). UN Women reports that only seven countries had 50 percent or more women in single or lower houses, including Rwanda, Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Andorra, Mexico and the United Arab Emirates, with a further 23 countries at or above 40 percent (UN Women, 2026a). Several of those high-share cases are not high-income Western states. That fact belongs in the international section because it undercuts the idea that representation only rises after a particular kind of affluence.

Rwanda's high parliamentary share is often cited and should be cited carefully. It is a real number in the UN Women list. It is also the product of a specific post-conflict constitutional and electoral design, not a general African average. Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole was reported at 27 percent women legislators, close to the world mean, while Central and Southern Asia was reported at 17 percent (UN Women, 2026a). Regional averages hide the high and low cases.

Executive leadership is thinner everywhere. Cabinet shares slipped to 22.4 percent in January 2026, and women Speakers declined (UN Women, 2026b; IPU, 2026). International experience, read honestly, is not a march. It is a set of national paths, some of which used quotas, some of which used party reform, some of which stalled after early gains.

Developing-Country Perspectives

Developing-country perspectives are not a side essay about culture. They are about different institutional starting points. Women, Business and the Law shows that legal rights to work, move, inherit and start a business still vary sharply, and that South Asia in the 2024 1.0 scores had no economy above 90 (World Bank, 2024). A leadership pipeline that assumes free movement, formal childcare and equal property rights is an imported pipeline. It will not describe careers in settings where those rights are incomplete.

At the same time, several of the world's highest parliamentary shares are in countries that the World Bank would not class as high-income (UN Women, 2026a). Quota design and post-conflict constitutional moments have sometimes moved political representation faster than labour-market formalisation. That is an important developing-country lesson. Political presence can be built by rule change even when corporate CEO shares remain tiny. The two ladders are related, but they are not the same ladder.

ILO's enterprise surveys included firms across many income groups and still found glass ceilings and glass walls (ILO, 2019). Informality, however, sits outside those surveys. In economies where most women work outside formal firms, "women in leadership" cannot mean only listed-company boards. Local government, cooperatives, public administration and political reserved seats become the relevant rooms. This paper cannot map all of those rooms. It can only warn against reading a Fortune-500 literature as a universal theory.

A second developing-country issue is the double shift in the absence of public care. WBL's newer pillars are an attempt to measure that environment rather than to assume it (World Bank, 2026). Leadership programmes that import after-hours networking models into settings without childcare, safe transport or reliable electricity will look participatory on paper and extractive in practice. That is a design warning, not a claim that women in those settings lack interest in authority.

A third issue is legal pluralism and family law, which WBL only partly captures. Rights to work can sit next to constraints on mobility or on heading a household. The 2024 finding that no South Asian economy scored above 90 on the older legal index is a reminder that pipelines begin before the first job application (World Bank, 2024). Leadership research that starts at MBA intake starts too late for those systems.

None of this licenses a deficit story. Rwanda's parliamentary share, Mexico's parity rules, and other high-share cases in the UN Women list show that political design can move faster than income (UN

Women, 2026a). The developing-country perspective in this paper is therefore two-sided. Rights and care systems can be thinner. Political tools can still be strong. Collapsing those two facts into “backwardness” would be exactly the unsupported generalisation the brief asked this paper not to make.

Public leadership in developing countries also carries a different risk surface—security, unpaid care with less state support, and sometimes backlash when quotas are introduced. Those are documented themes in quota research (Krook, 2009). They are not reasons to treat developing-country women leaders as exceptions. They are reasons to treat context as part of the mechanism, which is what Janowski-style contextualisation would suggest in a neighbouring literature, and what this review tries to do in plainer words.

Comparative Table and Pipeline Figures

Table 1 gathers official markers that this paper could verify. It is not a ranking of countries’ virtue. It is a comparison of what different institutions bother to count. Figure 2 places several of those markers on one bar chart so the drop across levels is visible without forcing them into one fake cohort.

Table 1

Selected official markers of women’s leadership and legal environment. Figures are not from one survey and should not be averaged into a single index.

Marker	Women’s share / score	Date / coverage	Source and reading
National parliaments	27.5%	1 Jan 2026, global	IPU (2026); UN Women (2026a). Up from 11.3% in 1995 and 27.2% in Jan 2025.
Cabinet ministers heading a portfolio	22.4%	1 Jan 2026, global	UN Women (2026a, 2026b). Down from 23.3% in 2024.
Countries with a woman head of state or government	28 countries	2026	UN Women (2026b). 101 countries have never had a woman leader.
Managerial positions	About 3 in 10 (~30%)	ILO global brief	ILO (2025). Separate from board and CEO counts.
Company boards	27%	ILO global brief	ILO (2025). Not an OECD-only figure.
CEOs	6%	ILO global brief	ILO (2025). Tiny fraction at the top of firms.
Entry-level professional roles	46%	WEF / LinkedIn 2024	WEF (2024). Different method from ILO; directionally consistent drop.
WBL legal frameworks (older 1.0 index)	Global average 77.9 / 100	WBL 2024	World Bank (2024). Laws on the books, not occupancy of leader roles.

