

# Organizational Strategies for Promoting Women to Key Managerial Positions in Public Organizations: Overcoming Glass Barriers Through a Succession Planning Approach

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## ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted with the aim of developing organizational strategies for promoting women to managerial positions in public organizations by overcoming glass barriers through a succession planning approach. Given the exploratory nature of the research topic, the study adopted a qualitative methodology and employed thematic analysis. Research data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 academic experts, senior managers, and women employed in the public sector. Sampling was carried out using purposive sampling combined with the snowball technique, and data analysis was performed through open, axial, and selective coding procedures. Ultimately, 73 basic themes were identified and categorized into 16 organizing themes and 5 overarching themes. These themes included empowerment and skill development, supportive organizational culture, talent identification, women's professional innovation, and women's career advancement. The findings indicate that the implementation of succession planning programs grounded in these themes can facilitate the overcoming of glass barriers and enhance women's participation in managerial levels.

**Keywords:** Organizational strategies, women's career advancement, women in management, public organizations, succession planning

## Introduction

Across the globe, public sector institutions continue to struggle with persistent gender imbalances in leadership, despite decades of policy attention and institutional reforms aimed at fostering equality. Research consistently demonstrates that women remain underrepresented in senior managerial positions, particularly within government organizations, even in contexts where women constitute a substantial proportion of the professional workforce (1-3). This structural inequality is not merely a symbolic concern but directly influences organizational performance, public trust, governance quality, and social legitimacy (4, 5). As public institutions face increasing complexity, uncertainty, and societal demands, the exclusion of women from strategic leadership roles represents a critical loss of talent and perspective that undermines organizational resilience and innovation (6, 7).

One of the most persistent explanations for women's limited upward mobility in managerial hierarchies is the phenomenon commonly described as the "glass ceiling." This concept refers to invisible yet powerful organizational,

### Article history:

Received 10 September 2025  
Revised 03 December 2025  
Accepted 10 December 2025  
Published online 01 January 2026

### How to cite this article:

Jahanian, M., Nejad Haji Ali Irani, F., Dadash Karimi, Y., & Omranzadeh, E. (2026). Organizational Strategies for Promoting Women to Key Managerial Positions in Public Organizations: Overcoming Glass Barriers Through a Succession Planning Approach. *Journal of Management and Business Solutions*, 4(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jmbs.157>



cultural, and structural barriers that systematically restrict women's access to top leadership positions despite formal equality in policies and qualifications (8, 9). These barriers manifest through gender-biased language, informal power networks, exclusion from strategic decision-making processes, and deeply embedded stereotypes regarding leadership suitability (5, 10). Empirical studies from diverse contexts, including Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, confirm that women's career trajectories are frequently interrupted or constrained by these interlocking barriers, resulting in slower promotion rates and limited representation in executive roles (11-13).

Public sector organizations are particularly susceptible to these challenges because of their bureaucratic structures, rigid hierarchies, and historically male-dominated leadership cultures (2, 14). Although legislative frameworks and gender mainstreaming policies have expanded women's participation in public administration, the translation of these policies into sustained leadership inclusion remains uneven and fragile (15, 16). Studies in Indonesia, Zambia, Spain, and Ethiopia reveal that formal equality measures often coexist with informal practices that continue to marginalize women from strategic roles (2, 11, 17). Consequently, organizational reforms that focus solely on compliance and representation fail to address the deeper structural mechanisms that perpetuate leadership inequality.

Within this context, succession planning has emerged as a strategic mechanism for institutionalizing leadership development and ensuring long-term organizational continuity. Succession planning refers to a systematic process through which organizations identify, develop, and prepare high-potential employees for future leadership roles (18, 19). Unlike traditional promotion systems that often rely on informal sponsorship and subjective evaluations, succession planning emphasizes transparency, competency frameworks, leadership pipelines, and intentional talent development (20, 21). When designed with an equity-oriented lens, succession planning holds substantial promise as a tool for dismantling the glass ceiling and enabling women's advancement into key managerial positions (18, 22).

