



# **THE PERCEPTION OF GLASS CEILING OF IRANIAN FEMALE EMPLOYEES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

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## **ETHICAL DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis and that I have conducted my work in accordance with academic rules and ethical behavior at every stage from the planning of the thesis to its defense. I confirm that I have cited all ideas, information and findings that are not specific to my study, as required by the code of ethical behavior, and that all statements not cited are my own.

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# ABSTRACT

## THE PERCEPTION OF GLASS CEILING OF IRANIAN FEMALE EMPLOYEES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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This study investigates the glass ceiling experiences of Iranian women, focusing on the persistence of the phenomenon within a socio-cultural context marked by strong gender norms. Grounded in Gender Structure Theory (Risman, 2004, 2018) and supported by related literature, the study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to capture women's experiences of gender inequality in the workplace. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with selected Iranian professional women from diverse sectors and career stages. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings are organized into thematic categories operating across micro, meso, and macro levels, including Cultural and Social Norms, Organizational Barriers and Discrimination, Work-Life Balance and Gendered Expectations, Mentorship and Professional Networks, and Adaptation and Resistance Strategies. These themes reveal how structural constraints, interactional biases, and internalized gender norms sustain gender inequality.

The study highlights anticipatory discrimination and bounded autonomy as mechanisms through which women's opportunities for advancement are restricted, even without explicit exclusion. By applying Gender Structure Theory to the Iranian context, the study demonstrates how gendered inequalities are reproduced through interactions between institutional policies, workplace practices, and individual coping strategies. The findings extend gender structure analysis to a Middle Eastern setting and illustrate the limits of individual resilience in addressing systemic inequality. Practical implications include recommendations for transparent promotion systems, formal mentorship and sponsorship programs, work-life balance policies, and organizational interventions aimed at reducing bias. Overall, the study provides insights into women's professional experiences under the glass ceiling Iran.

Keywords: Glass Ceiling, Gender Inequality, Iranian Women, Gender Structure Theory, Qualitative Research

# ÖZET

## İRANLI KADIN ÇALIŞANLARIN CAM TAVAN ALGISI: NİTEL BİR ÇALIŞMA

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Bu çalışma, güçlü toplumsal cinsiyet normlarıyla şekillenen sosyo-kültürel bir bağlamda, İranlı kadınların profesyonel örgütler içindeki kariyer ilerlemelerini belirleyen engelleri ve mekanizmaları incelemekte; cam tavan olgusunun sürekliliğine odaklanmaktadır. Toplumsal Cinsiyet Yapısı Kuramına (Risman, 2004, 2018) dayanan ve cam tavan yazınıyla desteklenen araştırma, işyerinde toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliğine ilişkin kadınların yaşantılarını ortaya koymak amacıyla nitel fenomenolojik bir yaklaşım benimsemiştir. Veriler, farklı sektörlerde ve kariyer aşamalarında bulunan, amaçlı örnekleme yoluyla seçilmiş İranlı kadınlarla gerçekleştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Görüşme verileri, Braun ve Clarke (2006) tarafından geliştirilen tematik analiz yöntemi kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular; Kültürel ve Toplumsal Normlar, Örgütsel Engeller ve Ayrımcılık, İş–Yaşam Dengesi ve Toplumsal Cinsiyetlendirilmiş Beklentiler, Mentorluk ve Profesyonel Ağlar ile Uyum ve Direniş Stratejileri olmak üzere mikro, mezo ve makro

düzeylede işleyen tematik kategoriler altında sunulmuştur. Bu temalar, yapısal kısıtların, etkileşimsel önyargıların ve içselleştirilmiş toplumsal cinsiyet normlarının eşitsizliği nasıl sürdürdüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Özellikle çalışma, açık dışlama olmasa dahi, kadınların yükselme olanaklarını sınırlayan mekanizmalar olarak öngörüşel ayrımcılık ve sınırlı özerklik kavramlarını vurgulamaktadır. Toplumsal Cinsiyet Yapısı Kuramı'nın İran bağlamına uygulanmasıyla, toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı eşitsizliklerin kurumsal politikalar, işyeri uygulamaları ve bireysel başa çıkma stratejilerinin etkileşimi yoluyla nasıl yeniden üretildiği gösterilmektedir. Bulgular, cinsiyet yapısı analizini Orta Doğu bağlamına genişleterek ve bireysel dayanıklılığın sistemik eşitsizliği ortadan kaldırmadaki sınırlarını ortaya koyarak literatüre katkı sunmaktadır. Uygulamaya dönük çıkarımlar; şeffaf terfi sistemleri, resmî mentorluk ve sponsorluk programları, iş–yaşam dengesini destekleyen politikalar ve toplumsal cinsiyet önyargılarını azaltmaya yönelik müdahaleler için öneriler içermektedir. Genel olarak çalışma, İran'da cam tavan altında kadınların profesyonel deneyimlerini anlamada bağlama özgü çok önemli içgörüler sunmaktadır ayrıca.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cam Tavan, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitsizliği, İranlı Kadınlar, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Yapısı Kuramı, Nitel Araştırma

