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**Gendered leadership stereotypes and women's  
career advancement in organizations**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Naisten aliedustus johtotehtävissä on edelleen ajankohtainen ilmiö, jota ei voida selittää pelkästään yksilötason tekijöillä. Tämä korostaa tarvetta tarkastella erityisesti organisaatioiden käytäntöihin ja kulttuuriin kietoutuvia sukupuolittuneita stereotyyppioita. Tämä tutkielma käsittelee naisten urakehitystä ja etenemistä johtotehtäviin organisaatiokontekstissa. Tavoitteena on tarkastella, millaiset organisaatiokäytännöt ja työelämän rakenteet vaikuttavat naisten mahdollisuuksiin edetä urallaan sekä millaisia esteitä ja mahdollistavia tekijöitä näihin prosesseihin liittyy. Tutkielma rakentuu kolmen tutkimuskysymyksen ympärille:

1. Millaisia sukupuolittuneita johtajuusstereotyyppioita naisjohtajiin liittyy?
2. Missä organisaatiokäytännöissä ja -prosesseissa nämä stereotyyppiat ilmenevät naisten urakehityksen yhteydessä?
3. Miten organisaatiokäytännöt vaikuttavat naisten urakehityksen muodostumiseen?

Tutkielma toteutettiin kirjallisuuskatsauksena. Teoreettisesti työ pohjautuu sukupuolittuneiden stereotyyppioiden tutkimukseen sekä johtajuutta ja naisten urakehitystä käsittelevään kirjallisuuteen. Keskeisenä viitekehystenä toimii roolien yhteensopivuusteoria (role congruity theory), joka selittää sukupuoliroolien ja johtajuusodotusten välistä ristiriitaa. Lisäksi tarkastelua ohjaavat agenttisuus-yhteisöllisyys-ajattelu sekä kuvailevien ja normatiivisten stereotyyppioiden käsitteet. Organisaatiotason ilmiöitä lähestytään muun muassa ammatillisen segregaaation sekä lasikatkon käsitteiden kautta.

Tämän tutkimuksen löydökset osoittavat, että sukupuolittuneet johtajuusstereotyyppiat perustuvat pitkälti perinteisiin sukupuolirooleihin ja ilmenevät ristiriitana erityisesti johtajuuteen liitettyjen agenttisten piirteiden ja naisiin liitettyjen yhteisöllisten odotusten välillä. Naiset kohtaavat niin sanotun "double bind" -ilmiön, jossa heitä arvioidaan kielteisesti riippumatta siitä, toimivatko he stereotyyppioiden mukaisesti vai niitä vastaan.

Tulokset osoittavat, että stereotyyppiat eivät rajoitu yksilötason asenteisiin, vaan ovat juurtuneet syväälle organisaation rakenteisiin, käytäntöihin ja kulttuuriin, mikä heijastuu esimerkiksi arviointiprosesseihin, epävirallisiin verkostoihin ja näiden kautta uralla etenemiseen. Organisaatiokäytännöt voivat siten toimia sekä urakehitystä rajoittavina tekijöinä, kuten vinoutuneina arviointikäytäntöinä ja poissulkevinä verkostoina, että sitä edistävinä tekijöinä, kuten mentorointina, sponsorointina ja toimivina joustavina työjärjestelyinä. Tulokset korostavat tarvetta kehittää organisaatiokäytäntöjä siten, että ne tukevat yhdenvertaista urakehitystä.

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**KEYWORDS:** gendered leadership, women's career advancement, gender bias, leadership stereotypes, glass ceiling, occupational segregation, gendered organizational practices

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## 1 Introduction

Despite growing attention to gender equality in organizations, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions. Only about half of organizations actively prioritize the advancement of women, and women often receive less career support and fewer opportunities for advancement compared to men (Krivkovich et al., 2025). This may influence their willingness to pursue leadership roles, which has been linked to subtle forms of gender bias in organizational contexts (Hideg & Shen, 2019).

In the European Union, women held around 35% of managerial positions in 2024, a slight increase from 31,8% in 2014 (Eurostat, 2026). Across EU and OECD countries, women account for roughly one third of managers in the private sector, although the proportion varies between countries (OECD, 2025). Finland presents a more balanced picture, with women accounting for approximately 41% of managers in 2025 (Tilastokeskus, 2026). However, despite this positive development, gender disparities in leadership persist. Women remain particularly underrepresented in managerial roles in male-dominated sectors such as construction and manufacturing, while they form the majority of managers in sectors such as health care and education (OECD, 2025). Gender disparities become even more visible at the highest levels of organizational hierarchies, where women hold only around 30% of board positions and an even smaller share of CEO roles in large publicly listed companies (OECD, 2025).

These patterns are often described as the “leaky pipeline”, where the number of women decreases at higher levels of organizational hierarchies (Hing et al., 2023, p. 7). However, research suggests that inequalities may emerge already at early stages of career advancement. Women are promoted to their first managerial roles less frequently than men; for every 100 men, only 93 women were promoted to managerial roles in 2024 (Krivkovich et al., 2025).

Leadership is often associated with men and with agentic traits, such as assertiveness and independence, rather than with women and communal traits, such as cooperation

and care (Hing et al., 2023, p. 7). Role congruity theory suggests that this mismatch between expected traits for women and those associated with leadership creates an incongruity, which contributes to biased evaluations of women leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These gendered stereotypes can make it more difficult for women to rise into higher positions and create expectations that women are less suited for leadership roles (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 388). They may also trigger stereotype threat, meaning the fear of confirming negative stereotypes, which can lead to poorer performance in leadership related tasks and weaken women's sense of belonging in organizational contexts (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 390–391). Because sense of belonging is crucial for motivation and persistence, such experiences may reduce women's interest in pursuing leadership positions (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 389).

Previous research has widely documented gender inequalities in organizational contexts. Inequalities can emerge in a wide range of organizational processes, such as recruitment, performance evaluations and promotion practices (Hing et al., 2023). Organizational practices therefore play a crucial role in shaping career opportunities within organizations, and these practices may also reproduce gendered expectations about leadership, often in unconscious ways. This thesis aims to examine leadership stereotypes and their potential influence on women's career advancement with a particular focus on how these stereotypes are reflecting in organizational practices and processes.

## **1.1 Objectives of the thesis and research questions**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how gendered leadership stereotypes become embedded in organizational practices, and shape women's career advancement. By analyzing how these stereotypes appear in everyday workplace practices and leadership norms, this thesis aims to explain the mechanisms through which gendered expectations may support or limit women's professional development as leaders. The three main research questions are the following:

1. What kind of gendered leadership stereotypes are associated with women leaders?
2. In which organizational practices and processes do these stereotypes manifest in relation to women's career advancement?
3. How do organizational practices influence the formation of women's career advancement?

## **1.2 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis is structured into four main chapters. The first chapter presents the topic and provides the background of the study. It presents the general context of the research, outlines the objectives and research questions of the thesis. The second chapter presents the theoretical background of the study by discussing gendered leadership stereotypes. The chapter introduces key concepts such as role congruity theory, agency and communion, and descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotypes, which creates the foundation for understanding gender bias in the context of leadership.

