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Leadership and Decision-Making: Promoting Gender Balance

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Abstract

Gender balance in leadership and decision-making is an important dimension of social justice, institutional effectiveness and sustainable development. Although women have expanded their participation in education, employment, professional occupations and public life, their representation in senior decision-making positions remains uneven. This article examines the relationship between leadership, decision-making and gender balance through a conceptual and descriptive review of secondary literature and institutional reports. It focuses on structural barriers such as gender stereotypes, unequal access to networks and mentoring, opaque recruitment and promotion practices, care responsibilities, organizational cultures and unequal distribution of authority. The article argues that gender balance should not be understood merely as numerical representation. Meaningful participation requires voice, influence, access to information, resources, accountability and opportunities to shape decisions. Evidence from international organizations also indicates continuing under-representation of women in corporate, political and educational leadership. The article discusses strategies including transparent selection, leadership development, mentoring, sponsorship, flexible work arrangements, gender-responsive policies, accountability mechanisms, inclusive organizational cultures and data-based monitoring. Particular attention is given to education because schools and teacher-education institutions can reproduce or challenge gender norms. The article concludes that gender-balanced leadership requires coordinated institutional and social change rather than isolated interventions. Sustainable progress depends on creating systems in which leadership is accessible on the basis of competence and opportunity rather than gendered expectations.

Keyword: Gender Balance, Leadership, Decision-Making, Women's Leadership, Gender Equality, Inclusion, Organizational Culture, Empowerment

Introduction

Leadership is the process through which individuals and groups influence goals, mobilize resources, coordinate action and shape collective outcomes. Decision-making is closely connected with leadership because leaders determine priorities, allocate resources, establish rules and influence institutional directions. When access to leadership and decision-making is unequal, the experiences and interests of different sections of society may not receive equal consideration. Gender balance therefore has significance not only for representation but also for the quality, legitimacy and inclusiveness of institutions. Women's participation in education and employment has increased substantially in

many societies, yet advancement into senior positions has not occurred at the same pace. The International Labour Organization reports that women remain under-represented in company decision-making positions and notes that only about three in ten managerial positions globally are held by women. It also reports that women hold 27% of board seats globally and 6% of CEO positions. These figures illustrate a continuing gap between participation in organizational life and access to the highest levels of authority (International Labour Organization [ILO], n.d.). The political sphere shows a similar pattern. UN Women and the Inter-Parliamentary Union reported that, as of 1 January 2025, women constituted 27.2% of members of national parliaments worldwide, while

women held 22.9% of cabinet-minister positions. Only 25 countries had a woman serving as Head of State and/or Government at that point (UN Women & IPU, 2025). These figures do not indicate a lack of ability or interest among women; rather, they demonstrate that institutional access to leadership remains unequal. Education provides another important example. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report notes that women may constitute a large share of the teaching workforce while being considerably less represented among school principals. Across a group of countries with available data, the average share of female principals was at least 20 percentage points lower than the average share of female teachers (UNESCO, 2024) ^[7]. This pattern makes educational leadership an important site for examining how organizational structures and social expectations influence advancement. Against this background, the present article examines how leadership and decision-making can promote gender balance. It treats gender balance as both a representational issue and a question of institutional power: who participates, whose knowledge is heard, who controls resources, and who has the authority to influence outcomes.

Objectives of the study

- To examine the relationship between leadership, decision-making and gender balance.
- To identify major structural, cultural and organizational barriers to women's participation in leadership.
- To discuss the importance of inclusive decision-making in education, workplaces and public institutions.
- To examine strategies for promoting gender-balanced leadership and meaningful participation.
- To suggest institutional measures for monitoring and sustaining gender balance in decision-making.

Methodology

The article follows a qualitative, conceptual and descriptive research approach based on secondary sources. Relevant literature and institutional publications concerning women's leadership, organizational decision-making, gender equality and educational leadership were reviewed. Sources include reports and web publications from UN Women, UNESCO, the International Labour Organization and the World Bank, supplemented by established scholarship on leadership and gender. The analysis is thematic rather than statistical: evidence is organized around representation, structural barriers, organizational practices, leadership development, decision-making power and institutional accountability. Because the study relies on secondary material, its conclusions are interpretive and should not be treated as the findings of a new primary survey or experiment.