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The advancement and long-term prosperity of any society are fundamentally linked to the active participation of women in social, economic, and professional spheres. When women are granted equitable access to opportunities across sectors, consistent with their talents, qualifications, and aspirations, they become powerful drivers of innovation and socio-economic development (Shafi et al., 2021). Numerous studies highlight that women's inclusion not only increases the diversity of perspectives within organizations but also improves decision-making quality, adaptability, and overall organizational performance (Shortland & Perkins, 2020).

Human capital is widely recognized as the most valuable asset of any institution, and an organization's success is directly shaped by its ability to develop and utilize the full potential of its workforce. Given that women constitute approximately half of this human capital, their systematic underrepresentation in senior roles represents a significant loss of talent and productivity (Khuong & Chi, 2017). Despite their skills and contributions, women often face a range of structural and cultural obstacles that disrupt or slow their career progression, including limited access to leadership opportunities, gender bias, and discriminatory workplace practices (Nazari, 2021; Taparia & Lenka, 2022).

Despite increasing global advocacy for gender equality and the formal recognition of equal social and human rights for men and women, a substantial divide persists between theoretical commitments and real-world implementation. Numerous scholars argue that the mere existence of equality policies does not automatically translate into equitable workplace practices, because deeply embedded cultural beliefs and institutional norms continue to reinforce gender hierarchies in subtle yet persistent ways (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Acker, 2006). Even within organizations that publicly promote fairness and diversity, everyday interactions, evaluation processes, and informal networks often reproduce traditional gendered expectations, creating what Acker (2006) describes as "inequality regimes", systematic patterns of advantage and disadvantage rooted in organizational structures.

Furthermore, the symbolic endorsement of gender equality can sometimes mask the underlying persistence of exclusionary practices, leading to what has been termed "decoupling," where organizations outwardly embrace gender equality norms but fail to

meaningfully integrate them into decision-making processes or promotion pathways (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). These gaps between rhetoric and practice are especially evident in settings where cultural norms emphasize traditional gender roles, making it difficult to challenge entrenched beliefs about who is best suited for leadership. As a result, women continue to face invisible structural and interpersonal barriers, illustrating that legal reforms and policy initiatives alone are insufficient without corresponding shifts in institutional culture, managerial behavior, and societal attitudes.

Social attitudes and values, particularly in developing countries, continue to be shaped by masculine structures that concentrate power unevenly (Jung & Cho, 2020). As a result, the barriers faced by women in attaining high-level managerial positions have emerged as a global phenomenon. Compared to men, women are unreasonably represented in lower-level and lower-ranked roles (Mohammadkhani & Gholamzadeh, 2016; Sharma & Kaur, 2019). These widespread yet often invisible barriers are widely referred to as the "glass ceiling," (Cotter et al., 2001).

The glass ceiling is a multi-dimensional barrier that hinders women's career advancement through a complex interplay of structural, cultural, organizational, and psychological factors. Structural barriers include organizational policies and promotion procedures that favor stereotypical leadership profiles, making it harder for women to obtain senior roles (Akintunde et al., 2021). Culturally, social norms and gender expectations contribute to biases that frame leadership as more "male," influencing evaluations and hiring decisions (Naguib & Madeeha, 2021). Organizational factors involve workplace practices and policies, such as lack of flexible working hours or inadequate diversity and inclusion initiatives, which make it harder for women to balance professional and personal responsibilities (Selvakkumar, 2019). Psychologically, these external obstacles often get internalized: perceived barriers, role conflicts, and limited access to mentoring or sponsorship can undermine women's confidence and diminish their motivation to seek higher-level positions, all of which have been shown to influence actual career progression in management (Yadav & Khanna, 2014). Since these dimensions are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, meaningful change demands interventions across multiple levels, encompassing policy, organizational practices, cultural norms, and individual support, rather than relying on isolated solutions (Akintunde et al., 2021).

Being a worldwide issue, the glass ceiling limits women's career growth in many countries. In developing nations, factors like unequal access to education and economic challenges make these barriers more visible (Marinakou, 2014). In the Middle East, cultural norms and traditional gender roles further restrict women's participation in the workforce and their chances for promotion (Marinakou, 2014). These cultural and organizational factors help explain why the glass ceiling persists in the region.