The third chapter examines gendered organizational practices and structural factors that may influence women's career advancement. The chapter discusses structural barriers such as the glass ceiling, second glass ceiling, occupational segregation, and explores how organizational practices may shape opportunities for career progression. Finally, the last chapter presents the conclusions of the thesis and summarizes the key findings in relation to the research questions and discusses their implications for practice while also identifying directions for future research.

## **2 Gendered construction of women's leadership**

This chapter introduces the gendered construction of leadership norms. First, it discusses gender stereotypes in leadership and the ways in which women and leaders are commonly characterized. The second part of the chapter introduces the role congruity theory as a framework for understanding how perceived mismatches between gender roles and leadership roles can lead to bias. Finally, the chapter explores the masculine norm of leadership, highlighting how organizational structures and career models have historically been constructed around male life patterns.

### **2.1 Gendered stereotypes in leadership**

Gender stereotypes refer to commonly shared beliefs about the characteristics of women and men (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000, p. 1172). These beliefs concern not only personality traits but also cognitive abilities, physical attributes, interests, and perceived competencies (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 167). Gender stereotypes are often understood to stem from the traditional social roles assigned to women and men, where women have been associated with caregiving responsibilities and men with breadwinning roles (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 167).

According to Heilman (2001, p. 671), gender stereotypes are the main cause of gender bias and discriminatory treatment of women in organizations, hindering especially their advancement to higher positions. Gender-based stereotypes can be especially harmful to women in traditionally masculine fields, such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 388). Top management and leadership positions also are often seen as male-dominated. These roles are usually linked to qualities like ambition, competitiveness and emotional toughness (Heilman, 2001, p. 659). Because these traits are often considered masculine, they may conflict with traditional stereotypes about women, which often emphasize warmth, care, and cooperation instead of dominance (Heilman, 2001, p. 659).

The qualities seen as necessary for traditional male roles are often different from traits people usually associate with women (Heilman, 2001, p. 660). Because of this, women are expected to perform worse in male-dominated jobs, and the more masculine a job is seen, the more likely it is that people doubt women's ability (Heilman, 2001, p. 660). The stereotyped expectations that portray women as less capable can create psychological pressure and contribute to their underrepresentation in leadership roles (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 388).

### **2.1.1 Agency and communion**

Gender roles are often divided into two categories: agency and communion (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 167). Agency is often associated with men, which means they are seen as strong, independent and dominant, while communion is often connected to women, viewing them as sensitive, nurturing and caring (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 167). These stereotypes are not only different but also seen as opposites; what is considered typical for one gender is often seen as lacking in the other (Heilman, 2001, p. 658).

As a result, leadership is frequently perceived as a male role and linked to agentic traits, while women are more often associated with communal traits, which can create challenges for women aspiring to higher positions (Hing et al., 2023, p. 7). Female leaders often face a dilemma where they are criticized regardless of how they behave. Those who display communal qualities may be seen as too soft or ineffective, while those who act in agentic ways may be seen as not feminine enough and therefore face criticism (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 388).

Even when women are in leadership positions, they are still described as less agentic than men (Heilman, 2001, p. 658). This suggests that gender stereotypes continue to influence how leaders are perceived. Women often need to display agentic behaviors to be seen as competent leaders, but highly agentic women are often evaluated more negatively than highly agentic men or women who display more communal traits (Hing et al., 2023, p. 8). This reinforces the challenges women face in progressing into higher

positions. Consequently, women in leadership may face a dilemma, “double bind”; those who emphasize communal qualities may be seen as ineffective leaders, while those who display strong agentic traits may be criticized for not fitting traditional expectations of femininity (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 388).

Early research on leadership prototypes supports this distinction. Schein (1973, p. 99) found that characteristics associated with successful managers were more closely aligned with stereotypes of men than women, a pattern later described as the “think manager – think male” phenomenon (Koenig et al., 2011, p. 617).

### **2.1.2 Descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes**

A key idea behind the claim that gender stereotypes and biased evaluations prevent women from reaching leadership positions in organizations is the set of beliefs about what women are like and how they are expected to behave (Heilman, 2001, p. 658). Importantly, these stereotypes are both descriptive and prescriptive, meaning that they describe how women and men are perceived but also define how they are supposed to be (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 167).

According to Heilman (2001, p. 670), descriptive stereotypes lead to bias when the perceived characteristics of women are seen as inconsistent with the demand of upper-level managerial positions. Prescriptive stereotypes on the other hand can lead to bias and disapproval when women violate gender norms by displaying behaviors associated with men in workplace settings (Heilman, 2001, p. 671). When women succeed in masculine domains, this may signal that they are not conforming to expected gender norms, and as a result, their success can trigger negative reactions and social penalties (Manzi et al., 2024, p. 3).

Both descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes play an important role in creating gender bias, shaping how people evaluate competence and suitability, which can lead to discrimination (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 167). As a result, these stereotypes help maintain

ongoing inequalities between men and women in terms of career opportunities, pay, and status in the workplace (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 167).

In addition to expectations about how women should behave, there are also clear ideas about how they should not behave. These stereotypically masculine behaviors include dominance, strong ambition, assertiveness, and emotional expressions such as anger (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 177). Even when women hold positions of authority, openly dominant behavior, such as making direct demands or strongly pushing their own viewpoints can lead to negative reactions (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 177). Research has shown that when women engage in such task-oriented leadership behaviors, they may experience stereotype threat, which can lead to reduced engagement in leadership roles (Lin et al., 2025, p. 1100-1101). Although these women may be seen as competent, they are often disliked and viewed as less suitable for hiring or promotion compared to men who behave in the same way (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 177).

A similar pattern appears with insensitivity. While impolite or disrespectful behavior is viewed negatively for both women and men, women are judged more harshly for it (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 177–178). Ambition is another area where women may be penalized. Actively seeking promotions or leadership can lead to negative evaluations when women do it, and these women are often perceived as less warm and likable than men with similar ambitions (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 178). These behaviors are often necessary for career advancement, thus making it harder for women to progress into leadership positions without facing social penalties (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 178).

Emotional expressions such as anger and pride can also lead to penalties. Although women are often stereotyped as more emotional than men, emotions linked to status and authority, such as anger and pride, are more strongly associated with men (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 178) When women express these emotions, they often receive negative reactions, as they are seen as violating expectations about how women should behave (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 178). These findings show that when women engage in

behaviors that conflict with prescriptive gender norms, they are more likely to face social and professional discrimination.

However, women are also penalized when they fail to display behaviors that are stereotypically expected from them. One important exception relates to care and altruism. Women are assumed to be naturally caring and concerned about others, but when they do not act in compassionate or selfless ways, they are more harshly judged than men in similar situations (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 179). Failing to meet these caring expectations can lead to poorer performance evaluations and fewer rewards, but at the same time fulfilling these expectations is rarely rewarded (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 179).

Agreeableness is another strongly prescribed trait for women. Being cooperative, accommodating, and relationship-oriented is expected, and these expectations also apply to leadership roles (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 179). Female leaders are often required to be both strong and attentive to others' needs in order to be seen as effective, whereas male leaders are primarily expected to demonstrate strength (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 179). When female managers discipline employees without using a relational or supportive communication style, they tend to be evaluated more negatively than male supervisors who behave in the same way (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 179).

