Management Strategies and Engineering Sciences 2024; 6(2):31-39

Women's Promotion to Managerial Positions in Iranian Organizations: A Systematic Review Approach

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Received: 2024-06-19 **Reviewed:** 2024-06-29 **Revised:** 2024-07-25 **Accepted:** 2024-08-28 **Published:** 2024-09-14

Abstract

This study aims to explore the key factors Impacting the promotion of Iranian women to managerial positions in Iranian organizations. By identifying barriers and facilitators across individual, social, cultural, and organizational domains, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges women face in ascending to leadership roles and offer practical solutions to address these issues. The study employed a systematic review approach, analyzing existing literature and qualitative data from various academic sources. The research focused on identifying relevant themes through conceptual and axial coding. Articles were selected based on their focus on women's promotion, gender roles, organizational culture, and leadership dynamics. A thematic analysis was conducted to extract key patterns related to women's career progression, with particular attention to cultural and organizational barriers in Iran. The study identified several significant barriers to women's promotion, including entrenched gender stereotypes, organizational cultures favoring male leadership, and the persistent glass ceiling effect. Work-family conflict also emerged as a critical impediment to women's career growth. However, social support systems such as mentorship and organizational changes promoting diversity were found to be facilitators of promotion. Personal traits such as perseverance and assertiveness also contributed to overcoming these barriers, though broader cultural and organizational support remains essential for sustained progress. While there has been some progress in the promotion of women to managerial positions in Iranian organizations, substantial barriers persist. Gender stereotypes, organizational culture, and work-family conflict continue to limit women's career opportunities. To foster women's promotion, organizations must implement supportive policies, mentorship programs, and cultural shifts that promote gender equality and recognize diverse leadership styles.

Keywords: Women's promotion, Iranian organizations, gender stereotypes, glass ceiling, organizational culture, work-family conflict, mentorship, leadership development.

How to cite this article:

Sadeghpour Dilmaghani M, Gholipour A, Roshandel Arbatani T, Mohammadesmaeili N.(2024). Women's Promotion to Managerial Positions in Iranian Organizations: A Systematic Review Approach. Management Strategies and Engineering Sciences, 6(2), 31-39.

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1. Introduction

Gender inequality in professional environments, particularly within managerial hierarchies, has been studied extensively. Research has often revealed that women face numerous challenges in ascending to leadership positions, including but not limited to gender stereotypes, organizational cultures, and a lack of support systems (Adamska et al., 2022). Such barriers are not exclusive to specific countries or regions but are rather a global phenomenon that affects women's career trajectories, albeit with varying degrees of intensity across different cultural and organizational contexts (Ali et al., 2019; Coetzee & Moosa, 2020). These challenges are compounded by the glass ceiling effect, a metaphorical barrier that prevents women from reaching upper-level management positions, as identified by Dauti (2020) and others.

A recurring theme in the literature is the influence of organizational culture and corporate norms on women's career progression. Organizational climates that foster gendered stereotypes and favor male-dominated leadership structures hinder women's advancement (Altintaş, 2010). Alemán (2014) argues that managerialism, often perceived as a discursive masculinity, reinforces these gendered structures, making it more difficult for women to break into leadership roles. The concept of the "old boys' network," as discussed by Silva et al. (2021), further underscores the exclusionary practices that keep women from accessing critical informal networks that are often crucial for career progression.

Mentoring and social support have been identified as essential mechanisms for women's promotion in managerial roles. Research by Arifeen (2010) highlights the significance of mentorship in facilitating women's career development, especially in regions where traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched, such as Pakistan. Similarly, Ali et al. (2019) emphasize the positive impact of corporate culture and social support systems in advancing women's careers. Their findings suggest that organizations that actively promote diversity and inclusion create environments where women can thrive and ascend to leadership roles more effectively.

