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Investigating Supports and Barriers in Women's Careers: A Review

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Abstract

The issue of women's career progression has garnered growing academic attention. However, existing research remains fragmented and often constrained by regional perspectives. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of women's career advancement by synthesizing existing literature and categorizing the barriers and support mechanisms influencing their professional growth. Employing a systematic literature review approach, sixty peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and 2024 were analyzed. The findings indicate that societal norms, rigid organizational cultures, family obligations, and limited access to mentoring consistently hinder women's career development across diverse cultural contexts. In contrast, organizational support, family encouragement, inclusive workplace policies, and individual self-efficacy serve as critical enablers of career advancement. The study concludes that gender-based discrimination and systemic barriers persist universally. However, opportunities for growth can be cultivated through strategic institutional support and empowerment initiatives. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on gender equity in the workplace and provide implications for policy development and organizational practice.

Keywords: Women's Career Progression, Gender Barriers, Systematic Literature Review,Organizational Support, Gender Equity, PRISMA

Introduction

Women's career development prospects have been the centre of debate for a long time; however, progress remains slow due to persistent barriers and insufficiently effective support mechanisms. In the 1980s, the phrase "glass ceiling" was coined. This term primarily refers to an invisible but impermeable barrier that limits the career advancement of women (Burke and Vinnicombe, 2020). In the last few decades, this glass ceiling has been broken many times

by women by occupying more senior executive roles, holding positions of influence, serving as CEOs or gaining seats on corporate boards. However, Burke and Vinnicombe (2005) argued that this progress is slow and not every woman can or will be entitled to break this ceiling in this time. As of 2024, only 10.4% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women (Catalyst, 2024). Women hold 29.2% of senior roles in S&P 500 firms (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Globally, they occupy just 23.3% of board seats and 6% of CEO positions (Deloitte, 2023). These numbers reflect that there are still a lot of gaps that women need to fill before getting a truly gender-equal organizational environment. Having less than 30% of representation in all fields suggests that there are significant barriers that women are facing. These barriers are not a single structure but a complex system spanning multiple dimensions, including recruitment, promotion, compensation, leadership evaluation, and work-family balance. They often manifest differently across industries, regions, and cultural contexts (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Particularly noteworthy is that even upon reaching senior levels, women may still encounter the “glass cliff” phenomenon—being appointed to high-risk positions during crises (Ryan & Haslam, 2005)—further revealing the deep complexity of organizational gender dynamics. Hence, on one side, there is an increasing awareness among stakeholders about the necessity of women in organizations holding key positions; on the other hand, obstacles ranging from structural biases to cultural norms continue to be an important area of debate. Against this backdrop, systematically examining the mechanisms and pathways of barriers to women's careers not only helps uncover the roots of structural inequality beneath the surface of equality but also provides theoretical foundations for designing more inclusive and effective organizational human resource policies. From a broader socioeconomic perspective, advancing women's career development is crucial for unlocking talent potential, driving innovation, and achieving sustainable development goals. Therefore, this study aims to synthesize existing academic perspectives and empirical evidence to deepen understanding of contemporary manifestations of career barriers for women and explore corresponding strategies, thereby contributing to the advancement of gender equality at both academic and practical levels.

Literature Review

Existing literature tends to address these barriers in a fragmented manner, often comprehensively isolating specific factors. For instance, de Souza Barros et al.'s (2024) study has specifically focused on gender discrimination as a barrier. Similarly, the study by Greer and Kirk (2022) emphasized the perspective of social support. Clark and Bower’s (2016) study focused on financial barriers as a key area of concern. While these studies offer valuable insights, they each emphasize only one dimension of the broader experience. This creates a gap in the literature, highlighting the need for a comprehensive study that identifies and organizes both barriers and supports within a single, unified framework and across a global context. This study addresses the gap by providing a holistic view of all central support mechanisms and barriers existing around global women’s progressive career development. However, identifying such a diverse and complex range of factors necessitates a robust and systematic approach. This study will identify all the existing support factors as well as barrier mechanisms that exist for women through a review of the literature. This study aims to conduct a systematic literature review of research published between 2014 and 2024 to identify, categorize, and synthesize existing findings, highlighting the key barriers and support structures influencing women's career development. The following are the two objectives:

RO1: To identify the main barriers that hinder women's career advancement across various professional settings
RO2: To examine the types of support mechanisms that facilitate women's career progression.

By synthesizing insights from peer-reviewed studies published between 2014 and 2024, the review will provide a structured framework to better understand the multifaceted challenges women encounter and the adequate supports available. The study will contribute to a comprehensive conceptual framework under a holistic understanding of the main supporting factors as well as barrier mechanisms that are present against women's career progress.

Methodology

Search Strategy

This study has followed a secondary qualitative analysis method. In this regard, a systematic literature review followed by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) is considered an approach. PRISMA ensures transparency and rigour in the article selection process, which reduces subjective selection bias through the help of some predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The search strategy is replicable, supported by the documented keywords used throughout the review process. At the same time, PRISMA is a widely recognized and respected framework, commonly accepted as a standard in evidence-based research. These are the reasons PRISMA selected as a method. However, the time-intensive process required significant screening strategies. Still, it allowed the selection of the data in a standardized manner.