Women can face negative reactions simply because their success suggests that they have gone against traditional gender norms (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 179). When a woman succeeds in a male-dominated field, people may assume that she must have behaved in ways that are not considered traditionally feminine, and she is judged more harshly because her success challenges expectations about how women are supposed to behave (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 179). This shows how strong and persistent prescriptive gender stereotypes can shape workplace evaluations.

### 2.1.3 Influencing factors

Although gender stereotypes are widely shared, their influence on leadership evaluations varies depending on contextual and individual factors. According to Heilman et al. (2024), the characteristics of the evaluator, situational conditions, and the perceived gender-typing of a role all shape the extent to which stereotypes shape judgements.

Certain personal characteristics, such as motherhood and physical attractiveness are often associated with traditional ideas of femininity (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 171). As a result, women who are mothers or who are perceived as highly attractive may be viewed as more feminine and less agentic, which can negatively affect perceptions of their competence (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 171). According to Hing et al. (2023), mothers are seen as less flexible and committed, while this is not the case for fathers.

Structural factors also play a role. In environments where women are numerically underrepresented, they may stand out more clearly as a member of their gender group, which can increase the impact of gender-based stereotypes (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 171). In addition, when evaluators have limited information or face time pressure, they are more likely to rely on stereotypes as cognitive shortcuts, because gender is a highly visible factor (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 171).

In addition to individual and situational factors, the influence of gender stereotypes also depends on whether a job or field is perceived as masculine or feminine. Women are more likely to face negative evaluations in male gendered fields, and these work contexts become gendered in two main ways (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 172). First, certain jobs are described in terms that emphasize masculine and agentic qualities, such as decisiveness and competitiveness (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 172). Leadership roles, for example, are still often defined in agentic terms, even though ideas about effective leadership have evolved over time. Second, the numerical representation of men and women within a field influences how it is perceived (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 172). Fields where men are strongly overrepresented tend to be seen as more masculine, which can affect how

women are judged in those environments. However, not all positions in male-dominated industries are viewed equally; roles that emphasize interpersonal or communal tasks may be perceived as less masculine (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 172–173). Together, these factors show that the gendering of work environments plays an important role in shaping evaluations of women.

Finally, the characteristics of the evaluator can influence the extent to which gender stereotypes shape evaluations. According to Heilman et al. (2024, p. 184), gender and individual beliefs of the evaluator can affect the extent of bias. Meta-analyses indicate that male evaluators tend to express slightly stronger bias against women in male-dominated fields compared to female evaluators. Similar observations were made by Koenig et al. (2011, p. 635), stating that men view leadership as more masculine than women. Although both men and women may attribute both agentic and communal qualities to leaders in general, men tend to describe female leaders primarily in communal terms, particularly as emphatic (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023, p. 15). This may contribute to the tendency to view female leaders as relational rather than possessing core leadership qualities, especially in contexts where men occupy senior decision-making positions (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023, p. 15). As a result, female leaders may be recognized for relational strengths but less often for qualities traditionally linked to leadership competencies.

In terms of individual beliefs, evaluators who strongly endorse traditional gender stereotypes are more likely to perceive a mismatch between feminine traits and qualities associated with success in masculine fields (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 184). Perception about gender equality can also influence the evaluation process, and individuals who assume that gender discrimination is no longer a significant issue may be more prone to overlook structural bias. This can result to them being more likely to perceive a lack of fit and evaluating women more negatively in traditionally male roles (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 184).

## 2.2 Role congruity theory

Role congruity theory was developed by Alice H. Eagly and Steven J. Karau in 2002. It is based on social role theory by Eagly (1987), and role theory by Biddle & Thomas (1966) (as cited in del Carmen Triana et al., 2024, p. 190). Descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotypes form the foundation for role congruity theory. The theory suggests that a perceived conflict between women's gender role and the leadership role leads to two forms of prejudice: viewing women as less suitable candidates to leadership positions and assessing their leadership-related behavior more negatively than similar behavior displayed by men (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 573).

These prejudices arise when people expect members of a certain social group to behave in a particular way, and this clashes with the characteristics that are seen as necessary for success in a specific role (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 574). According to Eagly & Karau (2002, p. 589), even when women fulfill the expectations of a leadership role, they may still face prejudice because such behavior can contradict traditional expectations of women's behavior. As a result, female leaders tend to face more negative attitudes compared to male leaders, have a difficulty obtaining leadership roles, and may be evaluated less favorably in these roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 589).

Role congruity theory has also been applied in research on women's entrepreneurship, where similar incongruities between gender roles and entrepreneurial roles have been observed (Visintin et al., 2025, p. 547). The theory can be applied to leader-follower dynamics in both top-down and bottom-up processes within organizations, which shows that perceptions of role congruity are not limited to formal leadership positions but exist at different levels of the organization (Visintin et al., 2025, p. 571).

## **2.3 The masculine norm of leadership**

Leadership has historically been constructed around masculine ideals rather than being gender neutral. As a result, leadership has been defined through norms and expectations traditionally associated with men.

### **2.3.1 Historical development**

Research suggests that modern organizational structures were historically developed in a context where men were assumed to be the primary breadwinners and where career advancement was closely tied to a male life pattern (Witz & Savage, 1992, as cited in Billing, 2011, p. 299). Bureaucratic career models were constructed around the idea of a “career man”, whose full commitment to the organization was supported by a wife responsible for domestic and caregiving duties (Witz & Savage, 1992, as cited in Billing, 2011, p. 299).

Beyond these historical foundations, organizations continue to reproduce gendered expectations through everyday norms and practices. Both formal rules and informal norms shape behavior in organizations, and some of these practices reinforce gender differences (Billing, 2011, p. 299). The concept of “doing gender” suggests that gender is not only something people are, but something they actively express and reproduce in social interactions (Billing, 2011, p. 299). As a result, gendered structures are sustained not only through official career systems but also through daily interactions and organizational routines.

### **2.3.2 Ideal worker and ideal executive**

The concept of the “ideal worker”, developed by Joan Acker in the early 1990s, offers a framework for understanding how organizational structures can create barriers to women’s advancement (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1422). The ideal worker is described as someone who is fully devoted to their work, has no significant responsibilities outside of their workplace, and is continuously available for the organization

(Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1422). This image is based on a traditional male career pattern, in which work is prioritized above all else and family responsibilities are managed by a partner (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1422).

