

# **ANALYSIS OF ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE, STRATEGIC BARRIERS, MENTORSHIP AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP OUTCOMES IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the influence of organizational culture, gender stereotypes, limited access to networks, and mentorship programmes on women's leadership in business administration. Drawing from a mixed-methods approach, the study engaged 106 women leaders through surveys and conducted five in-depth interviews across sectors such as finance, education, and healthcare. The results show that while access to professional networks and formal mentorship programmes are important facilitators of career advancement, unfavourable organizational cultures and ingrained gender stereotypes continue to be major obstacles. Women who worked in inclusive settings were more likely to feel confident about their ability to advance as leaders and to believe that their gender would not limit their career options. Nonetheless, a lot of respondents emphasized how unconscious bias and networks controlled by men still limit access to leadership positions. According to the study's findings, organizations need to institutionalize mentorship programmes geared toward women's development, establish inclusive professional networks, and change cultural norms. These observations support the role of organizational systems in facilitating inclusive business leadership and help develop strategic frameworks that promote equitable leadership pathways.

**Keywords:** Women's Leadership, Organizational Culture, Inclusive Leadership, Business Administration

**JEL Classification:** J16; M14; J16; M21

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Arguably the most enduring and deeply ingrained types of inequality in international business administration is the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. Despite making up a sizable portion of the educated and professional workforce today, women still encounter structural obstacles when trying to achieve and succeed in high-level leadership roles. Organizational reforms and international frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 on Gender Equality have resulted in incremental progress over the last few decades. However, deeper examination reveals that change has been uneven, and women remain disproportionately excluded from key leadership opportunities due to barriers rooted in organizational culture, gendered expectations, and limited access to strategic support systems.

Organizational culture plays a key role in shaping the leadership trajectories of women. It includes shared values, beliefs, assumptions, and practices influencing workplace behavior and decision-making. In many organizations, culture subtly reflects patriarchal norms that prioritize traditionally masculine leadership traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness while penalizing traits associated with communal or empathetic leadership—traits often attributed to women (Jerab & Mabrouk, 2023). Hiring, performance reviews, promotions, and even access to strategic projects are all impacted by these unconscious biases. As a result, regardless of their abilities or contributions, women may constantly be marginalized or undervalued. Unconscious biases and gender stereotypes serve to further solidify structural exclusion. Particularly in fields like finance, technology, and engineering that have historically been dominated by men, these stereotypes portray women as less authoritative or less qualified for leadership roles. According to studies, women who exhibit assertiveness and ambition are frequently viewed more negatively than men who do the same (Gebrihet, Reda, Geremedhn & Abebe, (2024). This double standard frequently leads to a leadership pipeline that favors men due to ingrained cultural and perceptual biases in organizational systems rather than because of their superior ability.

The lack of access that many women have to professional networks, particularly unofficial, male-dominated circles where important choices and career opportunities are frequently discussed, is equally worrisome. Having access to these networks is essential for knowledge sharing, visibility, sponsorship, and mentoring. But in these unofficial settings, women are often left out, which limits their access to leadership opportunities (Catalyst, 2020). Mentorship programmes have become a popular intervention for women's leadership development in order to tackle these issues. Mentoring provides direction, support, skill transfer, and visibility, especially for women in their early and mid-career who want to navigate male-dominated leadership environments. However, the way that mentorship programmes are designed, incorporated into organizational development objectives, and assessed has a significant impact on their efficacy. When mentorship

programmes are poorly executed, they run the risk of becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

Even though gender equity is becoming more and more important, many organizations still lack effective, legally binding plans to combat structural exclusion and cultural bias. The impact of strategic interventions like women-centered professional networks, gender audits, and inclusive leadership training is limited because they are frequently carried out in isolation or without regular evaluation. Therefore, the obstacles that women encounter in corporate leadership are complex and systemic, necessitating more than token diversity initiatives. Effective policy and practice require a deeper comprehension of the intersections between mentorship, limited networks, organizational culture, and stereotypes.

