


Cultural Constraints and Catalysts: A Cross-Regional Inquiry into Women's Leadership Aspirations in Eastern and Western Societies

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ABSTRACT

The persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions across diverse global contexts continues to be a significant concern, not merely as a matter of equity but as a reflection of entrenched cultural norms and institutional structures that often constrain women's leadership aspirations. This study undertakes a comparative investigation between Eastern and Western societies to unravel the multifaceted cultural dynamics that influence women's motivation, access, and progression into leadership roles, drawing on both extensive secondary literature and primary empirical data collected via a structured cross-regional survey of working women. The findings suggest that while cultural expectations are experienced globally, the manifestation and intensity of these expectations vary significantly, with Eastern societies often presenting more rigid traditional gender roles that hinder professional advancement, whereas Western contexts, though more progressive on paper, reveal subtler yet persistent barriers rooted in organizational practices and societal perceptions. Despite these differences, shared structural impediments such as gender stereotypes, limited mentorship, and work-life balance challenges underscore the global nature of the issue. This paper highlights the urgent need for policy reform, organizational transformation, and cultural reconfiguration to foster inclusive leadership ecosystems that recognize and elevate women's leadership potential across geographical and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: Women's Leadership, Cultural Norms, Gender Stereotypes, Cross-Cultural Comparison, Work-Life Balance

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world marked by heightened calls for diversity and inclusion, the persistent gender gap in leadership positions remains a glaring paradox, particularly as women's educational attainment and professional qualifications continue to rise across both developed and developing regions. Notwithstanding decades of advocacy and policy interventions aimed at redressing gender-based disparities in the workplace, women's progression to senior leadership roles remains consistently hindered by a complex interplay of cultural expectations, institutional biases, and historically entrenched gender roles, the origins of which are deeply embedded in the social fabric of different societies. Within this context, the examination of how cultural dimensions distinctly shape, enable, or constrain women's leadership aspirations becomes not only a scholarly

imperative but also a pressing socio-economic concern, especially given the demonstrated correlation between gender-diverse leadership and improved organizational performance, innovation capacity, and ethical governance. The present study seeks to unpack the cultural undercurrents that differentially influence women's leadership trajectories across Eastern and Western societies, with a particular focus on examining whether and how cultural norms, values, and expectations (often transmitted through family structures, educational institutions, and workplace cultures) manifest in divergent outcomes for women in pursuit of leadership roles. While prior research has extensively documented the underrepresentation of women in corporate boardrooms, political offices, and executive management, much of the literature has treated gender disparities as a monolithic global issue, often overlooking the regional nuances and cultural variables that distinctly shape women's experiences in various sociocultural environments. In contrast, this study adopts a comparative lens that juxtaposes Eastern societies (characterized by higher collectivism, stronger adherence to hierarchical social structures, and more traditional gender norms) with Western societies, where individualism, meritocracy, and gender egalitarianism are more prominently espoused, at least ideologically.

The significance of this inquiry lies in the need to move beyond binary narratives of progress and stagnation, and instead to critically engage with the subtleties of cultural influence that often elude quantitative metrics and organizational policies. For instance, while Nordic countries such as Norway and Sweden consistently score highest on global gender gap indices and boast formal mechanisms for gender inclusion, women in these contexts still report experiencing implicit bias, gendered expectations regarding work-life balance and limited access to informal leadership networks. Conversely, in parts of Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, despite more overt structural barriers and limited institutional support for women, there exist instances of resilience and innovation in navigating cultural expectations, often through alternative leadership pathways that remain underexplored in mainstream leadership literature. The central research problem, therefore, concerns the extent to which cultural expectations and value systems, shaped by factors such as religion, tradition, education, and socio-economic development, affect women's internal aspirations and external opportunities to attain leadership positions. This inquiry is especially pertinent given the persistent mismatch between women's professional ambitions and the structural availability of leadership opportunities in both Eastern and Western contexts. Specifically, the study aims to investigate whether the motivations and deterrents experienced by women differ significantly between these two broad cultural clusters, and if so, in what ways cultural norms and gendered socialization processes contribute to those differences. Considering this problem, the study is guided by two overarching research questions:

- i. How do cultural influences shape women's perceptions, motivations, and experiences in aspiring to leadership roles?
- ii. Are these cultural influences different in nature and intensity between Eastern and Western societies, and if so, how do they manifest in terms of structural and perceptual barriers? The principal objective of this research is, therefore, to analyze the influence of culture on women's leadership aspirations by identifying key cultural dimensions that act as barriers or enablers, comparing how these factors operate in different regional contexts, and offering strategic recommendations for institutional and policy reform based on the findings.