The databases selected were Scopus and Web of Science. These two are widely accepted databases providing broad coverage of international, peer-reviewed publications across fields. After conducting keyword-based searches, a substantial number of relevant studies published in recent years were identified, reflecting growing scholarly interest in the topic of women's career barriers and support mechanisms.
The search strategy was guided using specific keywords, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1
Boolean keywords

Keyword 1	Operator 1	Keyword 2	Operator 2	Keyword 3
"Women"	AND	"Career"	AND	"Barrier"
"Female leaders"	AND	"Support"	AND	"Advancement"
"Gender equality"	AND	"Workplace bias"	AND	"Promotion"
"Mentorship"	AND	"Organizational support"	AND	"Career development"
"Glass ceiling"	AND	"Leadership"	AND	"Gender discrimination"

The inclusion criteria for this review required studies to be empirical, peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and 2024, written in English. Article relevance served as a key inclusion criterion, with each abstract reviewed to determine if those articles are specifically on barriers and/or support mechanisms related to women's career development. Studies were selected based on the availability of full-text access as well. The exclusion criteria

encompassed theoretical articles, dissertations, editorials, and book chapters, along with studies that were not available in full text or did not explicitly address either career barriers or support systems related to women.

Corpus Analysis and Selection

Two independent reviewers initially screened the search results, exporting citations into Excel for tracking and coding purposes. Each article was evaluated based on the following criteria: author(s), year of publication, title, research objective, journal, country of data collection, methodology (including research design, sample, and instruments), and key findings.

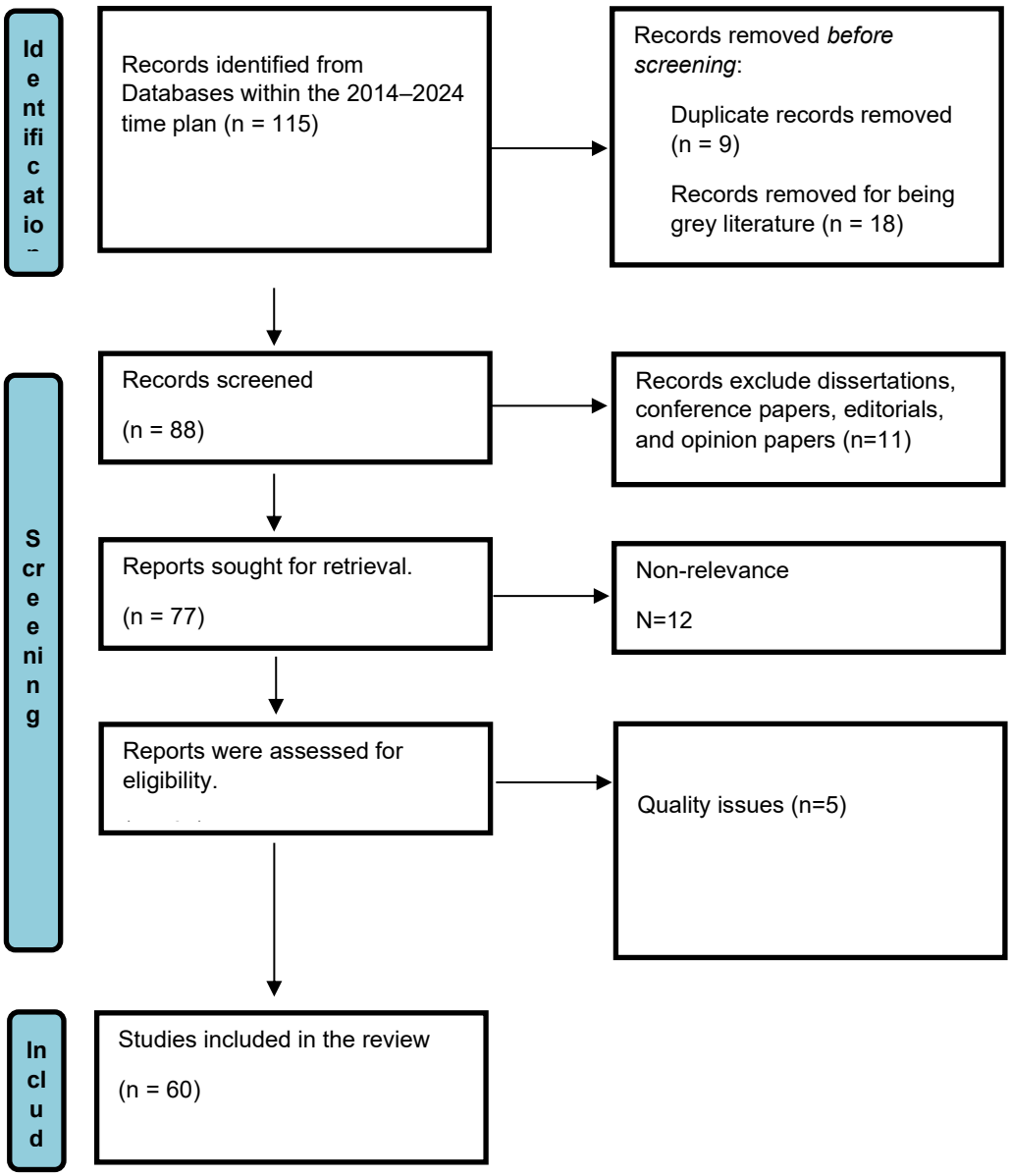

Figure 1: PRISMA flow chart

Ultimately, the final sample included 60 articles (Figure 1). This data extraction captures the type of career barriers or supports identified, research aims and study context, methodological specifics (including sample, research design, tools, and country), and the main findings with practical implications.

