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GENDER-INCLUSIVE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP ADVANCEMENT: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS, MENTORSHIP PATHWAYS, AND INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Women's advancement into senior leadership has become a prominent concern for organizations across sectors, yet the mechanisms that enable or obstruct this advancement remain unevenly understood. Attention has increasingly turned from individual-level explanations toward organizational communication practices, structural barriers embedded in evaluation and promotion systems, and the design of mentorship and inclusive leadership initiatives. This review examines how institutional barriers, mentorship pathways, and inclusive leadership practices intersect with gender-inclusive organizational communication to shape women's advancement into leadership. Findings are synthesized from seventeen peer-reviewed studies published between 2018 and 2025, spanning healthcare, higher education, business and management, and public-sector organizational contexts. The reviewed literature indicates that institutional barriers persist in the language used to evaluate performance and in the structural composition of managerial hierarchies, that mentorship alone is frequently reported as necessary but insufficient without accompanying sponsorship or organization-level intervention, and that inclusive leadership behaviors grounded in belongingness and valuing of uniqueness are associated with measurable gains in women's advancement across multiple sectors. Across the reviewed studies, organizational communication that names and interrupts gendered evaluation language, coupled with structured mentorship and sponsorship pathways and deliberate inclusive leadership practice, emerges as a recurring lever for change. Gaps remain in research connecting communication practice directly to advancement outcomes, and in evidence from sectors outside healthcare, higher education, and large-firm management.

Keywords: Gender-Inclusive Communication, Organizational Communication, Women's Leadership Advancement, Institutional Barriers, Mentorship Pathways

1 INTRODUCTION

Women's advancement into leadership positions has become a central concern across organizational and management research. As organizations increasingly frame diversity and inclusion as strategic priorities, scholars have turned attention to the mechanisms through which women move into senior roles and the barriers that continue to constrain

that movement. A growing body of this literature situates these mechanisms not in individual women's characteristics but in organizations' structural and communicative features.

Inclusive leadership is one such mechanism. Randel et al. (2018) conceptualized inclusive leadership as a set of leader behaviors that foster group members' sense of belonging while allowing them to maintain their uniqueness, proposing that these behaviors are associated with psychological empowerment and reduced turnover. This belongingness-and-uniqueness framework has since been applied to sector-specific contexts. Meng and Neill (2021) extended it to public relations leadership, finding that inclusive leadership fostered organizational diversity climate and was associated with women's perceptions of continued career growth opportunities.

Organizational communication practices themselves have been shown to shape advancement outcomes directly. Weinberg et al. (2019) found that perceived masculine communication style predicted hierarchical career advancement, including the number of promotions and movement into higher managerial levels, while perceived feminine communication style predicted non-hierarchical rewards such as compensation and span of control; gendered communication style affected women's compensation more than men's. Correll et al. (2020) identified a related mechanism embedded in routine evaluation processes, finding that the language managers used in written performance reviews at a large technology company differed by gender and that these language differences were associated with numeric ratings, indicating that formal, ostensibly gender-neutral evaluation procedures can nonetheless produce unequal outcomes.

In healthcare, organizational interventions supporting women's advancement have received sustained attention. Mousa et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review that identified five categories of potentially effective interventions: organizational processes, awareness and engagement, mentoring and networking, leadership development, and support tools. A subsequent meta-ethnographic synthesis examined how organizations implemented these intervention categories in practice (Mousa et al., 2022), and a qualitative study of women in health care leadership identified organizational practices, including directly addressing systemic barriers, that participants described as supporting their advancement (Mousa et al., 2023).

Perceptions of leadership style and organizational culture also shape how women's leadership is evaluated. Cundiff (2022) found that female leaders were perceived as more transformational than male leaders without a corresponding difference in perceived effectiveness, with organizational culture moderating how leadership style translated into effectiveness judgments.

Mentorship is widely promoted as a remedy for women's underrepresentation in leadership, though the literature raises questions about its sufficiency on its own. Azevedo et al. (2023) found that women faculty in public affairs programs held mentoring needs and values that differed from those of men, and that equitable mentoring required institutional investment beyond informal pairing. Maheshwari et al. (2023) identified the presence of mentors and role models as an enabling factor for women's progression into higher education leadership in Mexico, while noting that its absence functioned as a barrier, a finding echoed by Thien et al. (2025) in Malaysian higher education. Gröschl et al. (2025) distinguished sponsorship from mentorship directly, finding that sponsoring activities, defined as advocacy that converts developmental support into concrete career opportunity, constituted a distinct and consequential mechanism in women leaders' advancement, and that women in their study were predominantly sponsored by men rather than by same-sex sponsors as prior literature had suggested.