The structure of the article reflects a logical progression from theoretical grounding to empirical validation. Following this introduction, the second section presents a comprehensive literature review that synthesizes scholarly contributions on the intersections of culture, leadership, and gender, with particular attention to well-established theoretical frameworks such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions and the GLOBE leadership study. This is followed by the third section on methodology, which details the design of the primary research, including sampling, data collection procedures, and analytical frameworks employed to assess cross-regional differences. The fourth section presents and discusses the findings derived from survey responses of women across Eastern and Western societies, analyzing trends, correlations, and deviations from existing literature.

The final section draws conclusions based on the integrated insights from primary and secondary data, discusses limitations of the study, and proposes directions for future research, especially considering evolving gender dynamics and cultural transformations in leadership paradigms. This study contributes to the expanding field of cross-cultural leadership and gender studies by offering a nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of how culture continues to mediate women's access to power and leadership. It underscores the need for culturally sensitive policy approaches and leadership development models that recognize the multifaceted experiences of women in different parts of the world, and which aim not only to close the gender gap numerically, but also to dismantle the deeper cultural barriers that sustain it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The discourse surrounding gender and leadership has evolved substantially over the past decades, shifting from simplistic explanations centered on individual capabilities to more nuanced analyses that consider the broader

socio-cultural, institutional, and psychological ecosystems within which leadership potential is either nurtured or constrained. At the core of this scholarly evolution is the recognition that culture, both as a system of shared values and as an apparatus of social control, plays a decisive role in shaping women's aspirations, perceptions, and experiences concerning leadership trajectories. Culture, as Hofstede (1984) originally conceptualized, encompasses collective mental programming distinguishing members of one group from another, and such programming inevitably determines the expectations, acceptability, and interpretations of gender roles and leadership attributes across societies.

In Eastern societies, characterized predominantly by collectivist values, high power distance, and strong orientation toward traditional hierarchies, women often confront rigid social prescriptions that associate leadership with masculinity, authority and assertiveness, traits often deemed incongruent with culturally idealized notions of femininity. For instance, studies in East Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have demonstrated that cultural norms surrounding honor, modesty and familial duty function as implicit barriers to women's public ambition, often resulting in what Hakim (2020) described as a "cultural glass cage", wherein women's aspirations are subtly molded away from leadership and directed instead toward socially approved roles as caregivers and supporters. In contexts where religious values further intertwine with national identity (as seen in many parts of the Middle East) leadership becomes a gendered space not only through organizational exclusion but also through spiritual and moral framing (Metcalf, 2021).

By contrast, Western societies, although generally more egalitarian in their legal and institutional frameworks, are not immune to the cultural mechanisms that impede women's rise to leadership. Eagly and Carli's (2007) theory of the "labyrinth" remains relevant, as it emphasizes how women in Western corporate settings often navigate a convoluted path to leadership, filled with hidden prejudices, glass cliffs and unspoken penalties for deviating from gendered expectations. More recent scholarship confirms this pattern, suggesting that even in contexts where formal gender equity policies exist, women are still disproportionately affected by informal organizational cultures that privilege masculine-coded behaviors, penalize assertiveness in women, and restrict access to the informal networks essential for upward mobility (Liu et al., 2022).

Despite these regional differences, a growing body of literature highlights the presence of shared global challenges that transcend cultural contexts. One such challenge is the persistence of gender stereotypes, which continue to color leadership perceptions in both East and West. According to Koenig et al. (2020), stereotypes linking leadership with masculinity are so deeply embedded that even women often internalize them, thereby experiencing what has been termed "stereotype threat," which negatively affects confidence, ambition, and performance. This internalization is particularly problematic when coupled with external reinforcement, such as lack of female role models in leadership positions and limited access to mentorship programs that can counteract these psychological effects.

