

Gender Inequality in the Workplace: Barriers to Women's Career Advancement

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Abstract

This study investigates the barriers to women's career advancement in the workplace, examining the multifaceted nature of gender inequality that continues to impede women's progression into senior leadership and management positions across organizational hierarchies. Despite significant legislative progress and growing corporate commitments to diversity, women remain substantially underrepresented in executive suites, boardrooms, and senior management roles globally. This research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative survey with semi-structured interviews, to identify and analyze the organizational, sociocultural, and individual-level barriers that women encounter in their career trajectories. A structured questionnaire was administered to 100 working women employed in mid-level and senior positions across five private-sector organizations, supplemented by 20 in-depth interviews with purposively selected participants. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, independent samples t-tests, and multiple regression analysis, while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that the glass ceiling phenomenon persists across the sampled organizations, with 78% of respondents reporting that they had personally experienced at least one significant barrier to career advancement attributable to their gender. The most prevalent barriers identified were gender-based stereotyping and unconscious bias (reported by 72%), work-family conflict and inadequate family-friendly policies (68%), exclusion from informal professional networks and mentoring opportunities (61%), unequal access to high-visibility assignments and stretch roles (54%), and gender pay disparity (49%). The regression model, incorporating organizational culture, work-family conflict, mentoring access, and perceived gender bias as predictors, explained 46% of the variance in career advancement satisfaction scores. The study concludes that dismantling the barriers to women's career advancement requires a comprehensive, multi-level intervention strategy that addresses structural organizational practices, cultural attitudes, and systemic policy gaps simultaneously.

Keywords: gender inequality, glass ceiling, women's career advancement, workplace barriers, unconscious bias, work-family conflict, mentoring, organizational culture, leadership

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The pursuit of gender equality in the workplace has been a central focus of social, legal, and organizational reform efforts for over half a century. Since the landmark civil rights legislation of the 1960s and the subsequent waves of feminist advocacy that followed, women have made remarkable strides in entering the labor force, attaining higher levels of education, and establishing their presence across virtually every industry and profession. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023), women's global labor force participation rate stands at approximately 47%, and in many developed nations, women now constitute more than half of all university graduates and an increasingly significant proportion of professional-degree holders in fields such as law, medicine, business, and accounting.

Despite these substantial gains in workforce participation and educational attainment, a persistent and pervasive pattern of gender inequality continues to characterize the upper echelons of organizational hierarchies. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2024) estimated that, at current rates of progress, achieving full gender parity in economic participation and opportunity would require approximately 131 years. Women hold only approximately 10% of Fortune 500 CEO positions, constitute roughly 28% of senior management roles globally, and continue to earn, on average, 77 cents for every dollar earned by men in comparable positions (McKinsey & Company, 2023). This persistent gap between women's qualifications and their representation in leadership positions has been extensively described through the metaphor of the glass ceiling, a term coined by Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) to describe the invisible but impenetrable barriers that prevent women from ascending to the highest levels of organizational power and authority.

The barriers to women's career advancement are neither singular nor simple but constitute a complex, interconnected system of organizational structures, cultural norms, cognitive biases, and institutional practices that collectively disadvantage women at multiple points along their career trajectories. Understanding the nature, prevalence, and relative impact of these barriers is essential for designing effective interventions that can accelerate progress toward gender equality in the workplace.

1.2 Problem Statement

While the existence of gender-based barriers to career advancement has been widely acknowledged in the organizational literature, significant gaps remain in the empirical understanding of how these barriers operate in specific organizational and cultural contexts, which barriers are perceived as most consequential by women themselves, and how organizational, sociocultural, and individual-level factors interact to shape women's career experiences and outcomes. Many existing studies have focused on single barriers in isolation, such as the gender pay gap or work-family conflict, without examining the cumulative and interactive effects of multiple barriers within a single analytical framework. Furthermore, the voices and lived experiences of working women are often underrepresented in quantitative research that relies on organizational statistics and aggregate data. This study addresses these gaps by employing a mixed-methods approach that combines the breadth of quantitative survey data with the depth of qualitative interview insights to produce a comprehensive, contextually grounded analysis of the barriers to women's career advancement among 100 working women in private-sector organizations.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study pursues the following objectives: first, to identify the most prevalent barriers to career advancement experienced by working women in private-sector organizations; second, to examine the relationship between organizational culture, work-family conflict, mentoring access, and perceived gender bias and women's career advancement satisfaction; third, to compare the career advancement experiences of women in different organizational levels, age groups, and family circumstances; fourth, to explore women's subjective perceptions and lived experiences of gender-based career barriers through qualitative inquiry; and fifth, to propose evidence-based recommendations for organizations, policymakers, and women themselves to overcome these barriers.

