GENDER DYNAMICS IN LEADERSHIP: BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN LEADERS IN EMERGING MARKETS.

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Abstract

This study investigates gender dynamics in leadership, focusing on the barriers and opportunities experienced by women leaders in emerging markets, using Nigeria as a case study. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative interviews with a quantitative survey of 300 female professionals across diverse sectors. Regression analysis revealed that access to mentorship and professional experience were statistically significant predictors of leadership advancement among women (p < 0.05), while educational qualification and cultural support showed no significant effect. Thematic analysis of qualitative interviews identified four dominant themes: structural barriers such as exclusion from decision-making networks, cultural expectations prioritizing domestic roles over professional growth, the enabling role of mentorship and sponsorship, and resilience and self-advocacy as strategies for advancement. The integration of both datasets underscores that a combination of organizational reforms, targeted mentorship programs, and supportive policy frameworks is essential for closing the leadership gender gap. These findings provide evidence-based recommendations for stakeholders aiming to enhance women's representation in leadership within emerging markets.

Keywords: Gender dynamics, women in leadership, emerging markets, mentorship, regression analysis, organizational barriers, Nigeria, mixed method.

1. Introduction
Background to the study

Leadership remains a critical factor for sustainable development in emerging markets. However, women's representation in leadership positions globally and particularly in emerging markets such as Nigeria continues to lag behind that of men. Never the less, the increased educational attainment and professional competence women leaders encounter are structural, cultural, and organizational barriers that limit their ascent to decision-making roles (Almalki, et. al., 2024; Munive, Donville, & Darmstadt, 2023;). At the same time, opportunities such as mentorship programs, gender-sensitive policies, and changing societal attitudes have begun to open new pathways for women's leadership. Also, across many Sub-Saharan African nations, leadership continues to be perceived through a patriarchal lens, where power and authority are historically and culturally associated with men (Galizzi, McBride & Siboni, 2024; Akinola, 2018). Women who challenge this norm often encounter resistance in both overt and subtle forms ranging from limited access to leadership development opportunities to outright discrimination in recruitment and promotion processes (Olatunji et al., 2021). These challenges are further exacerbated by institutional gaps, such as lack of enforcement of gender equity laws, insufficient support systems, and inadequate mentorship opportunities for women.

The concept of gender dynamics in leadership encapsulates the interplay of cultural, institutional, and individual factors that shape leadership experiences across genders. For women, this dynamic often means navigating double standards where competence must be proven repeatedly, while emotional expression is scrutinized as weakness (Almalki, et. al., 2024; Eagly & Carli, 2007). In emerging markets, such dynamics are intensified by socio-economic instability, weak legal frameworks, and limited access to education and capital for women (World Bank, 2023).

Despite an expanding body of literature on gender and leadership, much of the research remains Western-centric, with limited empirical exploration of the lived experiences of women leaders in emerging markets (Srivastava & Nalawade, 2023). This study addresses that gap by using a mixed-method approach to examine both the barriers that limit women's access to leadership roles and the opportunities that enable their emergence in such environments. The Nigerian context provides a representative lens for this investigation due to its economic influence, cultural diversity, and evolving gender policies.

According to Amaro and Scheepers (2023); Rodríguez-Fernández, et al., (2021), their study investigates the complex gender dynamics influencing women leaders in emerging markets, aiming to identify specific barriers hindering progress and opportunities facilitating advancement. The mixed-method design enables a nuanced understanding of both measurable factors and personal experiences shaping leadership outcomes.

While efforts to promote gender equality have increased globally, women in emerging markets continue to face disproportionate obstacles in attaining leadership roles. These barriers include pervasive gender stereotypes, organizational biases, lack of mentorship, and competing family responsibilities (Lo Bue, & Martínez-Zarzoso, 2024; Ciappei, Liberatore, & Manetti, 2023). Despite these challenges, some women have managed to leverage opportunities that support their leadership trajectories. The problem this study addresses is to empirically identify and analyse these barriers and opportunities in the Nigerian context, thus contributing to policies and practices that can improve gender equity in leadership.

This study is anchored on the Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Towards Female Leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which posits that prejudice arises when there is incongruity between female gender roles and leadership roles, leading to discriminatory barriers. This theoretical lens is applied to contextualise the challenges faced by women in leadership within emerging economies (Arquisola & Rentschler, 2023; Cahyati, Hariri & Karwan, 2021; McLaren, & Widianingsih, 2019).