In addition, work-life balance remains a central issue globally, albeit with differing cultural implications. In Eastern societies, the expectation for women to be the primary caretakers often renders full-time leadership roles impractical, while in Western societies, despite more flexible work arrangements, societal judgment and organizational cultures still implicitly favor uninterrupted career trajectories, thus penalizing women who take time off for family responsibilities (Madgavkar et al., 2022). This double bind results in a form of systemic attrition, whereby women opt out of leadership pathways not due to lack of competence or ambition, but because of the structural and cultural penalties associated with non-linear careers.

Theoretical frameworks such as the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) study provide further insight into the cultural contingencies of leadership perception. According to House et al. (2004), leadership prototypes vary significantly across cultures, with some regions favoring participative and humane-oriented leadership styles (traits more commonly associated with female leaders) while others continue to associate effective leadership with autonomy, assertiveness, and control, thereby aligning more closely with traditional male archetypes. The degree to which a culture values gender egalitarianism also impacts women's leadership access, as shown by Chhokar, Brodbeck, and House (2013), who found that high gender egalitarianism correlates with higher representation of women in leadership roles, yet this variable is often moderated by contextual factors such as political regime, economic development, and religious influence.

From a psychological standpoint, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) has also been employed to analyze women's intrinsic and extrinsic motivations toward leadership. Recent applications of this theory suggest that in collectivist societies, extrinsic motivators such as family expectations and societal approval may play a greater role in shaping women's career choices, whereas in individualist societies, intrinsic motivation, including personal fulfillment and identity construction, assumes greater importance. However, both motivational pathways are susceptible to cultural gatekeeping, which filters what is considered socially acceptable or desirable for women, particularly in public roles involving authority and visibility.

Notably, the role of education as a cultural agent of change has received increasing scholarly attention. While higher education institutions are often positioned as vehicles for empowerment, studies have found that curricula, faculty

representation, and institutional cultures can either reinforce or challenge existing gender norms. According to Morley and Crossouard (2016), universities in many developing countries continue to operate within patriarchal logics that marginalize feminist discourse, thereby limiting the transformative potential of education for women's leadership development.

Conversely, research in Western institutions has highlighted the importance of inclusive pedagogy and leadership training programs specifically tailored to women's needs as effective tools in bridging the gender leadership gap (O'Neil et al., 2021). Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a reevaluation of leadership and work dynamics worldwide, bringing to light both vulnerabilities and opportunities for gender equity. While women have disproportionately borne the brunt of caregiving responsibilities during lockdowns, they have also received recognition for effective crisis leadership in public health and governance sectors, as seen in countries like New Zealand and Germany (Wenham et al., 2020).

This dual narrative has intensified calls for redefining leadership away from traditional hierarchies and toward more relational, empathetic and collaborative models (traits that empirical studies increasingly associate with female leadership styles) (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021). Figure 1 presents the conceptual model derived from the literature, summarizing the relationship between cultural norms, gendered expectations, barriers and enablers, and women's leadership aspirations.