Despite these supportive mechanisms, women's career advancement is often constrained by work-family conflict, which disproportionately affects women compared to men. Alok et al. (2021) explore the mediating role of managerial support in mitigating the negative effects of work-family conflict on women's professional self-efficacy. The study demonstrates that women who receive robust managerial support are more likely to maintain career persistence, even in the face of significant personal and professional challenges. Similarly, Bonet et al. (2020) highlight that gender differences in the speed of career advancement often stem from the societal expectation that women should prioritize family over career, a notion that continues to limit women's opportunities for promotion.

The role of gender stereotypes in shaping perceptions of leadership has been well-documented in the literature. Cuadrado et al. (2015) found that both male and female managers are often evaluated based on gender-typed expectations of leadership, with men being perceived as more suitable for managerial roles. This phenomenon, often referred to as the "think manager, think male" bias, has been confirmed by Berkery (2023), who explored how gendered stereotypes of leadership roles persist even among younger generations. Such stereotypes create additional hurdles for women who aspire to managerial positions, as they must continuously prove their competence in environments that are biased toward male leadership qualities.

The glass ceiling, as noted by Ganiyu et al. (2018), represents one of the most significant barriers to women's promotion in the workplace. This invisible barrier manifests in various ways, including limited access to leadership opportunities, gender bias in promotions, and the lack of female role models in upper management. Several studies, including those by Josimovska (2023) and Perales et al. (2021), have examined the persistence of the glass ceiling across different industries and regions. Their findings suggest that while some progress has been made in terms of gender equality, substantial disparities remain, particularly in traditionally male-dominated sectors.

The role of social capital in women's promotion is another critical area of research. Górska et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of both bonding and bridging social capital in facilitating women's journey to leadership positions. Bonding social capital refers to the close-knit relationships women develop within their own social groups, while bridging social capital involves building connections across different social groups, including those dominated by men. The authors argue that women who can effectively leverage both forms of social capital are more likely to succeed in their managerial aspirations.

In addition to social capital, leadership style and organizational fit play significant roles in determining women's success in managerial roles. Carrim (2018) examines the hybrid identity work of Indian women managers in South Africa, highlighting how women

navigate multiple identities and cultural expectations in corporate environments. This hybrid identity work allows women to balance traditional gender roles with the demands of leadership, although it often comes at the cost of increased stress and identity conflict. Similarly, Delgado-Piña et al. (2020) discuss how gender diversity within organizations, particularly in leadership roles, can lead to improved organizational productivity and performance.

Another critical factor influencing women's promotion is the presence of formal policies that support gender equality. Research by Sánchez and Gómez-Salcedo (2022) suggests that family-oriented policies, such as maternity leave and flexible working hours, can help bridge the gender gap in managerial positions. However, these policies must be accompanied by a shift in organizational culture that values and supports women's contributions to leadership. Without such cultural shifts, even the most progressive policies may fail to produce significant changes in gender dynamics at the managerial level.

The role of managerial assessment centers in perpetuating gender inequality has been explored by Kark et al. (2023), who argue that the criteria used to evaluate potential leaders often favor traditionally masculine traits. This perpetuates the cycle of gender inequality in leadership roles, as women are judged by standards that do not necessarily align with their leadership styles. To address this issue, organizations must rethink their evaluation criteria and develop more inclusive frameworks that recognize and reward diverse leadership styles.

The intersection of gender and organizational power is another area of concern. Stainback and Kwon (2011) found that female leaders often hold less organizational power than their male counterparts, even when they occupy similar positions. This imbalance of power limits women's ability to effect change within their organizations and reinforces the gendered hierarchy that exists in many workplaces. To combat this, there must be a concerted effort to not only promote women to leadership positions but also to ensure they are given the authority and resources necessary to succeed.

