

# Rethinking Gender and Leadership: Effectiveness, Context, and Organisational Culture

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## Abstract

The debate over whether men or women make better leaders continues across academic and professional spheres. This paper examines theoretical perspectives on leadership, synthesises empirical findings from organisational psychology and management studies, and evaluates gender-related leadership styles and outcomes. Utilising a narrative literature review of quantitative, qualitative, and meta-analytic studies, the evidence suggests that differences in leadership effectiveness are small and context-dependent; women often exhibit transformational leadership behaviours associated with positive organisational outcomes, whereas men may predominate in certain hierarchical structures due to social and institutional factors rather than inherent aptitude. The conclusion emphasises that leadership effectiveness is shaped more by individual competencies, situational demands, and organisational culture than by gender alone. The paper calls for future research on intersectionality and structural barriers in leadership pathways.

**Keywords:** gender, leadership effectiveness, transformational leadership, organisational performance, gender stereotypes

## Introduction

The question of whether men or women make better leaders remains highly contested in both popular discourse and academic research. Leadership has historically been conceptualised as a masculine domain, shaped by patriarchal social structures and gendered expectations that favoured men's access to power and authority (Ayensu et al., 2024; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kark & Buengeler, 2024; Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). Early leadership models reinforced this bias by privileging traits such as assertiveness, dominance, and decisiveness, characteristics traditionally associated with men (Northouse, 2022). As a result, women were frequently perceived as less suitable for leadership roles, regardless of competence or performance. These perceptions contributed to systematic exclusions of women from senior leadership positions across political, corporate, and institutional spheres. Despite significant social change, remnants of these stereotypes continue to influence leadership selection and evaluation processes. Consequently, the debate surrounding gender and leadership effectiveness remains both empirically and socially relevant.

In recent decades, the global rise of women in leadership roles has prompted renewed scholarly interest in gender differences in leadership styles and outcomes (Agaragimova, 2022; Chin, 2011; Shen & Joseph, 2020). Women's increased representation in executive management, academia, politics, and civil society has challenged longstanding assumptions about leadership capability (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This shift has coincided with broader transformations in organisational

structures, which increasingly value collaboration, emotional intelligence, and adaptability. Such competencies align closely with leadership behaviours often associated with women, particularly transformational leadership styles (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Empirical studies have therefore begun to question whether traditional male-dominated leadership paradigms remain optimal in contemporary organisations. Importantly, this evolving context necessitates a reassessment of leadership effectiveness beyond gendered stereotypes. The growing diversity of leadership experiences underscores the need for evidence-based evaluation rather than normative assumptions.

Academic research on leadership effectiveness has increasingly moved away from trait-based explanations towards behavioural and relational frameworks. Transformational leadership theory, for example, emphasises motivation, individualised consideration, and shared vision, qualities shown to enhance organisational performance and employee satisfaction (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Meta-analytic evidence suggests that women, on average, demonstrate slightly higher levels of transformational leadership behaviours than men (Eagly et al., 2003). However, these differences are modest and do not imply inherent superiority but rather reflect socialisation processes and contextual expectations. Men and women are often encouraged to develop different interpersonal skills from early childhood, which may influence leadership behaviour later in life (Hyde, 2014). Leadership effectiveness must therefore be understood as socially constructed rather than biologically determined. This perspective challenges essentialist arguments that link leadership capacity directly to gender.

Despite increasing empirical sophistication, evaluations of leadership effectiveness remain susceptible to gender bias. Research consistently demonstrates that identical leadership behaviours may be interpreted differently depending on whether they are enacted by a man or a woman (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women leaders often encounter a “double bind” in which assertiveness is penalised as unfeminine, while communal behaviour is interpreted as weak or insufficiently authoritative (Costigan, 2024). Such biases distort performance appraisals and may obscure objective assessments of leadership outcomes. Men, conversely, may benefit from prescriptive stereotypes that align masculinity with leadership competence. These dynamics complicate attempts to compare leadership effectiveness across genders in a neutral manner. As a result, observed differences may reflect evaluative bias rather than substantive performance disparities.

Organisational context plays a critical role in shaping both leadership behaviour and its perceived effectiveness. Leadership demands vary across industries, institutional cultures, and situational conditions such as crisis, stability, or innovation phases (Northouse, 2022). Certain contexts may reward directive, hierarchical leadership styles, while others benefit from participatory and inclusive approaches. Empirical research indicates that women’s leadership styles are often especially effective in knowledge-based, service-oriented, and team-driven environments (Eagly & Carli, 2007). However, men and women alike demonstrate behavioural flexibility when organisational incentives and norms encourage it. This evidence undermines claims that leadership effectiveness can be meaningfully compared without accounting for situational fit. Leadership outcomes are therefore better understood as the product of interaction between individual capability and contextual demands.

Beyond individual behaviour, structural and institutional factors significantly influence leadership trajectories. Gender disparities in leadership representation are shaped by unequal access to

mentoring, networks, and promotion opportunities rather than differences in ability (Lips, 2020). Women frequently encounter barriers such as occupational segregation, work–family role expectations, and biased recruitment practices. These constraints limit leadership opportunities and skew the observable distribution of leaders across genders. Consequently, the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership should not be interpreted as evidence of inferior leadership potential. Instead, it reflects systemic inequalities embedded within organisational and societal structures. Addressing these barriers is essential for achieving equitable leadership evaluation and development.

