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# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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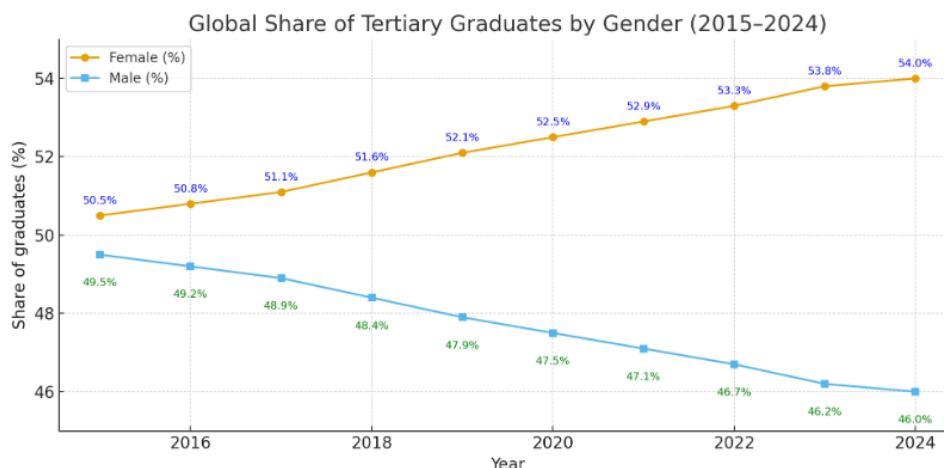
## Abstract

This article explores the growing role of women in leadership in the 21st century, highlighting both progress and challenges. It presents recent statistics, such as women holding about 11% of CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies and approximately one-third of board seats. The article emphasizes the positive impact of women leaders, including diverse perspectives, inclusive decision-making, and serving as role models for younger generations. At the same time, it notes persistent barriers such as gender stereotypes, work-life balance issues, and structural inequalities. The conclusion stresses that empowering women in leadership is not only a matter of fairness but also a key driver of innovation, sustainability, and global development.

**Keywords:** Women in leadership, gender equality, female CEOs, decision-making, diversity, empowerment, innovation, sustainability, stereotypes, 21st century.

## Introduction

The 21st century has become a turning point in the history of leadership. Around the world, women are increasingly stepping into positions of power in politics, business, science, and education. From heading countries to running global corporations, women are proving that leadership is not defined by gender but by competence, vision, and resilience. Yet, despite clear progress, true equality remains a challenge.



<sup>1</sup>For centuries, leadership was considered the domain of men. Women were excluded from political life and denied access to education and professional growth. However, the late 20th and early 21st centuries marked a new era. Today, more women are graduating from universities than men in many countries, and

```
clear
input str10 gender count
"Women" 55
"Men" 445
end

graph bar count, over(gender) ///
title("Fortune 500 CEOs by Gender, 2025") ///
ytitle("Number of CEOs") ///
bar(1, color(orange)) bar(2, color(navy))
```

they are entering fields previously dominated by males.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [https://gem-report-2023.unesco.org/monitoring-7/?utm\\_source=https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2023\\_e13bef63-en/full-report/who-graduates-from-tertiary-education\\_6be4b2fa.html?utm\\_source](https://gem-report-2023.unesco.org/monitoring-7/?utm_source=https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2023_e13bef63-en/full-report/who-graduates-from-tertiary-education_6be4b2fa.html?utm_source)

<sup>2</sup> [https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/gender-equality-index-2020-report/women-continue-gradually-outpace-men-educational-attainment?language\\_content\\_entity=en&utm\\_source=https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2025\\_1c0d9c79-en/full-report/who-is-expected-to-complete-tertiary-education\\_a1099e2e.html?utm\\_source=https://unece.org/media/news/445?utm\\_source](https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/gender-equality-index-2020-report/women-continue-gradually-outpace-men-educational-attainment?language_content_entity=en&utm_source=https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2025_1c0d9c79-en/full-report/who-is-expected-to-complete-tertiary-education_a1099e2e.html?utm_source=https://unece.org/media/news/445?utm_source)



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As of 2025, **11% of CEOs in Fortune 500 companies are women** — 55 out of 500.<sup>3</sup> This is the highest number in history but still far from equal representation.