Institutional and structural barriers persist alongside these individual-level mechanisms. Gooty et al. (2023) argued that business schools face systemic barriers to gender-inclusive leadership, including a masculine social structure and a muddled approach to performance evaluation, and called for structural rather than individual-level solutions. Alshdiefat et al. (2024) reported persistent structural barriers to women's advancement into university leadership in Jordan. Kyambade et al. (2024) examined the relationship between gender participation and women's leadership representation in university governance in Uganda, finding that dimensions of gender participation, including women's level of involvement in governance processes, were associated with the extent of women's representation in leadership positions. At the organizational hierarchy level, Stainback et al. (2024) found inconsistent support for a trickle-down effect in which women's representation at senior levels predicts representation in lower and middle management, suggesting that pipeline and trickle-down mechanisms alone are insufficient to explain or resolve underrepresentation. Gander and Sharafizad's (2025) systematic review of 36 studies on women's advancement into senior leadership found a shift in the literature since 2020 away from individualized explanations toward systemic, organization-level approaches to closing the leadership gap.

Taken together, the literature indicates that women's leadership advancement is shaped by interconnected institutional, communicative, and developmental processes. While Gander and Sharafizad (2025) examined gender equity in senior leadership and Mousa et al. (2021) synthesized organizational interventions to advance women in healthcare leadership, this review extends this evidence by integrating gender-inclusive organizational communication,

institutional barriers, mentorship and sponsorship pathways, and inclusive leadership practices across organizational contexts. This integrative approach examines how these dimensions collectively influence women's leadership advancement, identifies areas of convergence and sector-specific evidence, and highlights gaps in understanding how organizational communication and other institutional mechanisms interact to support women's progression into leadership.

2 METHODS

2.1 Study design

This study employed a systematic literature review methodology to examine gender-inclusive organizational communication and women's leadership advancement, with particular attention to institutional barriers, mentorship pathways, and inclusive leadership practices. The review was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. The review mapped the characteristics and major themes of available literature on the organizational conditions that influence women's leadership advancement. The primary research question was: What evidence has been reported regarding gender-inclusive organizational communication and women's leadership advancement, particularly in relation to institutional barriers, mentorship pathways, and inclusive leadership practices?

2.2 Search strategy

A structured literature search identified scholarly studies relevant to women's leadership advancement and organizational inclusion. The search concepts combined terms related to women's leadership, gender-inclusive organizational communication, organizational culture, institutional barriers, mentoring, sponsorship, inclusive leadership, leadership advancement, and gender equity. These concepts reflect the principal themes in the reference library.

2.2.1 The search strategy included variations of the following terms:

(("women leadership" OR "women's leadership" OR "female leadership") AND ("organizational communication" OR "gendered communication" OR "organizational culture") AND ("gender inclusion" OR "inclusive leadership" OR "gender equity") AND ("mentoring" OR "mentorship" OR "sponsorship") AND ("career advancement" OR "leadership advancement" OR "career progression")).

The search concepts were adapted to capture studies examining different organizational settings and forms of leadership advancement. The literature included studies addressing higher education, healthcare, public relations, business schools, managerial hierarchies, and broader organizational contexts. The final reference library contained 17 studies published between 2018 and 2025. The studies addressed organizational communication, gendered performance assessment, organizational culture, institutional barriers, mentoring, sponsorship, inclusive leadership, representation, and organizational practices that advance women in leadership

2.3 Eligibility criteria and study selection

Table 1: Population-Concept-Context (PCC) Framework

Component	Description
Population	Women participating in, seeking, or advancing within leadership positions across organizational settings, including higher education, healthcare, public relations, business schools, managerial organizations, and university governance.
Concept	Gender-inclusive organizational communication and women's leadership advancement, including institutional barriers, organizational culture, mentoring, sponsorship, inclusive leadership, and organizational interventions.
Context	Organizational and institutional environments in which women's leadership is developed, evaluated, supported, or constrained, including universities, healthcare organizations, business schools, public relations, and managerial hierarchies.

Sources: Alshdiefat et al., 2024; Azevedo et al., 2023; Meng & Neill, 2021; Mousa et al., 2021.

The Population Concept Context (PCC) framework informed the eligibility criteria. Studies were eligible if they examined women's leadership, women's participation or advancement in organizational settings, gendered organizational communication, organizational culture, institutional barriers, mentoring, sponsorship, inclusive leadership, or organizational practices relevant to women's leadership advancement. Studies published between 2018

and 2025. The synthesis excluded studies that did not address women's leadership, organizational inclusion, gender-related organizational processes, or pathways to leadership advancement.

2.4 Data extraction

Data were extracted using a structured charting approach aligned with the review objectives. Extracted information included the author and publication year, geographical or organizational setting (where identifiable), study focus, organizational background, leadership dimension examined, institutional barriers, communication-related factors, mentoring or sponsorship pathways, inclusive leadership practices, and reported implications for women's leadership advancement. The extracted information was then organized according to the review's principal dimensions. Studies examining gendered communication and performance assessment were grouped under organizational communication, while studies addressing organizational culture, institutional barriers, and representation were grouped under institutional barriers. Studies addressing mentoring, sponsorship, and organizational interventions were grouped under advancement pathways. Studies examining belongingness, inclusion, and gender-inclusive leadership were grouped under inclusive leadership practices. The characteristics of the 17 included studies were also organized by publication year and organizational background to identify patterns in the literature's development and distribution.