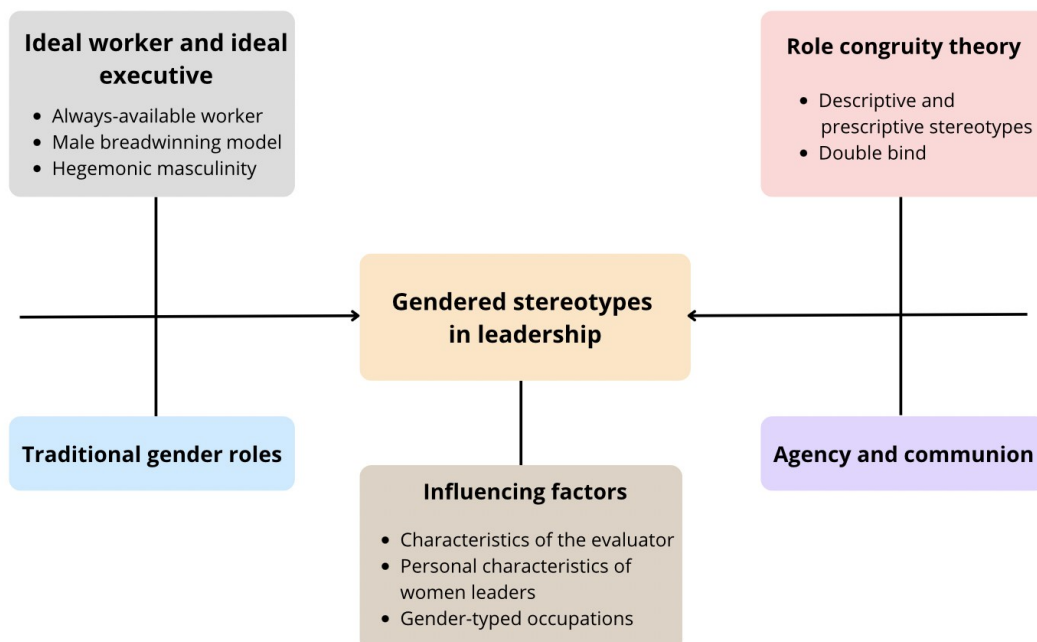
Although the characteristics of the ideal worker are often presented as gender-neutral, they closely resemble the traditional male breadwinner model rather than the lived realities of many women (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1422). Women, who are more often associated with caregiving responsibilities, may be seen as deviating from the ideal worker norm (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1422). They may feel pressure to demonstrate exceptional commitment to prove themselves. In this way, the ideal worker model contributes to maintaining gender inequalities and reinforces the masculine norm embedded in organizational structures.

Building on Acker's concept of the ideal worker, Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan (2021) have introduced the idea of the "ideal executive". This concept was developed through research on senior male managers and describes the expectations associated with advancement into top leadership positions. Similar to the ideal worker, this model assumes a person who is fully available for work and free from significant caregiving duties (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1433). As a result, individuals who do not fit this model, particularly women with caregiving responsibilities, may face greater challenges in advancing to senior positions (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1433). This illustrates how senior leadership criteria can unintentionally favor certain life patterns over others, and shapes who is seen as suitable for top-level roles.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity helps to further explain how the ideal executive is shaped within organizations. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity in a particular context (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1423). In senior positions, organizational culture may reflect this dominant form of masculinity and help maintain male dominance (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1423). Men are often positioned as the standard for leadership, while women are seen as "others" who

do not fully align with the ideal executive (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1434). These expectations shape organizational practices and contribute to the continued overrepresentation of men in leadership roles (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1434).

A related concept is homosociality, which refers to social connections between men that involve shared power, information, and mutual support (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1423). Research suggests that men in high-level positions tend to recruit and promote individuals who resemble themselves in terms of background, values and identity (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1423). This process, known as homosocial reproduction, can lead to relatively homogeneous leadership groups and strengthen existing male-dominated networks in leadership (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1423). Together, these concepts help explain gendered leadership structures, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Key factors shaping gendered leadership stereotypes.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the main theoretical and social dimensions that shape gendered stereotypes in leadership. It brings together five interconnected components that operate at structural, cultural and individual levels: role congruity theory, agency and communion, traditional gender roles, ideal worker model and influencing factors. Together, these elements illustrate how social expectations, evaluative biases, and organizational norms collectively sustain gendered assumptions about leadership.

Overall, these perspectives highlight the persistence of a masculine leadership norm. However, recent research has begun to challenge the traditional “think manager–think male” association. Berkery & Ryan (2023, p. 340) found in their study that traditional pro-male bias in management has notably decreased in a ten-year period, showing that there is a stronger alignment between women and the managerial role. They examined students entering workforce and discovered that views have changed during this 10-period, meaning more open-minded employees are entering the workforce. However, changing stereotypes can be slow at a broader level, and it must be considered that students who entered the workforce just 10 years ago had very different views. Organizations should therefore ensure that recruitment and promotion processes ensure equal opportunities for men and women, and that current employees’ mindsets about leadership are challenged (Berkery & Ryan, 2023, p. 339). To fully understand the evolving views on gender and leadership, it is essential to examine the organizational structures and practices that shape leadership opportunities.

### **3 Gendered organizational practices and women's career advancement**

The gendered stereotypes and leadership norms discussed in the previous chapter do not exist only at the level of perceptions but are also reflected in organizational structures and practices. This chapter examines how gendered organizational processes influence women's career advancement.

#### **3.1 Structural barriers to women's advancement**

Structural barriers to women's career advancement can arise from broader organizational conditions, such as organizational culture, access to networks, and established organizational practices (Jauhar & Lau, 2018, p. 173). These structural factors shape the environment in which career opportunities are created, and they can influence the extent to which women are able to advance into senior leadership positions (Jauhar & Lau, 2018, p. 173).

Organizational culture plays an important role in shaping career opportunities. According to Jauhar and Lau (2018, p. 166), organizational cultures have been historically shaped by men, which may contribute to persistent gender gaps. Masculine norms can make it more difficult for women to be perceived as suitable for authority positions, and women may feel pressured to demonstrate higher levels of competence than men in order to advance in their careers (Jauhar & Lau, 2018, p. 166).

Access to professional networks is another structural factor hindering women's career advancement. Women may face greater challenges in participating in organizational networks compared to men due to time constraints related to family responsibilities (Jauhar & Lau, 2018, p. 167). The concept of "old boys' networks", informal networks often dominated by men and based on shared social backgrounds and interests also limit women's opportunities to be included in organizational networking (Jauhar & Lau, 2018, p. 167).

Women's exclusion from key informal networks can reduce their access to influential relationships and therefore hinder their career progression (Hing et al., 2023, p. 8).

In addition, established organizational practices may influence the career advancement opportunities. This is because these practices are often shaped by senior management, which in many organizations are predominantly male (Jauhar & Lau, 2018, p. 167). Consequently, practices and norms may unintentionally reflect gendered assumptions about leadership and career advancement, contributing to unequal career opportunities and reinforcing barriers that limit women's advancement to senior leadership positions (Jauhar & Lau, 2018, p. 167). These organizational practices will be further discussed in the following section from the perspective of barriers and enabling factors.

### **3.1.1 Glass ceiling**

One widely discussed structural barrier to women's career advancement is the "glass ceiling". The term refers to invisible barriers that prevent women from reaching the highest levels of leadership despite having the necessary qualifications and experience. According to Sharma & Agarwal (2024, p. 1927) two key factors creating the glass ceiling are "unequal treatment" and "male superiority". The concept was originally introduced to describe the unseen obstacles that limit women's progression into senior positions (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986, as cited in Manzi & Heilman, 2021, p. 258). The metaphor highlights how individuals may be able to see opportunities for advancement but remain unable to access them because of hidden structural obstacles within organizations (Sharma & Agarwal, 2024, p. 1925–1926).