This paper critically evaluates the claim that one gender is inherently a better leader than the other by synthesising theoretical and empirical evidence. It situates the discussion within contemporary leadership theory and draws upon organisational, psychological, and sociological research. Attention is paid to leadership styles, effectiveness outcomes, and the influence of gendered expectations. Rather than advancing a binary conclusion, the analysis emphasises the multidimensional nature of leadership effectiveness. Gender is treated as one of several interacting variables rather than a deterministic factor. This approach allows for a more nuanced and evidence-driven understanding of leadership. Ultimately, the paper argues that leadership effectiveness is contingent upon competence, context, and opportunity rather than gender alone.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Leadership research is grounded in several theories that explain how individuals influence others to achieve organisational goals. Early trait theories proposed that leaders possess innate characteristics, such as intelligence, confidence, and decisiveness, that distinguish them from non-leaders (Stogdill, 1948). While influential, trait theory has been criticised for reinforcing essentialist assumptions and failing to account for situational and contextual factors (Fiedler, 1967). Behavioural and contingency theories shifted focus from inherent traits to observable behaviours and the fit between leadership style and situational demands (Fiedler, 1967). These frameworks emphasise that effective leadership depends on both the leader’s actions and the organisational or environmental context. Transformational leadership theory, central to contemporary leadership studies, highlights the role of inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and consideration for followers’ needs in driving organisational success (Bass, 1990; Bass & Riggio, 2006). This study draws upon these theoretical perspectives to examine the interplay between gender, leadership style, and organisational outcomes.

Role congruity theory provides a critical lens for understanding gender dynamics in leadership. The theory posits that prejudice arises when there is a perceived incongruity between gender stereotypes and leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women are stereotypically associated with communal traits, such as warmth and cooperation, whereas leadership is culturally coded with agentic traits, including assertiveness and decisiveness (Eagly & Karau, 2002). When women display agentic behaviours, they may face social penalties, whereas men displaying communal behaviours may be devalued in leadership evaluations (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). This framework helps explain observed disparities in leadership emergence, appraisal, and representation. By integrating role congruity theory with leadership style theories, the study considers both behavioural competencies and social perceptions. Understanding these dynamics is essential for evaluating the complex relationship between gender and leadership effectiveness.

Transformational leadership theory offers an explanatory model for gender differences in leadership behaviour. Research suggests that women are more likely to exhibit transformational leadership behaviours, including motivation, empowerment, and attention to individual follower needs (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Eagly et al., 2003). These behaviours are associated with higher follower satisfaction, team cohesion, and organisational innovation (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Conversely, task-oriented or transactional behaviours, often observed among men, focus on structure, monitoring, and goal achievement (Eagly et al., 2003). The study draws on these distinctions to examine how leadership style mediates the relationship between gender and organisational outcomes. By situating leadership behaviours within an organisational context, transformational and transactional frameworks provide a mechanism for understanding effectiveness beyond essentialist gender assumptions. This perspective emphasises the role of learned competencies over innate traits.

Social role theory further contextualises gendered leadership patterns by linking behaviour to societal expectations. According to this theory, men and women internalise culturally prescribed roles, which influence leadership behaviours and perceptions (Eagly, 1987). Women's relational and collaborative behaviours reflect socialised expectations for communal conduct, whereas men's task-oriented tendencies reflect agentic socialisation (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Carli, 2007). These learned behaviours interact with organisational norms and expectations, affecting both leadership emergence and evaluations. By incorporating social role theory, the study accounts for the influence of socialisation, stereotypes, and institutional context on leadership effectiveness. This framework highlights that gender differences are not biologically predetermined but socially constructed and reinforced (Koenig et al., 2011). Understanding these dynamics is critical for identifying strategies that promote equitable leadership opportunities.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for the study. Trait, behavioural, and transformational leadership theories explain the competencies and actions that contribute to effectiveness (Bass, 1990; Fiedler, 1967). Role congruity and social role theories elucidate how gender stereotypes and societal expectations influence leadership evaluation and opportunity (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly, 1987). Together, these frameworks allow for analysis of both individual behaviours and the social context in which leadership occurs (Bass & Riggio, 2006). They also provide a basis for examining how gender interacts with organisational culture and situational demands to shape outcomes. By combining leadership and gender theories, the study moves beyond simplistic comparisons of male and female leaders. This integrated theoretical approach supports a nuanced investigation of the factors that contribute to effective leadership.

## Literature Review

### Empirical Evidence on Gender and Leadership

Empirical research on gender and leadership effectiveness spans a wide range of methodological approaches, including organisational assessments, leader self-reports, subordinate evaluations, and objective performance indicators. Early studies often relied on perceptual measures, which reflected prevailing gender norms as much as actual leadership behaviour. More recent research has adopted multi-source and longitudinal designs to improve validity and reduce bias (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This body of literature consistently demonstrates that gender differences in leadership effectiveness are generally small. However, even small differences have been magnified in public discourse and organisational decision-making. Scholars, therefore, caution against overinterpreting gender-based

comparisons without contextual analysis. The literature increasingly emphasises the need to distinguish between leadership style, effectiveness, and evaluation.