Results

This table summarizes key study characteristics, including career barriers/support types, research aims, methodologies, contexts, and main findings.

Table 2
Data extraction

Article No	Author(s) and Year	Research Objectives and Context	Methodological Details (Sample, Design, Tools, Country)	Key Findings and Implications
1	Mohamed et al. (2023)	Examine social and psychological barriers to women's career motivation in Sudan.	Delphi study with 75 women leaders across sectors, Sudan	Societal norms rooted in patriarchy and stereotypes hinder women's career motivation
2	Rostiyanti et al. (2020)	Identify barriers to women's career advancement in the Indonesian construction industry.	Literature review, expert interviews, survey, Relative Importance Index, Indonesia	Worksite insecurity is most critical; structural and cultural reforms are needed.
3	Sougou et al. (2022)	Explore career barriers for West African female researchers	30 interviews (21 female, 9 male), across five West African countries	Family roles deeply influence career progression
4	Abidin et al. (2019)	Investigate the glass ceiling in Malaysia's banking sector	113 survey respondents from major banks in Malaysia	Only family responsibilities significantly impacted career advancement
5	Carriero & Naldini (2022)	Explore gender disparity in early academic careers in Italy	Secondary data (ISTAT survey, N=32,000), Italy	Gender gap absent at post-doc but emerges at assistant professor level, esp. in STEM.
6	Choi & Park (2014)	Compare Korea's civil service gender inequality with that of the U.S.	Gov employment data, interviews, South Korea	Strong cultural factors exacerbate gender inequity despite legal frameworks.
7	Oliveira-Silva & Parreira (2022)	Analyse barriers and coping strategies for women in male-dominated careers	15 qualitative interviews, Brazil	Barriers outweigh coping strategies
8	Topić (2021)	Explore how social interactions and banter create barriers in advertising	38 interviews, thematic analysis, UK	Patriarchal norms in office culture hinder women's advancement
9	Esnard & Grangeiro (2025)	Compare cultural barriers in academic careers between France and Brazil	161 academics, survey + comparison	Cultural framing shapes career perception and internalized biases
10	Sarwar & Imran (2019)	Understand barriers at macro, meso, and micro levels in Pakistan	27 interviews, NVivo, Pakistan	Barriers interwoven across levels; intersectionality emphasized

11	Galizzi et al. (2024)	Explore barriers in Italian accounting academia	24 women, phenomenographic method, Italy	Gender roles embedded in academic culture block women's progression
12	Zhang (2024)	Investigate how mentoring impacts doctoral women in chemistry	14 interviews, SCCT framework, USA	Overwork culture, Microaggressions
13	Cannito et al. (2023)	Barriers and coping strategies for women in Italian academia	46 semi-structured interviews, Italy	Glass ceiling linked to structural culture and self-selective strategies
14	Lan Oo et al. (2019)	Explore barriers and career choices of women in construction	Survey of graduates, Australia	Integration into industry is challenged by gendered culture
15	Bates et al. (2023)	Address early career barriers in pediatric psychology	NIH data review, USA	Recommends structural solutions to support NIH award success
16	Iqbal & Woodcock (2023)	Investigate mobility and career challenges for women in Karachi	Focus groups, scenario-based, Pakistan	Socio-spatial barriers exclude women from early career roles
17	Mozahem et al. (2019)	Explore engineering career barriers and family support in Lebanon	30 interviews, Lebanon	Family and personal agency support persistence amid discrimination
18	Khan (2022)	Examine career barriers for rural women in India	Mixed-method: 10 interviews, 148 surveys, India	Gender roles and family pressures limit rural women’s career progression
19	Naseviciute & Juceviciene (2024)	Identify ICT career barriers and three-level interventions	Expert interviews with ICT leaders, Lithuania	Importance of visibility, mentoring, and policy at all levels
20	Grottis (2022)	Critically review barriers and achievements of Black women in higher education leadership.	Literature review and synthesis, USA	Systematic barriers for women of colour
21	Mate et al. (2019)	Explore career and leadership development for women in Australia and Vietnam.	Narrative research: female academics in Australia and Vietnam	Contrasts covert (Australia) and overt (Vietnam) barriers; highlights mentoring and sponsorship as key enablers
22	Saifuddin et al. (2019)	Examine unique and common career barriers faced by women in high-tech careers in Bangladesh	35 in-depth interviews; snowball sampling, Bangladesh	Gendered norms and biases limit access to resources and advancement
23	Ferrari et al. (2022)	Review barriers to women's career progression in surgery and identify solutions.	Systematic scoping review of 120 studies	Mentorship and social media are identified as crucial support mechanisms.