Research continues to show that the glass ceiling effect persists despite the growing participation of women in the workforce and managerial positions (Sharma & Agarwal, 2024, p. 1925–1926). The presence of women in high-level positions is often thought of as evidence that these barriers are slowly disappearing, also called as "breaking the glass ceiling" (Manzi & Heilman, 2021, p. 257). Female leaders are frequently seen as role

models whose success may challenge stereotypes about women's abilities and encourage the acceptance of women in leadership roles (Manzi & Heilman, 2021, p. 257).

However, research suggests that the presence of a female leader does not necessarily benefit other women seeking similar positions. Because female leaders may be seen as representatives of their gender group, evaluations of other women can become linked to the performance of existing female leaders (Manzi & Heilman, 2021, p. 259). Seeing a successful female leader does not necessarily lead to more positive evaluations who aspire to similar leadership roles, and on the contrary failure may reinforce existing stereotypes about women's abilities and negatively affect how other women are evaluated (Manzi & Heilman, 2021, p. 262). This reflects a process of evaluative generalization, in which the evaluation of a female leader's presence and performance may influence and shape the assessment of women aspiring to similar leadership positions (Manzi & Heilman, 2021, p. 270).

Research also indicates that the presence of women on corporate boards does not necessarily lead to greater representation of women in these positions, and in some cases, boards that already include women may be less likely to add additional female directors (Pascual-Fuster et al., 2025, p. 1019). One explanation for this relates to the concept of recategorization. Although women who reach high positions may have characteristics similar to their male counterparts, this alone may not be enough for them to be perceived as members of the dominant in-group (Pascual-Fuster et al., 2025, p. 1036). As a result, they often experience resistance when attempting to access the most influential positions within these groups (Pascual-Fuster et al., 2025, p. 1018). This suggests the existence of a second glass ceiling, where women who have already entered top leadership structures remain less likely than men to advance to the most influential positions within those structures, such as chair positions (Pascual-Fuster et al., 2025, p. 1036).

### **3.1.2 Occupational segregation**

It is widely recognized that women and men often work in different fields and occupations, and this is generally considered to put women at a disadvantage. This phenomenon is called occupational segregation (Blackburn et al., 2002, p. 513). Occupational segregation has two dimensions: horizontal segregation and vertical segregation (Blackburn et al., 2001, p. 513). The latter is especially impacting more the advancement of women into higher positions, as it has to do with upward mobility in organizations.

The concept of gender capital offers a useful perspective for understanding the persistence of occupational segregation. According to Huppatz and Goodwin (2013, p. 297), gender is not only a social category but can also operate as different forms of capital; masculine, feminine, and male capital. Individuals accumulate and utilize gender capital throughout their careers, influencing both entry into occupations and career advancement within them, thereby reinforcing both horizontal and vertical occupational segregation (Huppatz & Goodwin, 2013).

The concept of gender capital helps explain how women's career progression is shaped by unequal access to gendered resources. Masculine capital, such as traits associated with leadership and assertiveness, is often more highly valued in higher-level positions (Huppatz & Goodwin, 2013, p. 300). This places women at a disadvantage, as they may not be equally recognized as embodying these traits, which limits their opportunities for promotion and vertical segregation.

## **3.2 Organizational practices in women's career advancement**

Building on the structural barriers discussed in the previous section, organizational practices represent the everyday ways in which gender inequalities are either maintained or challenged. These practices can create both barriers and opportunities for women's career advancement, depending on how they are implemented. According to Stamarski & Hing (2015, p. 12-13) gender inequality within organizations is a multifaceted issue that

is reflected in practices such as recruitment and promotion decisions. These practices are shaped by broader organizational factors like leadership and culture, and as a result, they can influence women's career development and opportunities for advancement (Stamarski & Hing, 2015, p. 12-13).

Organizations often embed their practices into the culture to strengthen their legitimacy and ensure long-term stability (Murray & Southey, 2020, p. 1194). Institutionalized workplace structures aim to make equality a part of organizational culture, because without them, women may have to rely solely on their personal abilities (Murray & Southey, 2020, p. 1195).

### **3.2.1 Barriers in organizational practices**

Organizational practices can create barriers to women's career advancement. This is often characterized as second-generation bias. Second-generation bias describes subtle and often unintentional practices that appear gender-neutral but still disadvantage women because they reflect traditionally male-dominated norms and values (Donohoe & Mohan, 2021, p. 1). Unlike first generation bias, which is more explicit, second-generation bias cannot be easily addressed through formal policies or legislation, which often lead to only limited change (Opoku & Williams, 2019, p. 18). It is reflected in how women are treated and evaluated in organizations, often influenced by gender stereotypes (Opoku & Williams, 2019, p. 17). This can lead to unequal performance assessment, exclusion from informal networks, and workplace expectations that do not fully support women's career development, therefore affecting recruitment, promotion and women's representation in senior management (Opoku & Williams, 2019, p. 17).

Several studies highlight the mismatch of existing policies and their actual implementation. According to O'Brien et al. (2023, p. 1877–1878) this can lead to women struggling to progress in their careers, because policies were not effectively communicated across different levels of organizations. This suggests that organizations may not provide clear pathways and guidance for leadership advancement (O'Brien et al., 2023, p. 1878).

Gender biases continue to make it harder for these strategies to support women's career advancement, and for this reason career pathways should be included in formal policies (O'Brien et al., 2023, p. 1878).

Similar observations about policies and their implementation were made by Ramseook-Munhurrun et al. (2025, p. 60) regarding flexible working arrangements; even though policies existed in some organizations, male managers often did not put them into practice and favored those being at the office. This aligns with the findings of Opoku & Williams (2019, p. 13-14) and Piggott & Pike (2020, p. 1020-1021), who found out that managers tend to associate performance with physical presence at work, which can limit women's career development due to caregiving responsibilities. In practice, presenteeism was described as a common feature of organizational culture, where being visibly present and available was interpreted as a sign of commitment and was even linked to higher rewards (Sheeran & Linehan, 2025, p. 10). While flexibility may be formally offered, it is often unclear in practice, leading employees to question its reliability (Piggott & Pike, 2020, p. 1021; Sheeran & Linehan, 2025, p. 11). This reinforces traditional workplace norms and male-dominated leadership culture, making it more difficult for women to manage work-life balance and advance into leadership positions (Ramseook-Munhurrun et al., 2023, p. 63).

These expectations are further reinforced by strong norms around full-time commitment and constant availability, where demonstrating continuous dedication to the organization is seen as essential for career progression (Sheeran & Linehan, 2025, p. 11). Career advancement was also described as being influenced by senior male gatekeepers, who shape access to opportunities. Always-on work norm was associated with greater recognition and financial rewards, while taking any form of leave was often seen as detrimental to career progression (Sheeran & Linehan, 2025, p. 11). These expectations are particularly relevant for women, as they are often more likely to carry caregiving responsibilities alongside their work roles.