Meta-analytic studies provide some of the most robust evidence on gender and leadership styles. A seminal meta-analysis by Eagly et al. (2003) found that women scored slightly higher than men on measures of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership includes behaviours such as individualised consideration, inspirational motivation, and participative decision-making. Women were also more likely to demonstrate collaborative and relational leadership behaviours. By contrast, men and women did not differ significantly in transactional leadership behaviours, such as contingent reward and corrective action. These findings challenge assumptions that men are inherently more effective leaders. Instead, they suggest that women's leadership styles often align with contemporary organisational needs.

Research examining organisational performance outcomes presents more mixed and context-dependent findings. Some studies report that organisations with greater gender diversity in leadership positions experience higher levels of innovation, improved financial performance, and stronger employee engagement (Post & Byron, 2015). These benefits are often attributed to cognitive diversity, inclusive decision-making, and improved governance. However, other studies find negligible or inconsistent effects once industry type and firm size are controlled. Organisational culture, sectoral norms, and national context significantly moderate the relationship between gender and performance. Consequently, leadership effectiveness cannot be attributed solely to leader gender. The literature, therefore, highlights the importance of structural and environmental factors in shaping outcomes.

Gender stereotypes play a significant role in shaping leadership evaluations and perceptions of effectiveness. Research demonstrates that women leaders are often evaluated more harshly than men when they display assertive or dominant behaviours traditionally associated with leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This phenomenon is frequently described as a “double bind,” wherein women are penalised both for conforming to and deviating from gender norms. Conversely, men who engage in communal or relational leadership behaviours may receive less recognition or be perceived as weak. These evaluative biases complicate efforts to measure leadership effectiveness objectively. Performance appraisals may therefore reflect social expectations rather than actual outcomes. Such biases contribute to persistent gender disparities in leadership advancement.

Political leadership research offers additional insights into gender and leadership effectiveness, particularly during periods of crisis. Analyses of public health emergencies, including the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted effective responses by several female heads of government (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2021). These leaders were often praised for clear communication, empathy, and evidence-based decision-making. However, scholars caution against attributing these outcomes solely to gender. Policy frameworks, institutional capacity, and advisory structures play critical roles in shaping crisis responses. Moreover, selective case comparisons risk overstating gender effects. The political leadership literature thus reinforces the broader conclusion that leadership effectiveness is contextually produced rather than gender-determined.

## **Meta-Analyses of Leadership Styles**

Meta-analyses play a critical role in synthesising findings from diverse studies on gender and leadership styles. By aggregating data across organisational contexts, methodologies, and cultural

settings, meta-analyses provide robust estimates of gender-related differences in leadership behaviour. One of the most influential meta-analyses in this field was conducted by Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen (2003). Their findings indicate that women, on average, score slightly higher than men on measures of transformational leadership. Although the effect sizes were modest, they were consistent across samples and leadership settings. This consistency strengthens confidence in the reliability of the observed differences. Importantly, these findings challenge long-standing assumptions about male leadership superiority.

Transformational leadership is characterised by behaviours that inspire, motivate, and intellectually stimulate followers. Such behaviours include articulating a compelling vision, encouraging innovation, and providing individualised consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Meta-analytic evidence suggests that women engage more frequently in these behaviours than men. This pattern has been attributed to gendered socialisation processes that encourage women to develop interpersonal sensitivity and communication skills. Transformational leadership has been repeatedly linked to positive organisational outcomes, including higher employee engagement and performance. As a result, women's slightly higher scores in this domain have attracted considerable scholarly attention. However, researchers caution against interpreting these differences as biologically determined.

In addition to transformational leadership, meta-analyses reveal gender differences in collaborative and participative leadership behaviours. Women are more likely than men to adopt inclusive decision-making approaches that emphasise teamwork and shared responsibility (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These behaviours align closely with contemporary organisational values that prioritise cooperation and flexibility. Collaborative leadership styles are particularly effective in complex and knowledge-based work environments. Empirical evidence indicates that such styles enhance information sharing and collective problem-solving. Consequently, women's relational approach to leadership is often associated with improved team functioning. These findings highlight the relevance of leadership style rather than gender alone.

By contrast, meta-analytic research finds no significant gender differences in transactional leadership behaviours. Transactional leadership involves contingent reward, corrective action, and performance monitoring (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Both men and women demonstrate similar levels of effectiveness in these behaviours across organisational contexts. This evidence undermines claims that men are more suited to managing tasks, enforcing standards, or achieving short-term goals. It also suggests that leadership competence in transactional domains is not gender-specific. Instead, such competencies appear to be shaped by role expectations and professional training. These findings reinforce the argument that leadership skills are learned rather than innate.

A consistent outcome of meta-analytic studies is the association between women's leadership styles and positive follower outcomes. Women's relational and transformational approaches are frequently linked to higher levels of follower satisfaction, trust, and organisational commitment (Eagly et al., 2003). Teams led by women often report stronger cohesion and more supportive work environments. These outcomes are particularly valuable in settings where collaboration and morale are critical to performance. However, scholars caution that positive evaluations may also be influenced by contextual factors and evaluative bias. Followers may respond favourably to

relational leadership in environments that value inclusivity. Overall, meta-analyses suggest that women's leadership styles are well aligned with the demands of modern organisations.

