

Women Leadership in FMCG Firms: A Systematic Literature Review

Hussain Khawaja¹

1. Lecturer, Department of Management Sciences, University of Sufism and Modern Sciences, Bhitshah, Sindh, Pakistan

Corresponding email: h.jaghrani@gmail.com

Abstract

Leadership has long fascinated scholars, policymakers, and practitioners due to its critical role in shaping organizational performance and culture. The conceptualization of leadership has evolved significantly, shifting from a trait-based understanding to a process-oriented phenomenon that emphasizes influence, collaboration, and adaptability. The purpose of this systematic literature review is to examine the barriers and opportunities for women in leadership positions within FMCG firms, with particular attention to developing country contexts. This study adopts a systematic literature review methodology. Academic databases such as Elsevier, Sage, Wiley, Blackwell, Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, and Springer were searched using keywords including “women leadership,” “FMCG firms,” “gender diversity,” and “underrepresentation of women in management.” The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles in English, with no restriction on publication year to capture both historical and contemporary perspectives. This systematic review highlights that women’s underrepresentation in FMCG leadership stems from cultural, structural, and organizational barriers. However, evidence strongly supports the benefits of greater gender diversity in leadership. For Pakistan and other developing countries, adopting supportive policies—such as flexible work arrangements, mentorship programs, and gender-sensitive recruitment practices—can help bridge the leadership gap.

Keywords: Leadership; FMCG; Systematic Literature Review

Introduction

Leadership has long fascinated scholars, policymakers, and practitioners due to its critical role in shaping organizational performance and culture. The conceptualization of leadership has evolved significantly, shifting from a trait-based understanding to a process-oriented phenomenon that emphasizes influence, collaboration, and adaptability (Astin & Leland, 1991). Leadership is now widely seen as a dynamic process that fosters positive organizational change through the vision, competence, and skills of individuals who assume leadership positions.

Despite extensive scholarship, there is still no single universally accepted definition of leadership, as the term is understood differently depending on cultural, contextual, and disciplinary perspectives (Murray, 1995; McWhinney, 1997). Historically, leadership studies have been shaped by contributions from classical and behavioural schools of thought. For instance, Hawthorne studies in the 1920s highlighted that productivity was not solely influenced by monetary incentives but also by group norms and social relations within organizations (Petty & Pryor, 1974). Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) categorized leadership into authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire styles, shaping future discourse on how leaders affect team performance. Similarly, the Ohio State studies developed the Leader Behaviour Description Questionnaire (LBDQ), which emphasized two dimensions of leadership—consideration and initiating structure—as determinants of effectiveness (Petty & Pryor, 1974).

In addition, pioneers such as Peter Drucker emphasized management by objectives, decentralization, and knowledge management, while Lillian Gilbreth introduced time and motion studies, highlighting women's early yet underrecognized contributions to management sciences (Gilbreth, 1920). These frameworks have influenced leadership theory for decades, but the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, particularly in developing countries, remains a persistent concern. The gendered dynamics of leadership remain particularly relevant in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, where women often constitute a large portion of the workforce and consumer base but are significantly underrepresented in senior leadership roles. In Pakistan and other developing nations, cultural barriers, gender stereotypes, and institutional biases hinder women's advancement into boardrooms and executive positions (Federici, 2014; Klenke, 2011). This research aims to explore the underrepresentation of women in leadership within FMCG firms, highlight barriers and opportunities, and provide insights into how greater inclusivity can enhance organizational performance.

Problem Statement

Although women represent almost half of the global population and have increasingly entered the workforce, their presence in leadership positions remains disproportionately low, particularly in developing countries (Han & Noland, 2020). In the FMCG industry, where women play a central role as employees and consumers, the lack of female leaders is striking. Cultural norms, gendered perceptions of leadership traits, and systemic biases often exclude women from top-level decision-making roles (Klenke, 2011). In Pakistan, the situation is particularly concerning, as only a small fraction of women occupy leadership roles in FMCG firms, despite evidence suggesting that diverse leadership enhances organizational performance (Federici,

2014). This research addresses the underrepresentation of women leaders in FMCG firms, aiming to understand its causes and implications for organizational outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this systematic literature review is to examine the barriers and opportunities for women in leadership positions within FMCG firms, with particular attention to developing country contexts. Specifically, this study aims to:

- Identify the reasons behind women's underrepresentation in FMCG leadership.
- Highlight the potential contributions of women leaders to organizational diversity and performance.
- Review strategies adopted by different countries to improve women's access to leadership roles.
- Suggest policy and managerial recommendations to enhance women's leadership representation.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its focus on women's leadership within FMCG firms, a sector critical to both economic development and consumer engagement. Countries such as Norway and China have recognized women's representation on boards as a national issue and have implemented quotas or supportive policies to improve gender parity (Terjesen, Aguilera, & Lorenz, 2015). Learning from such models can provide actionable insights for developing nations like Pakistan. This study not only contributes to academic debates on leadership and gender diversity but also has practical implications for businesses seeking to enhance competitiveness, innovation, and consumer trust. By identifying obstacles and solutions, it can guide FMCG firms and policymakers in fostering inclusive leadership environments.

Literature Review

Historical Evolution of Leadership Theories

Leadership research has progressed through trait, behavioural, contingency, and transformational approaches. Early studies emphasized traits such as intelligence, charisma, and decisiveness (McWhinney, 1997). However, later research suggested that leadership could also be learned, challenging traditional assumptions about fixed traits (Gunn, 2000). The recognition of

leadership as a teachable and adaptable process opened the door for more inclusive understandings, but gender biases remained entrenched.