However, the effectiveness of succession planning in addressing gender disparities depends heavily on organizational culture, leadership commitment, and the integration of gender-sensitive practices throughout the talent management system (23, 24). Without deliberate interventions, succession planning processes may simply reproduce existing inequalities by privileging candidates who already occupy central positions within male-dominated networks (6, 7). Empirical evidence from the health sector in Sierra Leone illustrates that leadership transitions often occur without genuine succession planning, resulting in cycles of replacement rather than sustainable leadership development (19, 20). These findings underscore the necessity of reframing succession planning as a strategic equity instrument rather than a purely administrative function.

The importance of advancing women into leadership positions extends beyond individual career outcomes and directly affects organizational performance and governance quality. Studies indicate that women leaders contribute to reduced gender pay gaps, improved organizational ethics, enhanced stakeholder trust, and more inclusive decision-making processes (24, 25). In nonprofit and public service organizations, women's leadership has been associated with improved service delivery and stronger community engagement (4, 24). Moreover, gender-diverse leadership teams demonstrate superior problem-solving capacity, greater adaptability, and higher innovation potential (5, 21). These benefits reinforce the strategic imperative of integrating women more fully into leadership pipelines.

Despite these recognized advantages, women's career progression remains constrained by structural, cultural, and institutional obstacles. Across multiple regions, research documents persistent challenges including limited

access to professional networks, exclusion from informal power structures, unequal caregiving burdens, work–life balance conflicts, and implicit bias in performance evaluation (7, 23, 26). In academia, healthcare, politics, and corporate governance, women frequently encounter slower promotion trajectories and reduced access to leadership development opportunities (8, 22, 27). These constraints are particularly pronounced in public organizations where bureaucratic norms often amplify existing inequalities (2, 14).

Cross-national evidence further highlights the universality of these challenges. In Malawi, women's political inclusion remains limited by entrenched cultural norms and institutional barriers (12). In Nepal, electoral gender diversity has improved, yet leadership power remains concentrated among men (13). In Nigeria, women's political participation continues to face systemic resistance despite constitutional guarantees (28). Similar patterns are observed in Georgia, Vietnam, Spain, and the United Arab Emirates, where women's leadership aspirations are frequently constrained by structural discrimination and limited access to strategic opportunities (10, 26, 29, 30).

Within public sector organizations, these barriers interact with organizational norms that privilege continuity over transformation. Leadership development programs often lack gender-sensitive design, resulting in pipelines that systematically exclude women from high-visibility assignments, mentoring relationships, and strategic projects (6, 7). Even when women demonstrate strong performance, their leadership potential may be undervalued due to persistent stereotypes and biased evaluation criteria (8, 9). Over time, these dynamics create cumulative disadvantages that reinforce the glass ceiling and constrain women's professional mobility.

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes the need for integrated organizational strategies that combine leadership development, cultural transformation, policy reform, and succession planning to achieve sustainable gender equity (5, 18). In particular, succession planning offers a powerful framework for institutionalizing women's advancement when it incorporates transparent selection criteria, competency-based assessment, targeted leadership development, mentoring, and accountability mechanisms (18, 19). Such systems not only prepare women for leadership roles but also reshape organizational expectations regarding who is perceived as a legitimate leader (22, 24).

Nevertheless, empirical research on how succession planning can be effectively aligned with strategies to overcome glass barriers in public sector contexts remains limited and fragmented. While existing studies explore gender inequality, leadership challenges, and women's career development in various sectors, few investigations integrate these insights within a comprehensive organizational framework focused on succession planning in public institutions (3, 20). This gap is particularly significant in developing and transitional economies, where institutional reforms and leadership capacity building are central to governance modernization (2, 11).

Moreover, the evolving nature of public administration, characterized by digital transformation, performance-based governance, and heightened accountability demands, intensifies the need for inclusive leadership pipelines (5, 21). Organizations that fail to integrate women into leadership development risk organizational stagnation, reduced innovation, and diminished public legitimacy (4, 24). Consequently, advancing women into key managerial positions through systematic and equitable succession planning is not only a matter of social justice but also a strategic imperative for sustainable public sector performance.