## **Organisational Performance**

Research examining the relationship between gender and organisational performance has produced mixed and context-dependent findings. Early studies often relied on simplistic comparisons between male- and female-led organisations, yielding inconsistent results. More recent scholarship has adopted nuanced approaches that consider gender diversity within leadership teams rather than individual leaders alone (Post & Byron, 2015). This shift reflects growing recognition that leadership effectiveness operates within complex organisational systems. Performance outcomes such as profitability, innovation, and employee engagement are influenced by multiple interacting variables. Consequently, isolating the effect of leader gender presents significant methodological challenges. The literature, therefore, cautions against drawing deterministic conclusions about gender and organisational success.

A substantial body of research suggests that organisations with greater gender diversity in leadership experience positive performance outcomes. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that gender-diverse boards and executive teams are associated with improved financial performance and stronger governance practices (Post & Byron, 2015). These advantages are often attributed to increased cognitive diversity and broader perspectives in decision-making. Gender-diverse leadership teams may also be better equipped to understand diverse markets and stakeholder needs. Studies further suggest that inclusive leadership environments foster greater employee engagement and retention. Such outcomes are particularly relevant in competitive and innovation-driven industries. However, these benefits are not uniformly observed across all organisational contexts.

Innovation is one area in which gender-diverse leadership has shown notable potential benefits. Research indicates that diverse leadership teams are more likely to generate novel ideas and challenge entrenched assumptions (Østergaard et al., 2011). Women leaders are often associated with participative decision-making and openness to alternative viewpoints, which can enhance creative problem-solving. These qualities may be especially valuable in knowledge-intensive and technology-driven sectors. However, innovation outcomes are also shaped by organisational culture and resource availability. Gender diversity alone does not guarantee innovative performance. Rather, its effects depend on whether diversity is meaningfully integrated into organisational processes.

Despite these positive associations, other studies report weak or non-significant relationships between gender diversity and organisational performance. Some research finds that the benefits of diversity emerge only under specific conditions, such as supportive leadership climates and inclusive organisational cultures (Kochan et al., 2003). In environments characterised by resistance to diversity, increased representation of women may initially generate conflict or tokenism. Industry context also plays a critical moderating role, with stronger effects observed in service-oriented and professional sectors. These findings suggest that gender diversity interacts with institutional norms rather than operating as an independent performance driver. Performance outcomes must therefore be interpreted within broader organisational frameworks. This complexity explains the mixed empirical evidence in the literature.

Overall, the organisational performance literature highlights the importance of contextual moderation in evaluating gender and leadership effectiveness. Gender-diverse leadership appears most beneficial in organisations that value inclusion, collaboration, and innovation. Structural factors such as industry type, national culture, and governance systems significantly shape observed outcomes. These findings undermine claims that either men or women are inherently superior organisational leaders. Instead, leadership effectiveness emerges from the interaction between diversity, organisational practices, and strategic alignment. Policies promoting gender diversity must therefore be accompanied by cultural and institutional change. A holistic understanding of organisational performance requires moving beyond gender essentialism towards systemic analysis.

## **Gender Stereotypes and Evaluations**

Gender stereotypes play a central role in shaping how leadership behaviour is perceived and evaluated. Leadership roles are traditionally associated with agentic traits such as assertiveness, dominance, and decisiveness, which are culturally coded as masculine (Eagly & Karau, 2002). When men display these behaviours, they are often perceived as competent and authoritative. However, when women exhibit the same behaviours, they may be judged as aggressive or unfeminine. This asymmetry reflects deeply embedded gender norms rather than objective assessments of performance. Consequently, women leaders frequently face heightened scrutiny in leadership roles. Such dynamics complicate fair evaluations of leadership effectiveness.

Role congruity theory provides a robust framework for understanding gender bias in leadership evaluations. According to this theory, prejudice arises when there is incongruence between gender stereotypes and leadership role expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women are stereotypically associated with communal traits such as warmth, empathy, and cooperation. Leadership, however, is often defined in terms of agency and control. When women conform to communal expectations, they may be perceived as lacking authority. When they adopt agentic behaviours, they risk social backlash. This double bind constrains women's behavioural options in leadership roles.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that performance evaluations are influenced by gendered expectations. Experimental research shows that identical leadership behaviours are rated differently depending on whether the leader is presented as male or female (Heilman, 2012). Women leaders often receive lower competence ratings even when objective performance indicators are equivalent. These biases are particularly pronounced in male-dominated industries and senior leadership contexts. Men, by contrast, are more likely to benefit from assumptions of leadership competence. Such findings indicate that evaluative processes are not gender-neutral. Objective leadership effectiveness is, therefore, difficult to disentangle from perception bias.

Gender stereotypes also affect how communal leadership behaviours are interpreted. While communal behaviours such as collaboration and empathy are increasingly valued in modern organisations, men who display these behaviours may not receive equivalent recognition (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). In some contexts, male leaders engaging in relational leadership are perceived as weak or insufficiently authoritative. This dynamic reinforces narrow definitions of leadership that disadvantage both women and men. It also discourages leadership styles that promote inclusivity and team cohesion. Consequently, organisations may fail to reward behaviours associated with long-term effectiveness. Gendered evaluations thus restrict the full expression of leadership potential.