24	Rossenkhan et al. (2024)	Investigate how Malay Muslim women experience career barriers across identities	22 in-depth interviews; qualitative analysis, Malaysia	Identity intersections (gender, religion, ethnicity) produce complex prejudice patterns, varying by context
25	Maheshwari & Nayak (2022)	Examine barriers/enablers for women leaders in Vietnamese higher education	21 semi-structured interviews across 9 universities in Vietnam	Main barriers are social and structural; family and mentor support, evolving employer mindsets, and leadership competencies serve as career enablers
26	Hamzah et al. (2022)	Examine how career aspiration and organizational support affect subjective career success; test mediating role of self-efficacy among Malaysian women managers during Covid-19	146 Malaysian women managers; quantitative survey; occupational self-efficacy, career aspiration, organizational support, and subjective career success scales	High career aspiration and organizational support positively influence subjective success; self-efficacy mediates both relationships
27	Alok et al. (2021)	Investigate how work-family conflict impacts professional self-efficacy and whether perceived managerial support mediates this relationship in India's IT sector	510 career-persistent women in the Indian IT sector; quantitative survey; structural equation modelling with PROCESS macro	Work-family conflict increases self-efficacy demand/challenges; managerial support positively impacts self-efficacy
28	Takawira (2024)	Explore the mediating role of perceived organizational and social support in the self-efficacy–career satisfaction link among professional women	606 professional women (diverse backgrounds); quantitative survey; measures of self-efficacy, organizational and social support, and career satisfaction; Developing economy context	Organizational and social support strengthen the self-efficacy–career satisfaction relationship; peer, family, and managerial support are critical to enhancing satisfaction in male-dominated sectors
29	Greer & Kirk (2022)	Review of social support types/providers across women's career transitions	80 journal articles; directed content analysis; non-parametric tests	Instrumental support is most common; appraisal is least common
30	Jones (2024)	Explore support differences among undergraduate women in criminal justice	Integrative literature review	Tailored support is needed at different academic stages to boost retention and entry.

31	Thelma & Ngulube (2024)	To examine the barriers hindering women's advancement into leadership roles	Mixed-methods; descriptive survey design. Sample: 61 respondents from 6 organizations, Zambia	Societal and organizational biases hinder women's leadership. Limited access to mentorship, key projects, and sponsorship restricts advancement.
32	Chen et al. (2024)	Identify institutional efforts to support women faculty in science and medicine.	Interviews with 19 leaders from 12 US institutions	GROWTH initiative shows varied institutional responses; offers a framework for support
33	Fouad et al. (2023)	Do Women need a separate theory of women's career development	Systematic literature review based on PRISMA	Gender bias, harassment, Worse for women in nontraditional roles and women of colour, Career breaks due to childcare, partner influence, and inflexible jobs
34	Kaushiva & Joshi (2020)	Examine the impact of internship returnship programs on perceptions post-career break.	Experimental; 109 participants; India	Completion of support programs improves fit perception; neo-sexism biases evaluations.
35	Younger et al. (2015)	Assess the impact of career support modules for professional women in India.	Case studies (N=28), surveys (N=71); Bangalore	Mentorship, networks, and assertiveness help women navigate glass ceilings and stressors.
36	Takawira (2020)	Mediation effect of support in the adaptability–satisfaction link	606 women in finance/HR/engineering, South Africa; mediation analysis	POS and social support improve adaptability and satisfaction
37	Chauhan et al. (2022)	Impact of these variables on the perceived career success of women in the IT sector	292 women in the Indian IT sector; SEM	All three significantly impact career success; highlight challenges and support needs.
38	Kang & Kaur (2021)	Impact of contextual support on women's career aspirations	438 women in banking/insurance; SEM; Punjab, India	Supervisor support is most significant, followed by family and organizational support
40	Bae & Cho (2019)	Examine the reemployment issues of career-interrupted women with higher education.	Policy review: South Korea	Overqualification hinders reemployment

40	Kim & O'Brien (2018)	To assess perceived career barriers across racial/ethnic groups among college women	Survey of racially diverse college women in the US; analysis of Perception of Barriers Scale (PBS); psychometric and invariance testing	Women of colour face higher racism-related career and educational barriers
41	Greer & Kirk (2022)	To review types of social support and their providers in women's career transitions	Systematic review of 80 journal articles; content analysis and nonparametric testing	Instrumental support is most frequent, and appraisal support is least frequent
42	Brown et al. (2018)	To meta-analyse relationships between supports/barriers and educational/career outcomes	Meta-analysis of 276 samples (N = 104,440); random effects model	Supports have a stronger influence than barriers; gender, ethnicity, and age moderate relationships; implications for career education programs
43	Coleman (2020)	To explore perceived career barriers and enablers for UK women leaders	Qualitative interviews with 60 women leaders across sectors in the UK	Barriers include masculine culture and family conflict; facilitators are self-determination and mentoring
44	Wu et al. (2025)	To explore career development barriers among Chinese nurses with master's degrees	Qualitative interviews with 17 nurses (aged 26–29); content analysis using COREQ	Identified disconnects between training and practice, high expectations, weak support systems; insights to inform training/policy
45	Jung & Kim (2020)	To assess gender differences in engineering career perceptions and motivations	Survey of 415 undergrads at a Korean university; t-test and path analysis using SCCT	No major gender difference in academic variables, Women are perceived as less vested in their career future Emphasized structural change alongside support.
46	Maddrell et al. (2019)	To explore gender-based career progression issues in UK geography academia	250 qualitative survey responses; UK universities; inter-sectional feminist lens	Early-career barriers ("stone floors") and compounding mid-career obstacles due to motherhood and institutional rigidity.
47	Amon (2017)	To examine women's career narratives in STEM through a bottom-up participatory approach	46 STEM women (PhD/postdoc); Photovoice method; USA	Barriers include invisibility and shifting identities. Support from mentors, resilience, and work-life balance are crucial for retention.