2.5 Data synthesis

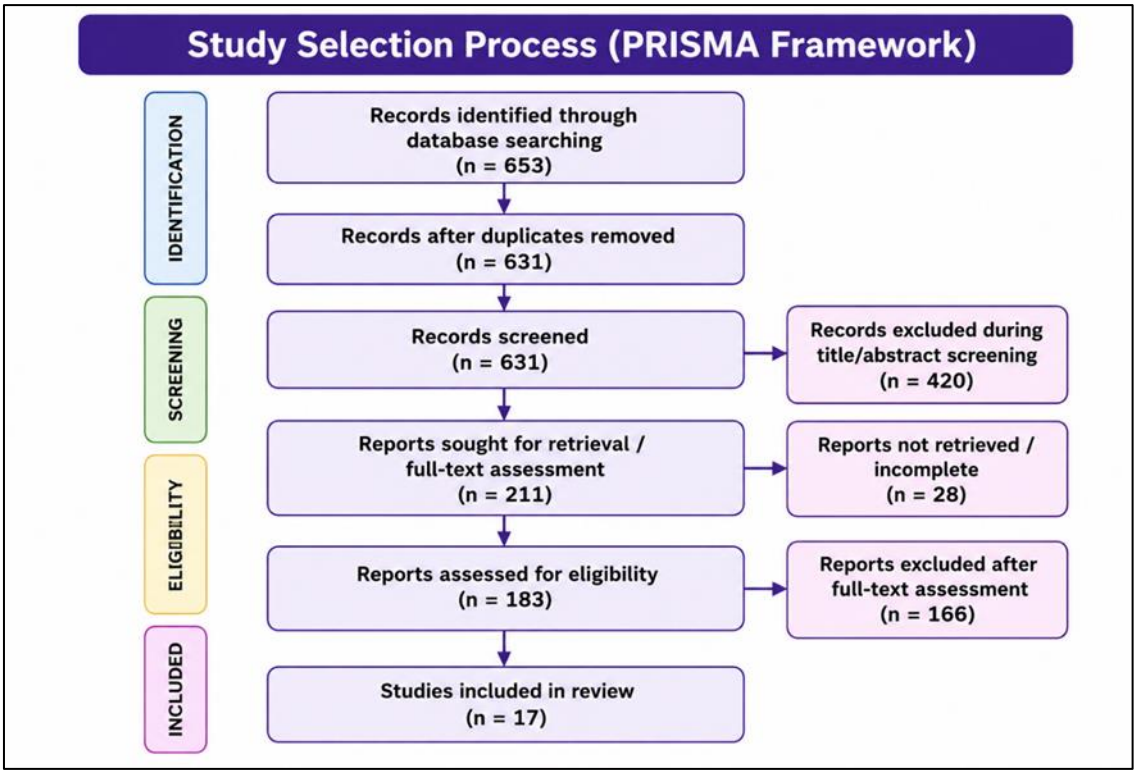


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection process

Source: Page et al. (2021)

The study selection process is summarized in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1). Database searches identified 653 records. After removing 22 duplicate records, 631 unique records remained. Title and abstract screening excluded 420 records that did not meet the eligibility criteria. A total of 211 reports were sought for retrieval and full-text assessment; of these, 28 could not be retrieved or were incomplete. Consequently, 183 reports were assessed for eligibility. After full-text review, 166 reports were excluded for reasons such as not meeting the inclusion criteria, insufficient focus on women's leadership advancement, irrelevant context, or lack of relevant evidence. Ultimately, 17 studies met all eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The included studies were charted and synthesized thematically to map evidence on institutional barriers, mentorship pathways, and inclusive leadership practices in relation to gender-inclusive organizational communication and women's leadership advancement.