Conceptual understanding of leadership and gender balance

Leadership as influence and shared responsibility

Traditional approaches often associate leadership with authority, hierarchy and individual decision-making. Contemporary perspectives increasingly emphasize collaboration, participation, communication, ethical responsibility and shared influence. Inclusive leadership extends this understanding by creating conditions in which people with different experiences can contribute to institutional decisions. In such a framework, gender balance is not simply about placing women in formal positions; it is about ensuring that women can exercise meaningful influence after entering those positions.

Gender balance beyond numerical representation

A numerical balance can be an important starting point, but it does not automatically produce equality. An organization may appoint women to committees while major financial, strategic or operational decisions remain concentrated elsewhere. Meaningful gender balance therefore includes representation, voice, influence, access to leadership pathways and accountability. UN Women emphasizes women's full and equal participation in leadership and decision-making as part of gender-responsive governance (UN Women, 2025) ^[6].

Decision-making as a question of power

Decision-making determines whose priorities receive institutional attention. Recruitment, promotion, budgeting, curriculum development, research agendas, workplace policies and public programmes all involve choices that affect different groups. Gender-balanced decision-making can broaden the range of experiences considered in these processes. It is not necessary to assume that women have a single or uniform perspective; rather, diversity can increase the range of experiences, knowledge and questions brought into deliberation.

Major barriers to gender-balanced leadership

Gender stereotypes and leadership norms

Leadership has historically been associated in many contexts with characteristics such as assertiveness, authority and uninterrupted career progression, while women have often been associated with caregiving, emotional support and domestic responsibility. Such stereotypes can influence recruitment, performance assessment and promotion. Women may be judged against contradictory expectations for example, being expected to demonstrate authority while also being expected to conform to conventional expectations of femininity. These pressures can affect perceptions of leadership potential even when formal rules appear gender-neutral.

The glass ceiling and unequal career pathways

The term glass ceiling describes barriers that are not necessarily written into formal rules but restrict advancement to senior positions. The ILO reports that women remain under-represented at senior and executive management levels and on boards, despite progress in education and employment (ILO, 2024) ^[4]. A key issue is that advancement often depends on informal networks, sponsorship, high-visibility assignments and access to decision-makers. If these resources are distributed unequally, formal equality of opportunity may not translate into equal outcomes.

Care responsibilities and work-life constraints

Unequal responsibility for unpaid care can influence career continuity, availability for extended working hours and access to professional opportunities. Leadership systems designed around long hours, geographic mobility or constant availability can disadvantage people with substantial care responsibilities. Flexible working arrangements, parental leave for all genders and supportive workplace cultures can reduce these structural constraints. Importantly, care policies should be designed so that using them does not become a career penalty.

Mentoring, sponsorship and professional networks

Mentoring can support skill development and confidence, while sponsorship can provide access to influential

assignments, promotion opportunities and senior networks. Women may have fewer opportunities to enter informal networks where organizational information and career opportunities circulate. A systematic mentoring and sponsorship programme can therefore help make career development less dependent on informal access. Such programmes are most effective when senior leaders are accountable for participation and outcomes rather than treating mentoring as an optional activity.

Institutional bias and opaque selection

Unclear criteria for recruitment and promotion can permit subjective judgments to influence leadership selection. UNESCO's work on educational leadership emphasizes the importance of open selection processes and notes that temporary quotas may sometimes be needed where disparities persist (UNESCO, 2024) ^[7]. Transparent criteria, structured interviews, diverse selection panels and documented reasons for decisions can reduce opportunities for unconscious or conscious bias.

Harassment, discrimination and hostile environments

Leadership cannot be considered inclusive if individuals face harassment, intimidation or discrimination because of gender. The ILO identifies legal impediments, cultural mindsets, stereotypes and discrimination across the employment cycle as continuing barriers to women's economic empowerment (ILO, 2024) ^[4]. Safe reporting systems, anti-harassment procedures, non-retaliation protections and institutional accountability are therefore part of leadership development rather than separate issues.