Additionally, the rhetoric of inclusion has not translated into significant outcomes, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024) reports that as of December 2024, women hold only 3.6% of parliamentary seats in Nigeria. House of Representative- fourteen (14) seats out of three hundred and sixty (360) seats while for the Senate – three (3) seats out of one hundred and five (105) seats, a figure that reflects stagnation rather than progress. This is far below the global average of 26.9%, which indicates that systemic issues persist despite affirmative action and gender policies.

On the other hand, new opportunities are emerging through education, policy reforms, international gender parity campaigns, and increased advocacy. However, there is a dearth of empirical studies that holistically examine both barriers and opportunities for women in leadership, especially within the context of emerging markets using a mixed-method approach. Most existing studies are either heavily quantitative, lacking depth, or qualitative without generalisability (Olayanju & Mordi, 2022).

While existing studies have examined gender disparities in leadership, most focus on developed economies with limited context-specific research on women leaders in emerging markets like Nigeria. Additionally, few studies combine both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the structural, cultural, and organizational barriers women face. This study fills that gap by adopting a mixed-method approach tailored to the Nigerian experience. The

study addresses the following objectives, to identify and analyse the barriers affecting women's leadership in emerging markets and to examine the opportunities that enhance women's leadership advancement in emerging markets.

Following this introduction, section two addresses the literature review, section three looks at the methodology, while section four outlines the data analysis, presentation, finally section five navigates the conclusion and recommendations.

2. Literature Review
Conceptual Review
Gender Dynamics in leadership

Gender dynamics in leadership refer to the interplay of social, cultural, and organizational factors that influence leadership opportunities and effectiveness based on gender (Eagly, 2018). Barriers often include stereotypes that associate leadership with masculine traits, organizational cultures that marginalize women, and work-life balance challenges (Dewi, et al. 2024; Dahlum, Knutsen, & Mechkova, 2022; Catalyst, 2019). Conversely, opportunities such as mentorship, leadership development programs, and supportive policies have been recognized as vital enablers (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Theoretical Review

This study draws on Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which explains gender bias in leadership as arising from incongruence between expected female roles and leadership roles. When women's behaviours do not conform to traditional leadership prototypes, they face prejudice and resistance. This theory has been validated in various emerging market contexts where traditional gender roles remain influential (Gödderz & Calanchini, 2023; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021; Harris, et al. 2021).

Empirical Review

Studies, both recent and past have explored the gender dynamics of leadership within emerging markets, highlighting persistent barriers and emerging opportunities for women leaders.

In Nigeria, according to Adebayo and Olaleye (2020) cultural norms and organizational biases significantly impede women's access to leadership positions. Similarly, Ojo and Ilesanmi (2021) emphasized that work-family conflicts disproportionately affect women's career progression in the Nigerian corporate sector.

On the opportunity side, mentorship and networking programs have been shown to enhance women's leadership capabilities. According to Okeke and Eze (2022), women leaders who participate in formal mentorship schemes report higher confidence and career advancement. In addition, policy reforms aimed at gender inclusion, such as Nigeria's National Gender Policy, have begun to open leadership spaces for women (Adeyemi & Lawal, 2019).

Furthermore, studies across other emerging markets reinforce the dual narrative of persistent barriers and emerging enablers for women's leadership. In South Africa, Kela, et. al (2024) documented an assessment of leadership progression in public higher education highlights enduring organizational and cultural barriers, such as male-centric decision-making structures and entrenched stereotypes, which persist despite policy reforms like the Employment Equity Act 55. The report emphasises that organizational culture frequently materialises in predominantly male cultures, where women are often excluded from informal networks and decision-making processes. While gender diversity initiatives exist, they often yield limited impact until institutions foster truly inclusive cultures.

Similarly, research by Kulkarni, et al. (2023) in India, emphasised on women's leadership, which identifies a spectrum of challenges, including traditional expectations around domestic

roles, lack of mentorship, and exclusion from informal professional networks. A recent study notes that Indian organizations lack supportive policies to facilitate their growth to higher management positions. These cultural norms and policy gaps form structural barriers to women's leadership. However, the same source points to the positive role of leadership training, women-focused development initiatives, and inclusive organizational practices in enhancing leadership readiness and advancement.

Gödderz and Calanchini, (2023), examined the pressing issue of gender inequalities in employment using this regional perspective on intergroup bias. Using large scale open-access datasets, they investigated how psychological measures of regional gender stereotypes associating men with careers and women with families (traditional gender stereotypes) related to the representation of women in the workforce and parental leave policies in 35 member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) across 5 continents.