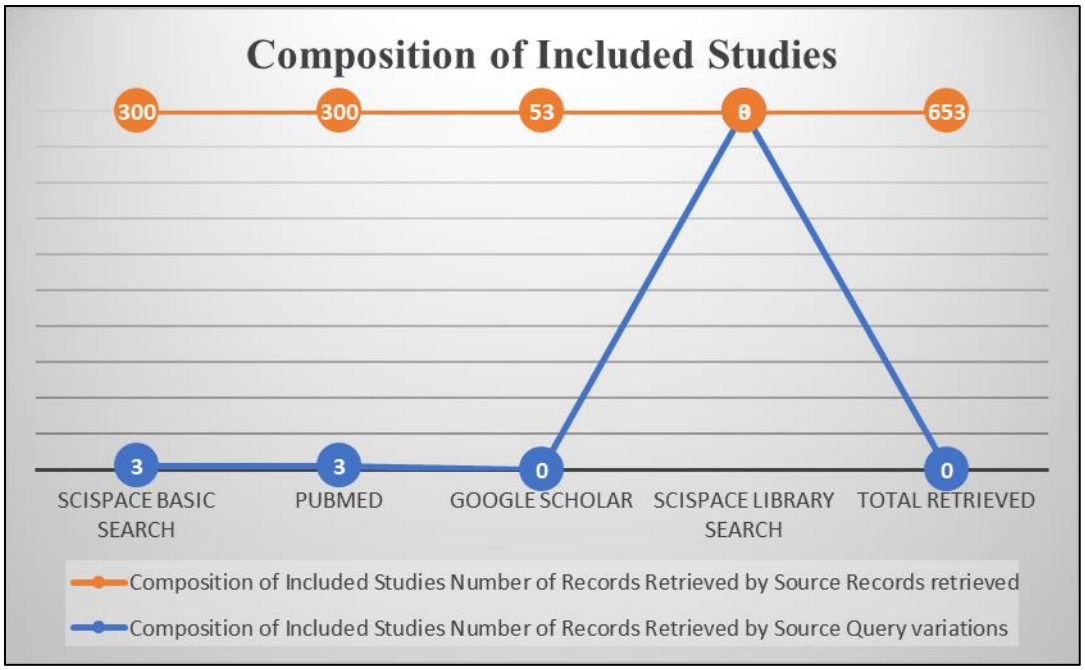


Figure 2: Number of Records Retrieved by Source

Source: Author's construct, 2026

2.6 Quality appraisal

Consistent with mapping the available literature across different organizational contexts, formal methodological quality appraisal as an eligibility criterion or as a basis for excluding studies. Instead, differences in study design, organizational context, methodological approach, and scope were considered when interpreting the synthesized evidence. The reference library contains different forms of scholarly evidence, including empirical studies, systematic reviews, meta-syntheses, bibliometric studies, and conceptual contributions. For example, Mousa et al. (2021) examined organizational interventions through a systematic review and meta-synthesis; Mousa et al. (2022) examined factors influencing the implementation of organizational interventions; and Mousa et al. (2023) examined experiences of organizational practices that advance women in healthcare leadership. Similarly, Gander and Sharafizad (2025) examined gender equity in senior leadership through a systematic literature review.

The review therefore sought to describe and synthesize the range and nature of evidence concerning gender-inclusive organizational communication and women's leadership advancement rather than produce a comparative quantitative estimate of intervention effectiveness.

Findings

The 17 included studies were characterized by publication year, geographic and organizational context, and sectoral focus before thematic synthesis. By publication year, included studies span 2018 to 2025, with the largest concentration in 2023 (see Figure 3). One study was published in 2018, 2019, and 2020; two in 2021 and 2022; four in 2023; and three each in 2024 and 2025, indicating that most of the reviewed evidence is recent, with more than half published in the final three years of the search window. See Figure 3 below.

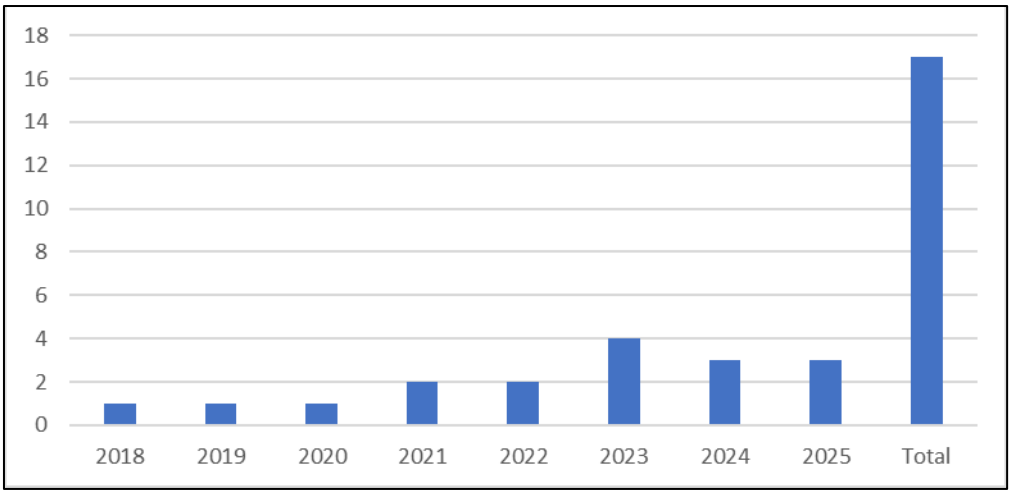


Figure 3: Number of Studies Based on Year of Publication

Source: Author's construct, 2026

By geographic and organizational context, the included studies draw predominantly on evidence from the United States, with smaller representation from multi-country or global samples, Australia, and single-country studies from Jordan, Uganda, Mexico, Malaysia, and a combined France/Spain sample (see Figure 4). This concentration means that findings on institutional barriers and mentorship pathways in this review are weighted toward U.S. organizational contexts, and conclusions drawn about other national settings rest on single studies each.