Globally, women occupy around **28–34% of senior leadership roles** in organizations.<sup>4</sup>

In politics, the number of women serving as heads of state or government has grown, but still only **31 countries (out of nearly 200)** are currently led by

```
clear
input str15 country percent
"Global Avg" 26.9
"Rwanda" 61
"Sweden" 47
"USA" 28
"Japan" 10
end

graph bar percent, over(country) ///
title("Women in National Parliaments, 2023") ///
yttitle("Percentage of Seats") ///
bar(1, color(gs12))
```

women.<sup>5</sup>

[https://www.scb.se/en/finding-statistics/statistics-by-subject-area/education-and-research-in-the-higher-education-sector/higher-vocational-education-and-arts-and-culture-courses/higher-vocational-education/pong/statistical-news/graduated-from-higher-vocational-education-2018/?utm\\_source](https://www.scb.se/en/finding-statistics/statistics-by-subject-area/education-and-research-in-the-higher-education-sector/higher-vocational-education-and-arts-and-culture-courses/higher-vocational-education/pong/statistical-news/graduated-from-higher-vocational-education-2018/?utm_source)  
[https://erudera.com/news/women-outnumber-men-at-european-universities-but-remain-less-represented-in-labor-market/?utm\\_source](https://erudera.com/news/women-outnumber-men-at-european-universities-but-remain-less-represented-in-labor-market/?utm_source)

[https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnietzel/2024/08/07/women-continue-to-outpace-men-in-college-enrollment-and-graduation/?utm\\_source](https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnietzel/2024/08/07/women-continue-to-outpace-men-in-college-enrollment-and-graduation/?utm_source)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.axios.com/2025/06/03/fortune-500-women-ceos?utm\\_source](https://www.axios.com/2025/06/03/fortune-500-women-ceos?utm_source)

[https://fortune.com/2025/06/02/fortune-500-companies-run-by-female-ceos-women-2025/?utm\\_source](https://fortune.com/2025/06/02/fortune-500-companies-run-by-female-ceos-women-2025/?utm_source)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.granthornton.co.za/Newsroom/women-in-business-2025/?utm\\_source](https://www.granthornton.co.za/Newsroom/women-in-business-2025/?utm_source)

[https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/education/news/why-do-women-occupy-only-28-1-of-senior-leadership-roles-globally/articleshow/122044038.cms?utm\\_source](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/education/news/why-do-women-occupy-only-28-1-of-senior-leadership-roles-globally/articleshow/122044038.cms?utm_source)

<https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/in-full/gender-gaps-in-the-workforce>

<sup>5</sup> [https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-womens-leadership-and-political-participation?utm\\_source](https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-womens-leadership-and-political-participation?utm_source)

[https://social.desa.un.org/sdn/facts-and-figures-womens-leadership-and-political-participation?utm\\_source](https://social.desa.un.org/sdn/facts-and-figures-womens-leadership-and-political-participation?utm_source)



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Women leaders often bring new qualities to leadership styles. Research suggests that women tend to lead with collaboration, empathy, and long-term thinking. Key Studies & Findings: “Transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles: a meta-analysis comparing women and men”<sup>6</sup> This study reviewed 45 prior studies and found that women score higher on *transformational leadership* — meaning they are better at inspiring and motivating, providing individualized support, and being considerate of team members’ needs. Women also engaged more in *contingent reward behavior* (a component of transactional leadership) than men. Meanwhile, men were more likely to exhibit management by exception (reacting to mistakes or problems after they occur) and laissez-faire styles (less involvement). These traits tend to correlate with more positive outcomes in organizations. For example, transformational leadership is linked with greater employee satisfaction, loyalty, innovation, etc. “Gender differences and leadership styles: Who Leads more Destructively?” (IBIMA, 2019)<sup>7</sup> This research shows that women managers are more likely to use relational leadership styles than men, while men tend to more often use controlling or task-oriented leadership styles. Also, in terms of negative or “destructive” leadership behaviors, men significantly exceed women. That is, women are less likely to use behaviors that damage team morale or well-being. Pew Research Center — Views on leadership traits and competencies (2018)<sup>8</sup> The Pew survey asked people which leadership traits leaders of each gender tend to have. Many respondents believed women are stronger on traits like compassion, empathy, and compromise, while men are more often seen as risk-takers. Most people (~57%) believe men and women differ in leadership styles, but fewer people think that one gender’s style is generally “better” than the other. Among those who do believe one is better, more say women’s approach is stronger in many of the listed traits (empathy, ability to compromise).

<sup>6</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12848221/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://ibima.org/accepted-paper/gender-differences-in-leadership-styles-who-leads-more-destructively/?utm\\_source](https://ibima.org/accepted-paper/gender-differences-in-leadership-styles-who-leads-more-destructively/?utm_source)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/09/20/2-views-on-leadership-traits-and-competencies-and-how-they-intersect-with-gender/?utm\\_source](https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/09/20/2-views-on-leadership-traits-and-competencies-and-how-they-intersect-with-gender/?utm_source)