Overall, gender stereotypes significantly complicate the assessment of leadership effectiveness. Evaluations are shaped not only by outcomes and behaviours but also by normative expectations regarding gender roles. These biases contribute to persistent gender disparities in promotion, compensation, and leadership representation. They also obscure the true relationship between leadership style and organisational performance. Addressing evaluative bias requires structural interventions, such as standardised performance metrics and bias-aware appraisal systems. Without such measures, leadership assessments will continue to reflect social prejudice rather than empirical effectiveness. A comprehensive understanding of leadership must therefore account for the influence of gender stereotypes on evaluation processes.

## **Political Leadership**

Political leadership during crises has provided a unique lens for examining the effectiveness of men and women in executive roles. Analyses of responses to public health emergencies, natural disasters, and economic shocks have highlighted instances where female heads of government achieved notably effective outcomes (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2021). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, several countries led by women implemented swift public health interventions and maintained clear, empathetic communication with citizens. These leaders often emphasised transparency, science-based decision-making, and collaboration with advisory teams. Media narratives and public discourse frequently attributed these successes to gender, framing women as inherently more empathetic and prudent leaders. However, such attributions risk oversimplifying complex organisational and institutional processes. Leadership effectiveness in political crises depends on multiple interacting factors beyond the leader's gender.

Structural and institutional contexts are critical in shaping political leadership outcomes. Governance systems, policy frameworks, and state capacity determine the scope for effective decision-making (Eagly & Heilman, 2016). Female leaders operating in well-resourced, stable institutions may appear more effective due to favourable conditions rather than inherent gender traits. Conversely, male leaders may achieve similar or better outcomes in contexts with robust institutional support. Team composition, expert advisory networks, and legislative cooperation further mediate the success of crisis management. Recognising these contextual variables is essential to avoid overgeneralising from individual case studies. Political leadership outcomes should thus be interpreted within their broader institutional and policy environments.

Empirical studies also consider leadership style and gendered approaches in political contexts. Female leaders have been observed to adopt participative, communicative, and inclusive decision-making strategies, which align with transformational leadership principles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These approaches can enhance public trust, compliance with directives, and social cohesion during crises. Nonetheless, men in comparable positions have demonstrated similar effectiveness when employing equivalent leadership behaviours. Gender differences in style are often small relative to situational factors, such as crisis severity and institutional capacity. Therefore, attributing superior outcomes solely to gender risks reinforcing stereotypes. Effective political leadership is multidimensional, contingent upon both individual competencies and systemic factors.

Media framing and public perception further influence evaluations of political leadership by gender. Positive coverage of female leaders during crises often emphasises stereotypically “feminine” qualities such as empathy and collaboration (Beaman et al., 2021). Conversely, male leaders

displaying similar behaviours may be depicted as pragmatic or competent, highlighting the gendered lens through which leadership is assessed. Such narratives can amplify perceived gender differences even when objective performance metrics are comparable. This dynamic demonstrates the interaction between social perception, gender norms, and evaluations of effectiveness. Bias in public and media assessments complicates the measurement of leadership outcomes. Scholars caution that media-driven attributions can distort the empirical understanding of gender and political leadership.

Overall, research on political leadership underscores the complexity of evaluating gendered effectiveness. While female leaders have demonstrated successful crisis management in several case studies, outcomes are contingent upon institutional, policy, and team-related factors. Gender may influence leadership style and communication, but does not act in isolation. A nuanced understanding requires considering structural, situational, and social dimensions alongside individual leader traits. Attributing success solely to gender risks reinforcing stereotypes and ignoring systemic determinants of performance. Comparative analyses that account for context provide more reliable insights into leadership effectiveness. Political leadership studies, therefore, reinforce the broader conclusion that gender alone cannot explain leadership outcomes.

## Methods

This paper employs a **narrative literature review** of peer-reviewed journals, books, and authoritative reports from psychology and management science indexed in databases such as PsycINFO, Web of Science, and PubMed. Inclusion criteria focused on studies comparing leadership behaviours or outcomes by gender and those exploring mechanisms linking gender and leadership effectiveness. Empirical studies from the past 30 years were prioritised, with seminal works on transformational leadership and gender roles included for theoretical grounding.

## Findings

### Leadership Style Differences

Research consistently highlights differences in leadership styles between men and women across organisational settings, though these differences are often modest and context dependent. Women are frequently associated with transformational leadership behaviours, which emphasise motivating, empowering, and developing team members (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leaders inspire followers to exceed expectations, encourage innovation, and provide individualised support, aligning closely with contemporary organisational goals. Several studies suggest that women also demonstrate strong relational and communicative skills, facilitating collaborative decision-making and effective conflict resolution (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These relational approaches contribute to higher team cohesion and positive work climates. Importantly, these tendencies are shaped by socialisation and opportunity structures rather than innate gender traits. Consequently, leadership style reflects both individual behaviour and broader organisational norms.

Emotional intelligence has emerged as a key factor in explaining gender-related patterns in leadership effectiveness. Emotional intelligence encompasses self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management (Goleman, 1998). Some studies report that women score higher on specific dimensions of emotional intelligence, which can enhance team performance and communication (Joseph & Newman, 2010). These competencies allow leaders to navigate interpersonal challenges, manage stress, and foster trust within teams. High emotional intelligence

has been linked to effective transformational leadership, suggesting an important mechanism through which women's leadership styles influence outcomes. However, findings are not uniform, and individual variation is substantial. Emotional intelligence interacts with situational demands to shape leadership effectiveness.