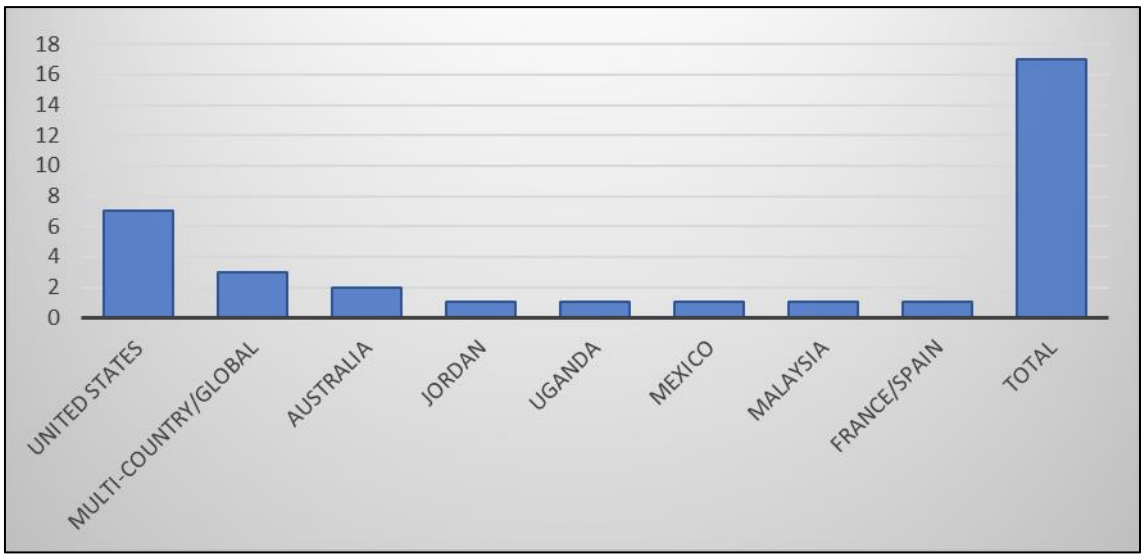


Figure 4: Number of Studies Based on Countries/Contexts of Research

Source: Author's construct, 2026

By sectoral background, higher education and business/corporate/technology contexts together account for eleven of the seventeen included studies, with healthcare, public relations, and cross-sector or conceptual work making up the remainder (see Figure 5). This distribution shapes which sectors this review can speak to most confidently.

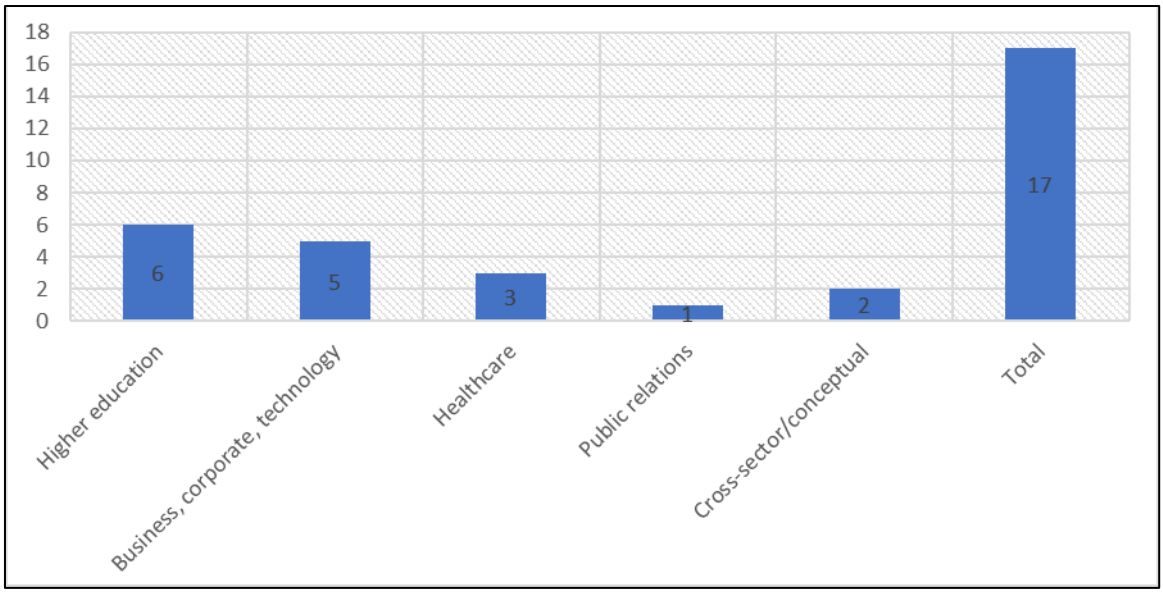


Figure 5: Number of Studies Based on Organizational/Sectoral Background

Source: Author's construct, 2026

The thematic synthesis identified eight recurring themes across the 17 included studies: organizational culture and institutional barriers, representation and leadership pipelines, gender equity in senior leadership, gendered organizational communication, mentoring, sponsorship, organizational interventions, and inclusive leadership (see Table 2). These themes were organized into four broader review domains: institutional barriers, communication mechanisms, advancement pathways, and inclusive organizational practices, and provide the basis for the narrative synthesis that follows. The thematic organization captures both the structural conditions that constrain women's leadership advancement and the organizational mechanisms through which advancement may be supported.

Institutional barriers appear most directly in the language and structure of organizational evaluation systems. Correll et al. (2020) found that the language used in written performance reviews at a large technology company differed by gender and that these language differences were associated with numeric ratings, indicating that routine, formally gender-neutral evaluation processes can still produce unequal outcomes. Weinberg et al. (2019) reported a related pattern at the level of communication style rather than evaluation text: perceived masculine communication style predicted hierarchical advancement, including promotions and movement into higher managerial levels, while perceived feminine communication style predicted non-hierarchical rewards such as compensation and span of control, with this effect on compensation stronger for women than for men. Cundiff (2022) extended this line of evidence to leadership perception itself, finding that female leaders were rated as more transformational than male leaders without a corresponding gain in perceived effectiveness, with organizational culture moderating this relationship.