Study: The Relationship between Female Leadership Traits and Employee Innovation Performance<sup>9</sup> (MDPI) This paper breaks down female leadership into dimensions such as *flexible leadership charm*, *personality caring ability*, *inspirational ability*, and *intelligent motivating ability*. It found that most of these (except personality caring ability) had a positive effect on employees sharing knowledge, and through that, a positive effect on innovation in the organization. Challenges women in software engineering leadership roles face (Qualitative study, “Software Engineering Leadership” domain)<sup>10</sup> In the technology/software engineering field, women in leadership roles reported that they lead differently: more collaborative, more communicative, less aggressive. They more often emphasize mentoring, listening, and engaging the team. The

```
clear
input str15 leadership_type deaths_per_million
"Female-led" 50
"Male-led" 300
end

graph bar deaths_per_million, over(leadership_type) ///
title("COVID-19 Deaths per Million (First Wave)") ///
yttitle("Deaths per Million") ///
bar(1, color(green)) bar(2, color(red))
```

study also documents challenges: sometimes these softer or relational styles are undervalued in male-dominated or more traditional settings, which expect more directiveness, risk-taking, or “toughness.” **Interesting fact:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, countries led by women — such as New Zealand under Jacinda Ardern and Germany under Angela Merkel — were praised internationally for effective crisis management.<sup>11</sup>

The success of Ardern, Merkel, and other female leaders was not just anecdotal.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/14/11/6739?utm\\_source](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/14/11/6739?utm_source)

<sup>10</sup> [https://arxiv.org/abs/2104.13982?utm\\_source](https://arxiv.org/abs/2104.13982?utm_source)

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.07.13.20152397v2.full?utm\\_source](https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.07.13.20152397v2.full?utm_source)



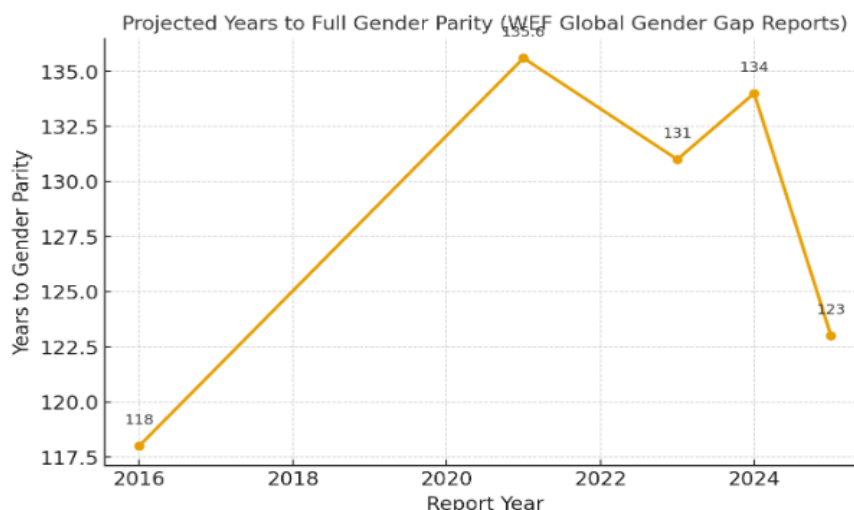
Studies comparing nearly 200 countries found that female-led nations experienced lower infection rates, fewer deaths, and shorter periods of high mortality compared to male-led counterparts. Researchers noted that women leaders were more likely to lock down earlier, prioritize public health over short-term economic concerns, and communicate more effectively with citizens. One study revealed that during the first wave of the pandemic, female-led countries had six times fewer total deaths on average than those led by men. While differences in population size and health infrastructure played a role, the trend was consistent enough to suggest that leadership style had a measurable impact. Here are more precise statistics from the studies:

Measure	Average in Female-Led Countries	Average in Male-Led Countries	Ratio / Difference
Total confirmed COVID-19 deaths	~ 1,983 deaths ( $\pm$ 2,724; 95% CI)	~ 13,276 deaths ( $\pm$ 9,848; 95% CI)	Female-led countries had ~ 6 times fewer deaths on average.
Deaths per capita	~ 1.6 times fewer than male-led countries.		
Peak in daily deaths	~ 91 deaths ( $\pm$ 122; 95% CI)	~ 643 deaths ( $\pm$ 435; 95% CI)	Peak daily death count ~ 7 times lower in female-led countries.
Days with confirmed COVID-19 deaths	~ 50 days ( $\pm$ 23 days; 95% CI) in female-led countries	~ 79 days ( $\pm$ 7 days; 95% CI) in male-led countries	
Slope of rise in daily deaths	Female-led countries had a curve that was 4-times less steep than male-led ones.		
Excess mortality per capita	~ 4.8 in female-led countries	~ 21 in male-led countries	