The persistence of gender-based discrimination in managerial roles is further highlighted by the work of Xie and Zhu (2016), who examine the challenges faced by women in leadership positions in China. Their study reveals that despite significant economic and social advancements, women in China continue to face barriers to career progression, including gender stereotypes and a lack of support from male colleagues. This is consistent with findings from other studies in different regions, including Iran (Mohajeri & Mousavi, 2017) and the Middle East (Fakih & Ghazalian, 2015), where cultural norms and traditional gender roles continue to hinder women's access to leadership positions.

In conclusion, the literature on women's promotion to managerial positions paints a complex picture of progress and persistent challenges. While there have been significant strides toward gender equality in the workplace, particularly in terms of policy development and organizational support, numerous barriers remain. Gender stereotypes, organizational cultures, and the glass ceiling continue to impede women's promotion, despite the growing body of research advocating for change. Moving forward, organizations must adopt a more holistic approach to gender equality, one that not only promotes women to leadership positions but also provides them with the support and resources they need to succeed. This study examines the factors impacting the promotion of Iranian women to managerial roles, drawing from existing literature and integrating findings from a diverse set of studies.

Methodology

In this study, we deployed a systematic review approach to identify the impacting factors on women's promotion to provide a predictive model of the promotion of women to managerial positions in Iranian organizations, using machine learning. A systematic review is a secondary, descriptive type of research that follows a structured, explicit methodology for identifying, selecting, and critically evaluating relevant studies. It allows for the collection and analysis of research data in a way that avoids bias and enhances the reliability of the findings. Below are the details of the study design, data collection tools, and data analysis:

The research design involved a comprehensive systematic review of prior studies on the promotion of women in managerial roles. The participants in this context are the past studies and articles that discuss the promotion of women in managerial positions. The systematic review was chosen due to its credibility as one of the most reliable forms of scientific reviews, ranking highest among various research review types in terms of validity.

The population of studies included in this systematic review consisted of peer-reviewed research articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters published in reputable international journals. Only English-language publications were included to ensure content quality, and there was no restriction on publication date.

To gather relevant studies, we used two major academic databases—Scopus and Web of Science—due to their comprehensive coverage of management sciences and their academic rigor. These databases provide access to a wide range of peer-reviewed studies, ensuring the thorough collection of data.

We designed our search strategy to identify articles relevant to women's promotion to managerial roles. To do so, we defined a set of keywords and synonymous terms, which were used to search the selected databases. The search process was conducted in five stages: first, identifying the relevant population of studies; second, selecting the databases for the search; third, defining the search terms; fourth, executing the search across the databases; and fifth, screening the articles based on predetermined criteria.

We retrieved 1,716 articles through our keyword searches. In the first screening phase, 1,432 articles that were irrelevant to the study topic (e.g., from unrelated fields such as medicine or agriculture) were removed. The remaining 284 articles underwent a more detailed review of abstracts and full texts. Articles were further filtered in three steps to focus on those dealing specifically with both women's promotion and managerial roles. Finally, 109 articles were selected for inclusion in this study.

The data analysis for this study involved qualitative content analysis of the selected studies. This approach allowed us to extract both descriptive data (such as publication year, authors, journal names, and research methodologies) and content-related data (such as research questions, goals, and key findings). The content of the articles was critically analyzed to understand the patterns and themes related to women's promotion in managerial positions.

We employed thematic analysis to identify and categorize the key themes that emerged from the selected studies. This involved familiarizing ourselves with the data through repeated readings, generating initial codes, and then grouping these codes into potential themes. Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they were coherent and relevant to the research questions. After this, a final thematic map was developed to represent the relationships between the themes, and the findings were summarized to provide a comprehensive overview of the research landscape.

The extracted data and themes were then analyzed in relation to the research objectives, allowing us to synthesize the findings and provide insight into the factors impacting women's promotion in Iranian organizations. This systematic approach ensured that the analysis was objective, reliable, and relevant to the research topic.

