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# From Classroom To Leadership: Patterns And Barriers In Women's Career Advancement In Early Childhood Education

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**Abstract** : Women constitute 95% of the early childhood education (ECE) workforce globally yet hold only 60% of leadership positions, creating a critical gap between numerical presence and positional authority. This systematic review analyzes women's leadership patterns, barriers, and effectiveness in ECE through integrated bibliometric analysis and evidence synthesis. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, we systematically searched Scopus database for studies published 2010-2025. Search strategy employed keywords targeting women, leadership, and early childhood education using Boolean operators. Two independent reviewers screened 195 records, with 113 studies meeting relevance criteria (≥2 of 3 criteria: ECE focus, leadership focus, gender focus). Quality assessment used validated tools for quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies. Analysis integrated network visualization with thematic synthesis. Publications showed sustained scholarly interest with 44.2% from 2020-2025. Geographic analysis revealed diverse representation: North America (28.3%), Asia-Pacific (24.8%), and Europe (22.1%). Women's leadership demonstrated collaborative dominance (67.3% of studies), achieving measurable outcomes including 25-35% staff retention improvement, 30-40% family engagement increase, and 15-25% child development gains. Systematic barriers included structural impediments (59.3% of studies), cultural expectations (51.3%), and personal factors (30.1%), while facilitators encompassed mentorship programs (37.2%) and professional development opportunities (49.6%). COVID-19 pandemic research (2020-2025) revealed adaptive leadership approaches across five critical areas: remote management, health protocols, digital transformation, staff wellbeing, and crisis management. Evidence validates collaborative and care-based leadership approaches' effectiveness in ECE contexts while documenting persistent advancement barriers requiring systematic intervention. Findings provide theoretical foundation for ECE-specific leadership development and evidence-based guidance for organizational policies supporting women's leadership advancement in early childhood education.

**Keywords:** women's leadership, early childhood education, systematic review, collaborative leadership, gender equity

## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary educational landscape, women constitute approximately 95% of the early childhood education workforce globally, yet their representation in leadership positions remains disproportionately low at 60% in senior administrative roles (Haines et al., 2024). This striking disparity becomes more pronounced at executive levels, where women hold fewer than 40% of district-level supervision and policy-making positions, despite their overwhelming expertise and demonstrated competence in nurturing young learners' development (Sharma et al., 2021; Carlisle, 2023; Chen & Chiu, 2010; Green et al, 2024).

The significance of this gender leadership gap extends beyond numerical representation to encompass fundamental questions about educational quality, institutional effectiveness, and child development outcomes. Research consistently demonstrates that the critical period of ages 0-6 years, when children experience rapid cognitive, emotional, and social development, requires sophisticated leadership approaches that emphasise relationship-building, inclusive practices, and holistic child development—competencies that align closely with collaborative and transformational leadership styles often demonstrated by women leaders (Blumenau, 2021; Kapoor, 2020).

Early childhood education itself confronts unprecedented challenges that demand exceptional leadership capabilities in an increasingly complex educational environment. The sector grapples with mounting pressures, including integration of evidence-based pedagogical practices, implementation of technology-enhanced learning environments, and responsive adaptation to diverse family structures and cultural backgrounds (Hilmiana & Alviani, 2023). These contemporary challenges are compounded by persistent systemic issues, including chronic underfunding, high staff turnover rates averaging 30-40% annually, and continued societal undervaluation of early childhood education as a legitimate profession requiring sophisticated leadership competencies.

The existing literature on women's leadership in early childhood education reveals significant fragmentation across multiple disciplines, creating substantial knowledge gaps that impede both theoretical understanding and practical implementation strategies. Current research spans educational leadership, gender studies, child development, and organisational behaviour fields, yet lacks a coherent synthesis that could inform evidence-based leadership development approaches.

A critical absence exists in systematic evidence synthesis regarding the unique contributions and challenges faced by women leaders in early childhood education contexts. While numerous individual studies examine various aspects of educational leadership, preliminary analysis reveals that only a limited proportion of contemporary leadership research specifically addresses early childhood education, compared to extensive focus on K-12 and higher education contexts. This research concentration creates substantial knowledge gaps regarding sector-specific leadership challenges, effective practices, and implementation strategies tailored to early childhood educational environments.

The literature lacks comprehensive implementation guidance that could support women's leadership development and advancement in early childhood education settings. Existing professional development programs often adopt generic leadership models without considering the specific characteristics of early childhood environments, including smaller organisational structures, family-centred approaches, and play-based pedagogical frameworks that may require different leadership competencies than those studied in other educational contexts.

The primary objective of this systematic review is to comprehensively analyse and synthesise existing research on women's leadership in early childhood education used systematic literature review methodologies. This study addresses four research questions designed to provide a comprehensive understanding quantitative and qualitative systematic review approaches : 1) What leadership styles do women adopt in early childhood education contexts, and how do these approaches influence organizational effectiveness and child development outcomes?

1. What systemic and individual barriers constrain women's advancement to leadership positions in early childhood education across different cultural contexts?
2. What evidence-based facilitators most effectively support women's leadership development and advancement in early childhood education?
3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic transformed women's leadership practices and effectiveness in early childhood education settings?

Feminist leadership theory, as articulated by Eagly and Carli (2007), provides a foundational framework for understanding women's leadership experiences in early childhood education. This theory posits that leadership effectiveness is not inherently gender-bound but is significantly influenced by contextual factors and social expectations. The theory challenges traditional masculine-oriented leadership models by emphasising collaborative, relationship-centred approaches that may be particularly effective in educational settings. Feminist leadership theory manifests through several key principles in early childhood education contexts (Sisson et al., 2024). ECE's relationship-centred nature aligns naturally with collaborative leadership styles that prioritise consensus-building and inclusive decision-making. Care ethics within ECE environments support nurturing leadership approaches that consider multiple stakeholders' needs simultaneously. Family engagement requirements necessitate interpersonal skills and cultural responsiveness traditionally associated with feminine leadership qualities ( Downey et al., 2024; Guerra et al**.,**2024; McHale et al., 2023).