Structural barriers at the institutional and hierarchical level compound these communication-level effects. Gooty et al. (2023) argued that business schools face systemic barriers to gender-inclusive leadership, including a masculine social structure and inconsistent performance evaluation, and called for structural rather than individual-level remedies. Alshdiefat et al. (2024) documented persistent structural barriers to women's advancement into university leadership in Jordan, and Kyambade et al. (2024) found that dimensions of women's participation in governance processes were associated with the extent of their representation in university leadership in Uganda. Stainback et al. (2024) tested whether women's representation at senior levels predicts representation in lower and middle management and found inconsistent support for this trickle-down effect, suggesting that increasing representation at the top of an organization does not reliably widen the pipeline beneath it. Gander and Sharafizad's (2025) systematic review of 36 studies found that the broader literature has shifted since 2020 away from explanations centered on individual women and toward systemic, organization-level accounts of the leadership gap, a shift consistent with the institutional focus of the barrier-related studies in this review.

Across the included studies, mentorship is treated as necessary but often insufficient on its own. Azevedo et al. (2023) found that women faculty in public affairs programs held mentoring needs and values that differed from those of men, and argued that equitable mentoring required institutional investment rather than informal pairing alone. Maheshwari et al. (2023) and Thien et al. (2025) each identified the presence of mentors and role models as an enabling factor for women's progression into higher education leadership, in Mexico and Malaysia respectively, while both also reported that the absence of mentorship functioned as a barrier. Gröschl et al. (2025) distinguished sponsorship from mentorship

explicitly, defining sponsorship as advocacy that converts developmental support into concrete career opportunity, and found sponsorship to be a distinct and consequential mechanism in women leaders' advancement, with women in their study predominantly sponsored by men rather than by same sex sponsors as prior literature had suggested. Taken together, these studies suggest that mentorship supports advancement primarily when paired with sponsorship or institutional structure, rather than functioning as a sufficient intervention on its own.

Table 2: Integrated Thematic Map of Women's Leadership Research - Domains, Themes, and Representative Studies

Review domain	Principal theme	Representative studies	Central focus	Related concepts
Institutional barriers	Organizational culture and institutional barriers	Cundiff (2022); Alshdiefat et al. (2024); Maheshwari et al. (2023); Thien et al. (2025)	Organizational culture, barriers, challenges, and enablers of women's leadership	Gendered organizational culture; institutional constraints; leadership barriers; organizational enablers
Institutional barriers	Representation and leadership pipelines	Kyambade et al. (2024); Stainback et al. (2024)	Women's representation, governance, and progression within organizational hierarchies	Representation; governance; managerial hierarchy; leadership pipeline
Institutional barriers	Gender equity in senior leadership	Gander & Sharafizad (2025)	Progression and equity in senior leadership	Gender equity; senior leadership; advancement
Communication mechanisms	Gendered organizational communication	Weinberg et al. (2019); Correll et al. (2020)	Gendered communication and performance assessment	Gendered language; performance assessment; career outcomes; leadership perceptions
Advancement pathways	Mentoring	Azevedo et al. (2023); Mousa et al. (2021)	Equitable and inclusive developmental support	Mentoring; professional development; networking
Advancement pathways	Sponsorship	Gröschl et al. (2025)	Sponsorship and advancement of women leaders	Sponsorship; career advancement; leadership progression
Advancement pathways	Organizational interventions	Mousa et al. (2021, 2022, 2023)	Organizational practices and implementation mechanisms	Organizational interventions; implementation; leadership development; support systems
Inclusive organizational practices	Inclusive leadership	Randel et al. (2018); Meng & Neill (2021); Gooty et al. (2023)	Inclusion, belongingness, and valuing uniqueness	Belongingness; valuing uniqueness; gender-inclusive leadership; participation and inclusion

Source: Author's Construct, 2026

Inclusive leadership practices appear as a third, more directly actionable dimension. Randel et al. (2018) conceptualized inclusive leadership as leader behavior that fosters belongingness while allowing individuals to maintain their uniqueness, and associated these behaviors with psychological empowerment and reduced turnover. Meng and Neill (2021) applied this framework to public relations leadership and found that inclusive leadership fostered organizational diversity climate and was associated with women's perceptions of continued career growth opportunities. In healthcare, a cluster of related studies examined inclusive and supportive organizational practice more

broadly: Mousa et al. (2021) identified five categories of potentially effective organizational intervention (organizational processes, awareness and engagement, mentoring and networking, leadership development, and support tools), Mousa et al. (2022) examined how these categories were implemented in practice through a meta-ethnographic synthesis, and Mousa et al. (2023) found that women in health care leadership directly identified organizational practices, including addressing systemic barriers, as supportive of their advancement.