48	Cavaletto et al. (2019)	To assess whether women in top ranks impact women's promotion in lower ranks	HR data from large Italian firms; quantitative analysis	Female leadership slightly improves the promotion of other women, but overall, the imbalance persists.
49	Feenstra et al. (2022)	To explore how women in high-power positions perceive their power	Survey of 185 high-ranking women, Netherlands; psychological scales	Gendered workplace culture increases impostor feelings, emotional exhaustion, and quitting intentions. Mentoring and inclusive cultures reduce perceived threats.
50	Chenevert et al. (2024)	To investigate how lookism and subtle mistreatment affect career perceptions	Cross-sectional survey; 699 Italian employees; Structural Equation Modelling	For women, lookism leads to incivility → impostor syndrome, → lower perceived employability.
51	Popoola & Karadas (2022)	To test the effects of grit on subjective career success through mediators	Survey of 221 female security professionals, Nigeria;	Grit boosts perceived job satisfaction, mediated by I-deals. Glass ceiling perception doesn't mediate success.
52	Beltramini et al. (2022)	To explore career barriers experienced by young women aged 21–30	Qualitative study; semi-structured interviews; Brazil	Young women face age and gender bias in hiring.
53	Murray (2023)	To examine how class and gender jointly affect UK parliamentary candidacy	Qualitative interviews; UK political context	High financial/time costs and gendered roles deter working-class women. Class-glass ceiling intersection creates cumulative disadvantage.
54	Kräft (2022)	To investigate gender differences in executive promotion and compensation in the oil sector	Quantitative study; UK oil industry	Women are promoted more frequently but face pay disparity.
55	van Veelen & Derks (2022)	To test if female academics perceive thicker glass ceilings in LSB vs. NTE fields	Survey; N = 2,109 assistant/associate professors; Netherlands	Stronger perceived barriers. Perception lowers confidence in achieving full professorship.
56	Sirin & ÖZ (2024)	To explore perceptions of female football observers in Turkey	Qualitative, in-depth interviews with 9 female observers	Organizational culture legitimizes hierarchy and stereotypes. Structural biases persist.

57	Naguib & Madeeha (2023)	To explore gender bias in leadership access in Qatar's public sector	45 semi-structured interviews; public sector employees; Qatar	Barriers include stereotypes and systemic neglect of work-life conflict.
58	Yagüe-Perales et al. (2021)	To assess gender inequality in managerial advancement in Spain	CSQCA applied to two cohorts of management graduates in Spain	Gender gap persists. Job variety and additional education aid advancement, but men face fewer hurdles.
59	Rincón & Domínguez (2023)	To examine sticky floor vs. glass ceiling in Mexico's SNI system	Quantitative; data-set of 41,000 researchers; Mexico	Women can advance at initial levels, but face a ceiling at higher ranks.
60	Qu & Zhao (2017)	To analyse wage inequality among Chinese migrants in urban labour markets	National household survey (2002–2007); quantile regression; China	Wage percentiles suggest institutional barriers remain for top-earning migrants.

Table 3 presents synthesized themes of barriers and supports affecting women's careers.

Table 3

Thematic table

Barrier Category	Barrier Specification	Article Number(s)	Theme
Societal/Cultural Barriers	Patriarchal norms, gender roles, and socio-cultural stereotypes	1, 3, 6, 10, 16, 23, 25, 26, 42, 48, 58	Cultural, Societal, and institutional structures are the primary career barriers for women.
Organizational/Structural Barriers	Rigid hierarchies, male-dominated culture, systemic policies, Sexual harassment, exclusion, lookism, incivility	2, 5, 8, 11, 13, 22, 24, 50, 56, 57, 60, 7, 14, 17, 19, 49, 52	
Family/Work-Life Conflict	Family obligations, motherhood penalty, Low self-efficacy, impostor syndrome, internalized bias, work-life imbalance.	3, 4, 18, 26, 28, 39, 45, 4, 15, 1, 12, 20, 51, 52, 53	
Mentorship and support	Lack of mentorship, poor networks, and limited funding access	20, 24, 27, 32, 34, 35	

Support Category	Support Specification	Article Number(s)	Theme
Organizational Support	Positive workplace climate, supportive managers	15, 26, 27, 28, 29, 36, 39	Organizational, social, policy, and self-efficacy are

Mentoring and Sponsorship	Guidance and sponsorship from experienced professionals	4, 12, 22, 24, 34, 36	supporting mechanisms.
Self-Efficacy and Career Aspiration	Confidence, resilience, and drive for success	1, 27, 28, 29, 53	
Policy and institutional support	Gender-sensitive policies, reemployment programs	32, 33, 41, 44, 48	

The conceptual framework in Figure 2 visualizes overall barriers and supports in women's careers.