As discussed in Chapter 2, stereotypes related to motherhood may shape how women's commitment and competence are perceived. Traditional gender roles continue to shape expectations around caregiving, with women often seen as the primary caregivers for children (Piggott & Pike, 2020, p. 1021). This can affect their career advancement, with challenges like balancing work and childcare, difficulties in arranging full time work alongside caregiving, and the impact of career breaks on career progression (Piggott & Pike, 2020, p. 1021). Women often feel dual pressure to be both ideal workers and good mothers, as they feel required to meet demands from themselves, partners, organizations and wider society (Niemistö et al., 2021, p. 711). Niemistö et al. (2021, p. 711-712) refer to this phenomenon as bounded individualism, where women are expected to manage and balance these responsibilities individually. Especially among senior managers, there is often an underlying expectation to work long hours and maintain constant availability, which can be extremely difficult to balance with childcare responsibilities (Piggott & Pike, 2020, p. 1021).

Quotas can also function as a barrier to women's career advancement when they are perceived negatively within organizations. Quotas are requirements set by governments or industries to ensure a certain level of gender representation in leadership positions (Sojo et al., 2016, p. 520). According to O'Brien et al. (2023, p. 1878) some women reported that quota-based measures made them feel marked as different and associated their advancement with special treatment rather than merit. Because of this, promotions resulting from quota policies were sometimes viewed as less legitimate, both by women themselves and others (O'Brien et al., 2023, p. 1878). The perception that women are promoted based on gender rather than competence can undermine their credibility and therefore strengthen existing gender bias.

Informal networks, already identified as a structural barrier in Section 3.1, also play an important role in shaping career progression within organizations. According to Opoku & Williams (2019, p. 12) interviewees highlighted the significant role of informal relationships in supporting advancement to senior management positions, with many

referring to the so-called “old boys’ network”. This network is described as a key source of privilege and power, providing access to essential information, which creates significant advantages that are difficult to replace with formal mechanisms (Sheerin & Linehan, 2025, p. 9-10). Several female employees described being excluded from these networks and noted that such exclusion limited their access to promotion, even when performance was not in question (Opoku & Williams, 2019, p. 12). Although often unintentional, this exclusion can create an uneven playing field by giving men greater access to influential relationships and career opportunities. Reliance on informal recruitment can also contribute to unintentional bias, especially when HR processes do not fully regulate such mechanisms (Opoku & Williams, 2019, p. 12).

Performance evaluation is identified as an organizational practice that can act as a barrier to women’s career advancement. According to Opoku & Williams (2019, p. 11-12) many participants reported that evaluation processes were inconsistent and often biased, with women needing to prove their competence more extensively than their male counterparts. A large majority also felt that women’s performance was assessed more harshly, particularly in comparison to men in similar roles (Opoku & Williams, 2019, p. 11-12). In addition, some participants noted a lack of constructive feedback in performance evaluations, which made it more difficult for women to progress in their careers (Opoku & Williams, 2019, p. 12). This is because the lack of meaningful feedback can reinforce horizontal segregation and the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (Opoku & Williams, 2019, p. 12).

In terms of leadership style, women are also judged more harshly than their male counterparts (Vinkenburg et al., 2011). According to Vinkenburg et al. (2011, p. 11), transformational leadership style can include acts of inspirational motivation and individual consideration. Inspirational motivation involves expressing optimism and enthusiasm about goals and future, while individualized consideration focuses on supporting people by mentoring and paying attention to their individual needs (Vinkenburg et al., 2011, p. 11). Because of prescriptive stereotypes about women’s communal, gender-like behavior,

they are expected to display both inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, while men are only expected to illustrate inspirational motivation (Vinkenburg et al., 2011, p. 17-19). This can affect women's career advancement, because they are facing a "double burden" of leadership expectations (Vinkenburg et al., 2011, p. 19).

In addition to the main barriers discussed above, studies also highlight more subtle factors that may influence women's career advancement, such as language and expectations of appearance and clothing (Piggott & Pike, 2020). Gendered language within organizations can reinforce traditional stereotypes and shape how leadership is understood in gendered terms (Piggott & Pike, 2020, p. 1017). The use of male-oriented or seemingly neutral terms, such as male pronouns or titles like "chairman", can normalize leadership as male, while subtle sexist language in everyday communication can also sustain unequal perceptions of women's leadership potential (Piggott & Pike, 2020, p. 1018). Gendered dress norms on the other hand can create visual distinctions between male and female leaders, for example when men adopt more uniform and traditionally "professional" styles that signal authority and belonging (Piggott & Pike, 2020, p. 1016). At the same time, women may feel that expressing femininity through their appearance can undermine their credibility, reinforcing the association between leadership and masculine norms (Piggott & Pike, 2020, p. 1017).

### **3.2.2 Enabling organizational practices**

While the previous section focused on barriers that limit women's career advancement, some organizational practices can actively support and help women progress into leadership positions. A great example of this is having access to mentoring, which has been identified as an enabler for women's career advancement (Calinaud et al., 2021, p. 686; Bridges et al., 2022, p. 380). According to Murray & Southey (2020, p. 1208) mentoring helps women build confidence in their leadership abilities and helps them access supporting networks. A supportive mentor can help to create a trusting environment where women feel comfortable asking questions and building trust (Bridges et al., 2022, p. 380). Support from mentors, particularly male mentors, can build women's authority and help

them achieve status recognition within their organizations (Murray & Southey, 2020, p. 1210–1211).

On the contrary, women working in organizations without a mentoring culture struggled to find suitable mentors and had to rely on their abilities alone to progress in their careers (Murray & Southey, 2020, p. 1208–1209). Similar observations were made by O'Brien et al. (2023, p. 1879), stating that having guidance from a mentor helped women navigate career pathways and understand the expectations of leadership. It has been described as one of the most important factors supporting career success, as it benefits not only individuals but also organizations as a whole (Mousa et al., 2023, p. 6-7). While mentoring is considered valuable for all employees, the importance of ensuring that women receive equal access to mentoring has been emphasized (Mousa et al., 2023, p. 7). This suggests that organizations can play a crucial role in facilitating women's career progression by providing mentoring and that it should be integrated into formal policies and everyday practices.

Similar to mentoring, sponsoring activities have also been identified as a driving factor for women's career progression (Gröschl et al., 2025). These activities have been divided by Gröschl et al. (2025, p. 1794-1795) into two categories; assistive support and appreciative support. Assistive support is described as sponsors helping their female mentees by offering more challenging and broader assignments, placing them in new roles with bigger responsibilities and creating opportunities for learning (Gröschl et al., 2025, p. 1793). Appreciative support, on the other hand, refers to situations where sponsors express confidence in their female mentees' abilities and potential, and reinforce their decisions to take on challenging assignments, emphasizing trust and encouragement (Gröschl et al., 2025, p. 1794). Although distinguished, these two types of support are generally equally important and complement each other in supporting women and building their professional self-confidence (Gröschl et al., 2025, p. 1794).