This study explores the experiences of Iranian professional women, focusing on how they perceive and describe the barriers that limit their career progression. These include institutional obstacles such as biased promotion policies, cultural pressures to prioritize family over career, and both formal and informal discrimination restricting access to leadership roles (Cotter et al., 2001; Moghadam, 2004).

In Iran, women face unique challenges shaped by deeply rooted social traditions and religious norms that influence workplace dynamics and social expectations (Moghadam, 2004). Restrictive laws combined with persistent gender stereotypes complicate career advancement, even as women increasingly attain higher education and enter diverse industries.

At the heart of this investigation lies an exploration of how Iranian women perceive specific barriers limiting their career progression across various sectors and organizational hierarchies. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis, the research systematically analyzes the data to ensure that the emerging themes genuinely reflect the participants' perspectives and real-life experiences. The study pays particular attention to the nuanced ways professional women interpret and experience institutional constraints, workplace discrimination, and cultural expectations that collectively shape their career trajectories. Building on this foundation, the research carefully examines the dynamic interplay between macro-level societal forces, including legal frameworks and religious norms, meso-level organizational cultures and practices, and micro-level personal experiences and coping mechanisms that together sustain professional limitations (Rashvanlouei, 2019).

The study further aims to document and analyze the adaptive strategies, resistance approaches, and survival mechanisms that women develop to navigate these systemic obstacles in their professional lives. This includes both individual resilience tactics and collective forms of support that emerge within professional networks. The study pays special attention to generational differences in how women perceive and respond to workplace barriers, as well as variations across different industries and organizational

types (Ataei & Maleki, 2017). Equally important is understanding how women navigate these challenges, employing strategies such as personal resilience techniques, forming support networks, or mentoring junior colleagues, which often differ depending on age, career stage, and professional context (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Bagilhole & White, 2011).

Through rigorous qualitative engagement with Iranian female professionals across career stages and industries, this study accomplishes several important objectives, similarly to the work of Ataei and Maleki (2020). This study aims to provide a multi-layered understanding of what barriers operate within specific cultural contexts, and identify potential leverage points for meaningful organizational and policy change. Consistent with Ataei and Maleki's findings, the research ultimately aims to contribute to more equitable professional landscapes where women's career advancement reflects their capabilities rather than gendered constraints.

### ***1.1 Research Questions***

This study seeks to answer the following question:

1. How do Iranian women experience and make sense of the challenges and opportunities in their professional careers?
2. How do gender dynamics at the personal, interpersonal, and institutional levels influence Iranian women's workplace experiences?
3. What strategies do Iranian women use to navigate barriers and advance in their careers?

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### *2.1 The Glass Ceiling Concept*

The term *glass ceiling* first emerged in a 1986 article in the *Wall Street Journal* and was subsequently elaborated within academic literature by Morrison, White, and Van Velsor (1987), who drew attention to the persistent underrepresentation of women in managerial and executive positions. Within scholarly discourse, the glass ceiling is understood as a metaphor for the invisible yet enduring structural barriers that inhibit individuals, particularly women, from attaining senior leadership roles, despite possessing the professional qualifications, competencies, and experience necessary for advancement. These constraints are rarely codified in explicit organizational rules; instead, they are embedded within institutional cultures, entrenched traditions, gendered expectations, and routine organizational practices that subtly influence collective perceptions of who is deemed suitable for positions of authority (Cotter et al., 2001; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

As research on gender and leadership has evolved, it has become evident that the glass ceiling is not a singular obstacle but rather a complex system of interrelated constraints that shape career lines long before individuals approach top-level roles. Scholars highlight that the glass ceiling comprises multiple layers, including biased evaluation criteria, exclusion from informal and influential networks, differential access to mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, and persistent gendered assumptions about leadership behavior, that accumulate over time and progressively restrict advancement (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Hoobler et al., 2011). These mechanisms typically operate beneath formal organizational structures, making the barrier “invisible but impenetrable” for many women (Morrison et al., 1987), and thereby complicating efforts to identify or address it through traditional policy interventions.

Moreover, the glass ceiling is not experienced as a single decisive moment of denied promotion; rather, it reflects a gradual narrowing of opportunities across the career lifespan. While organizational entry points often appear gender-neutral, disparities become more pronounced at mid-management and are most evident at senior leadership levels, where the distribution of decision-making power is heavily twisted (Baxter & Wright, 2000). At these stages, women encounter what scholars have termed “accumulated disadvantage”, a process in which subtle, recurring inequalities, such as being

overlooked for developmental assignments, excluded from informal leadership pipelines, or evaluated according to more stringent performance standards, compound over time to impede career progression (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014).