Men are more frequently associated with task-oriented leadership behaviours, particularly in hierarchical and performance-driven contexts. Task-oriented leadership prioritises goal setting, performance monitoring, and structured processes, which are often rewarded in traditional corporate and bureaucratic environments (Judge et al., 2004). Men are also disproportionately represented in top executive positions, reflecting systemic access differences rather than innate capability. Structural barriers, cultural expectations, and historical exclusion have limited women's access to these roles, creating apparent gender differences in leadership representation. Research indicates that when men and women occupy similar positions, behavioural differences narrow significantly (Eagly et al., 2003). This suggests that observed gender differences in leadership are largely situational. Consequently, task orientation is contextually reinforced rather than biologically determined.

Comparative analyses indicate that neither gender is universally superior in leadership effectiveness. Women's relational and transformational styles often enhance team cohesion, satisfaction, and innovation, whereas men's task-oriented approaches can be more effective in structured, high-pressure contexts (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The effectiveness of a given leadership style depends on organisational culture, task complexity, and follower needs. Furthermore, hybrid styles combining relational and task-oriented behaviours are increasingly recognised as optimal in contemporary organisations (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Gendered tendencies interact with opportunity structures and situational demands to produce variable outcomes. This highlights the importance of assessing leadership style in context rather than relying on essentialist assumptions. Leadership effectiveness is thus multidimensional and adaptive.

Overall, differences in leadership style are shaped by a combination of socialisation, organisational opportunity, and contextual demands. Women's emphasis on collaboration, communication, and transformational behaviours reflects both learned competencies and expectations associated with gender roles. Men's task-oriented behaviours similarly reflect organisational norms and historical access to hierarchical positions. Emotional intelligence, relational skills, and participative decision-making contribute to effective leadership regardless of gender. Structural and institutional factors shape who occupies leadership roles and which behaviours are rewarded. By integrating behavioural tendencies with contextual and structural analysis, scholars can move beyond simplistic gender comparisons. Leadership style differences, therefore, illuminate patterns of adaptation rather than innate superiority.

## **Effectiveness and Organisational Outcomes**

Empirical research on leadership effectiveness indicates that gender differences are generally small when assessed using direct performance measures. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that men and women perform similarly across a range of leadership tasks, including decision-making, team supervision, and goal achievement (Eagly et al., 2003). Observed differences in style, such as relational versus task-oriented approaches, do not consistently translate into differences in overall effectiveness. These findings challenge longstanding stereotypes that men are inherently more

capable leaders than women. Furthermore, contextual factors often moderate the relationship between gender and effectiveness. The small magnitude of differences reinforces the importance of evaluating leadership in terms of competencies rather than gender. This perspective encourages organisations to focus on talent development and skill acquisition for all leaders.

Women's leadership styles frequently align with positive subordinate outcomes, particularly regarding job satisfaction, engagement, and organisational commitment. Transformational and relational behaviours, such as individualised consideration and collaborative decision-making, enhance follower morale and trust (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Teams led by women often report higher levels of cohesion and communication effectiveness. These outcomes contribute indirectly to improved organisational performance by fostering a supportive work climate. Notably, these advantages are more pronounced in environments that value collaboration, flexibility, and participatory leadership. However, positive effects are context-dependent and may be attenuated in rigid or hierarchical structures. Thus, women's leadership tendencies offer potential benefits when appropriately aligned with organisational culture.

Organisational performance is influenced more strongly by leadership adaptability, strategic competence, and cultural fit than by leader gender alone. Leaders who can adjust their style to suit situational demands tend to achieve better outcomes in both stable and dynamic environments (Yukl, 2013). Strategic competence, including decision-making acumen, vision articulation, and resource management, correlates consistently with organisational success. Leaders who align their behaviours with organisational values and culture facilitate higher engagement, innovation, and productivity. Gendered tendencies may influence preferred leadership approaches, but their effect on overall performance is modest compared to these broader factors. This evidence underscores the importance of evaluating leaders holistically rather than focusing on gender. Organisations benefit from cultivating adaptable, culturally attuned leadership talent across all demographics.

Comparative studies further indicate that effective leadership emerges from the interaction between individual behaviours and structural context. While women's relational and transformational styles often promote subordinate satisfaction, men's task-oriented styles may be better suited to structured, high-pressure, or deadline-driven environments (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Effectiveness depends on matching leadership behaviour to situational requirements, such as team composition, organisational culture, and strategic objectives. Consequently, gender should not be used as a proxy for leadership ability or potential. Instead, understanding the interplay between style, context, and follower needs provides a more accurate assessment of effectiveness. This approach enables organisations to leverage diverse leadership strengths. Leaders of both genders can excel when their skills are aligned with organisational requirements.