1.4 Research Hypotheses

The study tests the following hypotheses: H1: The majority of working women report experiencing at least one significant gender-based barrier to career advancement. H2: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between perceived gender bias in the workplace and

career advancement satisfaction. H3: Work-family conflict is a statistically significant predictor of lower career advancement satisfaction among women. H4: Access to mentoring and professional networks is a statistically significant positive predictor of career advancement satisfaction. H5: Women with children report significantly greater career barriers than women without children.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research is significant for multiple reasons. For organizational leaders and human resource professionals, the findings provide actionable evidence for designing diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies that address the specific barriers most strongly affecting women's career progression. For policymakers, the study highlights the structural and cultural reforms needed to create a more equitable labor market. For women in the workforce, the research validates their experiences, identifies common patterns of disadvantage, and offers practical strategies for navigating and overcoming career barriers. For the broader academic community, the study contributes to the gender and organizational behavior literature by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches within a single comprehensive investigation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Glass Ceiling: Historical Context and Current Status

The glass ceiling metaphor, first introduced by Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) in *The Wall Street Journal*, has become one of the most enduring and widely recognized concepts in the study of gender inequality in the workplace. The term describes the invisible, often unacknowledged barriers that prevent women and minorities from advancing beyond a certain level in organizational hierarchies, regardless of their qualifications, experience, or performance. The United States Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) formally investigated this phenomenon and concluded that the glass ceiling was not a single barrier but a constellation of interconnected barriers, including organizational practices, attitudinal and cultural factors, and structural impediments, that collectively constrained women's upward mobility.

Three decades after the term was coined, the glass ceiling has proven remarkably resistant to dismantling. While women have made notable progress in entering middle management, the transition from middle to upper management and executive leadership remains disproportionately

difficult. Catalyst (2023), a global nonprofit organization focused on advancing women in business, reported that women held approximately 28.2% of senior management positions worldwide and only 8.8% of Fortune 500 CEO positions. Some scholars have proposed alternative metaphors to capture the evolving nature of gender-based career barriers, including the glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), which describes the tendency for women to be appointed to leadership positions during times of organizational crisis when the risk of failure is high, and the labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007), which conceptualizes women's career paths as complex, winding journeys full of obstacles at every turn rather than a single impenetrable barrier at the top.

2.2 Organizational Barriers: Structure, Culture, and Practices

Organizational-level barriers constitute a primary category of impediments to women's career advancement. These include formal organizational structures and informal cultural practices that systematically disadvantage women in hiring, evaluation, promotion, compensation, and developmental opportunity allocation. Acker (1990) introduced the concept of gendered organizations, arguing that organizational structures, processes, and cultures are not gender-neutral but are fundamentally shaped by and reflective of masculine norms and assumptions. Organizational cultures that valorize long working hours, continuous geographic mobility, linear career trajectories, and aggressive competitive behaviors implicitly favor men, who are more likely to have domestic support structures that enable conformity with these norms, while penalizing women, who disproportionately bear primary responsibility for caregiving and household management (Williams, 2000).

Performance evaluation systems represent another organizational barrier. Research by Heilman (2012) has demonstrated that identical performance is often evaluated differently depending on whether the performer is male or female, with women's successes being more frequently attributed to external factors such as luck, teamwork, or easy tasks, while their failures are attributed to internal deficiencies such as lack of competence or leadership ability. This evaluative bias results in women receiving less favorable performance ratings, being passed over for promotions, and receiving less challenging developmental assignments that are critical stepping-stones to senior leadership. Furthermore, Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) highlighted that organizations frequently exclude women from the high-visibility, high-stakes strategic projects

and stretch assignments that serve as proving grounds for leadership potential, thereby depriving women of the opportunity to demonstrate and develop their capabilities.