Additionally, dominant leadership prototypes within many organizations continue to reflect masculine-coded traits such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and emotional restraint. As a result, women whose leadership styles do not conform to these implicit norms may be judged as less competent or less “fit” for leadership roles, reinforcing gendered stereotypes even in workplaces that publicly endorse diversity and inclusion (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These institutionalized expectations perpetuate systemic bias and limit efforts to broaden conceptions of effective leadership

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that the glass ceiling is best understood as a multifaceted and deeply embedded structural phenomenon that operates simultaneously at institutional, cultural, and interpersonal levels. Its subtle and covert nature renders it particularly resistant to reform, underscoring the need for intentional, evidence-based organizational strategies aimed at identifying, challenging, and dismantling the mechanisms that constrain women’s advancement into senior leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Cotter et al., 2001; Ely et al., 2011; Risman, 2004). Although originally conceptualized to describe women’s limited access to senior positions, the glass ceiling has evolved into a broader analytical framework that applies to multiple marginalized groups who encounter similar forms of invisible exclusion. For racial and ethnic minorities, scholars refer to “racialized glass ceilings,” characterized by implicit bias, tokenism, cultural stereotyping, and exclusion from influential networks (Gee & Peck, 2018; Wingfield, 2019). Age can also function as a barrier, with younger employees dismissed as inexperienced and older employees perceived as inflexible or technologically outdated, producing an “age ceiling” that restricts advancement (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Likewise, individuals with disabilities often contend with attitudinal barriers, inaccessible work environments, and lowered expectations that impede career progression (Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall, 2014). LGBTQ+ employees may encounter what has been described as a “lavender ceiling,” where discrimination, fear of disclosure, and heteronormative workplace cultures restrict leadership opportunities (Rumens, 2018).

Across these varied social groups, a common pattern emerges: individuals who do not match the historically dominant archetype of leadership, typically male, heterosexual, able-bodied, and from the majority ethnic group, face implicit but persistent obstacles

that shape their career trajectories (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Thus, the glass ceiling must be understood not as a single barrier affecting only women, but as a multidimensional structural phenomenon embedded within the intersections of gender, race, disability, sexuality, and age.

Despite significant global efforts toward gender equality, the glass ceiling remains a tough challenge, particularly for women. Numerous studies reveal that gender bias and structural inequalities continue to influence evaluations of women's leadership potential and restrict access to career advancement (Abraham, 2013; Baxter & Wright, 2000; Parcheta, Kaifi, & Khanfar, 2013). In some organizational contexts, these barriers are most visible at the upper tiers of management (Cotter et al., 2001), while in others, women experience disadvantages at middle or even entry levels, preventing them from building the momentum needed for leadership success (Baxter & Wright, 2000).

The glass ceiling also intersects with other social identities. Women of color face compounded forms of discrimination, navigating both gendered and racialized stereotypes that shape perceptions of competence and leadership suitability (Gee & Peck, 2018; Wingfield, 2019). LGBTQ+ women may be judged through the lens of heteronormative norms, while women with disabilities confront assumptions about limited capacity or commitment (Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall, 2014; Rumens, 2018). Age-based discrimination additionally affects both younger women seen as inexperienced, and older women perceived as less adaptable or technologically skilled (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Purcell, 2013). These overlapping identities magnify the barriers women face, demonstrating that their experiences of inequality cannot be separated from broader social and cultural systems.

Organizational culture plays a central role in sustaining or dismantling these barriers. Workplaces that remain male-dominated or lack inclusive policies often reinforce inequalities through pay gaps, undervaluation of women's contributions, limited advancement pathways, and informal networks that favor men (Abraham, 2013; Cotter et al., 2001; Block & Crawford, 2013). Practices such as salary secrecy, rigid work schedules, and an absence of diversity and inclusion initiatives further restrict opportunities for women and other marginalized groups. Because organizational norms have historically been shaped around the characteristics and preferences of able-bodied white men, they continue, often unintentionally, to signal who belongs in leadership (Baxter & Wright, 2000; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Addressing the glass ceiling therefore requires action at multiple levels. Scholars argue that meaningful change must stem from structural reforms, cultural transformation, and individual empowerment working in tandem (Carrasco-Santos et al., 2024). Organizations can help reduce systemic inequality by introducing mentorship and sponsorship programs, unconscious bias training, flexible work policies, transparent promotion criteria, and leadership development initiatives designed specifically for women and marginalized employees (Smith, 2012; Suraj-Narayan, 2005; Davies-Netzley, 1998). Expanding the glass ceiling framework to include groups marginalized by race, disability, sexuality, and age underscores the need for intersectional strategies that promote equal opportunities for all (Carrasco-Santos et al., 2024; Wingfield, 2019).