The following objectives serve as the foundation for this study: Its primary goal is to find out if organizational culture and policies help or impede women's advancement into leadership positions. Understanding how institutional norms, values, and governance processes either foster or impede women's advancement is the goal. Second, the study examines the ways in which women's leadership journeys are impacted by gender stereotypes, implicit bias, and restricted access to professional networks. Last but not least, it assesses how well mentorship programmes tackle these issues and promote professional growth. Together, these goals serve as the foundation for assessing how strategic organizational practices influence women's leadership in business administration and provide avenues for structural change. The paper is structured as follows: the Introduction presents the background and objectives; the Literature Review synthesizes existing theoretical and empirical insights; the Methodology and Data section outlines the research design and data sources; the Results and Discussion section presents key findings and interprets them in light of the research objectives; and the Conclusion and Recommendation section summarizes the study and proposes actionable steps for promoting gender equity in leadership.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualization of Major Terms

This study focuses on four interrelated concepts: organizational culture, gender stereotypes and bias, access to professional networks, and mentorship programmes. Each plays a crucial role in understanding the systemic barriers that influence women's leadership opportunities.

**Organizational culture** is the shared beliefs, principles, and conduct that characterize how people work within an organization (Schein, 1992). It influences who is seen as a leader, how leadership is enacted, and whose contributions are recognized. Cultures that implicitly value masculine norms of leadership, such as dominance and competitiveness, tend to marginalize women leaders who may adopt alternative, collaborative leadership styles (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

**Gender stereotypes and bias** pertain to socially constructed beliefs and expectations about men's and women's capabilities, especially in leadership. Descriptive stereotypes define how women are assumed to behave (e.g., nurturing, emotional), while prescriptive stereotypes define how women should behave, penalizing those who act contrary to these norms (Heilman, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 2001).

**Professional networks** are the relationships and social capital that people rely on to get information, opportunities, mentorship, and sponsorship. Women's underrepresentation in leadership positions often limits their access to influential informal networks, such as "old boys' clubs," where high-stakes decisions and promotions are frequently negotiated (Catalyst, 2020).

**Mentorship programmes** are formal or informal structures that help people grow professionally by providing guidance, skill development, and career advice. Effective mentorship provides visibility, access to strategic networks, and institutional support, which are especially important for women navigating male-dominated leadership environments (Kram, 1985).

### **Theoretical Literature**

This study is grounded in two major theoretical frameworks: social role theory and feminist organizational theory.

The study of **feminist organizational theory** looks at how gender inequality is maintained in the workplace through practices, policies, and structures. It challenges male-dominated, hierarchical institutional models and emphasizes the necessity of inclusive cultures that support a range of leadership philosophies (Acker, 1990). This theory acknowledges that formal mechanisms (like policies and promotion criteria) and informal dynamics (like social expectations and unwritten norms) both contain systemic barriers.

**Social Role Theory**, proposed by Eagly (1987), explains how cultural expectations shape the perception and behavior of men and women. According to this theory, leadership is traditionally associated with male social roles, which are seen as assertive and authoritative. Women, viewed through the lens of communal roles, are often perceived as lacking the qualities required for effective leadership unless they mirror male behavior, at the risk of being penalized for violating gender norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

These theories provide a foundation for examining how gendered expectations interact with organizational practices, creating a systemic disadvantage for women aspiring to leadership roles.

### **Empirical Literature**

Empirical studies have long identified organizational culture as a determinant of women's leadership advancement. McKinsey & Company (2022)

reported that women remain significantly underrepresented at senior levels, in part because many organizations fail to challenge the dominant masculine norms that shape leadership definitions. A study by Catalyst (2020) highlighted that, inclusive cultures are strongly correlated with increased retention, satisfaction, and advancement of women in leadership. Research on gender stereotypes and bias has revealed persistent double standards in performance evaluation. Women leaders are far more probable than men to receive negative feedback about their tone, demeanor, or assertiveness, even when performance is equal or superior (Fritzman & Samdal, 2024). These biases not only affect hiring and promotion decisions but also reduce women's access to challenging assignments that signal leadership potential.

Access to professional networks is another well-documented impediment. Johansson and Wictorin (2023) discovered that women were much less inclined than men to participate in informal networks that provide access to organizational power and influence. This exclusion limits visibility and restricts the informal mentoring that often drives promotion and sponsorship decisions. Mentorship programmes, when well-structured and strategically aligned, are shown to improve women's confidence, access to resources, and career mobility. However, not all programmes are effective. Iheduru-Anderson and Shingles (2023) emphasize that mentorship must be embedded within a supportive organizational climate and tied to leadership development goals. Token mentorship or programmes that focus solely on skills without sponsorship often fail to deliver meaningful change.