2.3 Sociocultural Barriers: Stereotyping and Unconscious Bias

Gender stereotyping and unconscious bias represent deeply embedded sociocultural barriers that pervade workplace interactions, evaluations, and decision-making processes. Eagly and Karau (2002) proposed Role Congruity Theory, which posits that prejudice against female leaders arises from the perceived incongruity between the characteristics stereotypically associated with women, such as warmth, communality, and nurturing, and the characteristics stereotypically associated with effective leadership, such as assertiveness, dominance, and decisiveness. This incongruity creates a double bind for women: those who conform to feminine stereotypes are perceived as likeable but not competent enough for leadership, while those who adopt agentic behaviors consistent with leadership expectations are perceived as competent but are penalized for violating gender norms through social backlash, reduced likability ratings, and interpersonal sanctions (Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

Unconscious or implicit bias operates below the threshold of conscious awareness and influences judgments, decisions, and behaviors in ways that individuals may not recognize or intend. Moss-Racusin et al. (2012) conducted a landmark experimental study in which science faculty members evaluated identical application materials attributed to either a male or a female applicant. The results demonstrated that both male and female faculty members rated the male applicant as significantly more competent, more hireable, and deserving of a higher starting salary, despite the applications being identical in every respect except the name. These findings illustrate how deeply ingrained gender biases can systematically disadvantage women in recruitment, evaluation, and advancement decisions, even in contexts where decision-makers explicitly endorse principles of gender equality.

2.4 Work-Family Conflict and the Motherhood Penalty

Work-family conflict, defined as the incompatibility between the demands of work and family roles, is one of the most frequently cited barriers to women's career advancement. Despite significant societal changes in gender role attitudes, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of domestic labor, childcare, and eldercare responsibilities in most societies (Hochschild &

Machung, 2012). This unequal distribution of unpaid care work creates a time bind that limits women's availability for extended working hours, business travel, networking events, and professional development activities that are often implicitly required for career advancement. The concept of the ideal worker norm, which assumes that fully committed employees are those who prioritize work above all other responsibilities and are available without constraint, structurally disadvantages anyone who deviates from this norm, and women, as primary caregivers, are disproportionately penalized (Williams, 2000).

The motherhood penalty is a well-documented phenomenon in which mothers experience significant career disadvantages relative to childless women and to fathers. Correll, Benard, and Paik (2007) conducted a seminal audit study demonstrating that mothers were rated as significantly less competent, less committed, and less suitable for hire and promotion than identically qualified childless women, while fathers experienced no such penalty and, in some cases, received a fatherhood bonus in evaluations. This penalty manifests in lower callback rates for job applications, lower starting salary offers, reduced promotion rates, and diminished access to developmental opportunities, creating a cumulative career disadvantage that widens over time and contributes significantly to the gender leadership gap.

2.5 Networking, Mentoring, and Sponsorship Gaps

Access to informal professional networks, mentoring relationships, and sponsorship is widely recognized as a critical facilitator of career advancement, particularly into senior leadership positions where formal qualifications are less differentiating and social capital, visibility, and advocacy become decisive factors. Research has consistently demonstrated that women face greater barriers to accessing these informal career advancement resources. Ibarra (1993) found that women's professional networks tend to be smaller, less strategically diversified, and more segregated by gender than men's networks, limiting women's access to the information, influence, and sponsorship channels that facilitate upward mobility.