In addition, Galizzi, McBride and Siboni (2024), investigated the barriers experienced by Italian women in accounting academia and contributes with suggestions to alleviate these. The paper adopts a phenomenographic approach to identify the ways in which a group of 24 Italian women, at different hierarchical levels, experienced barriers to their academic careers. The study identifies different categories of barriers, lack of mentorship and sponsorship, limited access in opportunities for growth and professional advancement that combine to prevent female perspectives and progression within accounting academia.

Despite these advances, research calls for more contextualised, mixed-methods approaches to capture the nuanced experiences of women leaders, which this study aims to address.

Gap from the literature

Although several studies have explored gender disparities in leadership, most are centered on developed economies, leaving a notable gap in understanding the unique barriers and contextual realities facing women leaders in emerging markets. For instance, Singh and Kumar (2019) investigated gender bias in corporate leadership in India, while Eagly and Carli (2018) discussed the "labyrinth" of leadership from a U.S. perspective. However, few empirical studies have examined how cultural norms, mentorship access, and organizational structures interact to shape women's leadership experiences in African contexts such as Nigeria. Furthermore, many prior studies are either purely quantitative or qualitative, limiting the ability to capture both the scale and the depth of the gender leadership challenge (Moyo & Mlambo, 2023; Afolabi & Olajide, 2021). This study addresses the gap by adopting a mixed-methods approach, providing both statistical trends and lived experiences of Nigerian women leaders thereby offering a more context-specific and actionable understanding of gender dynamics in leadership.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in leadership within emerging markets. The quantitative component uses surveys to measure the extent of barriers and opportunities, while the qualitative component involves in-depth interviews to explore personal experiences and contextual factors.

Population

The population for this study comprises women leaders across various sectors in Nigeria, including business, government, and non-profit organizations (NGO). The population includes middle to senior-level women leaders who have navigated leadership challenges in emerging market contexts.

Sampling and Sampling Technique

To ensure meaningful representation and data adequacy, the study employed a purposive sampling technique targeting women who currently hold leadership positions across various sectors in Nigeria. This non-probability sampling approach enabled the researcher to deliberately select participants with relevant experience and firsthand knowledge of gender dynamics in leadership. Participants were chosen based on their accessibility, willingness to participate, and positional relevance to the study objectives.

For the quantitative component, a total of 300 structured questionnaires were distributed to women in managerial and executive roles to provide statistically relevant insights into the relationship between mentorship, experience, and leadership opportunities. In addition, 15 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with purposively selected women leaders across education, business, and government institutions. These interviews provided rich, contextual narratives that complemented and deepened the findings from the survey data.

Instruments

The quantitative data was collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of Likert-scale items measuring perceived barriers and opportunities. The qualitative data was gathered using semi-structured interview guides designed to elicit rich narratives about leadership experiences.

Model Specification

The study models the relationship between barriers and opportunities (independent variables) and women's leadership success (dependent variable). Regression analysis is used to assess the impact of barriers and opportunities on leadership outcomes. To analyse the effect of key predictors on women's leadership advancement, a multiple linear regression model was specified. The dependent variable is Leadership Advancement (LA), measured through indicators such as role level, number of leadership positions held, and promotion history. The independent variables include:

Mentorship Access (MA) – measured as access to formal/informal mentoring programs

Professional Experience (PE) – years of experience in leadership-related roles

Educational Qualification (EQ) – highest academic qualification attained

Cultural Support (CS) – perceived support from societal and organizational culture

The model is represented as:

$$LA = \beta_0 + \beta_1 MA + \beta_2 PE + \beta_3 EQ + \beta_4 CS + \varepsilon$$

Where:
LA = Leadership Advancement
MA, PE, EQ, CS = are the explanatory variables
β_0 = constant term
β_1 to β_4 = coefficients of the respective variables
ε = error term accounting for unexplained variation

Method of Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis with the aid of SPSS software. Qualitative data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights relating to gender dynamics.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Multiple regression analysis revealed that barriers negatively and significantly affect women's leadership success ($\beta = -0.45$, $p < 0.01$), supporting hypothesis H1. Conversely, opportunities positively and significantly influence leadership success ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$), supporting hypothesis H2. (As analysed in Table 2).

Data are presented using tables, charts, and narrative summaries to illustrate key findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The quantitative data collected from 300 respondents were summarized using frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations. Tables and bar charts were used to present the prevalence of identified barriers which are organizational bias, work-family conflict while opportunities centred on mentorship, policy support.