The glass ceiling is not an abstract concept; it affects real people whose career paths, motivations, and well-being are shaped by these invisible constraints. Gender stereotypes, restricted access to mentors and sponsors, expectations around caregiving, and insufficiently flexible work environments all influence women's ability to advance (Taleghani, Pourezat, & Faraji, 2009; Eagly & Carli, 2007). By fostering equitable policies, nurturing inclusive organizational cultures, and supporting individuals through structured development programs, organizations can begin to dismantle the persistent barriers that limit leadership diversity. When structural, cultural, and personal obstacles are addressed together, leadership becomes genuinely accessible to all, allowing talent and potential (not gender, identity, or background) to determine who rises to the top.

## ***2.2 Gender Structure Theory***

Gender Structure Theory, developed by Risman (2004, 2018), offers a comprehensive and multidimensional framework for analyzing how gender functions as a deeply embedded social structure that shapes behavior, opportunities, and institutional arrangements. Rather than viewing gender inequality as the product of individual attitudes or personal choices, Risman conceptualizes gender as an overarching system operating simultaneously at three interconnected levels, the individual, the interactional, and the institutional. These levels constantly reinforce one another, producing patterned inequalities that limit women's access to power, authority, and career advancement across different sectors of society. This theoretical perspective has been widely recognized for its ability to capture the complexity of gendered constraints

within contemporary organizations and cultural contexts (Acker, 2006; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Risman, 2018).

At the individual level, gender structures influence internal identities, shaping how individuals understand themselves as gendered beings and how they internalize societal expectations (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Women may develop self-perceptions, aspirations, and career expectations in response to the gendered messages they receive throughout life. These internalized norms can affect self-confidence, leadership self-efficacy, and willingness to pursue high-status positions, illustrating how the gender structure becomes embodied within personal identities (Correll, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

At the interactional level, gender shapes the norms that govern everyday social interactions. These include expectations about communication style, emotional expression, assertiveness, and authority. In professional settings, interactional gender norms can lead to biased evaluations, role stereotyping, and differential treatment, often disadvantaging women who do not conform to traditional femininity or who adopt leadership styles deemed “too assertive” for their gender (Brescoll, 2016; Ridgeway, 2011). Such dynamics help explain why women frequently report being labeled as “aggressive,” “emotional,” or “unfit for leadership” when demonstrating behaviors identical to their male colleagues.

At the institutional level, gender is embedded within organizational routines, workplace policies, legal structures, and cultural norms. Institutions reproduce gendered divisions of labor, unequal access to leadership pathways, and biased promotion systems that privilege men while limiting women’s advancement (Acker, 2006; Charles & Grusky, 2004). These structural factors are often subtle and normalized, embedded in job descriptions, evaluation systems, and informal networks, yet they cumulatively reinforce male dominance in upper-level positions.

Gender Structure Theory is particularly relevant in the Iranian context, where gender norms are shaped not only by organizational cultures but also by broader societal forces. Deeply entrenched cultural expectations surrounding femininity, motherhood, and women’s family obligations interact with legal constraints and male-dominated workplace environments, creating multilayered barriers to leadership (Bagheri et al., 2022). These intersecting pressures place Iranian women at the nexus of institutional, interpersonal, and cultural limitations, making the gender structure especially visible in their career trajectories.

Applying this framework highlights how Iranian women simultaneously navigate internalized norms (e.g., expectations about modesty or self-sacrifice), interpersonal challenges (e.g., gendered evaluations from colleagues and supervisors), and institutional barriers (e.g., limited promotion opportunities or discriminatory policies). This multi-level approach provides a nuanced understanding of the glass ceiling by showing that structural inequality is not produced by a single factor but by the interaction of personal, relational, and organizational forces (Risman, 2018; Mikailova & Olsson, 2019).

The following subsections elaborate on each dimension of Gender Structure Theory and analyze how Iranian women experience these interconnected levels of gendered constraints within their professional environments.

### ***2.2.1 Micro-Level: Individual Experiences and Self-Perception***

At the micro-level, Gender Structure Theory focuses on individual self-perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors that are shaped by social norms (Risman, 2018). Women often internalize cultural expectations regarding femininity, caregiving responsibilities, and professional roles, which can influence career aspirations and confidence (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In Iran, these internalized norms are evident in studies showing that women frequently hesitate to pursue leadership positions due to fear of social judgment, family responsibilities, or cultural disapproval (Gilani, 2022).

For instance, Bahrami (2022) found that Iranian female professionals often self-regulate their ambitions to align with perceived societal standards, limiting their pursuit of promotions or high-responsibility roles. This internalization can affect decision-making, assertiveness, and negotiation behaviors, creating a subtle but powerful barrier to advancement. Micro-level factors also intersect with identity characteristics such as age, marital status, and socioeconomic background, further influencing women's professional choices (Eagly & Koenig, 2006; Ramezani et al., 2021).