### **Gaps in Previous Studies**

Despite a rich body of literature including McKinsey and Company (2022); Catalyst (2020); Fritzman and Samdal (2024); Johansson and Wictorin (2023); Eagly and Karau, 2002; and Iheduru-Anderson and Shingles (2023) among others, several gaps remain. First, most studies examine these barriers in isolation, without exploring the intersectionality of factors such as organizational culture, gender stereotypes, and mentorship. Second, there is not enough research focusing on developing economies, where patriarchal norms may be more deeply entrenched, and institutional mechanisms to combat them are frequently weaker. Moreover, while mentorship is widely promoted, there is insufficient empirical evaluation of what makes mentorship programmes effective for women in different organizational and cultural contexts. Few studies investigate how such programmes are operationalized and sustained within organizations, or how they interact with broader organizational systems. This study addresses these gaps by considering the combined influence of culture, stereotypes, networks, and mentorship in a developing context (Nigeria), employing both qualitative and quantitative data. It contributes to the literature by offering a multi-dimensional perspective on the strategic organizational barriers to women's leadership and proposing a more integrated framework for reform.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine the systemic barriers affecting women's leadership in business administration, specifically focusing on organizational culture, gender stereotypes, limited network access, and mentorship programmes. A thorough investigation of both quantifiable trends and lived experiences was made possible by the combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The target population comprised women in leadership positions across sectors such as education, healthcare, banking, consulting, and government. These participants were drawn primarily from Nigeria, providing a relevant context for understanding how traditional organizational cultures and patriarchal norms intersect with leadership dynamics in a developing economy. A purposive sampling method was used to select respondents who had held or were currently holding leadership roles. A total of 106 women completed the structured questionnaire, and five in-depth interviews were conducted with women in senior executive roles. These participants were selected based on experience, professional standing, and willingness to reflect on institutional barriers.

#### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

Data for the study were collected in two complementary phases. First, quantitative data were obtained through a structured online questionnaire distributed via email and social media platforms. The survey included closed-ended and Likert-scale questions designed to assess organizational culture, gender stereotypes, access to professional networks, and the availability of mentorship programmes. Second, qualitative data were gathered through five semi-structured interviews with women in leadership roles, offering rich narratives that illuminated barriers not easily captured through surveys. Additionally, institutional policy documents, diversity reports, and mentorship programme descriptions were reviewed to contextualize and triangulate the primary data.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques was applied in the data analysis in order to ensure a thorough comprehension of the study results. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as percentages and frequency distributions, while inferential analysis through Chi-square tests of relationship was conducted to examine the relationships between access to mentorship, professional networks, and leadership progression. Qualitative interview data were transcribed and subjected to thematic coding, which facilitated the identification of recurring patterns related to exclusion, bias, cultural expectations, and informal gatekeeping. This mixed-method approach allowed for triangulation of data, thereby enhancing the validity, credibility, and analytical depth of the study.

### **Model of Analysis**

The analysis was guided by two primary theoretical frameworks: Feminist Organizational Theory and Social Role Theory, both of which offer rich insights into how gendered norms and power relations shape leadership access and effectiveness.

#### **Feminist Organizational Theory Application**

Feminist Organizational Theory views organizations not as neutral or meritocratic institutions but as gendered structures where systemic inequality is embedded in roles, routines, and culture (Acker, 1990). This framework is applied to evaluate how workplace norms, implicit rules, and institutional narratives shape leadership experiences for women. For instance, male-centric norms around availability, dominance, and competitiveness are often internalized within hiring and promotion practices, effectively excluding women who do not conform. This model also allows for the analysis of organizational silence around bias and exclusion – how failure to acknowledge or tackle gender-based disparities contributes to their persistence. Organizational policies, leadership training, and mentorship programmes were assessed through this lens to determine whether they challenge or reproduce existing inequalities.