Findings and Results

After identifying and finalizing the axial codes from the selected articles, a detailed analysis of these codes was conducted. The themes were extracted into conceptual categories and subcategories, as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Axial Coding and Conceptual Categorization of Women's Advancement Barriers and Enablers

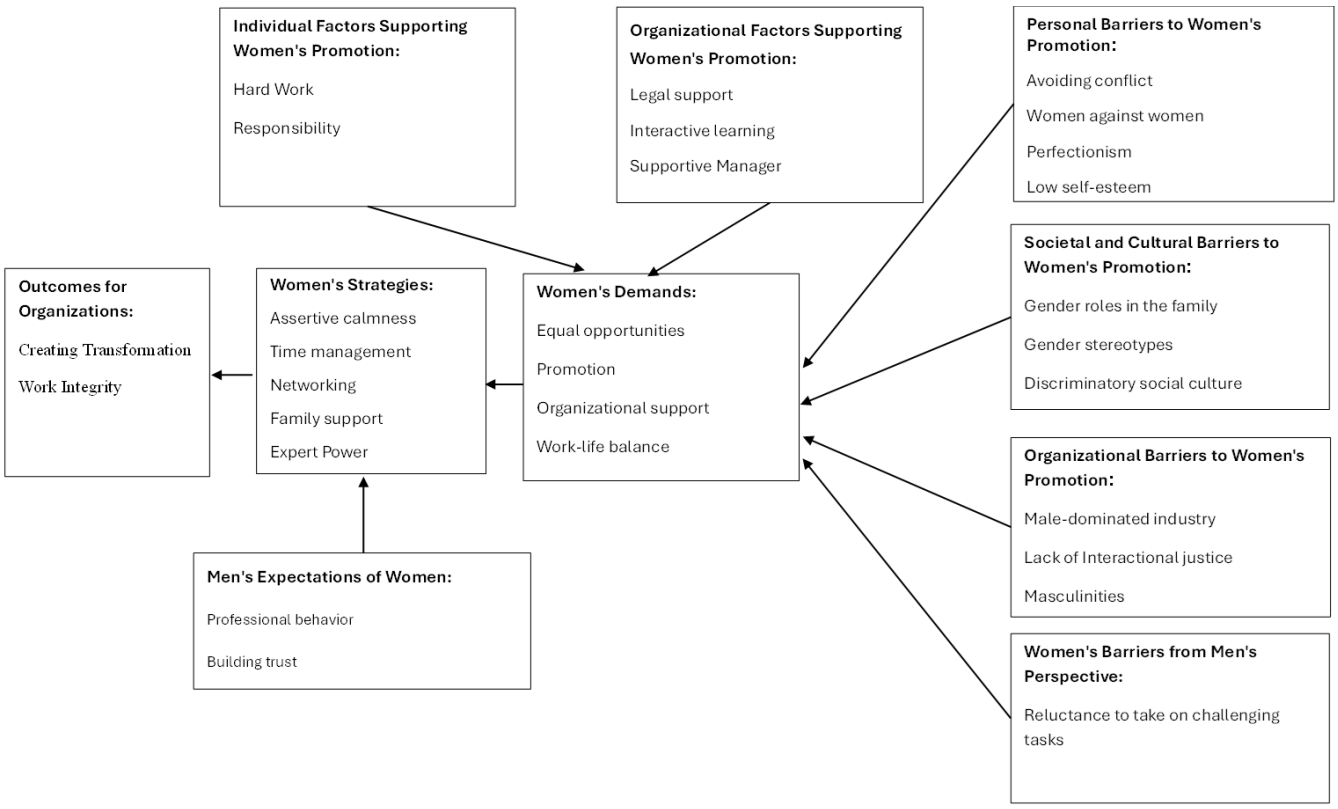
onceptual Coding	Conceptual Categories	Axial Coding
Passive behavior	Conflict avoidance	Barriers to women's growth from women's perspective
Weak networking skills	Women against women	
	Female jealousy	
Competition among women		
Perfectionism	Idealism	
Despair	Lack of hope for promotion	
Idealism		
Risk aversion	Low self-confidence	
Failure to express oneself	Low self-belief	
Low assertiveness	Lack of courage	
Risk aversion		
Hard work	Perseverance	Individual growth platforms
Perseverance	Endurance and persistence	
Extra effort	Diligence	
Persistence		
Organizational skills	Law-abiding behavior	
Law compliance	Personal responsibility	
Conscientiousness		
Responsibility		
Financial responsibility		
Legal responsibility		
Attention to detail		