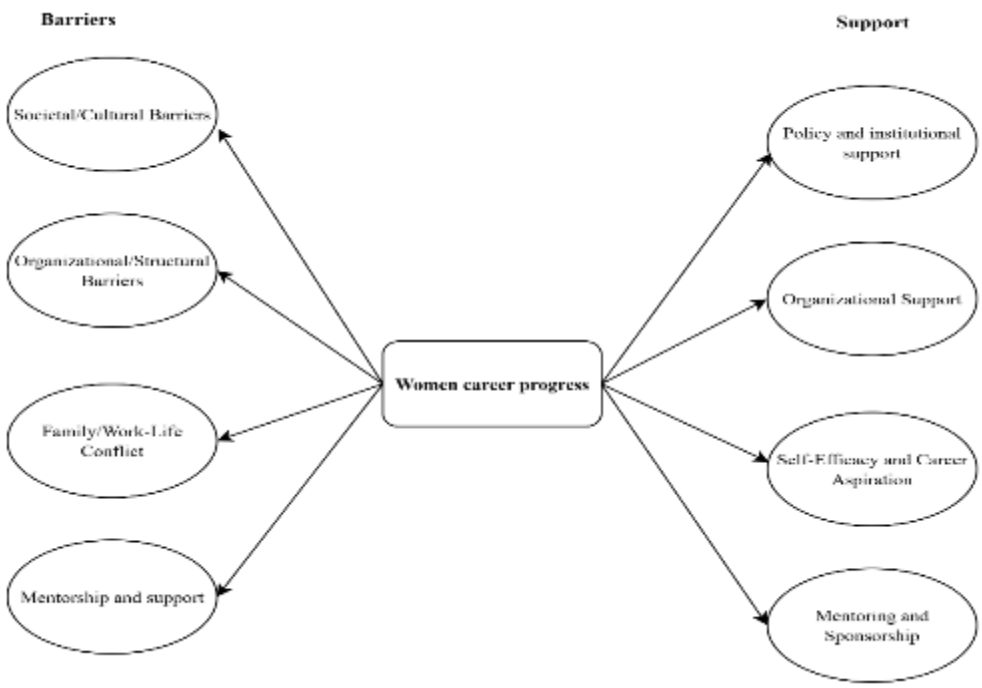

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

Discussion

Cultural, Societal, and institutional structures are the primary career barriers for women.

Most barriers are rooted in patriarchal cultural standards, which can be found in this literature. This is the barrier that is most common among the findings, irrespective of culture or country. In Sudan and Bangladesh, Mohamed et al. (2023) and Saifuddin et al. (2019) found deep-rooted social expectations. Sarwar & Imran (2019) said that religious, societal, and organizational norms in Pakistan create multi-level barriers. Both countries have institutionalized male dominance, reinforced gender roles, and limited women's access to leadership. Rostiyanti et al. (2020) Indonesia's male-dominated organizational culture is also quite similar. Contextually, all these countries have a theocratic ruling structure, which makes it obvious the dominance of male cultural norms (Sougou et al., 2022). Family obligations and institutional gender insensitivity in West Africa shape career progression. However, non-

theocratic cultures also have found stigma around female careers. Even in liberal democracies, covert cultural practices and informal power dynamics maintain gender inequality. For instance, Choi and Park (2014) showed that Confucian gender norms in South Korea exacerbate workplace inequality despite legal protections. Similarly, Topić (2021) identifies the impact of masculine office culture in the UK advertising sector. At the same time, family duties and gender roles restrict rural Indian women's career access (Khan, 2022). This suggests that patriarchal structures are both formal and informal, deeply embedded not just in laws or policies but in social expectations and institutional routines, even in 'progressive' environments. Hence, the problem lies not only in the absence of policies but also in the persistence of gendered norms that evolve and manifest across different sociopolitical systems.

Organizational structures and professional cultures become a significant barrier for women wanting to pursue a progressive career. Studies by Oliveira-Silva & Parreira (2022) and Lan Oo et al. (2019) highlight issues such as institutionalized gender discrimination, exclusion from professional networks, and limited decision-making power within organizations. Although this may vary based on country, culture, and economy, gender discrimination remains more or less in the workplace structure. In developing countries, these are broader societal norms embedded into institutional routines. Whereas in developed countries, these are mostly male-dominated things. For instance, Ferrari et al. (2022) emphasize systemic issues like workload and poor mentorship. Similarly, Rossenkhan et al. (2024) mentioned how intersecting identities intensify discrimination for Malay Muslim women, therefore explaining workplace inequalities. Similarly, Carriero & Naldini (2022) argued on the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon in academia, where subtle structural and hiring biases gradually push women out of career paths. Although these studies are mostly Asian or Middle Eastern, the lack of organizational policies can be found in most places. In contrast, most of the developed nations have inclusive gender policies, but male dominance often continues to prevail within organizational structures. For instance, structural sexism has been found in Italian and French academic and corporate environments (Cannito et al., 2023; Esnard & Grangeiro, 2025). At the same time, Grottis (2022) found institutional racism and exclusionary professional norms persist in US organizations. Fouad et al. (2023) say that exclusionary professional norms are even higher for women of colour. This means in developed nations, these policies often amount to symbolic gestures rather than substantive transformation. Hence, structural barriers are not inclusive of any developed or underdeveloped national identity. Instead, it merely takes different forms based on sociopolitical and organizational environments. Still, what differs is not their existence, but the degree, form, and visibility of such barriers across contexts. Overall, such dynamics are echoed in recent literature (Cavaletto et al., 2019; Feenstra et al., 2022; Chenevert et al., 2024), which emphasizes how token leadership, impostor feelings, and aesthetic biases compound to restrict women's advancement across organizational hierarchies.