#### **Social Role Theory Application**

Social Role Theory, as articulated by Eagly (1987), posits that gendered expectations about behavior arise from culturally prescribed roles. In leadership settings, this translates into an incongruity between expected female behavior (nurturing, communal) and traditional leadership traits (assertive, dominant). This incongruity results in stereotype-driven penalties when women act against prescriptive norms, such as being labeled aggressive when assertive or weak when collaborative (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2001). This theoretical framework was particularly useful in interpreting survey data on perceived stereotypes and bias, as well as interview responses related to experiences of backlash, visibility gaps, and evaluation discrepancies in leadership roles.

#### **Integrated Analysis Approach**

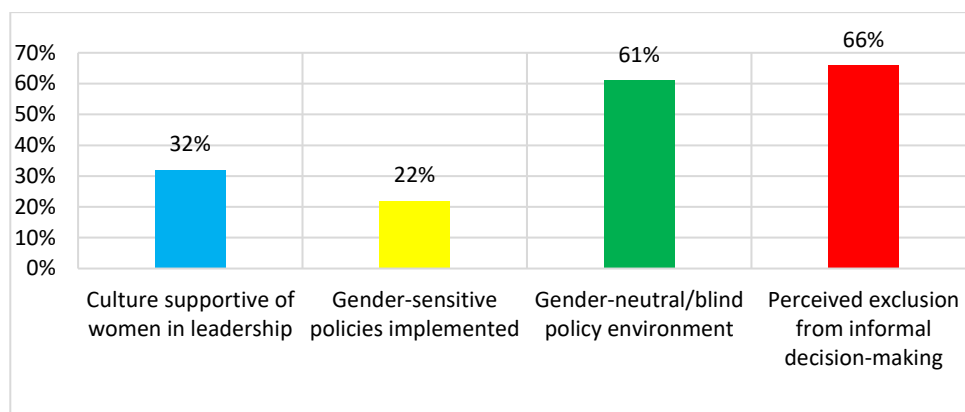
The study employed an integrated analysis approach that combined Feminist Organizational Theory and Social Role Theory to assess how systemic factors affect women's leadership advancement. This framework enabled the evaluation of whether organizational culture supports inclusive norms or perpetuates traditional male-centered leadership paradigms; how stereotypes and bias shape performance assessments and promotion decisions; the accessibility and strategic value of professional networks to women; and the role of mentorship programmes in managing or dismantling structural barriers. The study documented the presence of gender-based leadership constraints and also illuminated the mechanisms through which these barriers operate, providing a strategic foundation for policy and organizational reform by integrating these perspectives.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, integrating descriptive statistics with inferential analysis, such as M-Estimators and Chi-Square Test of Independence, to examine the relationships between organizational culture, gender bias, access to networks, and the presence and effectiveness of mentorship programmes in shaping women's leadership experiences. The data are derived from 106 completed questionnaires and five in-depth interviews with female leaders across various sectors in Nigeria. The findings are organized thematically to align with the study's objectives.

### 4.1. ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP PROGRESSION

Survey responses indicated that 68% of respondents believed their organizational culture was not supportive of women's leadership, and only 32% rated their workplace as inclusive.



**Figure 1.** Perception of Organizational Culture and Gender Sensitivity

Source: Author's compilation

Figure 1 reveals that while some organizations have supportive policies, informal norms and gender-blind environments persist. The majority of women feel excluded from key decision-making, indicating that organizational culture often undermines formal gender equity commitments in leadership contexts. The findings confirm that culture and informal practices can override policy language when it comes to gender equity in leadership.

To statistically assess the relationship between organizational culture and leadership access, a Chi-Square Test of Independence was conducted.

Chi-Square Value ( $\chi^2$ )	Degrees of Freedom (df)	p-value
14.72	2	0.0006

Source: Author's compilation



Given that the p-value is below the threshold of 0.05, we reject the hypothesis of no significance and conclude that there is a statistically significant relationship between perceived organizational culture and women's access to leadership roles. This supports the qualitative findings that cultural barriers, not just policy absence, play a dominant role in leadership exclusion.