Trustworthiness		
Cautious behavior	Calmness with authority	Women's strategies
Legitimizing behavior	Conservatism	
Masculinity	Normative adaptation	
Preserving boundaries	Conservative behavior	
Consulting decision-making	Time management	
Time management		
Professional communication	Networking	
Professionalism	Informal virtual communications	
Work prioritization	Being single	
Understanding spouse	Family support	
Family cooperation		
Spousal support		
Utilizing expertise	Expertise power	
Transformation		
Outcome-driven behavior	Transformation	Outcomes and impacts of women's growth
Law-abiding behavior	Work integrity	
Financial integrity	Work ethics	
Ethical integrity		
Dual roles of women	Gender roles in the family	Social and cultural barriers to women's growth
Family restrictions	Family roles	
Family responsibilities	Good father/mother ideal	
Time limitations	Work-family conflict	
Gender stereotypes	Gender-based expectations	
Gender-based discrimination	Gender-based culture	
Discriminatory culture	Communication limitations	
Cultural restrictions	Customary barriers	
Misconceptions in cultural attitudes	Cultural frameworks	
Tribal culture	Political and cultural inequality	
Maternal facilities	Legal support	Organizational growth platforms for women
Respecting legal minimums	Women's participation	
Legal support	Organizational support	
Respect for women		
Interactive learning	Learning from managers	
Learning from colleagues	Formal learning	
360-degree learning	Family-oriented training	
Supportive managers	Support from higher-ups	
Senior management support	Opportunities for visibility	
Succession planning	Sexual harassment	Organizational barriers to women's growth
Failure to address harassment	Managerial gender perspective	
Gender-based promotion	Gender expediency	
Gender-based quota	Glass ceiling	
Closed environment	Male-dominated industry	
Masculine thinking	Harsh industry	
Lack of gender sensitivity	Male-dominated work culture	
Sexist beliefs	Gender bias in segmentation	
Work-family conflict	Traditional managerial beliefs	
Traditional managers	Rejection of women in leadership	
Focused communication	Inequity in interactions	
Lack of connection to power lobbies	Career plateau	
Women’s lack of access to informal spaces	Centralized decision-making	
Lack of power distribution	Symbolic support	
Superficial support	Unequal support	
Token participation	Cynicism towards women's demands	
Mansplaining	Disbelief in women’s identity	
Underestimation of women	Disbelief in women’s capabilities	
Misogyny	Women’s sensitivity	Men’s view of women’s barriers to growth
Gossip and drama	Women's skepticism of men	
Laziness in women	Reluctance to engage in challenging tasks	
Passive attitude	Lack of ambition	
Low confidence	Low self-esteem	

Weak self-belief	Failure to express oneself
Low assertiveness	Lack of courage
Seeking support	Victimhood in women
Conflicting demands	Men's expectations of women
Professionalism	Assertive behavior
Professional conduct	Strengthening communication skills
Assertive decision-making	Observing organizational norms
Rationality	Emotional management

This table provides an overview of the major conceptual categories derived from the thematic analysis. These categories reflect the various personal, cultural, and organizational barriers faced by women in their pursuit of managerial positions. Additionally, the strategies that women employ, the outcomes of their professional growth, and the contrasting perspectives of men about women's promotion in organizations are clearly delineated.