Overall, research on leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes supports a nuanced view of gender and leadership. Direct performance comparisons show minimal gender differences, and women's leadership styles are often linked to positive subordinate outcomes. Organisational performance is more strongly shaped by adaptability, strategic competence, and cultural alignment than by gender. Leadership effectiveness is therefore contextually produced rather than inherently gendered. Emphasising skills, behaviours, and situational fit allows for a more accurate understanding of effective leadership. These findings challenge essentialist assumptions about male

or female superiority in leadership roles. By prioritising competencies and organisational alignment, both men and women can achieve high effectiveness.

## **Influence of Stereotypes**

Gender stereotypes play a pervasive role in shaping both the emergence and evaluation of leaders within organisations. Leadership roles are frequently associated with agentic traits such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and dominance, which are culturally coded as masculine (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women aspiring to leadership may be evaluated against these standards, leading to penalties when they display assertive behaviours. Conversely, women demonstrating communal traits, such as empathy and collaboration, may be perceived as insufficiently authoritative. This phenomenon, often referred to as the “double bind,” constrains the behavioural options available to women in leadership roles. As a result, women must navigate competing expectations to achieve recognition and credibility. These dynamics underscore the importance of understanding leadership not simply as individual competence but as socially mediated perception.

Research demonstrates that gendered expectations influence leader emergence and career advancement. Studies show that men are more likely to be nominated for leadership positions in male-dominated environments, reflecting implicit assumptions about suitability and competence (Heilman, 2012). Women, even with equivalent qualifications and experience, often face higher barriers to entry due to stereotype-based evaluations. These barriers include biased performance appraisals, lower perceived promotability, and limited access to high-visibility projects. As a consequence, the leadership pipeline for women is constrained, perpetuating underrepresentation in senior roles. Stereotypes, therefore, operate both as perceptual filters and structural impediments. Addressing these challenges requires organisational awareness and deliberate intervention.

The double bind phenomenon is particularly salient when women adopt traditionally “masculine” leadership behaviours. Research indicates that assertive, decisive, or competitive behaviours in women are often judged more negatively than the same behaviours in men (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Women may be seen as aggressive or unlikable, undermining their evaluations and social influence. Conversely, women who conform to communal stereotypes may be deemed warm but lacking authority. This creates a paradox: behaviour that signals competence may reduce likeability, while behaviour that enhances social approval may reduce perceptions of effectiveness. The double bind thus complicates leadership performance assessments. Organisational policies must explicitly account for these biases to promote equitable evaluation.

Stereotypes also shape follower perceptions and expectations, influencing organisational outcomes. Followers often respond differently to male and female leaders based on implicit gender norms, which can affect compliance, engagement, and team cohesion (Koenig et al., 2011). For example, subordinates may expect women to provide support and relational guidance, while men are expected to provide direction and decisiveness. When leaders violate these expectations, even with high competence, follower evaluations may be adversely affected. Such perceptions highlight the intersection of leader behaviour, follower expectations, and gendered stereotypes. Leadership effectiveness is therefore co-constructed between leaders and followers within a cultural context. Organisations benefit from training and awareness programs to reduce the impact of stereotype-driven perceptions.

Overall, the influence of gender stereotypes is a critical factor in leadership research. Stereotypes affect both the selection and evaluation of leaders, creating structural and perceptual barriers for women. The double bind exemplifies how competing expectations limit behavioural flexibility and influence career progression. These biases are not immutable; organisational culture, policy interventions, and awareness programs can mitigate their effects. Understanding the role of stereotypes is essential for developing fair evaluation systems and inclusive leadership pathways. It also helps explain why gender differences in leadership effectiveness are often small despite persistent underrepresentation. Addressing stereotypes contributes to more accurate assessments and equitable leadership opportunities.

## Discussion

The evidence reviewed does not support a categorical claim that either men or women are inherently superior leaders. Meta-analytic and empirical studies consistently show that gender differences in leadership effectiveness are generally small and context-dependent (Eagly et al., 2003). Instead, leadership outcomes are contingent upon the alignment between individual competencies and situational demands. Transformational leadership, which research suggests is more frequently exhibited by women, is particularly effective in contemporary organisational environments that value collaboration, innovation, and employee engagement (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Conversely, task-oriented leadership, more commonly associated with men in traditional hierarchical contexts, remains valuable in high-pressure, structured, or crises (Judge et al., 2004). These findings highlight that leadership effectiveness is multidimensional and adaptive rather than determined by gender alone. Therefore, simplistic gender-based evaluations of leadership performance are misleading.

Social and institutional factors significantly shape leadership opportunities, perceptions, and outcomes. Promotion practices, access to professional networks, and organisational culture often advantage men in reaching senior leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Gender bias in performance evaluations further compounds these structural inequities, penalising women for assertive behaviours while undervaluing communal or relational leadership traits (Heilman, 2012). Consequently, observed disparities in representation and recognition may reflect systemic barriers rather than innate differences in ability. Understanding the role of these social and institutional factors is crucial for developing equitable organisational policies. Structural interventions, such as bias-aware evaluation systems, mentorship programmes, and inclusive promotion practices, can mitigate these disparities. Leadership research must therefore integrate social context alongside behavioural analysis.