Table 3: Recurring Themes Addressed Across Included Studies, by Sector and Publication Year

Sector	Institutional barriers	Mentorship/sponsorship	Inclusive leadership
Higher education	2023, 2024	2023, 2023, 2025	—
Business, corporate, technology	2019, 2020, 2022, 2023, 2024	2025	—
Healthcare	—	2021	2021, 2022, 2023
Public relations	—	—	2021
Cross-sector/conceptual	2025	—	2018

Source: Author's Construct, 2026

Several patterns are observable from this distribution of themes, sectors, and years. In higher education, attention has focused on mentorship, role models, and structural barriers to governance representation, with all five higher-education studies published between 2023 and 2025; no included higher-education study addresses inclusive leadership behavior directly. In business, corporate, and technology contexts, the earliest included evidence (2019–2020) addresses communication-level mechanisms, while later studies (2022–2024) shift toward leadership perception, institutional critique, and hierarchical representation, with sponsorship appearing only in the most recent study (2025). In healthcare, the three included studies form a connected sequence: an initial cataloging of intervention types (2021), a synthesis of how those interventions are implemented (2022), and a qualitative account of which practices women themselves identify as supportive (2023), together tracing a shift from what organizations could do toward what women report actually helps.

Public relations and cross sector/conceptual work are each represented by a small number of studies spanning 2018 and 2021, insufficient on their own to establish a within-sector trend. Mentorship and sponsorship are treated as distinct constructs only in the most recent included study (Gröschl et al., 2025); earlier mentorship-focused studies in this review do not draw this distinction, suggesting a possible recent shift in how the literature conceptualizes developmental support. No included study addresses institutional barriers, mentorship, and inclusive leadership together within a single organizational setting; each dimension is documented primarily in isolation. Geographic coverage is concentrated in the United States (see Figure 4), limiting the extent to which this literature supports cross-national comparisons. No quantitative pooling of effect sizes was possible given the heterogeneity of study designs and outcome measures; the pattern reported here is a narrative synthesis rather than a statistically aggregated result.

3 DISCUSSION

These findings reveal a key pattern: institutional barriers, mentorship and sponsorship paths, and inclusive leadership are interconnected. Organizational communication plays a crucial role in either supporting or hindering these elements. Individually, each aspect tells only part of the story of women's advancement. Collectively, they highlight communication as the central mechanism that enacts, assesses, and influences these dimensions, reinforcing or challenging them. This section explores the theoretical implications for understanding advancement in organizational communication and leadership studies and considers practical applications for organizations aiming to apply this evidence through targeted interventions.

3.1 Theoretical Implications

The evidence reviewed complicates the belongingness-and-uniqueness model of inclusive leadership by Randel et al. (2018), extended to public relations by Meng and Neill (2021). Both studies treat inclusive leadership mainly as an individual leader behavior with effects on empowerment, diversity climate, and career opportunities. However, the structural evidence, especially Gooty et al.'s (2023) account of masculine social structures in business schools and Stainback et al.'s (2024) findings of inconsistent trickle-down effects from senior to middle management, suggests that inclusive leader actions are shaped by organizational structures. These structures can absorb or dilute such behaviors. For example, a leader promoting belongingness and valuing uniqueness operates within an evaluation system that rewards masculine-coded communication (Weinberg et al., 2019) or gendered language in performance reviews

(Correll et al., 2020), which may undermine inclusion. This indicates a need for a theoretical refinement: inclusive leadership should explicitly consider structural boundary conditions that determine when individual inclusive behaviors lead to broader representation, rather than presuming a direct link between leader actions and outcomes.

A second theoretical implication involves the role of communication in perceptions of advancement. Correll et al. (2020) and Weinberg et al. (2019) argue that organizational communication does not merely report existing evaluations of competence; it actively shapes those evaluations. Specifically, language used in performance reviews correlates with numeric ratings, and communication styles influence reward independent of the actual content. This indicates that organizational communication is constitutive rather than just descriptive, aligning with role congruity theories of leadership evaluation. These theories suggest that perceived mismatch between communal traits linked to women and agentic traits associated with leadership leads to less favorable judgments of women's leadership, even with similar performance (Eagly & Karau, 2002). They also echo structural views of organizations as gendered through routines, language, and evaluation criteria not as gender-neutral spaces into which men and women simply enter (Acker, 1990). Cundiff's (2022) finding that female leaders are rated more transformational than males, without a matching increase in perceived effectiveness, exemplifies this mismatch. The language used to describe women's leadership and the outcomes attributed to it do not align, and the belongingness-uniqueness framework alone does not resolve this. Combining these perspectives suggests that gender-inclusive organizational communication should be understood as correcting a structural default, rather than as an optional addition to neutral organizational practices.

A third implication relates to the mentorship-sponsorship distinction, which only the most recent included study draws explicitly. Gröschl et al. (2025) define sponsorship as advocacy that converts developmental support into concrete career opportunities and distinguish it from mentorship's developmental and relational functions. Azevedo et al. (2023), Maheshwari et al. (2023), and Thien et al. (2025), published earlier or without this distinction, treat mentoring more broadly as encompassing both functions. Theoretically, this suggests that mentorship research in this domain has been operating with an underspecified construct: developmental support and advocacy for opportunity are conceptually, and per Gröschl et al. (2025) empirically, separable, with different antecedents and different relationships to advancement. The finding that women in Gröschl et al.'s (2025) sample were predominantly sponsored by men, contrary to assumptions in prior literature that sponsorship would replicate the same-sex patterns observed in informal mentoring, further suggests that sponsorship operates through organizational position and access to opportunity rather than through identity-based affinity. This distinction carries implications for how advancement is theorized in social-capital and network-based accounts of career mobility: access to sponsorship may depend less on the availability of similar others and more on women's structural position relative to those who hold the authority to allocate opportunity.