The mentoring gap is particularly consequential. While many organizations have implemented formal mentoring programs, research by Ragins and Cotton (1999) demonstrated that women face more barriers to obtaining mentors than men do, and that when women do secure mentoring relationships, their mentors tend to occupy lower organizational positions and possess

less influence than the mentors of their male counterparts. Hewlett et al. (2010) further distinguished between mentoring and sponsorship, noting that while mentors provide guidance and advice, sponsors actively advocate for their proteges, use their organizational influence to create advancement opportunities, and put their own reputation on the line to support the protege's career progression. Their research found that men are significantly more likely than women to have sponsors, and that the absence of sponsorship is a primary reason why women plateau at middle management levels.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

This study integrates two complementary theoretical frameworks. The first is Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which explains the prejudice against women in leadership by identifying the perceived incongruity between female gender roles and leadership roles, generating both descriptive bias (women are seen as lacking leadership qualities) and prescriptive bias (women who display leadership qualities are penalized for gender-role violations). The second is Gendered Organizations Theory (Acker, 1990), which posits that organizational structures, processes, and cultures are inherently gendered, reflecting and reproducing masculine norms that privilege men's life patterns and career trajectories while marginalizing women's experiences and contributions. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive theoretical lens for understanding how barriers to women's career advancement operate simultaneously at the cognitive-perceptual level through stereotyping and bias, and at the structural-institutional level through gendered organizational practices and cultures.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods, cross-sectional research design that integrates quantitative survey data with qualitative interview data in a convergent parallel design. The quantitative component provides breadth by measuring the prevalence and statistical relationships among career barriers, while the qualitative component provides depth by capturing women's subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of these barriers. The convergence of both data streams enhances the validity, richness, and practical relevance of the findings.

3.2 Population and Sample

The target population comprised women employed in mid-level and senior positions within private-sector organizations in the services, finance, and technology industries. A stratified purposive sampling technique was used to select 100 female participants from five organizations: a commercial bank (n = 22), an information technology firm (n = 20), a telecommunications company (n = 20), a consulting firm (n = 19), and a hospitality company (n = 19). Stratification ensured representation across organizational levels, with 62 participants occupying mid-level management positions and 38 occupying senior management or director-level positions. The inclusion criteria required participants to have been employed in their current organization for at least two years and to hold positions at the supervisory level or above. The mean age was 37.6 years (SD = 7.43), with 41% aged 30 to 35, 33% aged 36 to 42, and 26% aged 43 and above. Regarding family status, 58% were married, 28% were single, and 14% were divorced or separated. Of the total sample, 54% had at least one child under the age of 18. Educational attainment was high: 52% held a master's degree, 39% held a bachelor's degree, and 9% held a doctoral degree or professional qualification. For the qualitative phase, 20 participants were purposively selected from the survey respondents to represent diversity in age, organizational level, industry, and family status.

3.3 Research Instruments

The quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising five sections. Section A gathered demographic and professional information, including age, marital status, number of children, educational attainment, industry, organizational level, and years of professional experience. Section B assessed perceived gender barriers using a 24-item Gender Barriers to Career Advancement Scale (GBCAS) developed for this study based on the conceptual frameworks of Eagly and Karau (2002), Acker (1990), and the findings of prior empirical studies. The scale comprised four subscales: perceived gender bias and stereotyping (6 items), work-family conflict (6 items), networking and mentoring barriers (6 items), and organizational culture and structural barriers (6 items). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Section C measured career advancement satisfaction using an adapted 8-item Career Satisfaction Scale based on Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley (1990), rated on a 5-point scale. Section D assessed organizational support for gender equality through 6