The interplay between leadership style and contextual fit is central to understanding gendered patterns of effectiveness. Transformational and relational behaviours, often exhibited by women, enhance follower satisfaction, trust, and team cohesion in collaborative work settings (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Meanwhile, task-oriented behaviours, commonly associated with men, are effective for achieving short-term goals and maintaining order in hierarchical or crisis-driven contexts. This dynamic indicates that no single leadership style is universally superior; effectiveness emerges from matching behaviour to situational demands (Yukl, 2013). Organisations that foster adaptive leadership and provide flexibility in role expectations are likely to benefit from diverse leadership approaches. Gendered tendencies should be viewed as probabilistic patterns rather than

deterministic traits. Such an approach encourages recognition of competence across all leaders, irrespective of gender.

Evidence also underscores the importance of addressing stereotypes and evaluative biases. Women leaders frequently navigate a double bind, balancing expectations for both assertiveness and communal behaviour (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Male leaders may also face devaluation when adopting relational or collaborative approaches, demonstrating that rigid gender norms constrain leadership expression for all genders (Koenig et al., 2011). Reducing the impact of these biases requires structural reforms, awareness training, and standardised evaluation frameworks. Organisational cultures that explicitly value inclusivity, diverse styles, and evidence-based performance metrics facilitate more equitable recognition of leadership effectiveness. Integrating behavioural flexibility with systemic change allows organisations to harness the strengths of leaders regardless of gender. Ultimately, leadership potential is realised when personal competencies and institutional support are aligned.

In summary, the review highlights that leadership effectiveness cannot be reduced to gender alone. Differences in style, such as transformational versus task-oriented approaches, interact with organisational context, follower expectations, and structural constraints. Observed gender disparities in leadership representation are more plausibly explained by social, cultural, and institutional factors than by innate abilities. Effective leadership arises from a combination of competencies, adaptability, and contextual alignment, rather than categorical gender-based traits. These findings have practical implications for organisational policy, training, and development initiatives. They also call for ongoing research into intersectional and systemic influences on leadership outcomes. Recognising the complexity of these factors encourages a more nuanced, evidence-based understanding of leadership effectiveness.

## **Conclusion**

Debates regarding whether men or women make better leaders are increasingly recognised as oversimplified and misleading. The evidence reviewed indicates that leadership effectiveness is contingent upon competencies, contextual fit, and organisational culture rather than innate gender traits (Eagly et al., 2003). Both men and women can achieve high performance when they are given equitable access to leadership opportunities and when their behaviours align with the strategic needs of the organisation (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Gendered tendencies in leadership style, such as transformational versus task-oriented approaches, may influence follower outcomes and team dynamics but do not determine overall effectiveness. Therefore, leadership should be evaluated on measurable competencies, behavioural flexibility, and alignment with situational demands. Reframing the debate in this way moves the focus from essentialist comparisons to practical organisational development. This perspective also encourages organisations to invest in leadership training and structural reforms that promote equity.

Equity in access to leadership roles remains a critical consideration. Structural and social barriers, including stereotype-driven evaluations, limited access to networks, and biased promotion practices, have historically restricted women's representation in senior positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Heilman, 2012). Addressing these inequities requires systematic interventions such as mentorship programmes, bias-aware appraisal systems, and inclusive organisational cultures. When these structures are in place, evidence suggests that leaders of any gender can thrive and contribute

meaningfully to organisational success. Equity-focused interventions also enhance employee engagement, innovation, and retention by signalling fairness and inclusivity. Consequently, leadership development must integrate both individual skill-building and institutional reform. This dual approach maximises the potential of diverse leadership talent.

Intersectionality provides an important lens for understanding leadership dynamics beyond a binary gender perspective. Leadership experiences and outcomes are shaped not only by gender but also by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and other social identities (Cole, 2009). Future research should examine how intersectional identities influence access to leadership, evaluation biases, and effectiveness outcomes. Longitudinal studies tracking career trajectories can reveal the cumulative impact of organisational structures and social norms on leadership opportunities. Such research can identify patterns of advantage and disadvantage that may remain invisible in cross-sectional analyses. Understanding intersectionality is essential for designing policies that foster truly inclusive leadership pipelines. Incorporating these insights will allow organisations to better support all leaders in achieving their potential.

The role of organisational culture and situational context remains paramount in moderating leadership effectiveness. Transformational and relational leadership behaviours, often observed among women, are most effective in collaborative, innovation-driven environments (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Task-oriented behaviours, more commonly associated with men, are often advantageous in structured, high-pressure, or crises (Judge et al., 2004). Leadership effectiveness arises from the alignment between leader behaviours, team needs, and organisational objectives rather than from gendered predispositions. Policies and development programmes that foster behavioural adaptability can enhance organisational outcomes. This approach emphasises the strategic value of matching leadership style to context. Ultimately, effective leadership is situational, relational, and skill based.

In conclusion, gender alone does not determine leadership effectiveness. High-performing leaders emerge when competencies, situational fit, and organisational culture intersect to support success. Future research should focus on intersectional identities, longitudinal trajectories, and the effectiveness of institutional reforms designed to reduce bias in selection and evaluation processes. Organisations should prioritise equitable opportunity structures, bias mitigation, and leadership development strategies that cultivate both relational and task-oriented competencies. By moving beyond essentialist comparisons, the field can focus on evidence-based practices that enhance leadership quality across diverse contexts. Recognising the multidimensional nature of leadership strengthens both theoretical understanding and practical application. Ultimately, leadership effectiveness is a function of skill, adaptability, and opportunity, not gender.

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