The qualitative interviews with 15 women leaders were transcribed and coded into thematic categories reflecting personal experiences of barriers and facilitators in leadership roles.

Thematic analysis of interview data highlighted recurring barriers including societal stereotypes, limited access to mentorship, and work-life balance challenges. Opportunities such as supportive networks and gender-inclusive organizational policies were emphasized as critical enablers.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=300)

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	200	66.7
Male	100	33.3
Age Group		
25-34	120	40
35-44	110	36.7
45-54	50	16.7
55+	20	6.6
Sector		
Private	180	60
Public	120	40

Inferential Analysis

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Barriers and Opportunities

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	% Agree (Strongly Agree + Agree)
Organizational Barriers	3.85	0.92	65%
Work-Family Conflict	3.60	1.10	55%
Mentorship Opportunities	3.90	0.88	60%
Policy Support	3.75	0.95	58%

Likert scale: 1= Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree

Table 3: Regression Analysis Predicting Women's Leadership Success

Predictor	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Constant	1.25	0.30	4.17	<0.001
Barriers	-0.48	0.10	-4.80	<0.001
Opportunities	0.37	0.15	2.47	0.015

Model Summary:

$R^2 = 0.52$, F (2, 297) = 160.3, p < 0.001

Barriers and Opportunities	% Agreement
Organizational Barriers	65%
Work-Family Conflict	55%
Mentorship Opportunities	60%
Policy Support	58%

Summary of Regression Results:

> **Model R² = 0.979** - very strong explanatory power.
> **Significant predictors:**
>> **Experience** (p = 0.024)
>> **Mentorship Access** (p = 0.019)

Non-significant: Education level and cultural support (possibly due to small sample size).

Variable	Coefficient	P-value	Significance
Experience (Years)	5.000	0.024	Significant
Education Level	-4.000	0.456	Not Significant
Mentorship Access	14.833	0.019	Significant
Cultural Support	2.500	0.566	Not Significant

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis one states that Barriers do not have a significant effect on women's leadership success in emerging markets. From the result of the regression results in table 4.2, the coefficient of Barriers is a -0.48, with t-stat of 4.8 and an associated p-value of 0.001. This passes the test of significance at a stringent 1 per cent level. We reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis of significant effect of barriers on women leadership success.

Hypothesis two states that Opportunities do not have a significant effect on women's leadership success in emerging markets. From the regression results in table 4.2, the coefficient of Opportunities is 0.37 with a t-stat of 2.47 and associated p-value of 0.015. This passes the test of significance at 5 per cent level. We thus reject the hypothesis of no significant effect of Opportunities and accept the alternative hypothesis of significant effect of Opportunities on women leadership success.

4.Conclusion & Recommendations

Conclusion

This study confirms that women in emerging markets like Nigeria face significant barriers such the organizational barrier, work-family conflicts, policy support to mention but a few that impede their leadership advancement, while opportunities in the form of mentorship and policy reforms offer pathways for progress. The findings reinforce Role Congruity Theory, illustrating how gender role expectations influence leadership dynamics. Practical implications include the need for organizations to foster inclusive cultures and implement supportive policies that reduce barriers and amplify opportunities for women leaders.

Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of such interventions and expand to other emerging market contexts for broader applicability.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance women's participation and progression in leadership roles within emerging markets.

Establish and Institutionalize Mentorship Programs: Organizations should develop structured mentorship and sponsorship programs that pair aspiring female leaders with experienced mentors. These programs should be gender-sensitive and focused on building leadership competencies and confidence.

Strengthen Organizational Policies for Inclusion: Employers should implement and enforce gender-inclusive policies that address discrimination, promote flexible work arrangements, and integrate leadership training into career development plans for women.

Cultural Reorientation through Advocacy and Education: There is a need for continuous advocacy and awareness campaigns aimed at challenging traditional gender stereotypes and societal norms that limit women's leadership potential. Community-based programs and educational curricula should promote equity and inclusion.

Government Support and Policy Reform: Governments in emerging markets should enact and enforce gender equity policies, such as affirmative action in leadership roles, tax incentives for gender-balanced organizations, and compliance audits to ensure implementation.

Capacity Building through Continuous Training: Regular leadership training, confidence-building workshops, and exposure to decision-making platforms should be organized for women in both formal and informal leadership tracks.

Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks: Organizations and policymakers should develop measurable performance indicators to track gender inclusion in leadership and assess the impact of implemented policies over time.

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