



EXPLORING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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Abstract

Leadership is attributed to many contributions to organizational development, and studies are proving this increasingly every day. Nowadays, increased attention is focused on how recent developments, especially in the field of sustainability, can be promoted and facilitated by leadership style. Despite the increase in research in this direction, less attention has been paid to the gender variable in different contexts. This study aims to analyze the impact of gender on decision-making and sustainable leadership through a systematic review of literature. The findings strongly suggest that organizations must go beyond symbolic representation to ensure that women hold genuine positions of leadership and influence. For organizations seeking to improve ESG disclosure, increasing female board representation to critical mass thresholds in substantive roles yields consistent benefits. In contrast, improvements in overall sustainability performance necessitate complementary governance mechanisms and organizational capabilities. The findings of this study can be a very good basis for business practitioners, but also for researchers in the field to direct attention to the gender factor in their research.

Keywords: Sustainable Leadership, Gender Diversity, Green Management, Systematic literature review, Leadership styles



INTRODUCTION

To meet the challenges of 21st-century professions, research on the psychology of sustainability and sustainable development supplements the psychology of work perspective by focusing on elements that promote worker well-being, decent work, and decent living in healthy companies (Peiró et al., 2023).

A dramatically increasing number of women have taken on sustainability positions over the last decade, proving that women's empowerment in sustainable development is not only expanding but also important. This argument is supported by numbers that demonstrate progress. Women now account for 29 percent of C-suite jobs, up from 17 percent in 2015 (Ecoskills academy, 2025).

Despite growing awareness of the advantages of diverse leadership, women are still underrepresented in decision-making, and gender equality in leadership continues to be a global concern (Saenz et al., 2025). At the same time, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is in line with advancing gender equality. By concentrating on practical methods to eliminate structural obstacles and establish inclusive workplaces where women can flourish, it specifically advances Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 (Gender Equality) (Saenz et al., 2025).

Flores et al. (2022) argue that executives who adhere to all four humanistic management principles support a greater number and diversity of SDGs. They support the three broad dimensions identified by prior research on champions in other organizational domains, such as gender equality and health. The findings of Chin et al (2023) suggest that responsible leadership attributes are critical for long-term employee performance, but there is an opportunity for improvement in how female employees view these traits.

Leadership literature emphasizes the significance of sustainability-oriented leadership styles in tandem with gender-focused findings. For instance, through mechanisms like integrity, moral values, and environmental CSR, environmentally focused transformational leadership is positively related to employees' green advocacy (Crucke et al., 2022). However, despite the rich development of sustainable leadership theories, experts observe that "it is unclear whether the barriers to women leaders in this context have changed and to what extent gender discrimination persists" (Kapse et al., 2025). Additionally, some empirical research indicates no significant gender differences in specific organizational circumstances, suggesting that the relationship between gender and sustainable leadership is more nuanced than typically assumed (Al-Zawahreh et al., 2019).

These discrepancies in the literature highlight a significant gap: despite the growth of research on sustainable leadership, the gender factor is still empirically dispersed and

theoretically underdeveloped. The ways that gender affects sustainable leadership practices, results, and organizational transformation in various industries and cultural contexts are rarely thoroughly summarized in research. Furthermore, no thorough analysis has yet compiled the data about whether and how men and women approach sustainability leadership differently, as well as how gender diversity affects sustainability performance at the organizational and societal levels.

Thus, the purpose of this systematic review is to investigate gender disparities in sustainable leadership by combining existing information on leadership styles, sustainability practices, and organizational outcomes. The study's specific goal is to examine how gender affects leadership methods in sustainability-oriented environments, as well as to reveal gaps in future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability and environmental concerns, globalization, and the need for ethical organizational dynamics all point to transformational leadership as the most effective leadership style for driving long-term organizational goals (Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019). In terms of gender, women and men perceived distinct types of leadership, capacities, and competencies related to sustainability.

Women are more effective transformative leaders because they inspire people to be self-motivated rather than being spurred by external incentives (Gaur et al., 2023). Furthermore, such a leadership style promotes improved work performance and mental health in employees. The women's desire to champion and actively develop the enterprise altered their perception by males in the community, who began to exhibit increasing respect for them and their abilities (Silva Dos Santos et al., 2025). Recruiting women in various managerial roles contributes to the creation of an inclusive workplace culture that supports and encourages their growth and development, hence breaking the glass ceiling phenomenon (Lakhal et al., 2024).