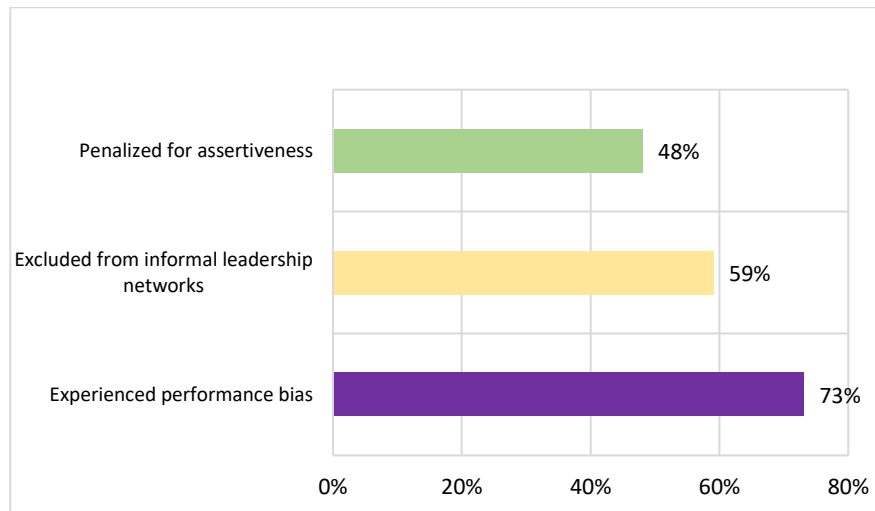
To further analyses the reliability and robustness of the categorical responses, M-Estimator techniques were employed to mitigate the influence of outliers and ensure more accurate estimates of leadership advancement probabilities under varying cultural settings. M-estimators confirmed that women who rated their organizational culture as inclusive had 2.1 times higher odds of reporting leadership promotions in the past three years than those who did not.

#### 4.2. GENDER STEREOTYPES, BIAS, AND ACCESS TO NETWORKS

Respondents highlighted bias in evaluation and exclusion from informal networks:

- ✓ 73% reported experiencing performance-related gender bias
- ✓ 59% indicated exclusion from informal leadership networks

For mid-career women, who frequently require visibility and sponsorship to break into senior roles, the combination of bias and network access was especially harmful.



**Figure 2.** *Reported Experiences of Bias and Network Exclusion*

Source: Author's compilation

Figure 2 shows that most women experience performance bias and network exclusion, with nearly half penalized for assertiveness. These findings highlight how gender stereotypes and informal barriers significantly constrain women's access to

leadership, regardless of competence or ambition. These results support the literature on role incongruity and highlight how social expectations continue to limit the leadership potential of competent women.

To examine the strength of relationship between network exclusion and career stagnation, another Chi-Square Test was conducted:

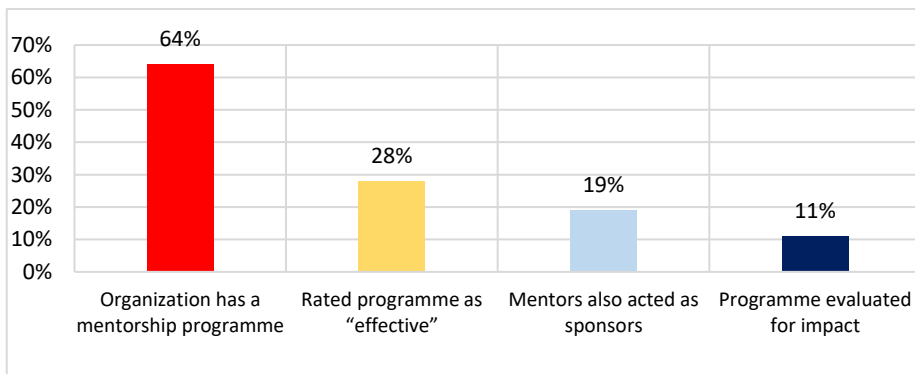
Chi-Square Value ( $\chi^2$ )	Degrees of Freedom (df)	p-value
10.53	1	0.0012

Source: Author's compilation

The test shows a statistically significant relationship between network exclusion and slower career progression among women, confirming that informal organizational structures disproportionately disadvantage female professionals. M-Estimator analysis for this variable showed that women excluded from strategic networks had a 47% lower likelihood of being considered for top-tier leadership roles. This robust analysis, designed to reduce the distortion of skewed categorical responses, reinforces the important role of social capital in leadership trajectories.