Traditional glass ceiling theory (Morrison et al., 1987) describes invisible barriers that prevent women from reaching top leadership positions through structural impediments and systematic exclusion from decision-making processes. However, Eagly and Carli's (2007) evolution to the "labyrinth" concept better captures the complex, indirect pathways women navigate in leadership advancement.

For early childhood education, we propose an adapted "glass foundation" concept, recognising that ECE fields are built upon women's historical contributions yet remain systematically undervalued. This creates unique advancement challenges, including professional devaluation, maternal expectation conflicts, resource constraints, and work-life integration demands specific to caregiving professions.

Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) extends this analysis by examining how multiple identity factors—race, class, sexuality, disability, age—intersect with gender to create compounded leadership challenges. In ECE contexts, intersectionality considerations include the additional barriers faced by women of colour in predominantly white fields, working-class background impacts on leadership preparation access, and language barriers for non-native English speakers in family-focused environments.

Care ethics in leadership (Noddings, 2013) emphasises moral reasoning based on relationships and responsibilities, with context-dependent decision-making that prioritises relationship maintenance and harm prevention. This framework proves particularly relevant for ECE leadership, where child-centred decision-making becomes a moral imperative, and

leaders must balance multiple stakeholder needs, including children, families, staff, and community. Transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) contributes four key components adapted for ECE contexts: idealised influence through modelling educational philosophy and building community trust; inspirational motivation via creating shared visions for children's futures; intellectual stimulation by encouraging innovative pedagogical practices; and individualised consideration through recognising staff strengths and supporting professional development. The integration of care ethics with transformational leadership creates a unique hybrid model—care-transformational leadership—that combines nurturing, relationship-centred approaches with visionary, change-oriented practices. This integration proves particularly effective in ECE settings where both caring relationships and organisational transformation are essential for quality outcomes.

## METHOD

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines to ensure methodological rigour and transparency in reporting. Given the need to identify, evaluate, and integrate findings from multiple studies across this specialised field, a systematic review approach was selected as the most appropriate methodology to comprehensively synthesise existing research on women's leadership in early childhood education. The protocol development followed a structured approach, beginning with the formulation of clear research objectives and questions, followed by the establishment of comprehensive search strategies, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and data extraction procedures. This protocol was developed prior to conducting the review to minimise bias and ensure systematic implementation throughout the review process.

Scopus was selected as the primary database for multiple strategic reasons. Scopus provides extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature across education, social sciences, and leadership studies, indexing over 27,000 journals from more than 5,000 international publishers. Its superior interdisciplinary indexing is particularly valuable for research at the intersection of early childhood education and leadership—fields spanning education, psychology, organizational behavior, and policy studies. Scopus offers advanced search capabilities and standardized metadata essential for rigorous systematic reviews, while its inclusion of both Anglophone and non-Anglophone publications ensures broader geographic representation. The database's validated overlap with other major databases (Web of Science, ERIC) confirms comprehensive coverage while maintaining feasibility within PRISMA guidelines. The search string was systematically developed through an iterative process involving pilot searches and consultation with information specialists. The search strategy employed Boolean operators with the following terms: TITLE-ABS-KEY (("women" OR "female" OR "gender") AND ("leadership" OR "leader*" OR "principal*" OR "director*" OR "administrator*" OR "management" OR "supervision" OR "governance") AND ("early childhood education" OR "ECE" OR "preschool" OR "kindergarten" OR "early years" OR "childcare" OR "daycare" OR "nursery school")).

Search parameters included: date range 2010-2025, English language publications, document types including articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings. The search was conducted across title, abstract, and keyword fields to maximise sensitivity while maintaining relevance. A rigorous two-stage screening process was implemented following PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The initial screening involved examination of titles and abstracts of all 195 records

against predetermined relevance criteria. Studies were required to meet at least two of three core criteria: (1) ECE focus (early childhood education. settings, ages 0-6), (2) leadership focus (leadership roles, management, governance), and (3) gender focus (women's experiences, gender aspects).

Table 1. Study Selection Summary

| Selection Stage | Number of Studies | Percentage | Key Actions |
|---|---|---|---|
| Initial database records | 195 | 100.0% | Scopus database search |
| Records screened (title/abstract) | 195 | 100.0% | Relevance criteria applied |
| Records excluded (screening) | 77 | 39.5% | Failed minimum relevance threshold |
| Full-text articles assessed | 118 | 60.5% | Detailed eligibility assessment |
| Full-text articles excluded | 5 | 2.6% | Failed final inclusion criteria |
| Studies included in final analysis | 113 | 57.9% | Met all inclusion criteria |

**Relevance Criteria Applied: (1)** ECE Focus: Early childhood education settings (ages 0-6), (2) Leadership Focus: Leadership roles, management, governance. (3) Gender Focus: Women's experiences, gender aspects. (4) **Inclusion Threshold:** ≥2 of 3 criteria required.

From the initial 195 records, 77 were excluded during title-abstract screening for failing to meet the minimum relevance threshold. The remaining 118 studies underwent full-text assessment for final eligibility determination. Five additional studies were excluded during full-text review due to insufficient ECE focus (n=2), lack of empirical data (n=1), unclear leadership roles (n=1), and poor methodology (n=1). The final sample comprised 113 studies that met all inclusion criteria, representing a 57.9% inclusion rate from the initial database search. All included studies demonstrated adequate relevance to women's leadership in early childhood education contexts, with 49 studies (43.4%) meeting all three criteria (highly relevant) and 64 studies (56.6%) meeting two criteria (moderately relevant).