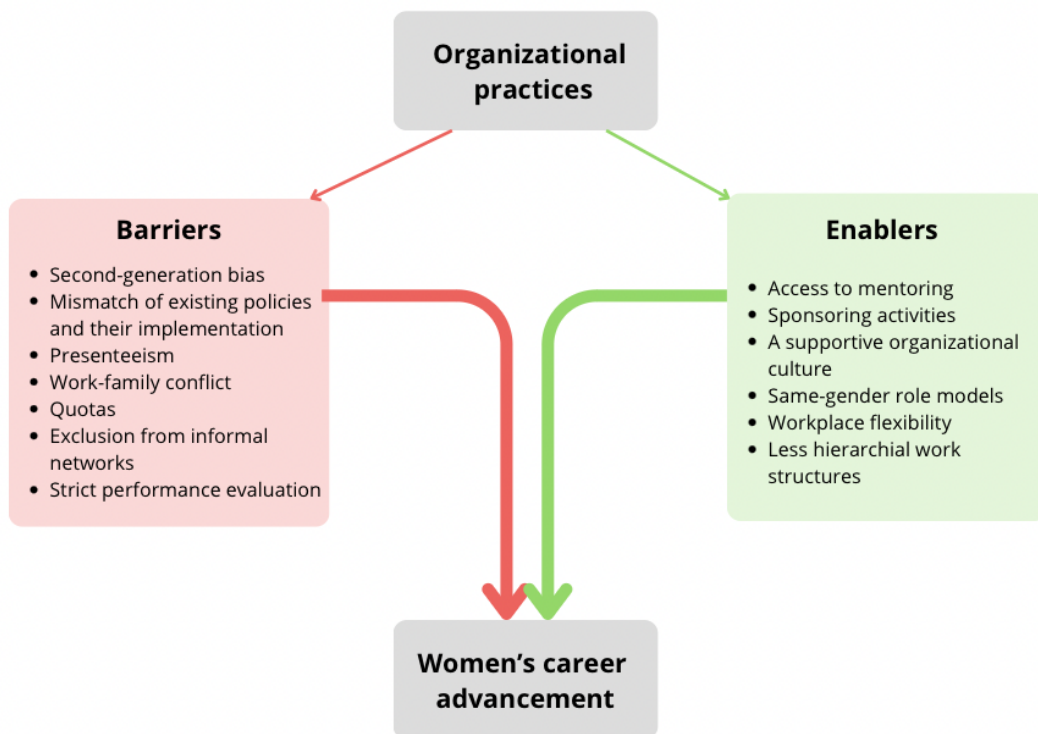
According to Gröschl et al. (2025, p. 1795), formalized short-term sponsorship programs tend to have limited impact and therefore greater emphasis should be placed on building long-term, personal relationships that extend across different networks. A supportive organizational culture that fosters trust and encourages learning appears to be more effective in helping women progress horizontally (Gröschl et al., 2025, p. 1795). In this context, the presence of female leaders may play an important role, as exposure to same-gender role models can normalize women's advancement and encourage greater mentorship and advocacy (Wiersma et al., 2026, p. 291-292).

Because women are often seen as the primary caregivers for children, workplace flexibility is one of the biggest enabling factors for their career advancement. As discussed in the previous section about barriers, the lack of flexible work arrangements can also function as a significant obstacle to women's career progression. Flexibility is therefore particularly important as it helps working mothers manage the demands of work alongside family and childcare responsibilities (Calinaud et al., 2021, p. 685; Fitong Ketchiwou & Naong, 2024, p. 290). In practice, flexibility can include practices such as flexible working hours or remote work, which can help women in balancing professional responsibilities and family (Fitong Ketchiwou & Naong, 2024, p. 292). At a more specific level, some organizations are for instance ensuring that employees on parental leave are still included in performance reviews and extending parental leave to the designated primary caregiver regardless of gender (O'Brien et al., 2024, p. 2757).

Organizational practices related to how work is structured can also support women's career advancement. Less formal and more flexible task arrangements, particularly those that involve collaboration and open group-based work, were found to reduce gender-based differences in how performance is evaluated (Murray & Southey, 2020, p. 1207). In such settings, women were more likely to participate on equal terms with men, which strengthened their sense of authority and confidence (Murray & Southey, 2020, p. 1210). It can be concluded that when work is organized in a less hierarchical way, it can weaken

gendered assumptions and reduce status differences, thus making it easier for women to demonstrate their competence (Murray & Southey, 2020, p. 1210).

Overall, these findings suggest that organizational practices can play an enabling role in supporting women's career advancement. Mentoring and sponsorship help women build confidence and access to networks, while flexible and less hierarchical work practices can reduce gendered constraints. Rasheed et al. (2025, p. 276) refer to practices these as "women-friendly HRM practices", enhancing psychological empowerment among female employees, which in turn contribute to their career progression. The following Figure 2 provides an overview of organizational barriers and enablers related to women's career advancement.



**Figure 2.** Organizational practices as barriers and enablers for women's career advancement.

Figure 2 illustrates how organizational practices can function either as barriers or enablers to women's career advancement. On the left, barriers such as second-generation bias and exclusion from informal network represent obstacles that limit women's career progression. On the right, enablers such as mentoring, sponsorship and workplace flexibility highlight practices that promote equal opportunities for women. Together, these pathways demonstrate that organizational practices can simultaneously hinder or facilitate women's advancement, depending on how they are implemented.

## 4 Conclusions

This chapter summarizes the key findings of the thesis by addressing the research questions related to leadership stereotypes, organizational practices and their influence on women's career advancement. It also presents managerial implications, as well as limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

### 4.1 Summary of key findings

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how gendered leadership stereotypes become embedded in organizational practices and how they shape women's career advancement. The first research question examined the types of gendered leadership stereotypes associated with women leaders. The findings suggest that stereotypes linked to women leaders are largely rooted in traditional gender role expectations, where women are associated with caregiving and men with breadwinning roles (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 167). A key mechanism underlying these stereotypes is the distinction between agency and communion. Agency refers to traits such as dominance and independence, which are often associated with men, whereas communion refers to warmth and nurturance, typically associated with women (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 167). Leadership roles are commonly linked with agentic qualities, and as a result, women leaders are often evaluated against expectations that are not fully compatible with traditional femininity. It can be argued that this misalignment creates a fundamental barrier, and as long as leadership is defined through masculine traits, women are seen as a "mismatch" for high-level roles.

Female leaders frequently face a so called "double bind", where they are evaluated negatively regardless of their behavioral style. When they display communal behavior, they may be perceived as too soft, whereas exhibiting agentic and assertive behaviors aligned with leadership expectations can lead them to being viewed as unfeminine or socially inappropriate (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 388). This tension is explained by role congruity theory, which suggests that prejudice arises when there is a perceived incongruity

between the female gender role and leadership role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These stereotypes are both descriptive and prescriptive, shaping not only how women are perceived but also how they are expected to behave (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 167). It can be argued that this creates a narrow and conflicting set of expectations for female leaders.

