



## The Evolution of Women's Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, the role of women in leadership has undergone a significant transformation across political, economic, and social domains. This article delves into the progress of women's leadership, highlighting the growing presence, authority, and influence of female leaders around the world. It discusses the major drivers behind this change, such as policy reforms, gender equality advocacy, expanded access to education, and the empowering role of technology and social media in elevating women's voices. The study also addresses persistent obstacles, including gender bias, difficulties in balancing professional and personal responsibilities, and the limited presence of women in senior leadership roles. By examining case studies of influential female leaders and assessing international developments, the article emphasizes both the advancements achieved and the ongoing efforts needed to attain gender equality in leadership. The analysis highlights the critical role of inclusive policies, mentorship opportunities, and institutional backing in nurturing long-term, effective leadership among women in the modern era.

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### Introduction

Leadership dynamics have significantly evolved in the 21st century, particularly regarding the participation of women in political, economic, and social arenas. Women are now stepping into leadership roles across sectors—from corporate offices to legislative bodies—that were historically out of reach due to entrenched patriarchal systems. This shift has been propelled by global feminist advocacy, policy changes, improved access to education, and an increasing appreciation for varied approaches to leadership. **Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) & UN Women. (2023)**

### Historical Background



In the past, women's leadership was largely limited to informal roles or exercised out of the public eye, constrained by deep-rooted cultural and institutional barriers. The 20th century marked a turning point, with the women's suffrage movement and societal shifts following the world wars paving the way for broader involvement in public life. However, despite this progress, the "glass ceiling" continued to hinder advancement across many sectors. Feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott has examined how gender has influenced historical narratives and power dynamics. Her work highlights how cultural norms and institutional structures historically restricted women's leadership to private or unofficial spaces, and how major social movements and post-war changes created opportunities for increased public engagement, even as significant systemic obstacles persisted. **Scott, Joan Wallach (1988)**

## Key Drivers of Change in the 21st Century

### 1. Education and Empowerment

Education has become a powerful catalyst for empowering women worldwide in the 21st century. Access to quality education has improved significantly, enabling women to participate more actively in economic, political and social life. Educated women are more likely to engage in formal employment, assert their rights and make informed decisions about health and family. Moreover, education fosters confidence, leadership, and the ability to challenge societal norms, thereby driving gender equality and inclusive development. **World Development Report 2012**

However, challenges remain, especially in rural areas and marginalized communities, where gender stereotypes, poverty and lack of infrastructure still hinder girls' educational attainment. Government policies, international initiatives, and grassroots movements continue to play a critical role in advancing women's education and empowerment in the 21st century. **(UNDP) (2020)**

Access to education has dramatically improved for girls and women across the globe. According to UNESCO (2020), the global literacy rate for women increased from 70% in 1990 to 83% in 2020. Higher education has empowered women with the skills and confidence needed to assume leadership roles in various fields. **UNESCO (2020),**

### 2. Legislative and Policy Frameworks

In the 21st century, governments around the world have increasingly adopted legislative as well as policy frameworks to promote gender equality and empower women. These include constitutional guarantees of equal rights, anti-discrimination laws, affirmative action in political representation and gender-responsive budgeting.

On the global stage, key frameworks like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (**CEDAW**), adopted in 1979, continue to serve as a cornerstone for national legislation aimed at achieving gender equality in the 21st century. Alongside CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action remains a vital reference point for shaping national policies. It provides an ongoing assessment of global progress in legislative and policy reforms since the 1995 Beijing Declaration, incorporating updated data and addressing contemporary gender-related challenges.



Many nations have introduced specific laws to tackle issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, maternity rights, and gender equality in the workplace. However, despite these legal advances, the practical implementation of such frameworks is often hindered by persistent patriarchal norms, insufficient enforcement mechanisms, and a lack of political commitment.

Strengthening legal mechanisms and ensuring their effective execution remain key to achieving substantive gender equality. Women, Business and the Law 2023, Provides data on laws affecting women's economic participation in 190 countries, including property rights, workplace protections, and parental benefits. **World Bank (2023)**

Many countries have adopted gender quotas and affirmative action policies to ensure women's representation in politics and corporate governance. For instance, Rwanda has consistently maintained over 60% female representation in its parliament since 2008, due in part to constitutional mandates (**Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021**).

### 3. Technological Advancements

Digital platforms and social media have provided new arenas for leadership. Women influencers, entrepreneurs, and activists use these tools to lead change, create communities and amplify marginalized voices. The rise of remote work has also enabled more women to balance professional as well as personal responsibilities, reducing one barrier to leadership participation.

The 21st century has seen a transformative shift in technology, as a result, women have played increasingly significant roles in advancing innovation, driving change in various STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields. Although women remain underrepresented in some sectors, their contributions to artificial intelligence, biotech, space exploration and digital entrepreneurship have been monumental. **UNESCO. (2023)**

Fei-Fei Li, A pioneer in AI, she co-created Image Net, a foundational database for training machine learning algorithms. Her work helped shape modern computer vision. **Li, F.F., & Li, J. (2010)** Timnit Gebru Known for her work on algorithmic bias and ethical AI. **Gebru, T. et al. (2018)**

### 4. Shifting Cultural Norms

In the 21st century, women around the world are experiencing a significant transformation in cultural norms related to gender roles, identity, labour, family and societal expectations. These shifts are driven by globalization, technology, education, legal reforms and evolving social consciousness. These movements have redefined leadership traits, emphasizing empathy, collaboration and inclusiveness—qualities often associated with women leaders. And women often outperform men in key leadership skills like empathy, collaboration and integrity. **Zenger, J., & Folkman, J. (2019).**