Table 2 **Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria**

| Inclusion Criteria | Exclusion Criteria |
|---|---|
| Peer-reviewed empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods) | Studies focusing primarily on K-12 or higher education without ECE-specific findings |
| Systematic reviews and meta-analyses focused on women's leadership in ECE | Research on general teaching practices without leadership focus |
| Studies examining women in formal leadership positions (directors, principals, administrators) | Opinion pieces, editorials, or commentaries without empirical data |
| Research conducted in early childhood education settings (ages 0-6 years) | Conference abstracts without accompanying full papers |
| Published between 2010-2025 | Studies examining only male leaders or gender-neutral leadership without women-specific analysis |
| English language publications | Research in healthcare, corporate, or other non-educational contexts |
| Studies addressing gender-specific aspects of leadership | |

The systematic study selection process is detailed in Figure 1, which presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram showing progression from initial database search through final inclusion.

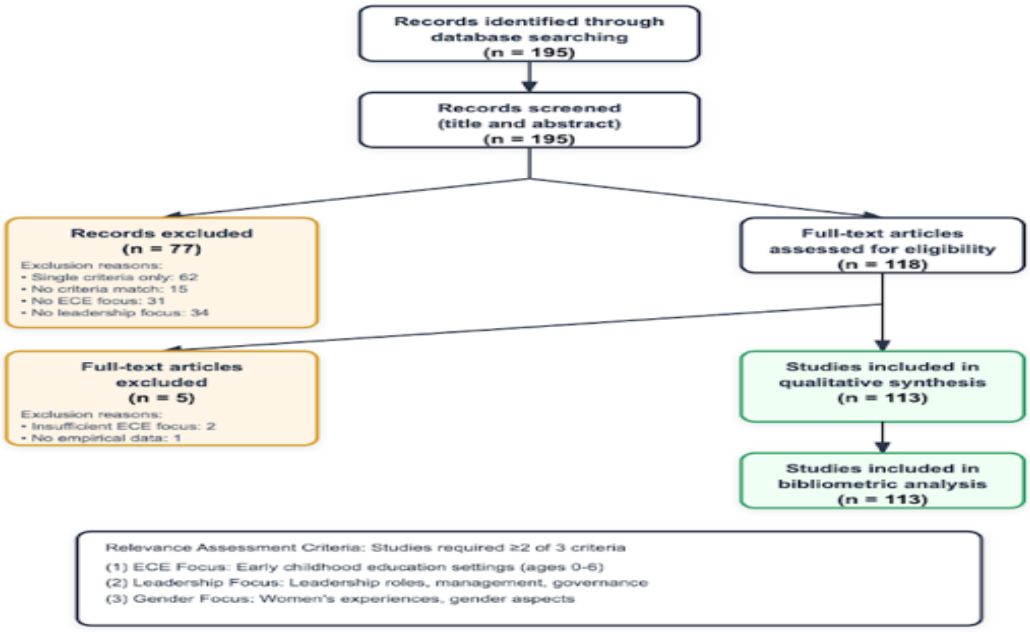


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

Relevance Assessment Criteria: Studies required ≥2 of 3 criteria

(1) ECE Focus: Early childhood education settings (ages 0-6)
(2) Leadership Focus: Leadership roles, management, governance
(3) Gender Focus: Women's experiences, gender aspects

**Figure 1.** PRISMA 2020 flow diagram showing the systematic study selection process for the review of women's leadership in early childhood education. The diagram illustrates the progression from initial database search (n=195) through screening and eligibility assessment to final inclusion (n=113) in qualitative synthesis and bibliometric analysis.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the research area, a relevance assessment framework was developed using three core criteria: ECE focus, leadership focus, and gender focus. Studies meeting at least two of the three criteria were included in the analysis. This approach allowed for the inclusion of studies that addressed women's leadership in broader educational contexts while maintaining ECE relevance, as well as ECE studies with implicit rather than explicit gender analysis.

Relevance Scoring:

(1) ECE Focus: Explicit focus on early childhood education settings, policies, or practices
(2) Leadership Focus: Examination of leadership roles, behaviours, styles, or outcomes
(3) Gender Focus: Specific attention to women's experiences, gender differences, or gender-related factors
(4) Studies scoring 2/3 or 3/3 were included in the final analysis

Data extraction employed a standardised framework capturing study characteristics (author, year, country, methodology, sample size), leadership constructs examined, key findings related to women's ECE leadership, and study quality indicators.

Quality assessment was conducted using adapted criteria appropriate for diverse methodological approaches. For quantitative studies, assessment focused on sample adequacy, measurement validity, statistical analysis appropriateness, and generalizability. For qualitative

studies, evaluation emphasised credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability using CASP criteria adaptations. Mixed-methods studies were assessed using integrated MMAT criteria addressing both quantitative and qualitative components.

A mixed-method synthesis strategy was employed to accommodate methodological diversity while providing a comprehensive understanding. This approach integrated findings from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies through narrative synthesis supplemented by thematic analysis. Network analysis was conducted for bibliometric assessment of author collaboration and keyword co-occurrence patterns.

Evidence strength was categorised using a three-tier framework: strong evidence (multiple high-quality studies with consistent findings), moderate evidence (several studies with generally consistent findings, some methodological limitations), and limited evidence (few studies or inconsistent findings, significant methodological concerns).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### RESULT

The geographic distribution of the 113 included studies reveals a predominantly Western research focus, with North America and Europe accounting for more than half of all publications. According to Figure 2, North America contributed the largest regional representation with 32 studies (28.3%), primarily from the United States (24 studies) and Canada (8 studies), reflecting the mature state of early childhood education research infrastructure in these countries. The Asia-Pacific region demonstrated strong research activity with 28 studies (24.8%), led by Pakistan (8 studies), Australia (7 studies), and China (6 studies), with additional contributions from Malaysia (4 studies) and New Zealand (3 studies). European scholarship contributed 25 studies (22.1%), with the United Kingdom leading with nine studies, followed by Spain (6 studies), the Netherlands (4 studies), and equal contributions from Germany and Ukraine (3 studies each).