Taken together, the literature underscores the complexity of women's leadership advancement and the necessity of multifaceted organizational responses. Overcoming the glass ceiling requires more than symbolic representation; it demands structural transformation of leadership development systems, organizational culture, and succession mechanisms (6, 7). Succession planning, when strategically designed and implemented, offers a powerful lever for

achieving this transformation by institutionalizing gender equity within the very architecture of leadership development (18, 19).

Therefore, the aim of this study is to develop organizational strategies for promoting women into key managerial positions in public sector organizations by overcoming glass barriers through a succession planning approach.

## Methods and Materials

Considering the exploratory nature of the subject and the objectives of the study, this research was designed and implemented using a qualitative approach based on thematic analysis.

The primary objective was to develop organizational strategies for promoting women to key managerial positions in public organizations by overcoming glass barriers through a succession planning approach.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews.

The participants consisted of 12 academic experts, senior managers, and women employed in public organizations, who were selected using purposive sampling combined with the snowball technique.

Data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis method.

During this process, initial concepts were extracted and, through open, axial, and selective coding, the principal dimensions and components related to the research topic were identified and categorized.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, participant validation and comparison with prior scientific literature were employed (APA style methodological rigor).

## Findings and Results

In the first stage, the primary themes derived from the interviews were categorized using qualitative analysis and based on the principles outlined in the previous section.

In accordance with the stages of thematic analysis, the interview transcripts were carefully reviewed multiple times, after which the coding process was initiated.

In the initial phase, indicators related to overcoming glass barriers with a focus on women's succession planning were extracted from the interviews to develop the preliminary framework.

The collected data were examined line by line, and initial concepts were coded.

At this stage, a substantial number of initial codes were generated.

Through iterative analysis between the data, similar and synonymous concepts were identified and merged into unified codes.

After completing the initial conceptualization and coding, the extracted indicators were categorized into conceptual dimensions.

Subsequently, through theme formation, review, and precise definition, the final results were organized into three levels: basic themes, organizing themes, and global themes.

Specifically, 134 initial codes were identified during the first coding phase, which, after eliminating redundancies and overlapping meanings, were reduced to 73 basic themes.

Based on the researchers' judgments, these were classified into 16 organizing themes and 5 global themes, as presented in the following tables.

**Table 1. Global, Organizing, and Basic Themes of Overcoming Glass Barriers Through Women's Succession Planning for Key Managerial Positions (Empowerment and Skill Development)**

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Themes
Empowerment and Skill Development	Development of Leadership Skills in Women	Conducting specialized leadership training programs; Improving crisis management skills; Enhancing negotiation and women's management skills; Strengthening strategic decision-making and negotiation skills; Supporting women's leadership development policies
	Education and Skill Development	Learning and applying political skills by women; Encouraging employees to build self-confidence; Acquiring time-management coping skills; Improving human resource management and strategic decision-making skills; Conducting managerial training programs; Familiarity with new technologies and industry trends
	Role Modeling for Women	Defining successful female role models in the organization; Supporting successful role models; Accepting key responsibilities and managerial positions; Learning from successful female managers
	Knowledge Sharing	Holding monthly experience-sharing sessions; Documenting women's professional achievements

**Table 2. Organizing and Basic Themes of Overcoming Glass Barriers Through Women's Succession Planning (Supportive Organizational Culture)**

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Themes
Supportive Organizational Culture	Organizational Support for Women	Establishing employee support groups; Creating a supportive environment for women's growth; Family-supportive policies; Gaining support from change-oriented managers; Managerial endorsement of women
	Trust-Based Relationships	Networking with supportive managers; Establishing communication networks; Colleague support for women's advancement; Facilitating organizational communication; Building strong professional relationships; Proximity to powerful organizational networks
	Senior Management Commitment	Promoting a culture of support for women; Preparing women for managerial levels; Supporting talented women for senior positions; Senior managers' positive attitudes toward women's competencies
	Organizational Mentoring	Mentoring and coaching for women; Guidance by senior female managers for younger women