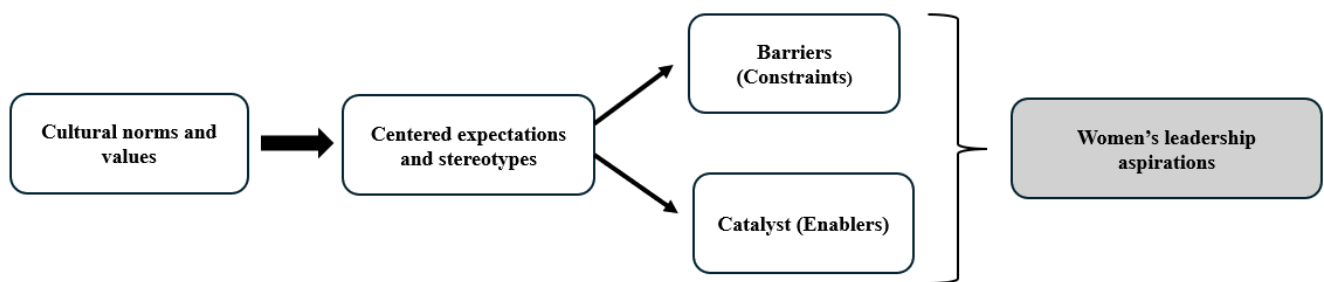


Figure 1- Cultural influence on women's leadership aspirations

Source: Personal elaboration

In sum, the literature reveals a complex, context-dependent picture of how cultural norms, organizational structures, and psychological mechanisms converge to shape women's leadership aspirations. While there is evidence of gradual shifts in attitudes and institutional frameworks, particularly in Western contexts, deeply ingrained cultural values continue to operate as both overt and covert barriers in many parts of the world. Recognizing and unpacking these cultural dynamics is essential for developing more effective, locally attuned strategies for fostering gender-inclusive leadership.

METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the cultural dimensions that influence women's aspirations to attain leadership positions in distinct sociocultural contexts, particularly between Eastern and Western societies, the present study employed a cross-sectional, descriptive research design based on primary quantitative and qualitative data collection. The methodological framework was guided by the need to capture both measurable trends and subjective perceptions among working women with diverse cultural affiliations, educational backgrounds, and professional experiences. As such, a survey-based approach was deemed appropriate to operationalize key constructs derived from the theoretical framework (namely, cultural norms, gender role expectations, leadership motivation, and perceived barriers) while simultaneously enabling the comparative analysis of attitudes, experiences, and aspirations between respondents from different regional contexts.

The research design prioritized breadth of response across geographies rather than depth within particular national contexts, aligning with the study's comparative objective to discern cultural trends across the East–West spectrum. Accordingly, the study population consisted of working women residing in countries identified as culturally representative of Eastern or Western paradigms, following Hofstede's and the GLOBE project's regional categorizations (House et al., 2004; Hofstede, 2001). The Eastern region was thus understood to include societies characterized by collectivist values, higher power distance, and stronger adherence to traditional gender norms—namely, parts of Asia, the Middle East, and Russia, while the Western region encompassed North America, Western Europe, and Oceania, regions commonly associated with individualism, lower power distance and greater gender egalitarianism.

Data collection was conducted through a structured, self-administered online survey developed in English and disseminated across digital platforms including professional social media (LinkedIn), community forums (Reddit) and private messaging channels (e.g., WhatsApp and Facebook groups). This dissemination strategy was selected to maximize respondent diversity, accessibility, and regional representation while ensuring anonymity and voluntary participation. The survey remained open for a two-month period, from October to November 2023, yielding a total of 92 responses. After data cleaning, which involved the exclusion of responses submitted by men, non-binary individuals, or respondents located outside the geographic scope of the study, the final sample consisted of 76 valid responses.

The demographic profile of the final sample was marked by a high level of educational attainment and professional experience. Approximately 79% of respondents held either a bachelor's or master's degree, with the majority employed in technical, administrative, or supervisory roles across various industries. The age distribution reflected a concentration of respondents in the mid-career range: 86% were between the ages of 25 and 48, which aligns with the demographic typically engaged in leadership development trajectories or organizational advancement opportunities. Of particular significance is the regional distribution: 64% of participants were from Eastern societies, while the remaining 36% represented Western contexts. Although this imbalance constitutes a potential limitation regarding regional generalizability, it nevertheless provides a rich comparative dataset for identifying cultural trends.

The survey instrument comprised 19 items, of which six were demographic questions, twelve were closed-ended questions utilizing Likert-type scales or dichotomous (yes/no) formats, and one was an optional open-ended question designed to capture qualitative insights. The closed-ended items were organized thematically to correspond to the constructs defined in the theoretical framework. For example, respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, the extent to which cultural expectations or traditional gender roles influenced their career aspirations. Additional questions inquired whether participants had ever altered or suppressed their leadership ambitions due to family or societal pressures—an inquiry designed to assess the internalization of cultural norms and their impact on self-perception. Other questions addressed workplace environments, the presence or absence of female role models, motivational factors (e.g., passion for the field, financial incentives, professional growth), and perceptions of regional differences regarding gender inclusivity in leadership.