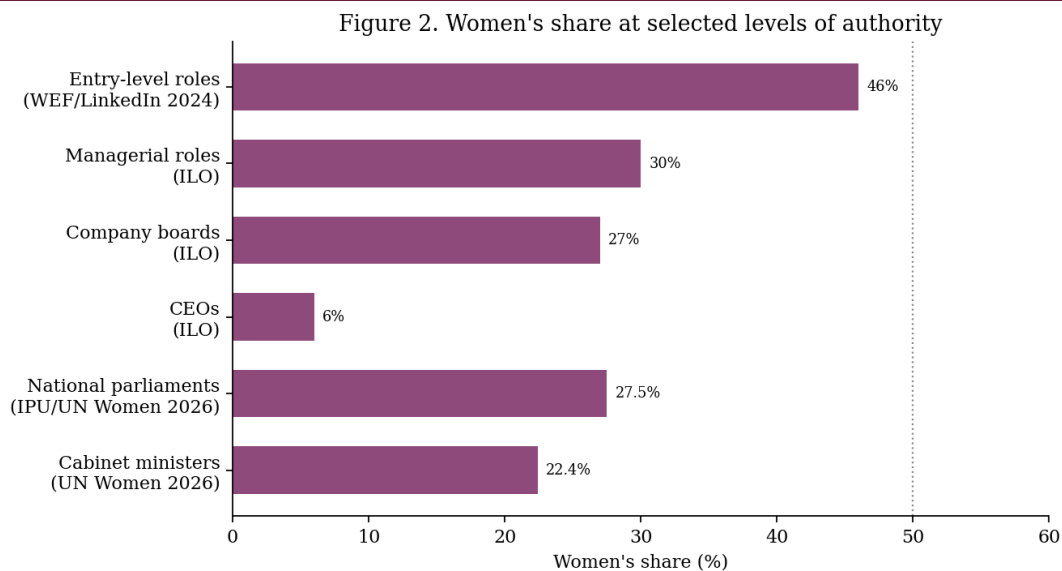


Figure 2. Women's share at selected levels of authority, using the official figures in Table 1 (ILO, 2025; IPU, 2026; UN Women, 2026a; WEF, 2024). Sources differ in method and year.

Discussion

If the sections above are read together, three statements seem defensible. First, underrepresentation at the top is an empirical regularity across public and private series, not a media invention (IPU, 2026; ILO, 2025; UN Women, 2026a). Second, the regularity is better explained by institutions, evaluation systems and care structures than by a claim that women lack the styles associated with effectiveness. The 2003 meta-analysis, if anything, leans the other way on style, with small effects (Eagly et al., 2003). Third, policy tools exist and have mixed records. Quotas can change candidate pools. Mentoring without sponsorship can disappoint. Legal reform without enforcement can raise a WBL score and leave careers untouched (Krook, 2009; Ibarra et al., 2010; World Bank, 2026).

What should not be said, because the sources do not carry it, is that women and men are opposites, or that every organization is a replica of a North American firm in 1977. Tokenism, role congruity and stereotype research grew in particular settings. They travel, but they travel as hypotheses. Developing-country political quota successes and continuing legal gaps can exist in the same region (UN Women, 2026a; World Bank, 2024). A discussion that flattens that complexity is not careful.

A further discussion point is pace. Thirty years from 11.3 to 27.5 percent of parliamentary seats is both achievement and delay (IPU, 2025, 2026). UN Women has published a simple extrapolation that parity in legislatures would not arrive before 2063 at current rates (UN Women, 2026a). Extrapolations are not forecasts. They are a way of saying that the present slope does not deliver the official target language on its own.

For organizations the parallel warning is the leaky pipeline. If 46 percent of entry roles and 6 percent of CEO roles can co-exist, then mid-career decision points are doing most of the sorting (WEF, 2024; ILO, 2025). Culture and family structure meet those decision points. So do feeder jobs. Repairing only the graduate-intake photograph will not repair the CEO count.

Recommendations

Recommendations below are labelled as such. They follow from the reviewed evidence; they are not themselves findings.

First, treat feeder roles as the promotion system. If operational and profit-and-loss posts remain male-dominated, board targets will keep recycling the same small pool (ILO, 2019, 2025).

Second, distinguish mentoring from sponsorship in public and private talent programmes. Count whether senior people spend capital, not only whether coffee meetings occurred (Ibarra et al., 2010).

Third, where democracies want faster parliamentary change, candidate-selection rules need to be rewritten, not only celebrated. Quota design has to fit the electoral system, and implementation has to be watched (Krook, 2009; IPU, 2025).