Leadership and decision-making in education

Educational institutions are especially important because they both reflect and shape social expectations. Schools, colleges and universities make decisions about curriculum, staffing, discipline, resource allocation, research, student support and institutional priorities. If leadership is gender-balanced, students and staff may encounter a wider range of leadership models. However, representation alone is insufficient; women leaders need authority, resources and institutional support to participate fully in strategic decisions. UNESCO's 2024 Global Education Monitoring Report identifies insufficient diversity in school leadership as a concern and reports that female principals are, on average, less represented than female teachers. It also observes that many systems lack measures to ensure balanced representation in leadership positions (UNESCO, 2024) ^[7]. This suggests that increasing the number of women in teaching does not automatically create a corresponding increase in women's leadership. Teacher education can contribute to change by integrating gender-responsive leadership, democratic decision-making, communication skills and critical reflection into professional preparation. Student-teachers can be encouraged to examine how gender stereotypes influence classroom participation, institutional responsibilities and career expectations. Leadership preparation should also address negotiation, conflict management, financial decision-making, digital leadership and institutional planning so that women are prepared for substantive responsibilities rather than symbolic representation.

Gender-balanced decision-making in organizations

Organizations can promote gender balance by examining the entire leadership pipeline rather than focusing only on final appointments. The pipeline includes recruitment, early-career

assignments, performance appraisal, professional development, promotion, succession planning and senior appointments. Data should be disaggregated by gender at each stage to identify where representation declines. The ILO recommends challenging gender bias in recruitment and promotion and developing enterprise-wide gender initiatives (ILO, n.d.). Decision-making bodies should also consider how meeting practices distribute influence. For example, chairing arrangements, speaking opportunities, agenda-setting, committee membership and access to information can affect whose ideas shape final decisions. Inclusive procedures can include rotating leadership roles, transparent agendas, evidence-based decision rules and opportunities for members to contribute before final decisions are made. Gender balance should also be integrated into organizational performance systems. Rather than treating gender equality as the responsibility of a single diversity officer, senior leadership can establish measurable goals, assign responsibilities and review progress regularly. The ILO notes that gender equality and diversity initiatives can contribute to organizational outcomes, while emphasizing the continuing under-representation of women in decision-making (ILO, 2024) ^[3].

Strategies for promoting gender balance

Transparent recruitment and promotion

Organizations should publish clear leadership criteria, use structured selection processes and maintain records of recruitment and promotion decisions. Selection panels should be diverse where feasible, and candidates should be assessed against predefined competencies rather than stereotypes about leadership style. Transparent procedures increase accountability and can reduce reliance on informal judgments.

Leadership development and capacity building

Leadership programmes should develop strategic planning, communication, negotiation, financial literacy, digital competence, conflict resolution and ethical decision-making. Women should have equal access to high-quality training and challenging assignments. The objective is not to 'fix' women to fit existing leadership cultures but to develop capabilities while also improving the cultures in which leadership is exercised.

Mentoring and sponsorship

Formal mentoring and sponsorship can create structured pathways to professional advancement. Senior leaders can be responsible for identifying high-potential staff from diverse backgrounds, providing career guidance and opening access to visible projects. Monitoring participation and outcomes can help ensure that these programmes do not become symbolic activities.

Flexible and family-supportive work policies

Flexible scheduling, parental leave, childcare support and reasonable workload design can help reduce barriers created by unequal care responsibilities. Such policies should be available to employees of all genders so that caregiving is not treated as exclusively a women's issue. Organizational cultures should also prevent flexibility from becoming a hidden signal of low commitment.

Quotas, targets and corrective measures

Where persistent under-representation exists, targets or temporary corrective measures may be considered. UNESCO notes that temporary quotas can be needed where disparities persist in educational leadership (UNESCO, 2024) ^[7]. Such

measures should be accompanied by transparent criteria, capacity development and regular evaluation. Their purpose is to address structural imbalance, not to replace competence-based selection.

Gender-responsive data and accountability

Institutions cannot effectively manage what they do not measure. Gender-disaggregated data can track representation at different organizational levels, recruitment rates, promotion rates, pay, committee membership, leadership training and retention. Annual reviews can identify where gaps remain. Accountability becomes stronger when findings are reported to governing bodies and linked to institutional planning.