items measuring the availability of family-friendly policies, diversity training, women's leadership programs, and equal opportunity practices. Section E included two open-ended items inviting participants to describe their most significant career barriers and suggest organizational changes. The qualitative interview protocol comprised 12 semi-structured questions exploring personal career trajectories, experiences with gender-based barriers, coping strategies, mentoring and networking experiences, organizational culture, and recommendations for change. A pilot study with 12 participants confirmed the reliability of the quantitative instrument, yielding Cronbach's alpha values of 0.87 for gender bias, 0.85 for work-family conflict, 0.83 for networking barriers, 0.86 for organizational culture, and 0.89 for career satisfaction.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The quantitative questionnaires were distributed electronically through organizational HR departments using Google Forms over a three-week period in October 2025. Organizational gatekeepers facilitated access by sharing the survey link through internal communication channels. The qualitative interviews were conducted face-to-face and via video call over a subsequent two-week period, each lasting approximately 40 to 55 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participant consent. All participants provided informed consent, were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 28. Descriptive statistics summarized the demographic profile and prevalence of career barriers. Chi-square tests examined associations between categorical variables such as motherhood status and barrier prevalence. Independent samples t-tests compared career advancement satisfaction between mothers and non-mothers. Pearson correlation coefficients assessed bivariate relationships between barrier subscales and career satisfaction. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the combined and individual predictive effects of the four barrier dimensions on career advancement satisfaction, controlling for age, organizational level, and years of experience. Qualitative interview transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights that complement and contextualize the quantitative findings.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Prevalence of Gender-Based Career Barriers

The overall prevalence of gender-based career barriers was remarkably high. Of the 100 respondents, 78% reported experiencing at least one significant gender-based barrier to career advancement during their professional career, confirming Hypothesis H1. The frequency of specific barriers experienced is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Prevalence of Gender-Based Career Barriers Among Respondents (N = 100)

Barrier Type	n	%
Gender stereotyping and unconscious bias	72	72.0
Work-family conflict / inadequate family policies	68	68.0
Exclusion from networks and mentoring	61	61.0
Unequal access to high-visibility assignments	54	54.0
Gender pay disparity	49	49.0
Lack of female role models in leadership	46	46.0
Sexual harassment or gender-based microaggressions	31	31.0
Experienced at least one barrier	78	78.0

4.2 Barrier Subscale Scores and Career Satisfaction

The descriptive statistics for the four barrier subscales and the career advancement satisfaction scale are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Barrier Subscales and Career Satisfaction (N = 100)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Gender Bias & Stereotyping	3.48	0.84	1.17	5.00
Work-Family Conflict	3.36	0.91	1.00	5.00
Networking & Mentoring Barriers	3.21	0.87	1.00	5.00
Org. Culture & Structural Barriers	3.14	0.82	1.17	4.83
Career Advancement Satisfaction	2.74	0.88	1.00	4.75

Gender bias and stereotyping recorded the highest mean barrier score ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.84$), confirming its prominence as the most pervasive perceived obstacle. The mean career advancement satisfaction score of 2.74 ($SD = 0.88$) out of 5.0 indicates a below-moderate level of satisfaction with career progression, suggesting widespread dissatisfaction among the sampled women with their advancement opportunities and trajectories.

4.3 Motherhood and Career Barriers

An independent samples t-test comparing career advancement satisfaction between mothers ($n = 54$) and non-mothers ($n = 46$) revealed a statistically significant difference ($t = -2.83$, $p = 0.006$, $d = 0.57$). Mothers reported significantly lower career satisfaction ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 0.82$) than non-mothers ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.87$). Furthermore, mothers scored significantly higher on the work-family conflict subscale ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.78$) compared to non-mothers ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.89$; $t = 5.12$, $p < 0.001$). A chi-square analysis confirmed that mothers were significantly more likely to report having been passed over for a promotion due to family responsibilities ($\chi^2 = 8.47$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.004$), with 42.6% of mothers reporting this experience compared to 17.4% of non-mothers. These results strongly support Hypothesis H5.

4.4 Correlation and Regression Analysis

Table 3: Pearson Correlations Between Barrier Subscales and Career Satisfaction ($N = 100$)

Barrier Subscale	r	p-value
Gender Bias & Stereotyping	-0.54**	< 0.001
Work-Family Conflict	-0.49**	< 0.001
Networking & Mentoring Barriers	-0.46**	< 0.001
Org. Culture & Structural Barriers	-0.51**	< 0.001

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

All four barrier subscales showed statistically significant moderate-to-strong negative correlations with career advancement satisfaction, supporting Hypotheses H2, H3, and H4. These results confirm that greater perceived barriers across all dimensions are associated with lower satisfaction with career progression.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Career Advancement Satisfaction

Predictor	B	Beta	t	p
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Gender Bias & Stereotyping	-0.26	-0.25	-2.67	0.009
Work-Family Conflict	-0.22	-0.23	-2.48	0.015
Networking & Mentoring Barriers	-0.19	-0.19	-2.12	0.037
Org. Culture & Structural Barriers	-0.28	-0.27	-2.89	0.005

Note: $R^2 = 0.49$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.46$, $F(7, 92) = 12.68$, $p < 0.001$. Controls: age, org. level, years of experience.