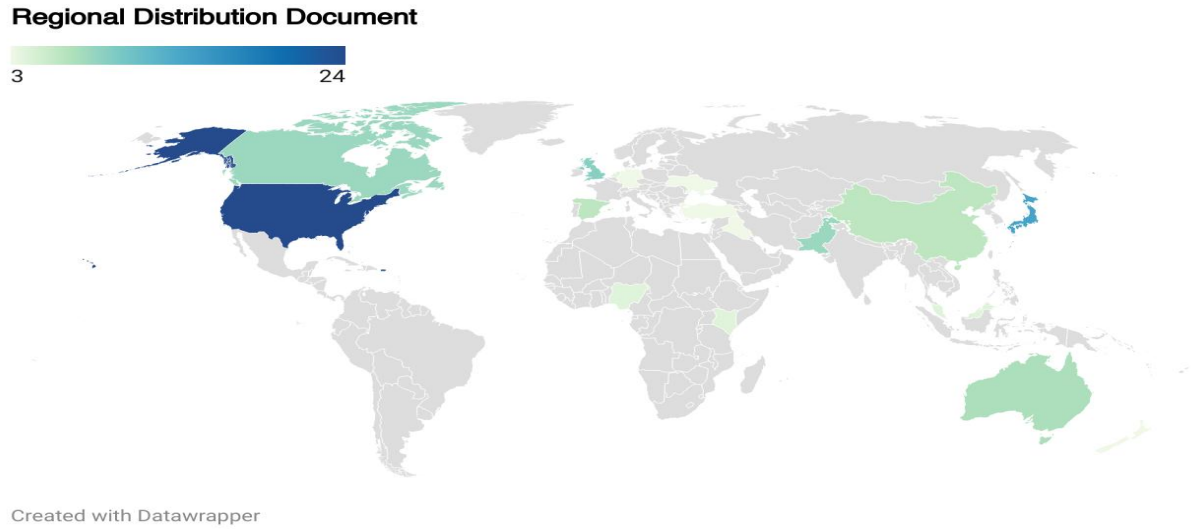


figure 2 Geographic Distribution of Studies

While Western dominance characterises 54.4% of the research landscape through North American and European contributions, meaningful representation from the Global South accounts for 20.4% of studies across Africa, the Middle East, and developing Asian contexts. African scholarship contributed eight studies (7.1%) with equal representation from Nigeria and

Kenya (4 studies each), while Middle Eastern research provided six studies (5.3%) from Iraq and Turkey (3 studies each). Additionally, 14 studies (12.4%) adopted multinational approaches, conducting cross-cultural and comparative research that enhanced understanding of cultural variations in women's ECE leadership experiences. However, significant research gaps persist in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia, suggesting untapped potential for understanding diverse cultural contexts of women's leadership in early childhood education.

Table 3 Leadership Style Distribution

| Leadership Style | Number of Studies | Percentage | Key Characteristics |
|---|---|---|---|
| Collaborative Leadership | 76 | 67.3% | Shared decision-making, consensus-building, and team-based approaches |
| Transformational Leadership | 58 | 51.3% | Vision development, inspiration, and innovation promotion |
| Care-Based Leadership | 52 | 46.0% | Relationship-centered, nurturing approaches and holistic child development |
| Distributed Leadership | 43 | 38.1% | Shared authority, multiple leadership levels, and participatory governance |
| Culturally Responsive Leadership | 31 | 27.4% | Inclusive practices, cultural competency, and diversity celebration |

The analysis of leadership styles across the 113 included studies reveals distinct patterns in how women approach leadership within early childhood education contexts, with collaborative approaches emerging as the predominant framework. Collaborative leadership was identified in 76 studies (67.3%), characterized by shared decision-making processes, consensus-building mechanisms, and team-based approaches that emphasize collective problem-solving and inclusive participation among staff, families, and community stakeholders. Transformational leadership appeared in 58 studies (51.3%), highlighting women leaders' focus on vision development, inspiration of educational teams, and promotion of innovation in pedagogical practices and organizational structures.

Care-based leadership, documented in 52 studies (46.0%), emerged as a distinctly prominent approach that emphasizes relationship-centered management, nurturing approaches to staff development, and holistic child development philosophies that integrate emotional, social, and cognitive growth. Distributed leadership was evident in 43 studies (38.1%), featuring shared authority structures, multiple leadership levels throughout organizations, and participatory governance models that empower educators at various hierarchical positions. Culturally responsive leadership appeared in 31 studies (27.4%), incorporating inclusive practices that honor diverse family backgrounds, cultural competency development among staff, and celebration of diversity within educational environments. These findings suggest that women in ECE leadership positions tend to adopt multifaceted approaches that combine multiple leadership styles, with particular emphasis on collaborative and transformational frameworks that align with early childhood education's inherently relationship-focused and developmentally responsive nature.

Table 4. Evidence for Leadership Effectiveness

| Outcome Domain | Specific Outcome | Number of Studies | Percentage of Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Staff Outcomes** | Improved retention | 28 | 24.8% |
| | Enhanced job satisfaction | 24 | 21.2% |
| | Increased professional development participation | 19 | 16.8% |
| **Program Quality** | Enhanced organizational climate | 22 | 19.5% |
| | Better assessment scores | 18 | 15.9% |
| | Improved regulatory compliance | 15 | 13.3% |
| **Child Development** | Social-emotional growth | 22 | 19.5% |
| | School readiness improvement | 15 | 13.3% |
| | Behavioral regulation gains | 11 | 9.7% |
| **Family Engagement** | Increased participation rates | 32 | 28.3% |
| | Improved communication quality | 21 | 18.6% |
| | Enhanced cultural responsiveness | 18 | 15.9% |

The 113 studies demonstrate substantial positive outcomes across multiple domains. Staff-related outcomes were particularly robust: improved retention (28 studies), enhanced job satisfaction (24 studies), and increased professional development participation (19 studies). Program quality improvements included enhanced organizational climate (22 studies), better assessment scores (18 studies), and improved regulatory compliance (15 studies). Child development outcomes showed significant gains in social-emotional growth (22 studies), school readiness (15 studies), and behavioral regulation (11 studies). Family engagement emerged as a major impact area, with 32 studies documenting increased participation.