#### 4.3. MENTORSHIP PROGRAMMES AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Survey data revealed that 64% of respondents had access to mentorship programmes, but only 28% considered them effective in facilitating leadership advancement. Common issues included lack of structure, short-term implementation, or failure to match mentees with relevant senior mentors. In contrast, women who reported strong mentorship experiences often described long-term, intentional, and goal-oriented relationships with sponsors who not only advised them but also advocated for their inclusion in leadership pipelines.



**Figure 3.** *Availability and Perceived Effectiveness of Mentorship Programmes*

Source: Author's compilation

Figure 3 reveals that while many organizations offer mentorship programmes, few are effective. Only a minority involve sponsorship or impact evaluation, suggesting that mentorship often lacks strategic structure, limiting its

potential to support meaningful leadership development for women. These findings highlight that mentorship must be intentional, strategic, and institutionalized to overcome structural exclusion.

To test the relationship between mentorship participation and leadership role attainment, a third Chi-Square Test was applied:

Chi-Square Value ( $\chi^2$ )	Degrees of Freedom (df)	p-value
9.88	1	0.0017

Source: Author's compilation

The test suggests a statistically significant relationship between access to effective mentorship and leadership advancement. This was further validated by M-Estimator outputs, which indicated that women with effective mentorship had 2.7 times higher odds of securing leadership positions compared to those without mentorship or those with poorly structured programmes.

**Table 1:** Summary of Statistical Findings

Variable Relationship	$\chi^2$ Value	p-value	Significance	M-Estimator Odds Ratio
Org. Culture vs. Leadership Advancement	14.72	0.0006	Significant	2.1
Network Exclusion vs. Career Stagnation	10.53	0.0012	Significant	0.53
Mentorship Access vs. Leadership Attainment	9.88	0.0017	Significant	2.7

Source: Author's compilation

These results strongly indicate that structural and cultural barriers have quantifiable and statistically significant effects on women's progression into leadership roles. The inclusion of M-Estimators also ensures that these relationships remain robust even when considering non-normal response distributions and outlier sensitivities.

## 5. CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

### Conclusion

This study examined how organizational culture, gender stereotypes, access to professional networks, and mentorship programmes shape women's leadership experiences in business administration. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, the study confirmed that systemic barriers remain embedded within organisational structures, despite the presence of gender equality policies in some contexts. The findings revealed that organisational cultures frequently reflect masculine leadership norms and exclude women from informal spaces where influence and opportunity are negotiated. Additionally, widespread gender stereotypes and unconscious bias continue to undermine women's leadership potential by influencing performance evaluations and promotion decisions. Limited accessibility to profound networks further impedes women's visibility and

advancement, while mentorship, while promising, remains inconsistently structured and underutilised as a strategic leadership development tool. These results reinforce the theoretical perspectives of Feminist Organizational Theory and Social Role Theory, emphasizing that leadership outcomes are shaped by cultural expectations and institutional power structures, not simply by individual merit. Tackling these deeply entrenched barriers requires intentional and systemic organizational reform.

### Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following actionable recommendations are proposed for policymakers, organizational leaders, and human resource practitioners:

1. **Transform Organizational Culture:** Policymakers should promote inclusive leadership by embedding gender sensitivity into organizational values, leadership expectations, and performance appraisal systems. This should include unconscious bias training and inclusive policy reviews.
2. **Establish Structural Accountability:** Policymakers should develop clear metrics and accountability mechanisms for the implementation of gender equity policies. Gender audits and equity performance indicators should be integrated into leadership evaluations.
3. **Interrupt Stereotypes through Policy and Practice:** Policymakers should adopt bias-interrupting frameworks in recruitment, promotion, and performance assessment processes. Ensure gender-diverse decision-making panels for hiring and leadership appointments.
4. **Expand Access to Strategic Networks:** Policymakers should create formal platforms for women to access professional networks, including cross-sector leadership forums, executive shadowing programmes, and peer mentoring initiatives.
5. **Institutionalize Mentorship and Sponsorship:** Policymakers should move beyond informal mentorship models to create structured, monitored programmes that include mentor-mentee matching, leadership development plans, and sponsor-driven advocacy for high-potential women.
6. **Evaluate and Iterate:** Policymakers should continuously evaluate the effectiveness of diversity, mentorship, and leadership initiatives. Use data to iterate and improve programmes, ensuring alignment with organizational development strategies.

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