The inclusion of an open-ended question enabled respondents to articulate their individual experiences and reflections on how culture influenced their career decisions or leadership pursuits. Although only ten participants opted to provide written responses, these narratives offered valuable qualitative depth and illustrated the interaction between structural and cultural forces in shaping leadership journeys. For example, several respondents from Eastern societies recounted instances where cultural or familial expectations discouraged ambition, while some Western participants highlighted more covert but persistent workplace biases. These accounts complemented the quantitative findings and enriched the interpretive framework of the study.

The data were analyzed using both descriptive and comparative statistical techniques. Frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations were calculated for all closed-ended questions, with particular attention paid to differences in responses between Eastern and Western participants. Cross-tabulations and basic correlational analyses were used to explore associations between demographic variables (e.g., age, education level) and responses to the leadership aspiration items. Although the relatively small sample size precluded robust inferential statistical analysis, the trends observed provided sufficient empirical grounding for the study's central argument concerning cultural influence on women's leadership ambitions.

Ethical considerations were integrated throughout the research design. Participation was entirely voluntary, informed consent was obtained at the start of the survey, and no personally identifiable information was collected. Furthermore, all data were anonymized and stored securely, in accordance with standard academic data protection protocols. The survey was designed to minimize psychological risk and did not include any questions of a sensitive or intrusive nature.

While the survey method offered substantial strengths in terms of geographic reach, respondent diversity, and alignment with the research objectives, the study also recognizes several methodological limitations. Chief among them is the imbalance in regional representation, with a larger proportion of Eastern participants, which may affect the generalizability of some findings. Furthermore, self-reported data are inherently subject to social desirability bias and may not fully capture the complexity of structural impediments or unconscious biases encountered by women in their leadership trajectories. Despite these limitations, the methodology employed provides a credible and analytically rigorous foundation for exploring the comparative impact of culture on women's leadership aspirations.

The methodological approach adopted in this study reflects a deliberate and theoretically informed strategy to capture the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of cultural influence on women's leadership. Through the integration of quantitative and qualitative data from a geographically and demographically diverse sample, the study

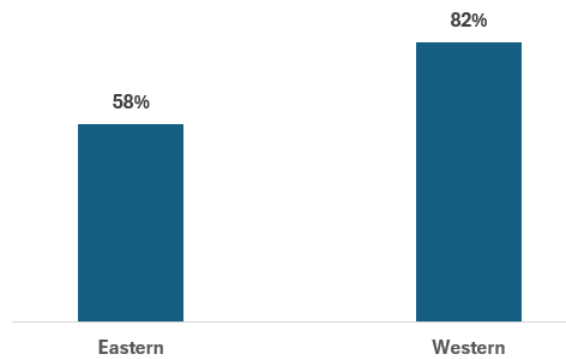
aspires to contribute meaningful insights to the growing literature on gender, leadership, and cross-cultural management.

RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected through the structured survey instrument yielded a nuanced and multifaceted portrait of how women from different cultural backgrounds, particularly those residing in Eastern versus Western societies, perceive, internalize and respond to the structural and cultural conditions that shape their aspirations for leadership roles. The descriptive statistics revealed distinct divergences in how leadership ambition is conceptualized and pursued across regions, as well as a notable convergence around common barriers such as gender stereotypes, unequal access to leadership networks and challenges in balancing professional and domestic responsibilities.

One of the most salient findings relates to the disparity in self-reported leadership ambition between respondents from Eastern and Western cultures. Graphic 1 illustrates the regional disparity in women's leadership ambition, highlighting that while a significant majority of Western respondents expressed clear aspirations for leadership roles, the proportion was notably lower among Eastern respondents