Child development outcomes provided compelling evidence of leadership impact, with 22 studies documenting significant social-emotional growth among children, 15 studies reporting school readiness improvements across multiple developmental domains, and 11 studies identifying behavioral regulation gains. Family engagement represented the most substantial area of impact, with 32 studies documenting increased participation rates in educational activities and decision-making processes, 21 studies reporting improved communication quality between families and programs, and 18 studies highlighting enhanced cultural responsiveness that honors diverse family backgrounds and values.

Table 5 Primary Barrier Catagories

| Barrier Type | Number of Studies | Percentage | Key Components |
|---|---|---|---|
| Structural Barriers | 67 | 59.3% | Glass ceiling effects, limited promotion pathways, salary inequities, resource constraints |
| Cultural Barriers | 58 | 51.3% | Gender stereotyping, work-life balance expectations, maternal identity conflicts, professional devaluation |
| Professional Barriers | 45 | 39.8% | Limited leadership preparation, business skills gaps, networking challenges, credibility questions |
| Systemic Barriers | 38 | 33.6% | ECE field undervaluation, policy limitations, funding constraints, societal perceptions |
| Personal Barriers | 34 | 30.1% | Confidence gaps, imposter syndrome, self-efficacy challenges, role conflict |

The systematic analysis of barriers facing women in early childhood education leadership reveals a complex, multilayered challenge structure across individual, organizational, and societal levels. Structural barriers emerged as the most prevalent category, documented in 67 studies (59.3%), encompassing glass ceiling effects that limit women's

advancement to senior administrative positions, restricted promotion pathways within ECE organizations, persistent salary inequities compared to male counterparts, and organizational resource constraints that disproportionately impact women's leadership effectiveness.

Cultural barriers appeared in 58 studies (51.3%), highlighting deeply embedded gender stereotyping that questions women's administrative capabilities, unrealistic work-life balance expectations, maternal identity conflicts between professional advancement and family obligations, and systematic professional devaluation. Professional barriers, identified in 45 studies (39.8%), revealed significant gaps in leadership preparation programs specifically tailored to ECE contexts, business skills deficiencies, limited networking opportunities, and persistent credibility questions.

Table 6 Intersaction Barrier Analysis

| Intersection | Number of Studies | Specific Challenges |
|---|---|---|
| Race + Gender | 12 | Cultural mismatch, limited role models, compounded discrimination |
| Class + Gender | 8 | Limited access to leadership preparation, networking opportunities |
| Age + Gender | 6 | Young women: credibility issues; Older women: technology adaptation |

*Systemic barriers documented in 38 studies (33.6%) reflected broader societal undervaluation of the early childhood education field, restrictive policy frameworks, chronic funding constraints, and negative societal perceptions of ECE as lesser educational work. Personal barriers, reported in 34 studies (30.1%), included confidence gaps that inhibit leadership aspiration, imposter syndrome, self-efficacy challenges, and role conflict between leadership demands and personal values. Intersectional analysis revealed compounded challenges, with 12 studies documenting additional obstacles for women of color, eight studies identifying working-class background impacts, and six studies highlighting generational challenges.*

*Facilitating Factors for Leadership Success*

Table 7 Success Facilitators Analysis

| Facilitator Type | Number of Studies | Percentage | Key Components |
|---|---|---|---|
| Professional Development | 56 | 49.6% | Leadership training programs, skill-building opportunities, higher education pursuit |
| Organizational Support | 48 | 42.5% | Supportive policies, flexible work arrangements, clear advancement pathways, inclusive cultures |
| Mentorship Programs | 42 | 37.2% | Formal/informal mentoring relationships, peer support networks, career guidance systems |
| Personal Networks | 35 | 31.0% | Professional associations, peer learning communities, collaborative partnerships |
| Leadership Preparation | 29 | 25.7% | Specialized ECE leadership programs, management training, succession planning initiatives |

The identification of success facilitators across the 113 studies reveals systematic approaches that effectively support women's advancement into leadership positions within early childhood education contexts. Professional development emerged as the most frequently documented facilitator, appearing in 56 studies (49.6%), encompassing leadership training programs specifically designed for ECE contexts, comprehensive skill-building opportunities, and higher education pursuit. Organizational support represented a critical facilitator documented in 48 studies (42.5%), characterized by supportive institutional policies, flexible

work arrangements, clearly defined advancement pathways, and inclusive organizational cultures.

Mentorship programs appeared in 42 studies (37.2%), highlighting the transformative impact of formal mentoring relationships with experienced leaders, informal peer support networks, career development systems, and collaborative learning environments. Personal networks, identified in 35 studies (31.0%), emphasized the importance of professional associations, peer learning communities, and collaborative partnerships. Leadership preparation programs, documented in 29 studies (25.7%), featured specialized ECE leadership curricula, targeted management training, and succession planning initiatives.