The micro-level analysis highlights the importance of interventions that build self-efficacy, confidence, and leadership skills. Mentorship, coaching, and targeted training programs can help women recognize and challenge internalized limitations, encouraging them to take leadership opportunities while navigating societal expectations (Smith, 2012; Bahrami, 2022).

Research on gendered socialization shows that from early childhood, women receive messages that prioritize modesty, compliance, and relational harmony over assertiveness or ambition (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). These internalized beliefs shape women's

professional identities, influencing how they interpret opportunities and constraints in the workplace. In Iran, where cultural expectations emphasize women's roles as primary caregivers and moral guardians of the family, these messages become even more salient, contributing to lower leadership self-esteem and reduced willingness to engage in competitive environments (Zandi & Mohammadi, 2020). As a result, women's internalized schemas often mirror societal narratives, reinforcing the very gender structures that limit their advancement (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014).

Micro-level constraints also manifest in the emotional labor women perform when navigating gendered expectations. Studies indicate that women often engage in self-monitoring like adjusting tone, behavior, or appearance to avoid negative judgments such as being labeled aggressive or unfeminine (Brescoll, 2016). Iranian women describe expending significant emotional effort to balance professionalism with culturally acceptable femininity, a dynamic that creates internal stress and reduces cognitive resources available for career advancement (Hosseini et al., 2021). This constant self-surveillance reflects how deeply gender norms shape internal psychological processes, reinforcing the glass ceiling not only structurally but emotionally.

Women use their own choices to negotiate identities that challenge and reinterpret cultural expectations. Scholars note that micro-level resistance, such as redefining femininity to include leadership, or selectively accepting and rejecting gender norms enables women to carve out space for professional growth even within restrictive contexts (Mahmoudi & Karimi, 2022). Iranian professional women increasingly develop strategies such as compartmentalizing roles, setting boundaries with family members, or leveraging education as a source of empowerment (Ramezani et al., 2021). These adaptive behaviors illustrate that the micro-level is not solely a site of constraint but also a space where individuals actively reconstruct their professional identities.

### ***2.2.2 Meso-Level: Interpersonal Interactions and Networks***

The meso-level examines interpersonal interactions, workplace relationships, and social networks that shape career opportunities (Risman, 2018; West & Zimmerman, 2009). At this level, women's experiences are influenced by colleagues, supervisors, mentors, and professional networks. Biases, stereotypes, and differential treatment in interactions often reinforce structural inequities; for example, studies in Iran show that male colleagues or supervisors may unconsciously favor male employees for promotions, challenging women's advancement despite equal qualifications (Tlaiss, 2014; Gilani, 2022).

Access to mentorship and sponsorship is a critical meso-level factor. Bahrami (2022) reports that Iranian women with supportive mentors and sponsors are better able to navigate organizational politics, gain visibility, and access leadership roles. Conversely, the absence of professional networks limits opportunities for skill development, guidance, and career advocacy; networking challenges are particularly pronounced in male-dominated organizations, where informal social interactions often exclude women (Smith, 2012; Ramezani et al., 2021).

Meso-level analysis also considers peer dynamics, gendered expectations, and social reinforcement. Interventions such as structured mentorship programs, cross-gender sponsorship initiatives, and professional women's networks can mitigate these barriers by creating supportive environments that promote equitable interaction and visibility (Bahrami, 2022; Bagheri et al., 2022).

Beyond these interpersonal and relational processes, meso-level dynamics also include the informal norms and unwritten rules that govern workplace behavior. Research indicates that women are often excluded from informal social circles where crucial information, opportunities, and alliances are formed such as after-work gatherings, lunch meetings, or male-only social events (Ibarra, 1993; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). In the Iranian context, cultural norms around gender segregation further restrict women's participation in such spaces, reducing their visibility and minimizing their chances of being recognized for leadership potential (Hutchings et al., 2010). These exclusions reinforce unequal access to social capital, a key determinant of advancement within hierarchical organizations (Bourdieu, 1986; Tlaiss, 2014).

Interpersonal biases at the meso level also shape how women's competence and authority are perceived. Studies demonstrate that women's ideas are often discounted, interrupted, or attributed to male colleagues, a pattern known as "idea appropriation," which diminishes women's influence within decision-making processes (Brescoll, 2011; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014). Iranian research similarly shows that women frequently feel the need to moderate their tone, justify their expertise more extensively, or adopt deferential communication styles to avoid being judged as aggressive or unprofessional (Ramezani et al., 2021; Gilani, 2022). These gendered dynamics normalize male authority while undermining women's legitimacy, contributing to long-term barriers in promotion pathways.