Another barrier, particularly in Global South contexts, is the burden of familial expectations and unpaid domestic labour. Khan (2022) identifies work-life imbalance and family duties as critical barriers for women in Malaysia and rural India. However, one could argue that evolving organizational cultures and HR reforms are beginning to recognize this imbalance. For instance, many firms in Malaysia have introduced flexible work arrangements and parental leave. Yet, as Abidin et al. (2019) note, even with such policies, women continue to

be penalized for taking family-related leave, suggesting that policies without cultural change are insufficient. In Africa, Sougou (2022) said traditional family roles become a burden on dreams. This indicates that Asian and African nations, which are mostly developing or underdeveloped, have familial expectations that are quite a great burden on women. Contextually, these burdens are mostly exerted by family members. The same goes for Middle Eastern countries. Mozahem et al. (2019) study mentioned that excessive dependence on family supports, such as finance, is the only way to progress for Lebanese women within their social stigma and biased culture. However, in the Western context, this is different as women tend to have much more freedom. In Western countries, for instance, Carriero and Naldini's (2022) study found that some Italian women felt career stagnation due to childcare responsibilities. Cannito et al. (2023) supported this by saying Italian female academics face career gaps due to the childcare and maternity period. These findings suggest that whether developed or underdeveloped countries, unpaid care work and family expectations continue to limit women's full participation in the workforce. Being a primary caregiver is a significant area that women have to face every day, which becomes a barrier to career progression. This barrier can even get extended when support systems like childcare are absent or when workplace policies fail to account for women's dual roles.

The lack of mentorship and support networks is another cross-cutting barrier. As Zhang (2024) and Bates et al. (2023) suggest, women in academia and science typically work without guidance or professional support, causing burnout. Mentorship support remains a hurdle in educational organizations. The absence of institutional mentorship programs hinders career advancement and intensifies feelings of isolation. Zhang (2024) and Naseviciute & Juceviciene (2024) have emphasized how microaggressions and subtle biases alienate women, especially in high-intensity or male-dominated sectors. Overall, most of the studies reveal persistent gendered and structural career barriers across sectors and countries, from sports and academia to public service and labour markets (Sirin & Öz, 2024; Naguib & Madeeha, 2023; Yagüe-Perales et al., 2021; Rincón & Domínguez, 2023; Qu & Zhao, 2017). The findings align with recent work (Popoola & Karadas, 2022; Beltramini et al., 2022; Murray, 2023; Kräft, 2022; van Veelen & Derks, 2022), which underscores early-career discrimination, intersectional disadvantage, compensation bias, and sectoral representation all interplay in shaping women's career trajectories.

Organizational, social, policy, and self-efficacy are supporting mechanisms

Organizational support emerges as the main factor supporting women's career progress through mentoring, flexible policies, leadership sponsorship, and return-to-work programs. For instance, Hamzah et al. (2022) study mentioned that organizational support, when it meets with high career aspirations, has been shown to significantly enhance subjective career success. The author also found that with self-efficacy, progress in a career gets enhanced as it helps in boosting internal confidence. However, such support structures often benefit only a narrow segment of women. Hamzah et al. (2022) focus on managers in formal sectors, potentially overlooking the experiences of women in informal or precarious jobs, where organizational support is minimal or non-existent. Thus, the impact of such mechanisms may be limited by class and sector. Zhang (2024) and Amon (2017) mentioned that organization-based mentoring programs acted as a buffer against microaggressions and overwork norms. Similar findings were reported by Younger et al. (2015), saying that in India, mentorship, networks, and assertiveness training in organizations helped women to break the glass

ceiling. Another study by Chauhan et al. (2022) suggested that organizational support, alongside mentoring and family roles, directly influenced women's perceived career success. This finding is reinforced by Takawira (2024), who says organizational and social support are critical to fostering satisfaction and adaptability in male-dominated sectors. However, such interventions often lack depth and continuity. For example, mentoring, as discussed by Zhang (2024) and Younger et al. (2015), is impactful only when consistently delivered across career stages. Organizational support is the primary need for women when it comes to steady progress in their careers. The reason is that organizations are the enforcers and decision-makers in the workplace.

Social support, from family, peers, and community, also plays a decisive role in women's resilience and career navigation. Chauhan et al. (2022), Mozahem et al. (2019), Hamzah et al. (2022), and Maheshwari & Nayak (2022) highlighted the need for family and social backing in women's career progress. Kang & Kaur (2021) suggested that supervisor support is essential for peers. However, these studies are non-Western country-based studies. Western literature provides a more nuanced and critical lens on the quality and type of social support women receive. Greer & Kirk (2022) distinguish between emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support, noting that while task-based support (instrumental) is common, motivational support is often absent. This indicates a deeper societal issue. The issue is that women may receive help in performing tasks, but rarely receive validation or encouragement that boosts confidence and long-term ambition. Hence, there is a gap where women do not get family or peer support, which is needed for progress. This gap reveals a misalignment between the types of support offered and the psychological needs women face in environments rife with gendered stressors. Although such issues are mostly prevalent in theocratic or developing or underdeveloped countries.

Policy and institutional interventions reflect another layer of career support, yet they are not without limitations. Maddrell et al. (2018) point of view is that there is a need for inclusive policy reform to overcome rigid institutional structures that disadvantage women mid-career. Brown et al. (2018) suggested that barriers will be there. Although policy-related supports will help to overcome those barriers. Chen et al. (2024) and Bae & Cho (2019) have pointed out that career halt can only be addressed with new reemployment policies, which will restart careers for career-interrupted women. However, many of these remain tokenistic or poorly aligned with actual structural inequalities. For instance, while policy frameworks exist in South Korea and the US, systemic sexism, racism, and class-based exclusions still permeate hiring and advancement processes (Kim & O'Brien, 2018; Maddrell et al., 2019). This means, despite having a policy framework, there is a possibility that gender discrimination may prevail, dismantling career progress for women. At the same time, policies are integrated with the organization itself. If organizational support is there, policies should be aligned with women's needs as well.