Fourth, pair legal reform with the supportive systems WBL now measures—childcare, safety, enforcement—so that a statute is not mistaken for a career (World Bank, 2026).

Fifth, keep evaluation structures explicit. Stereotype research is a reason to use structured criteria, not a reason to assume every committee is hopeless (Heilman, 2001).

Sixth, do not use developing-country contexts as a deficit story. Some of the highest political shares are there. The relevant question is which ladder—political, administrative, corporate—is being climbed, and what rights sit under it (UN Women, 2026a; World Bank, 2024).

Conclusion

Women's leadership is no longer a novelty at the middle of many organizations or in many parliaments. It is still a rarity at the top of firms and in cabinets (ILO, 2025; UN Women, 2026a). The reviewed theories—role congruity, tokenism, descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes—give a language for why occupancy lags style research (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kanter, 1977; Heilman, 2001; Eagly et al., 2003). Official series from IPU, UN Women, ILO and the World Bank give the counts and the legal weather.

Pathways to greater representation will not be one pathway. Political rules, organizational feeder jobs, sponsorship, and care infrastructure work on different parts of the same problem. A student review cannot rank those tools for every country. It can insist that they be treated as tools, that numbers be taken from named publications, and that women and men not be written as fixed opposites. The gap this paper began with is institutional. The responses that have a published record are institutional as well.

References

- Eagly, A. H., Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C., & van Engen, M. L. (2003). Transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles: A meta-analysis comparing women and men. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(4), 569–591. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.4.569>
- Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573–598. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.109.3.573>
- Heilman, M. E. (2001). Description and prescription: How gender stereotypes prevent women's ascent up the organizational ladder. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 657–674. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00234>
- Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. (2010). Why men still get more promotions than women. *Harvard Business Review*, 88(9), 80–85.
- International Labour Organization. (2019). Women in business and management: The business case for change. ILO.
- International Labour Organization. (2025). Women in leadership roles. <https://www.ilo.org/bureau-employers-activities/areas-work/women-business-and-management/women-leadership-roles>
- International Labour Organization & Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2024). Women at work in G20 countries: Progress and policy action in 2024. ILO.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2025). Women in parliament 1995–2025. IPU.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2026). Women in parliament in 2025. IPU.
- Kanter, R. M. (1977). Some effects of proportions on group life: Skewed sex ratios and responses to token women. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(5), 965–990. <https://doi.org/10.1086/226425>
- Krook, M. L. (2009). Quotas for women in politics: Gender and candidate selection reform worldwide. Oxford University Press.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (n.d.). Gender wage gap (indicator). <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/gender-wage-gap.html>
- UN Women. (2026a). Facts and figures: Women's leadership and political participation. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-womens-leadership-and-political-participation>
- UN Women. (2026b). Only 1 in 7 countries is led by a woman as global political power remains dominated by men [Press release]. <https://www.unwomen.org/>
- UN Women. (2026c). Women in politics: 2026. <https://knowledge.unwomen.org/>
- World Bank. (2024). Women, business and the law 2024. World Bank.
- World Bank. (2026). Women, business and the law 2026. World Bank.
- World Economic Forum. (2024). Global gender gap report 2024. World Economic Forum.

Declarations

◆ Funding	This research received no external funding.
◆ Conflict of Interest	The author declares no conflict of interest.
◆ Data Availability Statement	Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analysed in this study.
◆ Ethical Statement	Ethical approval was not required because the study is based exclusively on publicly available data and published literature and did not involve human participants.
◆ AI Use Disclosure	AI-assisted tools, where used, were employed solely to support language editing, clarity, and organization. The author retains full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and final content of the published work.

Journal Policies *JuriSocial Journal of Social Sciences*

OPEN ACCESS & LICENCE

All articles are freely available on publication under CC BY-NC 4.0. Readers may share and adapt the work for non-commercial purposes with proper attribution.

PEER REVIEW

Every research article undergoes double-blind peer review by at least two independent reviewers.

PLAGIARISM POLICY

All submissions are screened with similarity-detection software; plagiarism in any form leads to rejection.

CORRECTIONS & RETRACTIONS

Errors are corrected through published corrigenda; retractions follow COPE guidelines.

PUBLICATION CHARGES

No article publishing fee charged.

COPYRIGHT

Authors retain copyright and grant JJSS the right of first publication.

PUBLICATION ETHICS

JJSS follows the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Core Practices and guidelines.

GENERATIVE AI POLICY

AI tools cannot be listed as authors. Any substantive use must be disclosed; authors remain fully responsible for the content.

ARCHIVING & INDEXING

Content is preserved through [PKP Preservation Network / LOCKSS]. DOIs are registered with Crossref.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors or the publisher.

Submissions & enquiries editor@jjss.jurisocial.org ◆ <https://socialsciences.jurisocial.org/>