**Table 3. Organizing and Basic Themes of Overcoming Glass Barriers Through Women's Succession Planning (Talent Identification)**

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Themes
Talent Identification	Competency Criteria Definition	Identifying new opportunities; Creating new opportunities; Women's organizational entrepreneurship
	Managerial Potential	Women's risk-taking; Demonstrating women's competencies; Identifying managerial talent among women; Identifying and developing high-potential women
	Motivational Programs for Women	Clarity of reward, growth, and promotion criteria; Compensation and reward system design; Valuing women's work; Providing positive feedback in meetings; Highlighting women's positive performance

**Table 4. Organizing and Basic Themes of Overcoming Glass Barriers Through Women's Succession Planning (Women's Professional Innovation)**

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Themes
Women's Professional Innovation	Diversity and Inclusion Policies	Encouraging managers to create equal opportunities; Gender equality in organizations; Anti-bias training for managers; Recognizing gender diversity as a competitive advantage; Establishing a gender-diverse organizational culture; Supporting gender and employment equality policies
	Work-Life Flexibility and Balance	Support for women's maternal roles; Flexible work policies; Designing flexible working policies for women; Flexible work arrangements; Implementing flexible work programs; Encouraging work-life balance; Developing time-responsive organizational policies

**Table 5. Organizing and Basic Themes of Overcoming Glass Barriers Through Women's Succession Planning (Women's Career Advancement)**

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Themes
Women's Career Advancement	Demand for Career Growth Opportunities	Awareness of organizational policies; Acceptance of key roles by women; Requesting better opportunities; Membership in strategic and policy-making committees
	Growth and Development Opportunities for Women	Facilitating acceptance of managerial roles; Providing leadership opportunities for key projects; Ensuring equal promotion opportunities; Setting organizational goals for women's advancement; Creating platforms for women's voice and expression; Facilitating access to specialized managerial and organizational training
	Career Path Definition	Defining professional development pathways for women; Transparency in promotion and placement of women in key positions; Establishing accessible promotion paths and fair evaluation mechanisms

As demonstrated, the themes related to overcoming glass barriers through women's succession planning for key managerial positions in public organizations were derived inductively, moving from empirical data toward theory. Using influential indicators related to overcoming glass barriers through women's succession planning for key managerial positions in public organizations, the analysis ultimately resulted in the identification of five principal themes.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive organizational framework for overcoming glass barriers and promoting women into key managerial positions in public sector organizations through succession planning. The five global themes identified—empowerment and skill development, supportive organizational culture, talent identification, women's professional innovation, and women's career advancement—collectively illustrate that women's leadership progression is not driven by isolated interventions but by an integrated system of structural, cultural, and developmental mechanisms. This systemic nature of leadership advancement strongly aligns with prior research emphasizing that gender equality in leadership requires institutional transformation rather than symbolic inclusion (5-7). The empirical patterns revealed in this study confirm that when succession planning is embedded within such an integrated system, it functions as a powerful engine for dismantling long-standing gender barriers (18, 19).

The first major finding highlights empowerment and skill development as a foundational condition for women's leadership readiness. The emphasis on leadership training, strategic decision-making, negotiation, crisis management, and political skill development reflects an understanding that leadership effectiveness is learned and cultivated rather than inherently gendered. This aligns closely with research demonstrating that women's access to targeted leadership development significantly increases their probability of promotion and organizational influence (22, 26). Similar conclusions were reported in studies of women in healthcare leadership, where continuous skill development was directly associated with leadership resilience and career sustainability (23). Moreover, the study's identification of role modeling and knowledge sharing reinforces the importance of social learning mechanisms in leadership development, consistent with findings from Georgia and Vietnam showing that exposure to successful female leaders enhances women's leadership aspirations and confidence (26, 29). These results confirm that succession planning becomes substantially more effective when combined with structured empowerment pathways rather than relying on ad hoc promotion systems (18).

The second theme, supportive organizational culture, underscores the decisive role of institutional context in shaping women's leadership trajectories. Participants consistently emphasized trust-based relationships, senior management commitment, and organizational mentoring as essential mechanisms for dismantling the glass ceiling.