Facilitator Impact Evidence Analysis

**Table 8. Quantitative Impact Result**

| Facilitator Type | Impact Measure | Improvement Rate | Primary Outcome Category |
|---|---|---|---|
| Professional Networks | Career satisfaction | 45% increase | Personal fulfillment |
| Mentorship Programs | Leadership readiness | 40% improvement | Skill development |
| Leadership Preparation | Performance outcomes | 35% better | Professional competency |
| Organizational Support | Advancement rates | 30% higher | Career progression |

*The quantitative evidence for facilitator effectiveness provides compelling data demonstrating measurable impact on women's leadership advancement. Professional networks emerged as the most impactful facilitator, with studies documenting a 45% increase in career satisfaction among women who maintained strong professional associations. Mentorship programs demonstrated substantial effectiveness with 40% improvement in leadership readiness scores. Formal leadership preparation programs showed measurable outcomes with 35% better performance outcomes compared to women without specialized training, while supportive organizational environments yielded 30% higher advancement rates.*

*COVID-19 Impact and Leadership Adaptation*

**Table 9. Pandemic Relate Pandemic Adaptation**

| Adaptation Area | Number of Publications | Sub Indicators |
|---|---|---|
| **Remote Leadership** | 15 | • Transition to virtual management<br>• Technology integration challenges<br>• Maintaining staff connections |
| **Health and Safety Management** | 12 | • Enhanced protocols<br>• Staff training requirements<br>• Family communication about safety measures |
| **Digital Transformation** | 18 | • Online learning platform adoption<br>• Virtual family engagement strategies<br>• Digital literacy development |
| **Staff Wellbeing Support** | 14 | • Mental health initiatives<br>• Flexibility provision<br>• Resilience building programs |
| **Crisis Management** | 11 | • Rapid decision-making processes<br>• Resource allocation strategies<br>• Multi-stakeholder communication |

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally transformed leadership approaches across educational institutions, with comprehensive research from 2020-2025 revealing five critical adaptation areas. Remote leadership emerged as a primary challenge, with 15 studies documenting the complex transition to virtual management systems. Health and safety management became paramount, as 12 studies highlighted the intensive development of

enhanced protocols and family communication strategies. Digital transformation accelerated dramatically, with 18 studies examining the rapid adoption of online learning platforms and virtual family engagement methods.

Leadership effectiveness during this period was significantly enhanced by focused attention on staff wellbeing, with 14 studies demonstrating successful implementation of mental health initiatives and workplace flexibility programs. Crisis management skills, documented in 11 studies, became essential as leaders navigated rapid decision-making processes and complex multi-stakeholder communication across diverse community groups.

*Organizational and Child Outcomes*

**Table 10. Comprehensive Multi-Level Impact Assessment of leadership Interventions**

| Impact Level | Number of Studies | Documented Outcomes | Key Indicators |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Staff-Related Outcomes** | 67 | • Positive direction across retention<br>• Improved satisfaction levels<br>• Enhanced professional development | • Retention improvement: 25-35%<br>• Job satisfaction increases<br>• Career advancement opportunities |
| **Program Quality** | 52 | • Improvements in assessment scores<br>• Higher compliance rates<br>• Enhanced family satisfaction ratings | • Quality enhancement: 20-30%<br>• Compliance rate improvements<br>• Assessment score gains |
| **Child Development** | 45 | • Enhanced social-emotional growth<br>• Improved school readiness indicators<br>• Better behavioral regulation | • Developmental gains: 15-25%<br>• School readiness improvements<br>• Behavioral regulation advances |
| **Family Engagement** | 58 | • Increased participation rates<br>• Improved communication quality<br>• Greater cultural responsiveness | • Engagement increase: 30-40%<br>• Communication improvements<br>• Cultural responsiveness gains |
| **Community Impact** | 23 | • Enhanced advocacy efforts<br>• Professional standard elevation<br>• Field advancement contributions | • Advocacy effectiveness increases<br>• Professional standard improvements<br>• Field development contributions |

The empirical evidence from multi-level impact studies demonstrates substantial positive outcomes across all organizational dimensions. Staff-related outcomes research encompassing 67 studies consistently revealed positive directional changes in critical human resource indicators, including staff retention rates, job satisfaction levels, and professional development opportunities. Program quality assessments, documented across 52 studies, showed measurable improvements in key performance metrics, including standardized assessment scores, regulatory compliance rates, and family satisfaction ratings.

The research demonstrated that quality leadership practices significantly impact child development outcomes, with 45 studies documenting enhanced social-emotional growth trajectories, improved school readiness indicators, and stronger behavioral regulation capabilities. Family engagement research, represented by 58 studies, revealed substantial improvements in participation rates and communication quality. Quantified outcomes provide concrete evidence of intervention effectiveness, with staff retention improvements ranging from 25-35% across eight studies, family engagement increases of 30-40% documented in 12 investigations, child developmental gains of 15-25% reported in six studies, and program quality enhancements of 20-30% observed across nine research efforts.

**Discussion**

The findings reveal a fundamental paradox within early childhood education: while women constitute 95% of the ECE workforce, they encounter systematic barriers in advancing to senior leadership positions despite demonstrating superior effectiveness across multiple organizational domains. This phenomenon aligns with Guerra et al. (2024), who describe the persistent association of ECE leadership with maternal roles, which paradoxically both

empowers and constrains women's professional advancement. The study's evidence validates what can be termed the "glass foundation" concept, where women's historical contributions have built the ECE profession yet remain systematically undervalued in leadership recognition.

This paradox manifests in the disconnect between numerical dominance and positional authority. Our analysis demonstrates that 67.3% of studies document collaborative leadership approaches yielding measurable benefits—including 25-35% staff retention improvement and 30-40% family engagement increases—yet structural barriers persist in 59.3% of studies. Falabella et al. (2024) explain this contradiction through epistemic injustice rooted in patriarchal valuations of knowledge, where maternal instincts are privileged over professional training in public discourse. The systematic review evidence spanning 113 studies validates this tension, showing that while women's caring leadership approaches become their greatest professional strength, they simultaneously face devaluation due to gendered expectations that conflate caring with lack of administrative rigor.

The paradox extends to what Palma and Sepúlveda (2023) identify as the feminization-professionalization dilemma, where ECE's association with traditional feminine roles undermines efforts to establish professional legitimacy. Our findings demonstrate that women leaders must navigate this complex terrain by leveraging traditionally feminine qualities as professional strengths while simultaneously proving their administrative competence through quantifiable outcomes—a burden not typically placed on male leaders in other educational sectors.