3.2 Practical Implications

These theoretical implications translate into concrete practice points. Because gendered language in performance review text is measurably associated with rating outcomes (Correll et al., 2020), and because communication style, independent of content, is rewarded differently by gender (Weinberg et al., 2019), organizations seeking to support women's advancement have a specific, auditable point of intervention: the language used in evaluation and promotion documentation. This suggests moving evaluation-language audits from a general diversity recommendation to a routine component of performance management, reviewing review text for the gendered patterns Correll et al. (2020) identified, and training raters not only on what they evaluate but also on how differently phrased communication of the same underlying performance is likely to be read and rewarded.

Because mentorship is treated in this literature as necessary yet often insufficient, and because sponsorship is a distinct mechanism that mentorship does not automatically provide (Gröschl et al., 2025), organizations should design mentoring and sponsorship as separate, deliberately paired program components rather than as a single informal relationship expected to perform both functions. This means identifying who within an organization has the authority to convert developmental relationships into concrete opportunities, and building structured accountability for those individuals to exercise that authority on behalf of the women they mentor, rather than relying on informal conversion. It also means designing mentoring around the differentiated needs and values women report, as Azevedo et al. (2023) found among women faculty in public affairs programs, rather than defaulting to informal pairing, which Maheshwari et al. (2023) and Thien et al. (2025) each found insufficient on its own in higher education contexts.

Inclusive leadership training grounded in Randel et al.'s (2018) belongingness-and-uniqueness behaviors and in the diversity-climate and career-growth-perception associations Meng and Neill (2021) documented in public relations contexts is a defensible investment given the evidence reviewed here. However, the structural findings in this review caution against treating leader-behavior training as sufficient on its own. Because Gooty et al. (2023) locate the barrier at the level of business school structure rather than at the level of individual leader behavior, and because Stainback et al. (2024) found that representation gains at senior levels do not reliably trickle down, organizations should pair inclusive leadership training with a structural review of the evaluation and promotion systems those leaders operate within, rather than treating leadership development as a substitute for structural change.

Finally, the concentration of implementation evidence in healthcare, where Mousa et al. (2021, 2022, 2023) trace a sequence from cataloging intervention types to documenting implementation to identifying which practices women themselves find supportive, offers a practical template other sectors could adapt: naming candidate interventions, examining how they are implemented in practice, and checking implementation against the accounts of the women the interventions are meant to support. Because this sequence has not been replicated outside healthcare and public relations in the reviewed literature, and because the evidence base as a whole is weighted toward United States contexts and higher education and business settings, organizations in other sectors or national contexts should treat these recommendations as a starting framework to be tested against their own evaluation, mentorship, and leadership data rather than as a validated intervention package. No included study examined institutional barriers, mentorship, and inclusive leadership together within a single organizational setting, so practitioners implementing more than one of these levers at once are, in effect, operating ahead of the evidence base and should build in monitoring of how the levers interact rather than assuming their effects simply add together.

3.3 Future Directions

This review also points to a research agenda distinct from the organizational recommendations discussed above. The most direct gap concerns evidence connecting organizational communication practice to advancement outcomes: Correll et al. (2020) and Weinberg et al. (2019) establish that gendered language and communication style are associated with ratings and rewards, but no included study tests whether revising evaluation language or communication training measurably changes women's promotion or retention rates over time. Longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs that track advancement outcomes before and after such interventions would address this gap directly. A related gap concerns integration across dimensions: no included study examined institutional barriers, mentorship or sponsorship pathways, and inclusive leadership practices together within a single organizational setting, leaving open how these dimensions interact when addressed simultaneously, and the sponsorship-mentorship distinction that Gröschl et al. (2025) introduce has not yet been tested outside the single study in which it currently rests.

A further idea is geographic and sectoral. The reviewed evidence is concentrated in the United States and in higher education and business/corporate settings, with single studies representing entire national contexts such as Jordan, Uganda, Mexico, and Malaysia, and comparatively little evidence from public relations, nonprofit, government, or manufacturing settings. Expanding the evidence base to these underrepresented contexts and adopting more comparable outcome measures across future studies would also make the kind of quantitative synthesis this narrative review could not perform more feasible.

4 CONCLUSION

This review examined how institutional barriers, mentorship and sponsorship pathways, and inclusive leadership practices shape women's leadership advancement, with organizational communication running through each dimension. Across the 17 included studies, institutional barriers appeared most consistently in gendered evaluation language and structural constraints on hierarchical representation; mentorship was reported as a necessary but often insufficient mechanism, requiring sponsorship or institutional investment to translate into advancement; and inclusive leadership behaviors grounded in belonging and valuing uniqueness were associated with positive organizational outcomes, though evidence for this dimension remained concentrated in healthcare and public relations settings. No included study examined all three dimensions together within a single organizational setting, and the reviewed literature is weighted toward United States contexts and higher education and business/corporate settings, limiting how far findings generalize across sectors or countries.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

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