Women and Leadership in Developed vs. Developing Countries

In developed nations, women have gained increasing access to managerial roles, supported by policies promoting gender equality and inclusion. Studies have demonstrated that gender-diverse boards improve decision-making quality, organizational innovation, and stakeholder trust (Eagly & Carli, 2007). However, in developing countries, women face cultural resistance, structural barriers, and stereotypes that limit their leadership opportunities (Federici, 2014). In Pakistan, women's participation is often constrained by societal expectations around gender roles and limited access to professional networks (Shah & Shah, 2012).

Women in FMCG Firms

The FMCG sector is particularly relevant to gender studies because women are both primary consumers and significant contributors to the workforce. Yet, despite their importance, they remain underrepresented in managerial and executive roles. Research indicates that gender diversity in FMCG leadership leads to improved market insights, stronger consumer relationships, and higher performance (Catalyst, 2013). Nonetheless, systemic barriers prevent women from advancing to leadership positions, perpetuating inequality in this sector.

Barriers to Women's Leadership

The literature identifies multiple barriers:

- **Cultural and Social Norms:** Deeply ingrained gender stereotypes limit women's leadership aspirations (Klenke, 2011).
- **Structural Barriers:** Limited mentorship, networking opportunities, and flexible work policies hinder women's progression (Eagly & Carli, 2007).
- **Bias in Leadership Traits:** Leadership traits are often socially constructed as masculine, disadvantaging women (Northouse, 2019).
- **Work-Life Balance Challenges:** In contexts where domestic responsibilities primarily fall on women, balancing leadership with family obligations remains a major challenge (Shah & Shah, 2012).

Opportunities and Benefits of Women's Leadership

Despite these barriers, research underscores the positive outcomes of women in leadership:

- Enhanced corporate governance and ethical decision-making (Adams & Ferreira, 2009).
- Increased organizational innovation and adaptability (Eagly & Carli, 2007).
- Greater consumer alignment in industries like FMCG, where women dominate consumption (Catalyst, 2013).

Methodology

This study adopts a systematic literature review methodology. Academic databases such as Elsevier, Sage, Wiley, Blackwell, Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, and Springer were searched using keywords including “women leadership,” “FMCG firms,” “gender diversity,” and “underrepresentation of women in management.” The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles in English, with no restriction on publication year to capture both historical and contemporary perspectives. Inclusion criteria focused on research addressing women’s leadership in FMCG firms or comparable industries, gender diversity in management, and leadership outcomes. Dissertations and books were excluded. Duplicate studies across databases were removed.

Discussion

The literature reveals a consistent pattern of underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within FMCG firms, especially in developing countries. Despite growing awareness of gender diversity, structural, cultural, and organizational barriers persist. While developed nations have implemented effective policies such as gender quotas and mentorship programs, developing contexts like Pakistan still lag in adopting systematic reforms. The findings suggest that greater inclusion of women in leadership positions is not only a matter of equity but also a strategic advantage. FMCG firms with women leaders demonstrate stronger alignment with consumer needs, improved performance, and higher innovation. This indicates that the underrepresentation of women is not merely a social justice issue but a business challenge that directly impacts competitiveness.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This systematic review highlights that women’s underrepresentation in FMCG leadership stems from cultural, structural, and organizational barriers. However, evidence strongly supports the benefits of greater gender diversity in leadership. For Pakistan and other developing countries, adopting supportive policies—such as flexible work arrangements, mentorship

programs, and gender-sensitive recruitment practices—can help bridge the leadership gap. Future research should focus on empirical case studies of FMCG firms in South Asia, exploring how cultural contexts influence women’s leadership trajectories. Moreover, comparative studies between countries that have adopted gender quotas and those that have not can provide valuable insights for policy development. Promoting women’s leadership is not only an ethical imperative but also an organizational necessity for sustainable growth and competitiveness in FMCG firms.

References

- Adams, R. B., & Ferreira, D. (2009). Women in the boardroom and their impact on governance and performance. *Journal of Financial Economics*, 94(2), 291–309.
- Astin, H. S., & Leland, C. (1991). *Women of influence, women of vision: A cross-generational study of leaders and social change*. Jossey-Bass.
- Catalyst. (2013). *Why diversity matters*. Catalyst.
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). *Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders*. Harvard Business Press.
- Federici, S. (2014). *The exploitation of women in global capitalism*. PM Press.
- Gilbreth, L. M. (1920). *The psychology of management*. Sturgis & Walton.
- Gunn, R. W. (2000). Leadership traits: Can they be learned? *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 7(3), 45–59.
- Han, X., & Noland, M. (2020). Gender diversity and corporate performance. *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper*.
- Klenke, K. (2011). *Women in leadership: Contextual dynamics and boundaries*. Emerald Group Publishing.
- Lewin, K., Lippitt, R., & White, R. K. (1939). Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created social climates. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 10(2), 271–299.
- McWhinney, W. (1997). *Paths of change: Strategic choices for organizations and society*. Sage Publications.
- Murray, A. (1995). *The complete guide to leadership*. AMACOM.
- Northouse, P. G. (2019). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (8th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Petty, M. M., & Pryor, B. W. (1974). The Ohio State leadership studies: A critical review. *Academy of Management Journal*, 17(2), 278–291.

Shah, N., & Shah, S. (2012). Women, work, and empowerment in Pakistan. *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, 4(3), 297–314.

Terjesen, S., Aguilera, R. V., & Lorenz, R. (2015). Legislating a woman's seat on the board: Institutional factors driving gender quotas for boards of directors. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 128(2), 233–251.