Women leaders investigated what sustainable development and leadership meant to them, clearly tying the two concepts to their sense of empowerment. They felt empowered by their strengths in education, leadership, service, value, and action, but disempowered by gender inequity, limited access to education, and challenging familial circumstances (Barrios et al., 2020).

Companies should address top management gender diversity to break the glass ceiling problem. This includes actively recruiting and elevating women to senior roles as part of their overall innovation strategy (Lakhal et al., 2024).

According to previous literature, leading by example and communicating effectively have a direct and positive impact on human resource management (Gallego Nicholls et al., 2022). Human resource management, in turn, has an impact on the physical and psychological health of instructors. Although leaders appear to play critical roles in sustainable development, it is unclear whether the barriers to women leaders in this context have changed, and to what extent gender discrimination persists in this domain (Kapse et al., 2025). Examining the impact of organizational culture and the existence of gender-diverse leadership teams can help us gain a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between leadership and sustainability (Kapse et al., 2025).

Sustainable leadership entails actions that "create permanent value for all stakeholders, including the environment, future generations, and society at large." It is widely acknowledged as an important organizational practice to capture organizational learning (Al-Zawahreh et al., 2019). According to earlier studies, sustainable leaders uphold the fundamental green principles of sustainability, identify sustainability issues, establish green management practices, and provide creative solutions. Nevertheless, there is still a dearth of empirical data about individual-level factors; some research indicates that, at least in university settings, "gender, college, rank, and experience had no impact on the level of sustainable leadership."

Research suggests that environmentally specific transformational leadership focuses on influencing corporate environmental responsibility and is based on moral values. This type of leadership inspires employees to change their values, transcend self-interest, and elevate followers to higher levels of morality. Evidence suggests that "environmentally-specific transformational leadership is positively related to employees' green advocacy," which operates through mechanisms including perceived environmental CSR and organizational environmental support.

Furthermore, leadership gender diversity has emerged as an influential determinant in sustainability and innovative outcomes. Recent findings from corporate settings demonstrate that gender-diverse leadership enhances sustainability-oriented behaviors (Lakhali et al., 2024). Board gender diversity enhances both corporate and green innovation, with women leaders paying greater attention to "competitive advantage and sustainability while engaging in innovative activities.

This literature also implies that female CEOs are associated with an increase in corporate and green innovation, supporting the premise that leadership gender composition may impact organizational actions related to responsibility, innovation, and sustainability.

Together, these studies indicate that while sustainable leadership is central to advancing environmental and organizational goals, the specific role of gender in shaping sustainable leadership behaviors remains theoretically important and empirically underexplored.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) technique to discover, analyze, and synthesize existing research on sustainable or green leadership, with a special emphasis on gender and women. The review adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) standards to promote transparency, rigor, and replicability.

The review began with a comprehensive search of major academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. The search strategy used Boolean operators to combine predetermined terms. The following search string was used:

- *"sustainable leadership" OR "green leadership" OR "environmental leadership" as well as*
- *"women" OR "female" OR "gender" OR "gender diversity" OR "women leaders"*

This strategy ensured that all publications dealing with environmental or sustainability-oriented leadership were collected, as well as those that expressly investigated gender-related issues.

Articles that focused on sustainable, green, responsible, or environmentally specific leadership were included. The focus was primarily on gender-related factors (such as women's leadership, gender diversity, and gender comparison). These were peer-reviewed journal publications, conference proceedings, or book chapters published in English and provided empirical or conceptual insights on leadership and sustainability.

Published analyses focusing only on general leadership, with little mention of sustainability, where gender was mentioned briefly, without any analytical significance, and where the full text was not accessible, were excluded. All records were imported into a reference manager, and duplicates were deleted both automatically and manually. Following de-duplication, the selection procedure involved three stages:

- Title filtering eliminated articles that were plainly unrelated to sustainable leadership.
- Abstract screening - Abstracts were examined to ensure that gender or women-related themes were present.
- Full-text assessment entailed reading all eligible publications to establish conceptual and methodological relevance.