Challenging gender stereotypes

Institutional change also requires cultural change. Awareness programmes, curriculum reform, role-model initiatives and public recognition of diverse leadership can challenge assumptions about who can lead. Men and boys should be included in gender-equality initiatives, particularly around shared care, respectful workplaces and inclusive decision-making. Social norms influence institutional behaviour, so policy reform and cultural transformation need to operate together.

Discussion

The evidence reviewed suggests that gender imbalance in leadership is multidimensional. It cannot be explained only by a shortage of qualified women. Educational attainment, professional participation and leadership representation do not always move together. The gap can emerge through multiple stages of the leadership pipeline, including recruitment, assignment of responsibilities, access to networks, evaluation, promotion and retention. Consequently, a single intervention is unlikely to be sufficient. A second important issue is the distinction between presence and power. Increasing the number of women in a committee or leadership team is meaningful only when those members have opportunities to influence agendas, deliberations, budgets and final decisions. This is particularly relevant in education, where women may be numerous among teachers but less represented among principals and senior administrators. Gender balance should therefore be assessed through both representation and influence. A third issue concerns organizational culture. Policies can establish formal equality while informal norms continue to reproduce inequality. For example, a promotion system may be formally open to everyone while rewarding uninterrupted availability or informal networking patterns that disadvantage employees with care responsibilities. Institutional leaders therefore need to examine not only written rules but also everyday practices. Finally, gender-balanced leadership should not be understood as a competition between women and men. The objective is to create institutions in which leadership opportunities are accessible without gender-based barriers and decisions benefit from broad participation. A balanced institution can improve fairness, legitimacy and the range of knowledge available for problem-solving. However, the exact effects will vary by sector, country, organizational structure and social context, so claims of universal causal impact should be made cautiously.

Findings of the Study

- Women remain under-represented in many senior leadership and decision-making positions despite significant participation in education and employment.

- Gender imbalance is shaped by structural and cultural factors, including stereotypes, unequal care responsibilities, informal networks and opaque promotion practices.
- Numerical representation is not sufficient; meaningful gender balance requires voice, influence, authority and access to institutional resources.
- Educational leadership is a critical area because women may be strongly represented among teachers while being less represented in principal and senior administrative roles.
- Transparent recruitment, leadership development, mentoring, sponsorship, flexible work arrangements and accountability can strengthen the leadership pipeline.
- Gender-disaggregated data are essential for identifying where inequalities arise and for evaluating institutional interventions.
- Gender balance is most sustainable when organizational policy reform is combined with changes in norms, leadership culture and everyday decision-making practices.

Recommendations

- Develop transparent and competency-based criteria for recruitment, promotion and leadership selection.
- Establish structured mentoring and sponsorship systems with senior-level accountability.
- Provide equal access to leadership training, high-visibility assignments and professional networks.
- Introduce family-supportive and flexible work arrangements without penalizing employees who use them.
- Use gender-disaggregated data to monitor recruitment, promotion, retention, pay and leadership representation.
- Where persistent structural under-representation exists, consider evidence-based targets or temporary corrective measures with periodic review.
- Strengthen institutional mechanisms for preventing and responding to harassment and discrimination.
- Integrate gender-responsive leadership and participatory decision-making into teacher education and professional development.
- Promote shared responsibility for gender equality among women and men rather than treating it as a women-only issue.
- Review not only who occupies leadership positions but also who sets agendas, controls resource and influences final decisions.

Conclusion

Leadership and decision-making are central to the distribution of opportunity, authority and institutional resources. Promoting gender balance therefore requires more than increasing the number of women in visible positions. It requires the removal of barriers throughout the leadership pipeline and the creation of decision-making systems in which women can participate with genuine authority and influence. International evidence continues to show significant gaps in political, corporate and educational leadership, demonstrating that formal progress has not eliminated structural inequality. The analysis indicates that effective change depends on a combination of transparent institutional processes, leadership development, mentoring and sponsorship, family-supportive policies, safe workplaces, gender-responsive data and accountability. Education has a

particularly important role because educational institutions can either reproduce traditional gender expectations or provide models of inclusive leadership. Gender-balanced leadership should ultimately be understood as a continuous institutional practice: organizations need to examine who enters leadership, who advances, who participates in decisions, whose voice is heard and how outcomes are evaluated. Such an approach can contribute to more inclusive, representative and accountable institutions while respecting competence, diversity and equal opportunity

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