The final model of factors influencing the promotion of women, derived from the analysis of themes and concepts extracted from the systematic review:



Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study revealed several key factors impacting the promotion of Iranian women to managerial positions in organizations. The thematic analysis identified significant barriers and facilitators across individual, social, cultural, and organizational domains. A predominant theme was the persistence of deeply entrenched gender stereotypes and cultural expectations, which continue to shape both the opportunities and limitations faced by women in leadership roles. These findings align with much of the existing literature on women's promotion, reinforcing the notion that despite progress, significant obstacles remain.

One of the most significant barriers identified in this study is the issue of gender stereotypes and the "think manager, think male" bias. Similar to the findings of Cuadrado et al. (2015), the results demonstrated that Iranian women in managerial positions are often viewed through the lens of traditional gender roles, which associate leadership with masculinity. This stereotype negatively impacts women's ability to ascend to higher-level managerial roles, as they are frequently perceived as less competent or assertive compared to their male counterparts. Berkery (2023) also highlighted how these biases persist even among younger generations, emphasizing the deep-rooted nature of these stereotypes.

The study also found that organizational culture plays a pivotal role in either hindering or facilitating women's promotion. Many organizations in Iran, particularly in male-dominated industries, continue to operate under a masculine work culture, which excludes women from informal networks and key decision-making processes. This is consistent with the work of Bonet et al. (2020), who found that informal networking opportunities, often dominated by men, are crucial for career advancement. Similarly, Alemán (2014) argues that the managerialism in universities, a form of discursive masculinity, perpetuates male-dominated organizational structures, limiting women's access to leadership roles. These findings reinforce the idea that unless organizational cultures evolve to become more inclusive, women will continue to face significant barriers to promotion.

Social support emerged as a key facilitator of women's promotion, aligning with the work of Ali et al. (2019), who found that supportive corporate cultures and mentorship programs significantly enhance women's opportunities for promotion. The findings from this study suggest that Iranian women who receive support from both peers and supervisors are better able to navigate the challenges of work-family conflict and overcome organizational barriers. This is further supported by Arifeen (2010), who demonstrated the importance of mentoring for career development in Pakistani women. The parallels between these findings suggest that mentoring and social support are universal factors in fostering women's career success, particularly in cultures where traditional gender roles are dominant.

Another critical finding relates to the role of work-family conflict in impeding women's promotion. Similar to Alok et al. (2021), this study found that many Iranian women struggle to balance family responsibilities with the demands of a managerial career. This conflict is exacerbated by the lack of organizational policies that support work-life balance, such as flexible working hours or parental leave. As Bonet et al. (2020) highlighted, women are often expected to prioritize family over career, which limits their opportunities for promotion and career growth. The study's findings align with these conclusions, suggesting that Iranian organizations need to implement more family-friendly policies to retain talented women in leadership roles.

Furthermore, the study identified individual traits such as perseverance, hard work, and assertiveness as essential for overcoming the barriers to promotion. These traits, while beneficial, are often insufficient on their own without broader organizational and cultural support. The findings are consistent with the research of Carrim (2018), who demonstrated that hybrid identity work, where women blend traditional gender roles with leadership traits, is often necessary for success in corporate South Africa. Similarly, Górska et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of social capital in enabling women to navigate complex organizational landscapes and advance in their careers.

Cultural barriers, particularly gendered expectations regarding family roles and societal perceptions of women's leadership capabilities, were also prominent in the findings. This aligns with the research of Fakih and Ghazalian (2015), who noted that cultural norms in the Middle East often restrict women's participation in the labor force and limit their career opportunities. The study's findings also echo the conclusions of Mohajeri and Mousavi (2017), who explored the challenges Iranian women face in ascending to senior administrative positions in higher education. Both studies highlight the persistence of traditional gender roles as a significant barrier to women's promotion in Iran and similar cultural contexts.