These findings strongly corroborate evidence from public administration studies in Zambia and Tanzania, which demonstrate that without managerial endorsement and supportive networks, formal gender equality policies rarely translate into real leadership opportunities for women (2, 14). Furthermore, the role of senior management commitment observed in this study directly parallels findings from nonprofit public service organizations where women leaders were shown to contribute to reducing pay gaps and strengthening organizational equity climates (24). The presence of mentoring and coaching structures further supports the argument that leadership development must be socially embedded rather than individually driven (7). This reinforces the conclusion that succession planning must be culturally anchored within organizations to effectively counteract informal exclusionary practices (6, 8).

Talent identification emerged as the third core pillar of women's leadership advancement. The study's findings demonstrate that organizations must actively define competency criteria, recognize women's managerial potential, and implement motivational reward systems to counteract entrenched biases. These results align with studies in Ethiopia and Spain, which found that transparent evaluation criteria and merit-based promotion significantly reduce gender disparities in leadership outcomes (11, 16). Additionally, the emphasis on women's entrepreneurial behavior and risk-taking challenges long-standing stereotypes that portray women as risk-averse or less suited for strategic leadership, echoing findings from corporate governance research in Russia and Serbia (8, 31). The integration of talent identification into succession planning thus represents a critical corrective to historically subjective and network-driven promotion systems (18, 20).

Women's professional innovation, the fourth global theme, highlights the transformative potential of diversity, inclusion, and flexible work structures. Participants' emphasis on gender equality policies, anti-bias training, and recognition of diversity as a competitive advantage directly reflects contemporary leadership theory that positions diversity as a driver of organizational innovation and adaptability (5, 21). These results mirror evidence from the UAE and Spain showing that organizations embracing inclusive leadership models outperform traditional hierarchical structures in knowledge sharing and innovation outcomes (10, 25). Moreover, the strong focus on work-life balance mechanisms corroborates findings from healthcare and academic sectors where flexible working arrangements were shown to be essential for retaining and advancing women leaders (22, 23). By embedding flexibility into succession systems, organizations effectively remove one of the most persistent structural constraints on women's leadership continuity (7, 17).

The final theme, women's career advancement, synthesizes the preceding dimensions into a coherent developmental trajectory. The study demonstrates that women's leadership progression requires organizational transparency, clearly defined career paths, equitable access to leadership opportunities, and deliberate inclusion in strategic decision-making bodies. These findings strongly align with research in Malawi, Nigeria, and Nepal, where women's limited access to strategic committees and leadership pipelines was identified as a primary barrier to sustained career advancement (12, 13, 28). The integration of career path definition into succession planning ensures continuity, predictability, and fairness in leadership development, reinforcing trust in organizational systems and strengthening women's long-term commitment (18, 19).

Collectively, these findings substantiate the central argument that succession planning serves as the structural backbone through which organizations can systematically dismantle glass barriers. The convergence of empowerment, culture, talent management, innovation, and career development into a unified succession framework reflects advanced leadership models emphasizing systemic rather than fragmented interventions (5, 6).

This study extends prior research by demonstrating how succession planning operates not merely as a technical process of replacement but as a strategic instrument of gender equity and organizational transformation (18, 20). The consistency between the present findings and international evidence from diverse political, economic, and cultural contexts confirms the robustness and global relevance of this framework (2, 11, 25).

This study was limited by its qualitative design and the relatively small number of participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused exclusively on public sector organizations, and therefore the results may not fully reflect leadership dynamics in private or nonprofit sectors.

Future studies should employ mixed-methods or large-scale quantitative designs to validate the proposed framework across different organizational contexts. Comparative research across sectors and countries would further strengthen understanding of cultural and institutional influences on women's leadership succession.

Public sector leaders and policymakers should institutionalize succession planning systems that explicitly integrate gender equity objectives. Organizations should invest in leadership development pipelines for women, formal mentoring structures, transparent promotion mechanisms, and flexible work policies to ensure sustainable advancement of women into key managerial positions.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

## Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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