The regression model was highly significant ($F(7, 92) = 12.68$, $p < 0.001$), with an adjusted R-squared of 0.46, indicating that the four barrier dimensions, together with demographic controls, explained 46% of the variance in career advancement satisfaction. Organizational culture and structural barriers emerged as the strongest predictor (Beta = -0.27, $p = 0.005$), followed closely by gender bias and stereotyping (Beta = -0.25, $p = 0.009$), work-family conflict (Beta = -0.23, $p = 0.015$), and networking and mentoring barriers (Beta = -0.19, $p = 0.037$). All four barrier dimensions were independently significant, demonstrating that they each make unique contributions to the reduction of women's career satisfaction.

4.5 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the 20 interview transcripts yielded five overarching themes that provided rich contextual insight into the quantitative findings.

The first theme, "The Invisible Rules of Advancement," captured women's experiences of navigating unwritten organizational norms and expectations that implicitly favored men. Participants described a pervasive culture in which career advancement was contingent not only on formal performance metrics but on informal criteria such as socializing with senior leaders after hours, participating in male-dominated recreational activities, and projecting an image of total work dedication that conflicted with caregiving responsibilities. A senior manager in the banking sector described how promotions often seem to go to the men who are most visible at after-work gatherings and weekend events, spaces where women with families simply cannot be present.

The second theme, "The Competence-Likability Tightrope," reflected the double bind experienced by women who attempted to demonstrate leadership behaviors. Multiple participants described being characterized as aggressive, difficult, or intimidating when they adopted assertive leadership styles, while simultaneously being dismissed as too soft or lacking in executive

presence when they adopted more collaborative or empathetic approaches. A director in the technology sector noted that she had received feedback to be more assertive in one performance review and to be less confrontational in the very next review, illustrating the impossible standard women often face.

The third theme, "Motherhood as a Career Sentence," captured the profound impact of motherhood on career trajectories. Participants with children described being automatically excluded from consideration for demanding assignments, international postings, or leadership development programs based on the assumption that their family responsibilities would prevent them from fulfilling these roles. Several women reported being explicitly told by supervisors that certain opportunities were not suitable for someone with young children, without being given the choice to decide for themselves.

The fourth theme, "The Old Boys' Network," described women's persistent exclusion from the informal male-dominated networks through which critical career information, sponsorship, and opportunities are channeled. Participants noted that key decisions about assignments, promotions, and strategic initiatives were often made in informal settings, such as golf outings, after-work drinks, and private conversations, from which women were structurally or socially excluded.

The fifth theme, "Resilience and Strategic Navigation," highlighted the coping strategies and survival mechanisms that women developed to navigate gender-based barriers. These included seeking mentors outside their own organizations, building alliances with other senior women, carefully managing their self-presentation to balance assertiveness with warmth, and choosing to speak up selectively on issues where they felt their credibility was strongest. While demonstrating remarkable resilience, participants also expressed frustration that the burden of adaptation fell disproportionately on women rather than on the organizational systems and cultures that created the barriers.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that gender inequality in the workplace remains a deeply entrenched and multifaceted phenomenon that significantly impedes women's career advancement. The finding that 78% of respondents reported experiencing at least one significant gender-based barrier underscores the pervasive nature of the problem and is consistent with the global data

reported by Catalyst (2023) and the World Economic Forum (2024). The quantitative results, which identify gender bias and stereotyping, organizational culture, work-family conflict, and networking barriers as significant independent predictors of reduced career satisfaction, align with the theoretical predictions of Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and Gendered Organizations Theory (Acker, 1990), confirming that barriers operate simultaneously at the cognitive-perceptual and structural-institutional levels.