RESULTS

Results from all the evaluated research show a consistent link between socially conscious organizational behavior, sustainability results, and women's leadership participation. Research on corporate governance shows that "female board representation is positively related to corporate social performance," and that this relationship is "even more positive in national contexts when boards may be more motivated to draw on the resources that women directors bring" (Byron & Post, 2016). These results demonstrate that gender diversity enhances ethical behavior as well as a wider range of sustainability aspects, such as stakeholder engagement and environmental responsibility (Byron & Post, 2016)

This conclusion is supported by research on environmental stewardship, which emphasizes the "critical role that women leaders play in environmental protection and sustainability efforts," frequently emerging as "key agents who advocate for conservation, equitable access to resources, and community resilience" (Hussain et al., 2025). According to research, women in leadership typically take inclusive, community-focused, cooperative stances that promote "ecofeminist insights into governance, environmental protection, and social justice" (Hussain et al., 2025). These viewpoints support the claim that, in comparison to their male counterparts, female executives frequently integrate sustainability considerations into decision-making more organically and consistently.

Additional proof of this connection comes from research in underdeveloped economies. According to meta-analytic findings, "gender diversity significantly enhances sustainability performance across environmental, social, and governance indicators" in Pakistan. Women's involvement improves organizational accountability, transparency, and responsiveness to stakeholder expectations (Khan et al., 2020). These results are consistent with more extensive global data indicating that women-led companies embrace more socially conscious business practices and incorporate sustainability more thoroughly into governance frameworks.

According to research conducted in India, "women leaders are emerging as key drivers of ethical decision-making, social responsibility, and environmentally conscious initiatives," incorporating sustainability into long-term strategic planning and organizational culture (Sahu & Kannoujia, 2025). Indian case studies show that female executives support carbon reduction, green innovation, resource optimization, and socially conscious business strategies (Sahu & Kannoujia, 2025). These findings support the assertion that, as seen in Western and European contexts, female leaders typically place a higher priority on long-term perspectives than on short-term profit-oriented.

Employee habits connected to sustainability are also greatly influenced by leadership style. Research on organizational behavior demonstrates that "environmentally-specific transformational leadership is positively related to employees' green advocacy," with these leaders encouraging workers to "care about the environment and adopt green behaviors" (Crucke et al., 2022). According to Crucke et al. (2022), leaders who demonstrate "high levels of integrity" and match their personal conduct with environmental aims are more likely to have these benefits. These studies highlight leadership qualities, communication, empowerment, and ethical commitment that other research strongly links to female leadership styles, even though they do not solely concentrate on women.

The data show that, in a variety of institutional contexts, women's leadership is a significant driver of better environmental stewardship, corporate social responsibility, and organizational accountability, rather than just being correlated with sustainability (Byron & Post, 2016; Khan et al., 2020; Sahu & Kannoujia, 2025).

In most areas, women's representation in sustainability and green leadership is still much below standard. Although there aren't many exact, comparable numbers in the literature, what is known indicates that underrepresentation is still significant, especially in positions of senior decision-making.



Figure 1: The map of the keywords¹

¹ <https://tinyurl.com/2723sjl7>

Several topic clusters that organize the literature on gender and sustainable leadership are depicted in the VOSviewer term co-occurrence map, as shown in Figure 1. Research on gendered social contexts and the role of women in community-based sustainability projects is highlighted by the dense cluster of terms connected to community development, tradition, and patriarchy. A second cluster, which reflects research linking sustainable leadership to organizational practices and employee well-being, focuses on human resource management, environmental concern, and work. In the meantime, terms like "green advocacy," "sustainable leadership," and "responsible leadership trait" connect the field's conceptual and empirical strands and demonstrate how gender diversity, leadership behaviors, and sustainability results are increasingly studied in tandem.

Kassinis et al., (2016) empirically tested whether firms that have (1) more gender-diverse boards of directors and (2) more policies and practices that enable or reinforce gender diversity throughout the organization, they found that both 'demographic' and 'structural' gender diversity are significant predictors of a firm's environmental sustainability initiatives.

Balabantaray (2023) emphasizes how critical it is to identify, support, and elevate women's leadership in the field of sustainable environmental activities. In the end, it promotes a more harmonious relationship between human civilizations and the natural world by advocating for a more inclusive and equitable approach to environmental decision-making and policy formulation.

Female leadership promotes and implements environmental and social practices through a variety of inherent characteristics, including the capacity to highlight and listen, as well as a proclivity for sharing and collaboration (Pierli et al., 2022). Findings suggest that firms characterized by gender diverse leadership teams are more effective than other firms at pursuing environmentally friendly strategies (Glass et al., 2015). Encouraging women to demonstrate their leadership abilities is possibly the most promising avenue for effecting positive change (Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012). Studies demonstrate that women in this region continue to strive to raise the bar and break the hurdles that prevent their personal development and full involvement in education, corporate, and organizational administration.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this systematic review indicate that the relationship between gender and sustainable leadership is significant and is a variable worth including in the study when it comes to the generalizability of the findings. According to the research reviewed, women's participation in leadership is consistently identified as a driver of higher sustainability outcomes, stronger social responsibility, and more environmentally-friendly governance. Studies reveal that women

leaders exhibit leadership characteristics such as collaboration, ethical sensitivity, relational awareness, and long-term orientation, which are strongly linked to the fundamental needs of sustainable governance. The review also shows that organizational and institutional environments play an important role in the extent to which gendered leadership skills can be translated into measurable sustainability outcomes.

The analysis also highlights the persistent structural and cultural barriers that prevent women from advancing to leadership positions where they can have a significant impact on sustainability decision-making and initiatives.

This work adds to the theoretical progress of sustainability leadership research in several ways. It supports the assumption of theories of sustainable and transformational leadership by demonstrating that women's leadership actions are inherently aligned with values such as stewardship, responsibility, and long-term social well-being. Although previous literature studies have been conducted on sustainable leadership, none of them have had the objective of this study to see how gender influences this aspect. The findings lend credence to the Upper Levels Theory by demonstrating how leaders' internal beliefs, motives, and worldviews influence organizational sustainability performance. Gender becomes an important strategic component in determining how sustainability is interpreted, prioritized, and implemented.

The review highlights that the impact of gender on sustainable leadership is context-dependent and not universal, so we need to be cautious with interpretations. Institutional environments, cultural norms, and governance systems can amplify or constrain the impact of female leaders. This supports institutional theory by demonstrating how gender diversity interacts with system-level variables to influence sustainability outcomes. The practical ramifications of this review are similarly significant. Organizations seeking to improve their ESG performance, deepen their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) commitments, and move to more sustainable business models should view gender diversity as a strategic benefit rather than a compliance need. Ensuring that women hold key decision-making positions, particularly at the senior and board levels, can improve the quality of sustainability projects, boost stakeholder trust, and speed up the adoption of green practices.

For policymakers, the findings highlight the importance of governance systems that promote gender equality, transparency, and inclusive leadership. Strengthening gender-responsive policy frameworks can have a positive impact on environmental protection and sustainable economic development.

Despite its contributions, this review has certain limitations. First, empirical research on gender and sustainable leadership is fragmented and uneven across industries and countries.

Higher education, business governance, and community development are among the most underrepresented fields.

Second, many studies use different models, which limits our ability to draw causal generalizations about how gender influences sustainability outcomes over time. Third, operational definitions of “sustainable leadership” and “gender differences” vary significantly across studies, impacting comparability and synthesis.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Given these limitations, various opportunities for further investigation arise. First, more longitudinal and experimental research is required to determine the causal pathways by which gender affects long-term leadership behaviors and outcomes. Second, future studies should look into how organizational culture, structural power, and institutional factors affect the performance of gender-diverse leadership teams in achieving sustainability goals. Third, scholars should examine sustainable leadership from an intersectional standpoint, studying how various identity features interact to produce leadership effectiveness and commitment to sustainability. Fourth, research should go beyond corporate settings to include public institutions, nonprofit sectors, and community-based leadership scenarios, where gender dynamics may change. Future studies should use cross-cultural and longitudinal designs to investigate gender variations in sustainable leadership, with a focus on emerging economies and sector-specific contexts. Furthermore, empirical research incorporating institutional, cultural, and behavioral aspects would advance our understanding of gendered sustainability leadership.

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