Graphic 1. Leadership ambition by region



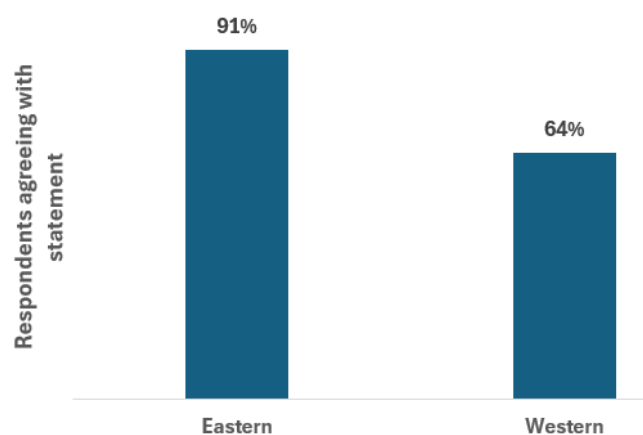
Source: Personal elaboration

Among the Western respondents, 82% expressed a clear and sustained desire to assume leadership roles within their organizations, with many citing self-actualization, professional growth, and the opportunity to influence positive change as primary motivators. In contrast, only 58% of Eastern respondents indicated similar levels of ambition, with a significant portion of participants from collectivist societies stating that their career goals had been tempered or reoriented due to familial expectations, social norms, or religious values that subtly or explicitly discourage public displays of ambition among women.

This regional discrepancy echoes the findings of Metcalfe (2021), who emphasized that in many Middle Eastern and Asian contexts, leadership is culturally encoded as a masculine space, thereby relegating women to supportive or background roles even when they possess the requisite skills and qualifications. The open-ended responses from Eastern participants corroborated this pattern, with several noting that overt ambition was often perceived as unfeminine, inappropriate, or even disrespectful in their sociocultural environments. Conversely, Western participants emphasized structural barriers over cultural ones, pointing to gender bias in promotion decisions, the prevalence of male-dominated leadership networks, and tokenism as central obstacles—findings that align with Eagly and Carli's (2007) "labyrinth" metaphor for women's career progression.

In terms of perceived cultural expectations, 91% of Eastern respondents agreed or strongly agreed that traditional gender roles continue to define societal perceptions of women's professional capacities, compared to 64% of Western respondents. Graphic 2 depicts the extent to which respondents perceive traditional gender roles as shaping societal views of women's professional capacities. The results reveal a stark contrast between regions: while most Eastern respondents (91%) affirmed the persistence of traditional expectations, a considerably lower (though still significant) proportion of Western respondents (64%) reported the same perception.

Graphic 2 - Perceived Impact of Traditional Gender Roles



Source: Personal elaboration

This contrast, while expected, is revealed in its magnitude and suggests that cultural norms are not only more rigid in Eastern contexts but also more overtly operationalized in both public and private spheres. These findings are supported by Liu et al. (2022), who documented that collectivist cultures often place a moral weight on gender conformity, thereby discouraging women from challenging societal roles through leadership pursuits.

However, the study also identified important areas of overlap, particularly concerning the internalization of gender stereotypes. Regardless of regional context, approximately 70% of all respondents reported at some point doubting their leadership capabilities due to perceived expectations or implicit messaging received during their formative years or early career stages. This form of internalized bias reflects what Koenig et al. (2020) termed "second-generation gender bias"—a subtle but pervasive form of discrimination that manifests not through explicit exclusion but through culturally reinforced narratives about what constitutes an ideal leader.

Notably, respondents from both regions highlighted the lack of female role models in leadership as a significant deterrent to their own leadership aspirations. In this regard, the data aligns with findings from O'Neil et al. (2021), who underscore the symbolic and practical importance of visibility in breaking down psychological and structural barriers to leadership. Interestingly, Western respondents were more likely to have access to mentorship programs and leadership development initiatives tailored to women, yet many still reported that these programs lacked substantive institutional support or failed to result in measurable promotion outcomes. This observation suggests that while inclusion policies may be in place, they often suffer from implementation gaps or lack the organizational will to produce transformative change.

When comparing motivations for seeking leadership, a dichotomy emerged: women in Western societies often articulated leadership as a vehicle for personal and organizational transformation, expressing values aligned with individual agency and impact, whereas Eastern respondents were more likely to view leadership through the lens of duty, responsibility to family or community, and social stability. This divergence is theoretically consistent with the individualism–collectivism dimension identified in Hofstede's cultural framework (Hofstede, 2001) and confirms the cultural specificity of leadership motivation. Yet both groups demonstrated a shared resilience and strategic adaptability in navigating constraints, whether cultural or institutional—a theme echoed in the work of Fitzsimmons et al. (2021), who argue that women's leadership journeys are often characterized by context-driven negotiation and iterative boundary-pushing. Work-life balance emerged as a critical concern across both cohorts. Approximately 83% of respondents reported that family obligations had influenced their career decisions, with a slightly higher incidence among Eastern participants. This finding mirrors broader global data compiled by McKinsey & Company (Madgavkar et al., 2022), which highlight the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work borne by women as a principal barrier to leadership. Although flexible work arrangements were more commonly reported by Western respondents, qualitative responses revealed that cultural expectations regarding motherhood and domestic responsibility continued to exert pressure, thereby limiting women's availability for leadership roles perceived as time-intensive or requiring geographic mobility.