Finally, meso-level structures interact closely with organizational leadership practices. Supervisors, who typically act as gatekeepers of opportunities, may provide high-visibility assignments, training, or client responsibilities to male employees while giving women administrative or routine tasks (Hoobler et al., 2011; Eagly & Carli, 2007). In Iranian organizations, where leadership remains largely male-dominated, this gendered allocation of work reinforces traditional hierarchies and restricts women from building the portfolios necessary for senior positions (Bagheri et al., 2022). Addressing these meso-level dynamics requires organizations to implement transparent decision-making systems, promote inclusive leadership development initiatives, and actively challenge interpersonal biases that shape everyday interactions (Carrasco-Santos et al., 2024).

#### ***2.2.2.1 Mentorship and Sponsorship***

Mentorship and sponsorship are distinct yet complementary strategies that support career advancement, particularly for women navigating gendered organizational structures; mentorship generally focuses on providing guidance, psychosocial support, and knowledge sharing to help individuals navigate professional environments (Taleghani, Pourezat, & Faraji, 2009). Mentors often offer emotional encouragement, career-related advice, and opportunities for skill development; they help individuals understand unwritten organizational norms, build confidence, and expand their professional competencies (Kram, 1985; Ragins & Kram, 2007).

Sponsorship, in contrast, involves active advocacy from someone in a position of power who uses their influence to promote the individual's career progression. Sponsors endorse candidates for promotions, recommend them for high-visibility assignments, and facilitate access to influential networks (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010). Unlike mentorship, which can occur at any level, sponsorship requires senior leaders willing to attach their reputation to the individual they support (Hewlett, 2013). Research shows that sponsorship has a far stronger impact on upward mobility than mentorship alone, particularly in hierarchical or male-dominated fields (Thomas, 2019).

In male-dominated workplaces, women frequently face limited access to either of these developmental resources. Studies indicate that male leaders often mentor individuals who resemble them in background or identity which unintentionally excludes women from informal networks of support (Kanter, 1977; Linehan & Walsh, 2000). This lack

of informal access intensifies career ‘slow progress’ and restricts visibility in promotion processes. Mentorship programs tailored specifically for women therefore play a critical role in offering structured guidance on navigating organizational politics, developing leadership presence, and strengthening professional identity (Davies-Netzley, 1998; Ely et al., 2011).

Sponsorship is particularly powerful in countering gendered assumptions that women are “not ready” or “not suited” for leadership roles. Research shows that when women have sponsors, they are significantly more likely to be promoted, selected for strategic tasks, and included in decision-making forums (Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2013). Sponsorship also helps challenge gender bias by ensuring that women’s achievements are made visible rather than overlooked or attributed to luck (Smith, 2012; Begeny et al., 2020).

In Iran, cultural norms and organizational structures further constrain women’s access to informal mentorship and sponsorship opportunities. Gender discrimination, conservative social norms, and concerns around modesty can limit close professional relationships between male managers and female employees (Moghadam, 2004; Shakoori, 2021). Younger or unmarried women may encounter additional barriers due to societal expectations regarding interactions with men or assumptions about future family responsibilities. As a result, informal pathways to advancement, already less accessible to women, become even more restricted (Bagheri, Esmacili, & Karimi, 2022).

Establishing formal mentorship and sponsorship programs that are culturally sensitive can moderate these structural limitations. Organizationally sanctioned programs reduce ambiguity, enable cross-gender collaboration under clear guidelines, and ensure that women have access to senior leaders, professional networks, and strategic opportunities (O’Neil & Hopkins, 2015). Such programs can also provide safe spaces for discussing barriers, building confidence, and fostering a collective support system among women professionals (Hoobler et al., 2018).

Strengthening mentorship and sponsorship structures represents a critical strategy for dismantling the gendered barriers that reinforce the glass ceiling (Hewlett, 2013; Ibarra et al., 2010; Ely et al., 2011). By institutionalizing equitable support systems, organizations can enhance women’s career trajectories, foster inclusive leadership pipelines, and work toward meaningful gender equity in the workplace.

#### ***2.2.2.2 Flexible Work Arrangements and Male-Dominated Organizational Culture***

Flexible work arrangements, including telecommuting, flexible hours, job sharing, and part-time schedules, have been proposed as strategies to support work-life balance and mitigate career barriers, particularly for women managing family responsibilities (María Jesús Carrasco-Santos, Seyfi, et al., 2024). While these arrangements can provide opportunities to manage dual roles, their effectiveness is influenced by organizational culture. In male-dominated workplaces, employees using flexible arrangements may be perceived as less committed, impacting promotions and career growth (Purcell, 2013).