Notably, self-efficacy acts as both a psychological support and a mediating mechanism. Studies by Alok et al. (2021) and Popoola & Karadas (2022) show that self-efficacy can translate adversity into growth, particularly when coupled with managerial support or individual traits like grit. This was suggested by Hamzah et al. (2022) and Takawira (2024) as well, hence confirming that organizational and social support enhance self-efficacy, which in turn leads to greater subjective career success. This means that self-efficacy mediates the

relationship between external supports (like mentoring, family support, or inclusive policies) and subjective career success. It's the psychological mechanism that activates the benefits of external support systems. This also means that when women have self-efficacy and receive external support, they are more likely to succeed in their careers. Overall, fostering self-efficacy is essential.

Conclusion

The study was conducted to understand the barriers and supports for women in their careers. A PRISMA-based review of past literature was conducted. Key barriers include societal norms, rigid organizational cultures, family obligations, and lack of access to mentoring. These are especially severe in developing contexts but persist globally in varied forms. However, career advancement becomes attainable when women receive targeted support, such as inclusive policies, organizational commitment, mentoring, and self-efficacy development. Ultimately, meaningful change requires not only structural reforms but also cultural shifts that normalize women's dual roles and aspirations. Sustainable progress lies in integrating policy, practice, and psychological empowerment across all levels.

Practically, the findings stress the need for organizations to shift from symbolic inclusion to structural transformation. Organizations must consistently execute programs such as tailored mentoring, leadership training for women, and flexible work policies. Institutions must embed accountability into policy enforcement to ensure inclusivity isn't performative. Similarly, from a leadership perspective, this study informs policy implementation by identifying key barriers and supports for women's career advancement. It provides evidence-based recommendations for targeted interventions such as mentoring, flexible work policies, and leadership development. By emphasizing self-efficacy and institutional accountability, the study supports the design of inclusive, enforceable, and context-sensitive policies. It empowers policymakers to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward structural transformation that promotes lasting gender equity in the workplace.

Despite the overall analysis, some limitation needs to be addressed. The potential bias within the 60 reviewed studies was not critically assessed, including publication bias, sample selection bias, and cultural bias. This can hinder the generalizability of findings. Similarly, many studies were context-specific and lacked cross-comparative analysis. Although this review adopts a global lens, it overlooks specific country-based dynamics. In future comparative cross-cultural studies, it is needed to explore how support mechanisms vary across sociopolitical systems. Similarly, emphasis should be placed on evaluating specific policy outcomes and exploring the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups, including ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and rural or low-income women.

Practical Implications for Asian Business

There is a significant practical implication for this study. Traditional norms, patriarchal expectations and the cultures, which are family-centric, all persist in influencing how the careers of women occur across Asia. To companies in this part of the world, it is not just a question of drafting just policies, but as well as changing the structural and cultural tendencies that are entrenched in the industries. Therefore, the organisational reforms need to transcend compliance or even token inclusion and proceed to develop institutional mechanisms that would proactively advance equality by policy, leadership, and culture.

First, the discussion indicates that organisations in Asia should formalise gender equity by having transparent promotion, quantifiable diversity targets and mentoring mechanisms. Though most of the Asian firms have launched programs of empowering women, they are usually just token gestures or single programs. Companies need to incorporate formal mentoring and sponsorship services wherein the top executives, both male and female, sponsor women to rise and offer them a systematic mentoring program.

Second, family and social demands continue to be some of the greatest limitations of women in the Asian workplaces. Chinese, Indian, Malaysian, Japanese and South Korean cultures are among the Asian cultures that place high expectations on the role of women as caregivers. As a solution to this, organisations ought to normalise flexible work arrangements, career re-entry routes by women who have gone on caregiving break and provision of childcare support system. Those companies which develop hybrid work arrangements, gender and both gender parental leaves, as well as re-skilling of women going back to the workforce will not only enhance the gender retention but also increase productivity and loyalty.

Third, the leadership development initiatives should be active in questioning patriarchal stories and implicit bias prevalent in most Asian business cultures. The culture of countries like Pakistan, Indonesia and some of India usually identifies leadership as masculine and excludes women as decision-making entities. Businesses must, consequently, invest in leadership pipelines that appreciate variety of leadership patterns, embrace emotional intelligence, and apply inclusiveness training in management behaviors.

Fourth, organisational cultures should be redefined to suit the dual roles of women as both professionals and individuals in the family. Asia companies have the opportunity to promote the culture of empathy, cooperation, and flexibility in the workplace. Domestication of male workers by encouraging them to take paternity leave and other awareness campaigns would make gender work-life balance normal.

Policy wise, the regional governments and business associations should be able to work together to develop a consistent gender-equality arrangement that connects organisational efforts and national development objectives. Tax incentives, grants, or visibility can be offered by the government to encourage those businesses that have gender-balanced leadership. Public- private partnerships would help to improve access to affordable childcare, leadership training and entrepreneurship support of women in emerging economic sectors like technology and green innovation.

Lastly, on the personal level, it is important to enhance self-efficacy and career robustness among women. Confidence-building courses, mentoring opportunities, and exposure of successful female role models should be offered in businesses and educational institutions in Asia.

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