Finally, the comparative analysis underscored the subtle evolution of leadership prototypes across cultures. While both groups acknowledged a growing appreciation for collaborative, empathetic, and people-centric leadership styles—traits more commonly attributed to women—many participants reported that actual promotion criteria continued to favor assertiveness, availability, and decisiveness, often coded in masculinized terms. These observations align with the GLOBE study's identification of ideal leadership traits across cultures, which although shifting, still reflect dominant cultural archetypes resistant to change (House et al., 2004). To better illustrate the contrasting dynamics that emerged from the survey responses, Table 1 summarizes the main cultural barriers constraining women's leadership aspirations alongside the catalysts that may enable their progression.

Table 1- Cultural Barriers and Catalysts for Women's Leadership

Barriers (Constraints)	Catalysts (Enablers)
Gender stereotypes associate leadership with masculinity	Inclusive leadership development programs
Limited access to mentorship and informal networks	Visibility of female role models
Work-life balance pressures (caregiving burden)	Flexible work arrangements and family-supportive policies
Traditional family and societal expectations (especially in Eastern societies)	Higher education and skills development
Institutional biases and organizational practices that privilege male-coded behaviors	Policy reforms and gender equality legislation

Source: Personal elaboration

In synthesis, data supports the assertion that while culture differentially impacts women's leadership aspirations, it does so in ways that are both explicit and latent, structural and psychological, public and private. The complexity of these influences defies simplistic regional generalizations and instead demands a more layered understanding of how intersecting norms, values, and organizational practices shape women's engagement with leadership. As such, any effort to promote gender-inclusive leadership must be sensitive not only to legal or institutional reforms but also to the underlying cultural narratives that continue to circumscribe women's professional horizons.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership roles across different cultural contexts continues to invite critical academic and policy-oriented reflection, especially in light of the ever-expanding evidence that links gender diversity in leadership with superior organizational performance, enhanced ethical standards, and more inclusive decision-making processes. Through the comparative lens adopted in this study (focusing on Eastern and Western cultural contexts) it becomes evident that cultural norms, values, and expectations constitute both overt and latent structures that exert significant influence over women's leadership aspirations, often operating beneath the surface of formal institutional mechanisms and policies.

One of the principal conclusions that emerges from the present research is the importance of recognizing the culturally specific manifestations of gender-based constraints and how these constraints differentially influence women's internal motivation to pursue leadership roles and their external opportunities to access such positions. In Eastern societies, the evidence suggests that traditional family structures, collectivist value systems, and high-power distance cultures continue to impose socially constructed gender norms that directly limit women's participation in public life and organizational leadership, often framing ambition as a masculine attribute and delegitimizing the notion of female leadership within cultural, religious, or moral frameworks. These findings corroborate prior literature emphasizing the role of socio-cultural conservatism and moral coding of gender roles in sustaining patriarchal systems in non-Western societies (Metcalf, 2021; Hakim, 2020).

Conversely, in Western societies, although legal frameworks and organizational policies may increasingly support gender equity, there remains a disconnect between formal inclusion and substantive participation, whereby women continue to encounter subtle but pervasive institutional biases, exclusion from informal power networks, and expectations to conform to masculinized leadership models that often marginalize alternative styles of leadership more commonly attributed to women. This divergence between policy and practice supports Eagly and Carl's (2007) argument that women in Western contexts navigate a "labyrinth" rather than a "glass ceiling," wherein progress is possible but fraught with invisible and variable barriers that shift across sectors, organizations, and life stages.