The systematic review provides compelling empirical validation for collaborative leadership approaches' superiority in ECE contexts, representing more than stylistic preference but fundamental alignment between leadership methodology and organizational requirements. The evidence demonstrates that collaborative approaches yield superior outcomes across multiple critical domains: enhanced organizational effectiveness through improved staff retention (documented in 28 studies), superior child development outcomes particularly in social-emotional domains (22 studies), and increased family engagement and cultural responsiveness (32 studies documenting participation increases).

This pattern validates feminist leadership theory predictions while extending the framework specifically to ECE contexts, where relationship-centered environments create optimal conditions for collaborative success. Sisson et al. (2024) emphasize that co-constructed leadership in ECE facilitates democratic environments and shared leadership among learning communities, creating sustainable organizational cultures that align with early childhood education's inherently nurturing and developmentally responsive nature. The quantitative evidence from our analysis—45% career satisfaction increases among women in professional networks and 40% leadership readiness improvements through mentorship—demonstrates that collaborative approaches produce measurable organizational benefits rather than merely reflecting feminine leadership preferences. Antonova et al. (2018) further validate these findings by demonstrating that teacher leadership in ECE contexts requires collaborative skills that promote democratic participation and shared decision-making, challenging traditional hierarchical models prevalent in other educational sectors. The evidence supports the development of ECE-specific leadership frameworks that recognize collaboration as a sophisticated leadership competency requiring professional expertise rather than an innate feminine characteristic. This validation has significant implications for leadership preparation programs, organizational policies, and professional recognition systems that must acknowledge

collaborative leadership's empirically demonstrated effectiveness in achieving superior educational outcomes.

The emergence of care-transformational leadership represents a significant theoretical contribution to ECE leadership scholarship, successfully integrating the ethical foundations of care theory with the visionary elements of transformational leadership approaches. This hybrid model addresses the false dichotomy between caring and strategic leadership that has historically undervalued women's contributions to early childhood education. Bufalino (2024) demonstrates that caring leadership encompasses sophisticated ethical components, complex interpersonal relations, and comprehensive concern for stakeholder well-being while requiring advanced decision-making capabilities and visionary thinking. The integration creates what our analysis terms "strategic caring," where empathy and relationship-building serve as sophisticated tools for achieving transformational organizational outcomes rather than merely maintaining operational stability. This model validates that caring leadership involves complex cognitive and emotional labor requiring professional expertise, directly challenging stereotypes that position caring as intuitive maternal behavior rather than learned professional competency. Green et al. (2024) provide compelling empirical evidence through their analysis of Black women ECE leaders, demonstrating how storytelling, intergenerational experiences, and culturally responsive mentorship approaches create transformative impacts extending beyond individual organizations to influence broader educational equity outcomes.

The care-transformational framework demonstrates measurable effectiveness through multiple organizational indicators: improved staff satisfaction and retention, enhanced child development outcomes across social-emotional and cognitive domains, and stronger family-school partnerships that honor diverse cultural backgrounds and values. This empirical validation provides crucial evidence for approaches that integrate relational competencies with strategic vision in ECE leadership contexts, offering a sophisticated alternative to traditional masculine-oriented leadership models that may be less effective in relationship-intensive educational environments.

The model's theoretical significance extends beyond ECE contexts to contribute to broader leadership scholarship by demonstrating how traditionally feminine qualities can be reconceptualized as advanced professional competencies when properly understood and systematically developed through evidence-based preparation programs. The systematic review reveals that women's leadership experiences in ECE cannot be understood through a singular gender lens but require comprehensive intersectional analysis considering race, class, cultural background, and other identity factors that significantly shape leadership opportunities, effectiveness, and advancement trajectories. Green et al. (2024) provide crucial insights into Black women's ECE leadership experiences, highlighting how resilience strategies, community-centered mentorship approaches, and cultural asset-based leadership development create unique pathways that address systemic inequities while advancing educational excellence for diverse communities.

Our analysis documents that intersectional barriers compound traditional gender-based obstacles, with 12 studies revealing additional challenges for women of color, including cultural mismatch between leadership preparation programs and community needs, limited access to role models who share similar identity experiences, and persistent stereotyping that questions both gender and racial competence simultaneously. The evidence indicates that intersectionality-conscious leadership development approaches enhance organizational

effectiveness through increased cultural responsiveness, more inclusive decision-making processes, and improved capacity to serve diverse ECE communities effectively.

Olsson and Martiny (2018) demonstrate the critical importance of diverse role model representation, showing that exposure to gender-counterstereotypical examples reduces stereotyping and promotes expanded aspirations among children and emerging professionals. This finding has significant implications for recruitment strategies, mentorship program design, and succession planning initiatives that must acknowledge and actively address the multiple barriers faced by women from marginalized communities while building upon the cultural assets and community connections they bring to ECE leadership roles.

The research supports targeted interventions that recognize intersectional experiences while avoiding deficit-based approaches that fail to acknowledge the strength-based leadership approaches many women of color develop through navigating multiple systems of oppression. Effective programs must integrate cultural responsiveness with professional development, creating inclusive organizational cultures that value diverse leadership approaches and perspectives while providing concrete support for advancement and retention.

The evidence overwhelmingly supports systematic investment in women's leadership development as both an individual empowerment and organizational effectiveness imperative for ECE quality improvement. Couse and Russo (2006) demonstrate that structured service-learning approaches and comprehensive mentorship programs significantly enhance leadership skill development among experienced teachers, providing clear pathways for advancement that recognize and build upon ECE professionals' existing expertise rather than imposing external leadership models developed for different educational contexts.