Male-dominated organizational cultures often reinforce traditional hierarchies, favor men's career trajectories, and undervalue contributions typically associated with women (Bazazo et al., 2017; Tlaiss, 2014). Such cultures can create environments where leadership norms favor assertive, risk-taking, and high-visibility behaviors more commonly associated with men. For women, navigating these norms requires strategic management of professional identity, careful negotiation of expectations, and, in some cases, reliance on mentorship and sponsorship networks to counteract cultural bias (Risman, 2018).

Addressing male-dominated organizational culture requires systemic interventions. Policies promoting flexible work, diversity, and equity must be accompanied by cultural change that challenges stereotypes, recognizes varied leadership styles, and values inclusive contributions (Smith, 2012). Evidence suggests that integrating flexibility with mentorship, sponsorship, and bias-awareness initiatives creates a synergistic effect, enabling women to progress despite persistent structural barriers (Suraj-Narayan, 2005; Carrasco-Santos et al., 2024).

### ***2.2.3 Macro-Level: Institutional and Cultural Structures***

At the macro-level, Gender Structure Theory emphasizes institutional norms, laws, policies, and cultural ideologies that sustain gender inequality (Risman, 2004, 2018). In Iran, macro-level barriers include male-dominated organizational structures, restrictive labor laws, and cultural expectations prioritizing women's domestic roles over professional ambitions (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2019). These institutionalized practices shape access to resources, decision-making authority, and leadership opportunities, creating systemic obstacles for women.

Research highlights the influence of macro-level policies on Iranian women's career trajectories. For instance, legal restrictions, such as requiring husband approval for certain professional or travel decisions, limit women's autonomy and reinforce male-

dominated cultural norms (Ghaderi et al., 2023). In addition, organizational practices, like lack of flexible work policies, biased promotion criteria, and gendered pay gaps, further entrench inequality (Abraham, 2013; Tlaiss, 2014).

Macro-level analysis also considers broader social movements and policy reforms. Grassroots activism, feminist campaigns, and government initiatives promoting gender equity can influence organizational practices and challenge societal norms, gradually reshaping the environment in which women operate (Bagheri et al., 2022; Carrasco-Santos et al., 2024). Addressing macro-level barriers is essential for sustainable change, as institutional reform and cultural shifts ensure that micro- and meso-level interventions, such as mentorship or confidence-building programs, can have a lasting impact (Risman, 2018).

At this level, gender is embedded within the broader ideological structures that define acceptable social behavior, occupational roles, and leadership norms. In many societies (particularly in contexts with strong patriarchal traditions) macro-level ideologies position men as natural decision-makers and women as dependents or caregivers, creating a persistent hierarchy of gendered authority (Kandiyoti, 2007). These ideologies legitimize gendered divisions of labor and justify exclusionary practices in hiring, promotion, and leadership pipelines. Research shows that when national cultures endorse masculine leadership schemas, organizations tend to reproduce these norms, limiting women's representation in senior roles regardless of qualifications (House et al., 2004).

Economic structures also play a central role in shaping macro-level gender inequality. Labor market segregation, where women are concentrated in lower-paid, lower-status occupations, continues to restrict women's access to advancement opportunities and reinforces societal narratives about women's competence (Anker, 1998; ILO, 2020). In Iran, women are disproportionately represented in education, healthcare, and administrative roles, while male dominance persists in technical, managerial, and strategic positions (Moghadam, 2004). This segmentation is not accidental; it reflects longstanding institutional policies and cultural assumptions that steer women toward "appropriate" professions, thereby reinforcing the glass ceiling from the earliest stages of employment.

Macro-level dynamics also include the ways states construct gendered forms of citizenship. Policies regulating mobility, family responsibilities, and workplace participation shape women's ability to engage fully in professional life. Scholarly work

emphasizes that restrictive family laws, unequal inheritance rights, and limitations on women's decision-making reinforce their economic dependency and reduce labor force participation (Hoodfar, 1999; Shahnazari, 2021). Furthermore, weak enforcement of anti-discrimination measures and lack of gender-sensitive organizational oversight allow inequalities to persist unchecked. Therefore, macro-level structures not only shape workplace opportunities but also determine the broader social environment in which women negotiate their professional identities.

### ***2.2.3.1 Challenges in the Middle East and Iran***

Gender equality in the workforce remains a pressing issue worldwide, with women facing persistent challenges that limit career progression. These challenges include occupational differentiation, underrepresentation in leadership roles, wage gaps, and unfavorable working conditions (Eger et al., 2022; Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019; Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015). Labor market dynamics, such as frequent job changes, unstable contracts, and part-time positions, further complicate women's career trajectories. In conservative religious societies, cultural and legal frameworks impose additional restrictions on professional participation, shaping both career aspirations and opportunities (Hall et al., 2023; