

Nurturing Mental Strength and Fostering Inclusive Leadership in Women

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the discourse surrounding women's empowerment and leadership has garnered significant attention, acknowledging their pivotal role in shaping diverse facets of society (Stromquist, 2015). The evolving narrative celebrates their contributions across social, economic, and political spheres, acknowledging their transformative impact on innovation, collaboration, and positive societal change. However, the journey toward women's empowerment often intertwines with a landscape fraught with challenges that significantly affect their mental health. This paper delves deeper into the complex relationship between mental health and women's leadership. It examines the multifaceted aspects that contribute to and hinder their empowerment.

Research shows that women in leadership positions often face discrimination, bias, and pressure to conform to male-dominated norms. They battle stereotypes while shouldering greater family responsibilities. As a result, many suffer from mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and burnout. Drawing from recent studies, conferences, and strategies, it is evident that supporting women's well-being must be a priority to achieve true gender parity. Organizations must foster inclusive cultures with policies around flexible hours, paid leave, and psychological safety. Leadership training should emphasize self-care, coping skills, community building, and recognizing signs of distress. By prioritizing mental health, we can empower women to reach their fullest potential and bring diverse perspectives that are transformative for businesses and society.

2. Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership

The contemporary leadership landscape is marked by a glaring disparity in the challenges women face compared to their male counterparts. Extensive research has

shed light on the heightened levels of stress, burnout, imposter syndrome, and mental health issues experienced by women leaders. Studies show they battle constantly to prove their competency and gain respect while confronting gender biases and societal expectations related to family responsibilities (Jones, 2022; Smith, 2020). The lack of diversity in leadership perpetuates negative stereotypes associating women with communal traits rather than agency and power. As a result, women leaders report facing microaggressions, unequal pay, and fewer opportunities for promotion and sponsorship.

Additionally, the shortage of female role models and lack of a supportive community compound feelings of isolation women face in top roles. Qualitative interviews suggest that internalizing biases lowers self-confidence and doubts about leadership abilities (Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008). The absence of organizational policies like paid family leave and flexible schedules disproportionately impacts women, forcing many to choose between career growth and family commitments. Together, these challenges translate to higher attrition rates, affecting the representation and advancement of women at the highest levels. Dismantling systemic barriers is imperative to cultivate an inclusive culture of equality.

Navigating work and family life poses unique challenges for women. Research shows they spend significantly more time than men on childcare, eldercare, and household tasks even when both parents work full-time (Sharma et al., 2016). This disproportionate burden contributes to career breaks and lost opportunities to gain leadership experience that is often informal. Without adequate workspace and schedule flexibility, many capable women exit the pipeline altogether.

Bias also manifests subtly through social exclusion, disparate treatment, and prescriptive stereotypes. Studies by Fabra (2019) find that women are less likely to be remembered, hired, or mentored when their qualifications are identical to their male counterparts. They are also subject to double standards in leadership and communication styles. Assertive behaviors seen as confident in men are perceived negatively in women. As a result, many feel pressured to conform to outdated notions of femininity at the cost of advancement. Over time, this wears down ambition and self-assurance if addressed systematically.

3. Insights from International Forums

The 67th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67), held in March 2023 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, served as a platform to deliberate strategies to empower women and foster inclusive leadership. It highlighted the need to address the pay gap between men and women, with research showing that women globally earn 25% less than men for similar roles, as stated in the ILO (2022). The conference called for robust family support policies like paid parental leave to help more women participate and advance in the workforce. Similarly, studies indicate a strong positive

correlation between several women in leadership and organizational performance (ILO, 2019).

The 15th Women's Leadership and Empowerment Conference (WLEC2024), scheduled for January 15-17, 2024, in Bangkok, promises to augment this discourse further. It will bring together over 500 leaders, entrepreneurs, and policymakers from 50 countries to share best practices around mentoring, sponsorship circles, and workplace wellness initiatives. Research presented at WLEC2024 will showcase how reskilling programs in digital skills and financial literacy have empowered women from lower-income backgrounds to start their businesses (LinkedIn, 2023).

4. Strategies for Empowerment and Mental Resilience

Empowering women necessitates a holistic, multi-pronged approach encompassing mental well-being, self-care practices, and cultivating inclusive environments. Encouraging women of all ages to prioritize daily practices that reduce stress and instill calm, such as exercise, meditation, yoga, spending time in nature, journaling feelings, and relaxation techniques, is pivotal (Smith et al., 2020). These low-impact activities alleviate stress and its physical symptoms and contribute to a deep sense of balance, renewal, self-awareness, and mindfulness - qualities crucial for effective leadership under pressure.

Building robust peer and community support networks is equally imperative in bolstering women's resilience and ability to navigate challenges confidently. Formal and informal mentorship programs where women can share experiences, both positive and negative, with empathetic equals outside their organization offer invaluable guidance and perspective. Digital support groups via social media platforms allow geographically dispersed women to stay connected and lift each other daily. Normalizing open, honest conversations about mental health struggles through company-wide training helps remove the stigma.

Leaders must advocate for flexible, family-friendly policies, including paid sick and parental leave, backup childcare solutions, and the option for partial or complete remote work. Comprehensive healthcare plans should provide coverage for counseling, therapy, lifestyle coaching, and other evidence-based interventions to treat anxiety, depression, and burnout before they escalate. Performance reviews and salary negotiations can instead focus on goals and output to minimize bias. Anonymized hiring processes give all candidates a fair shot.

Workplaces striving for authentic inclusivity conduct vulnerability assessments and address non-inclusive behaviors and microaggressions through compassionate feedback. They foster a culture where asking for help and prioritizing well-being are seen as strengths rather than weaknesses. When mental health is openly valued and

supported through tangible actions, women feel empowered to take on new opportunities and leadership roles while sustainably maintaining optimal wellness and productivity. A resilient, thriving workforce benefits employees and companies alike.

Organizing regular social activities, especially at lunchtime, after work, or on weekends, gives colleagues bonding opportunities outside the office environment. This could include sports groups, games nights, volunteer projects, or group fitness classes. Physical activity combined with teamwork and camaraderie has mental health benefits like reducing isolation, boosting mood, and enhancing social support networks. Team activities foster workplace relationships and community in a fun, low-pressure environment that counters stress.

Massage therapy is a holistic wellness practice that can help lower stress levels, relieve built-up muscle tension, improve circulation, and boost overall feelings of relaxation. Subsidizing occasional on-site massage sessions provides employees with an accessible means for stress reduction. A licensed massage therapist may visit the workplace to offer 10-minute massages. The light pressure massage of the shoulders, neck, scalp, and hands helps melt away physical knots and mental clutter. Experiencing gentle, healing touch has decreased cortisol levels and other stress hormones in the body (Holland, 2018). It can also improve sleep quality and ease pains like headaches.

Developing life skills such as effective communication, financial literacy, and learning to set boundaries bolsters individual empowerment. Workshops teaching negotiation, public speaking, and navigating relationships increase self-efficacy—access to continuing education and professional development opportunities to aid career progression. Subsidized training programs allow lower-income individuals to gain qualifications, improving job prospects and financial independence.

5. Creating Inclusive Leadership Practices

To foster truly inclusive leadership where women can equally thrive and advance, organizations must implement tangible policies and cultural practices that champion gender equality and explicitly prioritize mental well-being. According to Sharma et al. (2016), concrete initiatives promoting flexible work arrangements, equal compensation for equal work regardless of gender, comprehensive parental leave for both parents, and robust support for breastfeeding/pumping mothers contribute significantly to dismantling structural barriers hindering women's career progression.

Additionally, leadership training programs and initiatives tailored to empowering women with skills such as confidence-building, overcoming imposter syndrome, salary negotiations, speaking out, and navigating subtle biases go a long way in cultivating self-assured female leaders. Companies striving for inclusivity ensure women comprise at

least 30% of leadership/board positions to reflect the diversity of the customer base and drive better business decisions.

In addition to usual medical benefits, employers can offer a confidential employee assistance program with free counseling sessions. Through this service, employees and their immediate family members can speak with a licensed therapist to receive support for any work, home, or personal issues causing them stress. Common topics employees seek counseling for include anxiety, depression, relationships, sleeping problems, and burnout. Having convenient and subsidized counseling resources sends a strong message that mental wellness is a priority and removes barriers to getting timely help from professionals.

Moreover, a workplace culture of empathy, understanding, and psychological safety should be created, nurturing an environment where women feel seen, heard, and supported to thrive authentically without compromising their wellness. Many companies should provide a dedicated quiet room or quiet corner where employees can retreat when feeling overwhelmed or needing a break. These spaces should be designed for relaxation, with comfortable lounge furniture, dim lighting, plants, and calming music or nature sounds. Employees will spend 10-15 minutes in the quiet room to decompress without distractions from their desks or office environment. Simply stepping away to a peaceful oasis allows the mind and body to unwind and reset, making it easier to return to work feeling reenergized.

Moreover, governments play a role through policy reforms affirming gender equality. Mandating paid leave and flexible work arrangements as rights instead of privileges sets baseline standards. Enforcing workplace discrimination laws and offering recourse for harassment cases deters toxic behaviors. Expanding early childhood programs and increasing minimum wage to living standards mitigates barriers. Investments in female entrepreneurship through small business grants and loans empower women as job creators.

At societal levels, diverse representations in media influence prevailing attitudes. Elevating stories of women leaders from varied backgrounds inspires the next generation. Education curricula incorporating the achievements of influential females instill pride and possibilities from a young age. Grassroots initiatives raise awareness of ingrained challenges perpetuating the status quo. Coordinated efforts targeting systemic change maximize impact through a multifaceted lens accounting for intersections of gender, race, and socioeconomic status.

When implemented fully, these multifaceted efforts have demonstrable impacts—lowering attrition rates, boosting engagement, and increasing recruitment of top female talent. They also translate to wins for the bottom line through diverse perspectives and innovation that inclusivity unleashes. With sustained initiatives, workplaces can

empower women as architects of change, spearheading a more equitable and compassionate future.

6. Proposed Solution Using an App-Project

There is a lack of support and awareness around issues like menopause and other women's health concerns in the workplace. Being the most efficient and accessible and rising in technological advances, the app will be a tool for assessing and improving the company culture.

The key stakeholders impacted by the lack of organizational support for women experiencing menopausal symptoms include women employees going through menopause, who struggle without appropriate policies in place; the human resources department, which must navigate legal and ethical issues without established guidelines; managers and supervisors, who may lack sensitivity training to handle menopause-related challenges compassionately; company leadership that risks losing valuable talent and facing discrimination claims if needs are unmet; and employee wellness programs, which are missing a crucial opportunity to holistically educate and care for female employees during this significant life transition.

The app will utilize design principles that focus on user privacy and experiences. A foundational element is ensuring a supportive and understanding environment within the app. Through the use of empathy and discretion, it will allow women to feel comfortable sharing what they are going through. The interface will be intuitive and user-friendly, such as using a bear to ask questions, making it easy for women to engage with desired features during heightened stress or discomfort. This includes a wellness assessment component incorporating a scale and emoji selections to reflect one's current state effectively.

It will also include providing several essential features to support employees' mental health and foster connection. Users can discretely request a 10-minute break to relax in a designated quiet space through the app without needing any explanation from their manager. They can also schedule confidential counseling sessions through the app to process feelings and experiences. To enhance connectivity, it will notify users about upcoming team-building events and allow them to connect directly with colleagues. Employers will be informed about offering free on-site counseling services accessible via the app. Moreover, a virtual AI coaching assistant feature will be included so that when there is no accessibility to a physical counselor, the employers can talk to the virtual AI assistant, which offers essential solutions and ideas to the mental problem.

Moreover, an open discussion platform allows the sharing of experiences and perspectives on mental well-being to help remove any stigma. The app will regularly provide educational leaflets about stress management, mindfulness, and other self-care

techniques to promote overall wellness. These features empower discreet mental health support and cultivate understanding within the workplace community. For this, an integrated plan combining app features for individualized care with educational materials to enhance company culture overall may best promote women's empowerment via personalized support and atmosphere improvement. Moreover, the management will also analyze and assess employees needs of free workplace massage especially when they respond with an emoji/bear that they are sad or suffering from stress.

Implementing a multidimensional mental wellness program could provide discreet tracking of individual struggles and connect employees to build a supportive community. Promoting mental health awareness and empathy across the workplace could make a lasting impact through various initiatives. A blended digital and in-person approach may cultivate buy-in and optimal support.

However, it requires organizational investment and long-term commitment. Willingness to openly share personally depends on comfort levels, and private access may be difficult for some roles during work hours. There are also risks of compromised aggregated user data or specific individuals still being identifiable. Cultural shifts will not happen overnight, and solutions cannot solve all external stressors. Reliance on self-reported feedback instead of clinical diagnosis warrants attention.

Key barriers also exist. Many employees and leaders need more understanding of women's mental wellness priorities. Collection and handling of sensitive usage data presents privacy barriers that reduce trust in solutions. Overcoming stigmas associated with issues like menopause necessitates cultural sensitivity training. Strong top-down support from management and active participation in providing feedback is critical for success, monitoring usage performance, and collecting ongoing user input.

7. Conclusion

Empowering women and supporting their mental health and well-being must be a priority to achieve true gender equality and inclusion in leadership. While significant progress has been made, women face unique challenges in navigating their careers and leadership aspirations. Concerted efforts are needed across multiple levels, including organizational policies, societal attitudes, government interventions, and community support systems. Employers, in particular, play an essential role in fostering cultures of psychological safety, flexibility, and empathetic leadership. Mental health solutions must also account for individual needs and privacy considerations. With open dialogue, education, and a commitment to long-term, multidimensional approaches, workplaces can maximize women's potential and ensure their wellness and representation at the highest levels.

The proposed solution of developing a mental wellness app has the potential to be a powerful tool in supporting women's empowerment and leadership if implemented comprehensively. By offering discreet access to counseling, community-building resources, and educational materials, the app aims to address critical barriers to mental well-being individually and at an organizational level. Continued research, evaluation of initiatives, and coordinated collaborative action are essential to sustain meaningful change.

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