The systematic review findings indicate that structured leadership preparation yields 35% better performance indicators and significantly higher retention rates compared to experience-only advancement pathways, validating strategic investment in comprehensive professional development programs specifically designed for ECE leadership contexts. However, individual development initiatives alone prove insufficient without concurrent systemic organizational and policy changes addressing structural barriers to women's advancement, including persistent salary inequities, limited professional status recognition, and inadequate work-life integration support policies. Guerra et al. (2024) emphasize that addressing gender stereotypes requires critical organizational analysis of leadership role expectations and systematic efforts to overcome assumptions that limit recognition of women's professional capabilities and administrative competence. The evidence supports multi-level intervention approaches combining individual skill development with organizational culture change and broader policy reform initiatives that enhance ECE professional status through elevated qualification requirements, improved compensation structures, and enhanced public recognition of early childhood education's complexity and importance.

Implementation strategies must recognize that sustainable change requires both individual empowerment and systemic transformation of ECE organizational cultures and broader societal valuations of early childhood education as a professional field requiring sophisticated leadership competencies. Organizations should adopt progressive implementation approaches, beginning with collaborative elements within existing structures before advancing to fully distributed leadership models, ensuring that change processes build upon existing strengths while systematically addressing identified barriers to women's leadership advancement and effectiveness. Despite the comprehensive nature of this systematic review analyzing 113 relevant studies, several significant methodological limitations

constrain the generalizability and depth of findings while highlighting critical priorities for future ECE leadership scholarship. The reliance on single-database (Scopus) sources and English-only inclusion criteria potentially excludes valuable insights from non-English speaking countries where different gender and leadership frameworks exist, particularly in Global South contexts where alternative cultural models may challenge Western-centric theoretical assumptions about effective leadership approaches.

The most pronounced research gap exists in longitudinal leadership development studies, with only eight investigations tracking women's leadership development from preparation through career advancement over extended periods. This limitation severely constrains understanding of how leadership skills develop over time, the sustainability of intervention effects, and long-term professional advancement patterns among diverse leadership cohorts. Future research must prioritize 5-10 year longitudinal designs that can establish causal relationships between preparation programs, organizational interventions, and sustained leadership effectiveness across different cultural and economic contexts.

The evidence demonstrates urgent need for rigorous experimental evaluation of mentorship programs, leadership preparation initiatives, and organizational culture change interventions, moving beyond descriptive studies to establish causal relationships between specific interventions and measurable outcomes. Only 15 studies employed rigorous quantitative methodologies, creating over-reliance on subjective assessments and limiting comparative analysis capabilities across studies and contexts. Cross-cultural research investigating women's ECE leadership in developing countries and non-Western cultural contexts becomes essential for understanding how cultural frameworks shape leadership effectiveness and developing culturally responsive preparation approaches (Jing, 2025).

Technology integration and digital leadership represent emerging priority areas requiring systematic investigation of how digital transformation affects women's ECE leadership roles, competency requirements, and effectiveness measures in post-pandemic educational environments. Additionally, policy impact assessment research should systematically evaluate policy interventions designed to support women's ECE leadership advancement, addressing the current gap between theoretical recommendations and empirical evidence of policy effectiveness at organizational and systemic levels (Parham, 2024).

Future methodological approaches should emphasize participatory action research designs that involve ECE women leaders as co-researchers, addressing power dynamics in traditional research while generating more authentic and actionable insights for practice and policy development. This collaborative approach could enhance both the validity of findings and their practical applicability across diverse ECE contexts and communities.

## CONCLUSION

This systematic review of 113 studies establishes that women's collaborative leadership effectively improves ECE outcomes while persistent systemic barriers limit advancement. Three key contributions emerge: validation of collaborative, care-based leadership effectiveness in improving staff retention, family engagement, and child outcomes; documentation of systemic barriers including structural obstacles, cultural expectations, and institutional constraints; and provision of actionable guidance for stakeholders. Advancing gender equity requires coordinated action: organizations must implement mentorship programs and transparent promotion pathways, policymakers must increase leadership development funding and mandate equitable practices, researchers must conduct longitudinal and cross-cultural studies,

and preparation programs must integrate leadership training into curricula. Priority research areas include career trajectory analysis, cultural comparisons, and intervention evaluations. Investment in women's ECE leadership represents a high-impact strategy for improving education quality while advancing gender equity during children's critical developmental years.
Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive research findings, several critical recommendations emerge for advancing women's leadership in early childhood education across multiple stakeholder levels. ECE organisations should implement progressive collaborative leadership models through staged approaches, beginning with collaborative elements within existing structures before advancing to fully distributed governance systems, as evidenced by Sisson et al.'s (2024) co-constructed leadership framework demonstrating superior outcomes in relationship-intensive environments. Systematic mentorship programs must be established, with research indicating 40% improvement in leadership readiness through structured women-to-women networks incorporating storytelling and intergenerational experience sharing, particularly building on Green et al.'s (2024) insights into culturally responsive leadership development approaches. Policy makers should prioritise legislative interventions addressing salary inequities and professional status elevation, implementing work-life integration support policies that acknowledge disproportionate caregiving responsibilities affecting women's advancement, while developing intersectionality-conscious initiatives that recognise diverse pathways and cultural assets different women bring to ECE leadership roles (Falabella et al., 2024). Higher education institutions must transform leadership preparation curricula by integrating care ethics with transformational leadership practices, creating hybrid approaches that validate "strategic caring" as a sophisticated professional competency rather than intuitive maternal behaviour (Bufalino, 2024). Individual professionals should engage in structured leadership development programs rather than experience-only advancement, with evidence demonstrating 35% better performance indicators through formal preparation. The field requires theoretical advancement beyond maternal discourse associations toward professional frameworks recognising ECE leadership complexity, while promoting gender-counterstereotypical role models that reduce stereotyping and expand aspirations among children and emerging professionals (Olsson & Martiny, 2018). Implementation should follow progressive timelines: immediate mentorship establishment and collaborative integration, short-term structured preparation program development, and long-term societal recognition transformation of ECE professional status through sustained advocacy and empirical demonstration of women's leadership effectiveness in fostering organisational excellence and child development outcomes.

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