Moreover, the study finds that while cultural influences are indeed regionally specific, they converge in certain universal themes that transcend East-West binaries. Chief among these is the internalization of gender stereotypes, which manifests in self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and reduced leadership self-efficacy among women across both regions. This internalized bias, coupled with the scarcity of visible female role models in senior positions, contributes to a cyclical process of underrepresentation, wherein the lack of women in leadership reinforces the

perception that leadership is a male domain, thereby discouraging women from aspiring to such roles in the first place (Koenig et al., 2020; O'Neil et al., 2021).

Another shared barrier identified in both cultural contexts relates to the disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities shouldered by women, which significantly limits their ability to participate in leadership development programs, networking opportunities, and professional advancement trajectories that demand high mobility, long working hours, or uninterrupted career paths. Although flexible work arrangements and family leave policies are more prevalent in Western contexts, their effectiveness is often undermined by cultural norms that continue to assign domestic responsibilities primarily to women, a dynamic echoed in Eastern contexts, albeit more overtly justified through tradition and societal expectation (Madgavkar et al., 2022).

These findings underscore the critical importance of developing culturally attuned strategies to promote gender-inclusive leadership. In Eastern contexts, such strategies must include not only institutional reforms—such as anti-discrimination legislation and leadership development initiatives—but also grassroots cultural engagement aimed at transforming societal narratives around gender and leadership. Educational curricula, media representations, and community leadership programs can play a transformative role in reconfiguring gender expectations from an early age. In Western contexts, organizational accountability mechanisms must be strengthened to ensure that gender equity policies are translated into practice, particularly through leadership evaluations, promotion metrics, and the dismantling of exclusionary informal networks.

Despite the contributions of this research to the growing literature on gender and leadership, it is important to acknowledge its limitations, which in turn inform directions for future inquiry. First, the sample size—though adequate for descriptive and comparative analysis—does not allow for the use of more complex inferential statistical techniques that could uncover causal relationships or multivariate patterns. Future studies should consider employing mixed-method or longitudinal designs with larger, more diverse samples to enhance generalizability and statistical power.

Second, the regional imbalance in the sample—with a larger proportion of respondents from Eastern societies—may skew the comparative analysis, particularly in regard to the relative weight of cultural influence. Future research would benefit from stratified sampling techniques to ensure equal representation across regions, thereby enabling more balanced comparisons. In addition, further differentiation within the “Eastern” and “Western” categories would yield a more granular understanding of intra-regional variation, recognizing that countries within each bloc differ significantly in terms of religion, socio-economic development, and political structure.

Third, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the risk of social desirability bias, wherein participants may underreport culturally sensitive attitudes or overstate progressive views. Future research should consider triangulating survey data with ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, or organizational case studies to access deeper layers of cultural meaning and behavioral dynamics. Such methods would also enable the study of male and non-binary perspectives on leadership and gender expectations, thus enriching the analytical framework with more inclusive and intersectional dimensions.

Fourth, while this study focused primarily on cultural factors, it did not explicitly investigate how intersecting variables such as race, class, disability, or sexual orientation may compound or mitigate gender-based barriers to leadership. Future research should integrate an intersectional lens that recognizes the multiplicity of identities and their complex interaction with organizational and cultural systems, as suggested by Crenshaw's (1991) foundational work on intersectionality and its growing application in leadership studies.

Finally, future studies should also investigate the effectiveness of specific interventions aimed at promoting women's leadership in different cultural settings. Comparative evaluations of mentorship programs, gender quotas, inclusive leadership training, and flexible work policies could provide actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers seeking to design context-sensitive initiatives. The COVID-19 pandemic has already begun to disrupt traditional work models, offering a unique opportunity to rethink leadership paradigms and institutionalize more inclusive practices (Wenham et al., 2020). Evaluating the long-term impact of such changes on women's leadership trajectories will be essential in the years to come.

This study contributes to the scholarly understanding of gender and leadership by illuminating the complex and context-dependent ways in which culture mediates women's leadership aspirations across global regions. By juxtaposing Eastern and Western experiences, it reveals both divergence and convergence in the challenges faced by aspiring female leaders and calls for a multidimensional, culturally sensitive, and empirically grounded approach to advancing gender equity in leadership. The path forward must be guided not only by normative commitments to fairness and inclusion but also by rigorous, evidence-based strategies that acknowledge the enduring power of culture in shaping who leads—and who is permitted to lead—in societies around the world.

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