Traditional gender roles are being challenged in many societies. Women are increasingly taking on leadership positions, becoming primary earners, and participating equally in decision-making both at home and in public life. The increase in stay-at-home fathers and dual-income households reflects a cultural shift in domestic responsibilities. **Gerson, K. (2010)**

The rise in stay-at-home fathers and the prevalence of dual-income families indicate a broader cultural transformation in how domestic roles are shared (**Pew Research Center, 2019**). Although many traditional and religious societies continue to uphold rigid gender roles, there is an increasing effort by women within these communities to reinterpret religious doctrines and confront patriarchal traditions. For example, Muslim feminists are working toward gender equality by promoting justice within Islamic interpretive frameworks. **Badran, M. (2009)**

## **5. Women in Political Leadership**

The 21st century has seen a consistent rise in the number of women occupying high-level political positions. Influential leaders like Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand, Angela Merkel of Germany, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia have exemplified impactful and progressive leadership. Their governance often emphasizes key areas such as social welfare, healthcare, education, and the protection of human rights. Research from Indian village councils further supports this trend, showing that women in political roles tend to allocate more resources to infrastructure projects that address the specific needs of women, underscoring the value of political representation. **Chattopadhyay, R., & Duflo, E. (2004)**.

## **6. Women in Business and Entrepreneurship**

Although change has been more gradual in the corporate sector, significant strides have been made. Businesses led by women in executive positions frequently demonstrate stronger performance in areas such as innovation and profitability. Women like Indra Nooyi (former CEO of PepsiCo) and Mary Barra (CEO of General Motors) exemplify leadership rooted in resilience and adaptability. Moreover, the rise of women entrepreneurs, especially in emerging economies, has contributed to economic development and job creation. Microfinance institutions and digital platforms have played pivotal roles in this growth. (**McKinsey & Company, 2020**).

### **Challenges that Persist Despite the progress, challenges remain:**

#### **Gender Pay Gap:**

Catalyst has extensively explored the persistent gender pay gap and strategies to address it. In their 2024 insights, they highlight that women globally earn approximately 20% less than men on average. This disparity is attributed to factors such as occupational segregation, the motherhood penalty, unconscious bias, and a lack of pay transparency. Catalyst. (2024). Women globally still earn about 77 cents for every dollar earned by men (**ILO, 2022**).

#### **Work-Life Balance and Unpaid Care Work:**

In the 21st century, women's work-life balance and unpaid care work remain critical issues that intersect with gender equality, labour rights and social justice. Despite greater workforce participation, women still shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities, limiting their opportunities for advancement and affecting their mental and physical well-being.



The OECD report *Unpaid Care Work: The Missing Link in the Analysis of Gender Gaps in Labour Outcomes* (2014) by Gaëlle Ferrant, Luca Maria Pesando, and Keiko Nowacka offers a comprehensive examination of how unpaid care work contributes to persistent gender disparities in labour markets. **OECD 2014**

Stereotyping and Implicit Bias: Women leaders often face scrutiny based on their gender rather than performance. Cecilia L. Ridgeway, a prominent sociologist, presents a compelling theory of how gender inequality continues in modern societies, even in the face of legal and institutional progress. Her central argument is that gender functions as a "primary frame" for understanding and organizing social relations — and this frame persists even in egalitarian contexts. **Ridgeway, C. L. (2011)**

### **The Future of Women's Leadership**

The future of women's leadership lies in intersectionality—recognizing the layered identities of women based on race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Inclusive leadership development programs, mentorship networks, and male allyship will be critical. Additionally, investing in young girls' leadership potential through education, civic engagement, and skills training will pave the way for long-term change. It is important to introduce the concept of intersectionality, explaining how overlapping social identities shape women's experiences, including in leadership contexts. **Crenshaw, K. (1991)**. Few suggestion could also be followed as mentioned bellow.

- Quotas or targets for female representation in leadership roles (corporate boards, political seats) can accelerate equality. Promote transparent recruitment and promotion practices to reduce gender bias. **World Economic Forum. (2023)**
- Establish formal mentoring and sponsorship networks to connect emerging female leaders with experienced mentors. Organizations should create safe, visible pathways for women's advancement. **Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. (2010)**.
- Regular bias training and inclusive leadership programs must be mandatory at leadership levels. Cultivate environments that normalize diverse leadership styles. **Catalyst. (2024)**.
- Organizations should normalize flexible schedules, remote work, and parental leave for all genders. Public and private investment in childcare infrastructure enables more women to take on leadership roles. **OECD. (2023)**

### **Conclusion**

The evolution of women's leadership in the 21st century is a testament to the resilience, capability and vision of women worldwide. While progress has been significant, continued efforts are needed to dismantle remaining barriers and promote inclusive, equitable leadership for all. The evaluation of women's leadership in the present era reveals a significant yet incomplete journey toward equity and inclusion. Women leaders today are increasingly visible across sectors such as politics, business, education, and civil society. **Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007)**.

However, systemic barriers such as gender bias, underrepresentation, unequal pay, and limited access to leadership development opportunities continue to hinder progress (**Catalyst, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2023**). While initiatives like gender quotas, mentorship programs, and inclusive policies are



making a difference, deeper cultural and institutional change is still needed to fully unlock the potential of women leaders.

As society advances, the continued evolution of women's leadership will depend on our collective commitment to challenging stereotypes, supporting emerging women leaders, and embedding equity in leadership frameworks. Women are not just participating in leadership—they are transforming it.

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