Companies with greater gender diversity in leadership also tend to perform better financially. McKinsey research shows that businesses with gender-diverse



executive teams are **likely to outperform 25% more** less diverse competitors.<sup>12</sup> Women in leadership also act as role models. When young girls see women running companies, countries, or international organizations, they gain the confidence to pursue their own ambitions. Despite progress, barriers remain strong. Stereotypes and Bias: Women leaders are often judged more harshly than men. If they are decisive, they may be seen as “too aggressive,” but if they are collaborative, they may be perceived as “too soft.” Work-Life Balance: Women still carry a larger share of family and household responsibilities. Without flexible work policies, many talented women leave their career paths before reaching top positions. Representation Gap: Women of color, women in developing countries, and women in technology sectors are even more underrepresented. Statistic: At the current pace of progress, the World Economic Forum estimates

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters?cid=other-eml-alt-mip-mck&hctky=11855514&hdpid=4eaa142d-de5f-46b3-aa50-423380d53597&hlkid=4544abd2e8754189a3d1dde5d27f0754&utm\\_source](https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters?cid=other-eml-alt-mip-mck&hctky=11855514&hdpid=4eaa142d-de5f-46b3-aa50-423380d53597&hlkid=4544abd2e8754189a3d1dde5d27f0754&utm_source)



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it could take over 130 years to achieve full gender parity in leadership worldwide.<sup>13</sup>

The digital era offers new opportunities for women to rise as leaders. Remote work, online businesses, and global networks make it easier for women to balance responsibilities and show their skills. Governments and corporations are also implementing measures to encourage equality: Gender quotas for parliaments and boards of directors in some countries. Mentorship programs to support young women in business and politics. Campaigns promoting women's achievements to challenge stereotypes. Interesting fact: Rwanda is the world leader in women's political participation, with 61% of its parliament seats held by women — the highest rate globally. As of the 2024 legislative elections, 63.8% of the seats in Rwanda's Chamber of Deputies are held by women.<sup>14</sup> In earlier years: in the 2018 election it was about 61.3% women in the Chamber.<sup>15</sup> The Senate also has significant female representation, though lower than the Chamber of Deputies. Some sources mention 37.4% and up to 53.8% in different years or reporting periods.<sup>16</sup> The Rwandan Constitution (2003, revised in 2015) sets aside at least 30% of seats in all decision-making bodies for women.<sup>17</sup> After the 1994 genocide, Rwanda had to rebuild its institutions. Over time, women's representation in Parliament rose from lower levels (~18-20%) to a majority.<sup>18</sup> By 2008 Rwanda became the first country to have a female majority in its legislature.<sup>19</sup> Rwanda's >60% share of women in the lower house makes it

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.weforum.org/press/2023/06/gender-equality-is-stalling-131-years-to-close-the-gap/?utm\\_source](https://www.weforum.org/press/2023/06/gender-equality-is-stalling-131-years-to-close-the-gap/?utm_source)

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<sup>14</sup> [https://africa.unwomen.org/en/rwanda-reaffirms-its-unwavering-commitment-to-gender-equality-with-638-per-cent-of-women-in-the-chamber-of-deputies?utm\\_source](https://africa.unwomen.org/en/rwanda-reaffirms-its-unwavering-commitment-to-gender-equality-with-638-per-cent-of-women-in-the-chamber-of-deputies?utm_source)

<sup>15</sup> [https://iknowpolitics.org/en/learn/knowledge-resources/share-women-selected-national-parliaments-lower-or-single-house-december?utm\\_source](https://iknowpolitics.org/en/learn/knowledge-resources/share-women-selected-national-parliaments-lower-or-single-house-december?utm_source)

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.parliament.gov.rw/rw/women-representation?utm\\_source](https://www.parliament.gov.rw/rw/women-representation?utm_source)

<sup>17</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliament\\_of\\_Rwanda?utm\\_source](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliament_of_Rwanda?utm_source)

[https://www.parliament.gov.rw/women-representation/?utm\\_source](https://www.parliament.gov.rw/women-representation/?utm_source)

<sup>18</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women\\_in\\_government?utm\\_source](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_government?utm_source)

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.gmo.gov.rw/news-detail/rwanda-maintains-its-top-position-in-female-representation-in-parliament?utm\\_source](https://www.gmo.gov.rw/news-detail/rwanda-maintains-its-top-position-in-female-representation-in-parliament?utm_source)





world-leader among national parliaments in terms of women's representation.<sup>20</sup> The world average of women in parliament is much lower (~25-30%) depending on source and inclusion of upper/lower houses.<sup>21</sup> Apart from legislature, women in Rwanda also occupy substantial ministerial roles. In recent cabinets, about 13 out of 32 ministerial positions are held by women.<sup>22</sup> Special representation: Rwanda's electoral system includes reserved seats for women, youth, people with disability etc. For example, out of the 80 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, 24 seats are reserved for women besides those elected in the general vote.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliament\\_of\\_Rwanda?utm\\_source](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliament_of_Rwanda?utm_source)



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