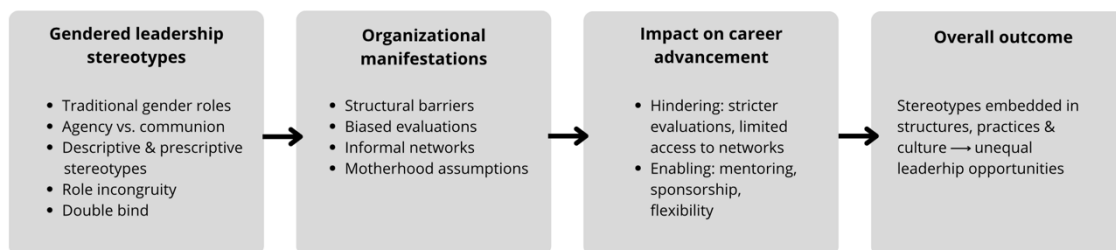
The second research question explored how and in which organizational practices and processes these stereotypes manifest in relation to women's career advancement. The results indicate that gendered leadership stereotypes manifest in a wide range of organizational processes, often in subtle and structural ways. Organizational culture plays a central role, as it has been historically shaped by men and continues to reflect masculine norms of leadership, such as constant availability, competitiveness and full work commitment (Jauhar & Lau, 2018, p. 166). Because these norms are often seen as normal, they are rarely questioned. One of the most significant manifestations is the glass ceiling, which refers to invisible structural barriers that prevent women from advancing to senior leadership positions (Sharma & Agarwal, 2024). In addition, research suggests the existence of a "second glass ceiling", where women who have already reached top management positions still face difficulties in accessing the most influential roles (Pascual-Fuster et al., 2025). This indicates that barriers to advancement persist even after initial success, highlighting the persistence and durability of gendered assumptions. This shows that reaching leadership positions does not automatically remove inequality.

Gender stereotypes are also embedded in everyday organizational practices, such as performance evaluations and promotion processes. Evaluation systems may appear gender-neutral but often reflect second-generation bias, where women are assessed more critically and required to demonstrate competence more extensively than men (Opoku & Williams, 2019, p. 11-12). This implies that formal equality in evaluations does not necessarily lead to equal outcomes, as underlying assumptions continue to influence judgement. Similarly, leadership styles are evaluated through a gendered lens, where women are expected to balance both agentic and communal behaviors, creating complex expectations compared to men (Vinkenburg et al. 2011).

Informal practices further reinforce these stereotypes. Access to career opportunities is often shaped by informal networks, from which women are frequently excluded (Opoku & Williams, 2019, p. 12). In addition, evaluative generalization can occur, where the performance of individual female leaders affects how other women are assessed, reinforcing group-based stereotypes (Manzi & Heilman, 2021, p. 270). At the same time, organizational policies may appear gender-neutral but are inconsistently applied in practice. For example, flexible working arrangements may formally exist, but managers tend to favor employees who are physically present and constantly available (Piggott & Pike, 2020, p. 1021). These practices are closely linked to gendered stereotypes about caregiving and motherhood, which can shape perceptions of women's commitment and suitability for leadership roles. Such effects are particularly evident in male-dominated fields, where leadership and competency are strongly linked with masculine traits, and women are more likely to face negative evaluations, especially in contexts where they are underrepresented (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 388; Heilman, 2001, p. 660; Heilman et al., 2024, p. 171-172). This further supports the view that numerical underrepresentation can intensify the impact of gender stereotypes.

Finally, the third research question explored how organizational practices influence the formation of women's career advancement with the findings highlighting that they can either hinder or enable career progression. Many existing practices tend to disadvantage women by aligning career success with masculine norms, such as continuous availability and visibility in the workplace. These expectations can limit women's advancement, particularly when combined with caregiving responsibilities, as career breaks or flexible work arrangements are often perceived negatively (Sheeran & Linehan, 2025, p. 11; Piggott & Pike, 2020, p. 1021). Biased evaluation processes, limited access to informal networks and inconsistent policy implementation can slow down women's career progression. For example, exclusion from influential networks reduces access to promotion opportunities, while stricter performance evaluations can hinder recognition and advancement

At the same time, certain organizational practices can support and enable women’s career advancement. Mentoring has been identified as an important mechanism for building confidence, leadership skills and access to professional networks (Calinaud et al., 2021, p. 686). Similarly, sponsorship plays a key role by actively promoting women’s careers through access to challenging assignments and visibility within the organization (Gröschl et al., 2025). Flexible working arrangements, when effectively implemented can also facilitate career advancement by allowing women to better balance work and family responsibilities (Fitong Ketchiwou & Naong, 2024, p. 292). In addition, more collaborative and less hierarchical work structures have been shown to reduce gender bias in performance evaluations and create more equal opportunities (Murray & Southey, 2020, p. 1210). These findings suggest that organizational change is possible, but requires not only formal policies, but also shifts in underlying norms and everyday practices. To clarify how the key findings of this thesis relate to one another, the following figure 3. summarizes the core mechanisms through which gendered leadership stereotypes shape women’s career advancement.



**Figure 3.** How gendered leadership stereotypes shape women's career advancement. Note: The conceptual layout was developed in assistance with Microsoft Copilot.

As the Figure 3 illustrates, gendered leadership stereotypes originate from broader cultural expectations and become embedded in organizational structures, practices and everyday interactions. Overall, the findings suggest that gendered leadership

stereotypes are not only individual-level biases but are deeply embedded in organizational structures and everyday practices. They shape how leadership is defined, how performance is evaluated and how career opportunities are distributed. Ultimately, this thesis highlights that true gender equality in leadership requires a systematic approach that goes beyond individual-level and targets the structural and cultural foundations of organizations.

## **4.2 Managerial implications and practical recommendations**

The findings of this study suggest that organizations play a key role in either reinforcing or reducing barriers to women's career advancement. Therefore, targeted managerial actions are needed to create more equal opportunities. First, organizations should establish structured mentoring and sponsoring programs to support women's professional development and improve access to influential networks, as they have been identified as key enablers of career advancement (Calinaud et al., 2021; Bridges et al., 2022). Second, increasing transparency in recruitment and promotion processes can reduce reliance on informal networks and limit unconscious bias (Opoku & Williams, 2019). Third, flexible work arrangements should be actively supported and normalized to enable better reconciliation of work and family responsibilities (Fitong Ketchiwou & Naong, 2024). In addition, managers should be trained to recognize subtle forms of bias that may influence evaluations of women's competence and commitment. Finally, fostering an inclusive organizational culture that encourages equal participation in informal networks and decision-making is essential. Overall, promoting women's career advancement requires both structural changes and sustained managerial commitment to create more equitable and supportive workplace environments.

## **4.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

This study examined mechanisms and phenomena surrounding women's career advancement from an organizational perspective. However, it does not take into account individual level factors, such as women's personal skills, motivations, or career ambitions,

and their potential influence on career development. Future research could address this gap by exploring both individual and organizational factors and how they interact in shaping women's career trajectories.

In addition, this thesis is based on existing literature, which may limit its ability to capture real-life experiences and current organizational practices. Future research could therefore include empirical data, such as interviews or case studies, to gain a deeper understanding of women's experiences in organizations.

Future research could also explore the differences across different industries and cultural contexts to see if there are any variations in how barriers and enabling factors manifest. As women's position in society can vary considerably across cultures, there may also be differences in how these issues appear in different contexts. In this thesis, some observations about the influence of male dominated sectors emerged, but different industries could be further explored and discussed.

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