The finding that organizational culture and structural barriers emerged as the strongest regression predictor is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests that the most consequential impediments to women's advancement are not individual attitudes or personal circumstances but the systemic features of organizational design, including evaluation systems, assignment allocation processes, promotion criteria, and workplace norms, that embed masculine standards into the fabric of institutional life. This finding supports Acker's (1990) contention that organizations are inherently gendered and that achieving gender equity requires fundamental restructuring of organizational processes, not merely attitudinal change among individual actors.

The significant motherhood penalty observed in this study, with mothers reporting markedly lower career satisfaction and substantially higher work-family conflict, is consistent with the experimental findings of Correll et al. (2007) and the sociological analysis of Hochschild and Machung (2012). The qualitative theme of motherhood as a career sentence provides vivid illustration of how assumptions about mothers' commitment and availability systematically exclude them from advancement opportunities, often without their knowledge or consent. This pattern represents a particularly insidious form of discrimination because it operates through seemingly protective or considerate assumptions that nevertheless deprive women of agency and opportunity.

The qualitative findings enrich the quantitative analysis by revealing the lived texture of gender-based barriers and the complex navigational strategies women employ to manage them. The themes of invisible rules, the competence-likability tightrope, and the old boys' network collectively paint a picture of workplace environments in which the criteria for success are implicitly gendered, the standards of evaluation are applied inconsistently, and the pathways to power are disproportionately accessible to men. The resilience demonstrated by the women

interviewed is commendable, but the study underscores that resilience alone is an insufficient and inequitable solution; systemic change is required.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study provides compelling mixed-methods evidence that gender inequality continues to constitute a formidable barrier to women's career advancement in the workplace. The glass ceiling persists not as a single monolithic obstruction but as a complex web of interconnected barriers spanning organizational structures and cultures, sociocultural stereotypes and biases, work-family dynamics, and networking and mentoring systems. The regression model, which explains 46% of the variance in career advancement satisfaction through four barrier dimensions, confirms the substantial and multidimensional impact of these obstacles on women's professional trajectories and aspirations. The disproportionate burden borne by mothers highlights the intersectionality of gender with family status in shaping career outcomes and underscores the inadequacy of interventions that address gender in isolation from caregiving responsibilities.

6.2 Recommendations

For organizations, implementing a comprehensive suite of gender equity interventions is essential. These should include mandatory unconscious bias training for all managers and decision-makers involved in hiring, evaluation, and promotion processes; transparent and standardized promotion criteria that reduce the influence of subjective judgment and informal networks; robust family-friendly policies including paid parental leave for both parents, flexible working arrangements, on-site or subsidized childcare, and return-to-work programs for women re-entering the workforce after caregiving breaks; formal sponsorship programs that pair high-potential women with senior leaders who actively advocate for their advancement; and regular gender pay audits with commitments to closing identified gaps within defined timeframes. For policymakers, strengthening legislative protections against gender discrimination, mandating corporate gender diversity reporting, and incentivizing organizations that achieve measurable progress toward gender parity in leadership would create the regulatory context necessary to accelerate change. For women themselves, building strategic professional networks, seeking both mentors and sponsors, investing in leadership skill development, and negotiating proactively for assignments,

recognition, and compensation are recommended as practical individual-level strategies, while acknowledging that the primary responsibility for eliminating gender barriers rests with the institutions that create and sustain them.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations. The sample of 100 women from five private-sector organizations limits the generalizability of findings to other sectors, organizational sizes, and cultural contexts, particularly the public sector, small and medium enterprises, and organizations in developing countries where gender dynamics may differ substantially. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences, and longitudinal studies tracking women's career trajectories over time would provide more definitive evidence of how barriers shape advancement outcomes. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce social desirability and retrospective biases, and future research could incorporate objective promotion rate data, compensation records, and organizational diversity metrics to triangulate the findings. Additionally, the study did not examine the intersectional effects of race, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation on career barriers, and future research should adopt an intersectional framework that recognizes how multiple dimensions of identity interact to produce unique patterns of advantage and disadvantage in the workplace.

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