Finally, the study highlights the existence of the glass ceiling in Iranian organizations, a barrier that remains difficult to break despite incremental progress. This finding

is consistent with the work of Dauti (2020), who emphasized the persistence of the glass ceiling across different industries and countries. The study also resonates with Perales et al. (2021), who examined the impact of the glass ceiling in Spain and found that women often struggle to advance beyond mid-level management due to deeply ingrained gender biases and organizational structures that favor men.

While this study provides valuable insights into the factors impacting the promotion of Iranian women to managerial positions, several limitations should be noted. First, the study relied primarily on qualitative data, which, while rich in detail, may not be generalizable to all organizational contexts in Iran. Future research could benefit from incorporating quantitative methods, such as surveys or statistical analyses, to complement the qualitative findings and provide a broader understanding of the issue.

Second, the study focused exclusively on Iranian organizations, limiting the applicability of the findings to other cultural contexts. While the results align with findings from other regions, such as Pakistan (Arifeen, 2010) and South Africa (Carrim, 2018), the specific cultural and organizational dynamics in Iran may not be fully representative of the broader Middle Eastern or global context. Comparative studies that examine women's promotion across different countries or regions could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers and facilitators at play.

Third, the study did not explore the intersectionality of gender with other factors such as age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. As highlighted by Górska et al. (2021), social capital and career advancement are often influenced by multiple intersecting identities. Future research could explore how these intersecting factors impact women's career trajectories, particularly in multicultural or multiethnic organizational contexts.

Future research could explore the role of intersectionality in women's promotion, particularly in contexts where multiple forms of discrimination may overlap. Examining how factors such as ethnicity, class, and age interact with gender to shape women's career experiences could provide a more nuanced understanding of the barriers to leadership. This approach would align with the work of Kark et al. (2023), who argue that traditional managerial assessment frameworks often fail to account for the diversity of experiences among women leaders.

Additionally, future studies could focus on the impact of organizational policies aimed at promoting gender equality, such as gender quotas or family-friendly policies. Research by Sánchez and Gómez-Salcedo (2022) suggests that such policies can help bridge the gender gap in managerial positions, but their effectiveness depends on organizational commitment to change. Comparative studies that assess the impact of these policies across different sectors or regions could provide valuable insights into their long-term efficacy.

Finally, research could examine the role of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, in predicting and addressing gender disparities in the workplace. As Bonet et al. (2020) suggest, technological advancements offer new opportunities for assessing organizational diversity and equity. Studies that explore how AI can be used to monitor and promote gender equality in managerial roles could offer innovative solutions to persistent gender imbalances.

To address the barriers identified in this study, organizations should consider implementing several practical measures. First, mentorship and sponsorship programs should be established to provide women with the guidance and support they need to navigate the challenges of career advancement. As Ali et al. (2019) and Arifeen (2010) highlighted, such programs are critical for helping women build the social capital necessary for leadership roles.

Second, organizations must actively work to change organizational culture by promoting diversity and inclusion at all levels. This includes creating family-friendly policies, such as flexible working hours, parental leave, and childcare support, which would help mitigate the work-family conflict that disproportionately affects women. The findings from Alok et al. (2021) and Bonet et al. (2020) underscore the importance of these policies in enabling women to balance career and family responsibilities.

Third, organizations should rethink their leadership evaluation criteria to ensure that they are not perpetuating gender stereotypes or favoring traditionally masculine traits. As Kark et al. (2023) argued, many managerial assessment frameworks fail to recognize diverse leadership styles, which can disadvantage women. By developing more inclusive evaluation processes, organizations can promote a broader range of leadership competencies and create a more equitable environment for women.

In conclusion, the promotion of women to managerial positions in Iranian organizations remains a complex and multifaceted issue. While progress has been made in recent years, significant barriers persist, including gender stereotypes, organizational cultures, and work-family conflict. By addressing these challenges through policy changes, cultural shifts, and increased support for women

leaders, organizations can foster a more inclusive environment that enables women to thrive in leadership roles.

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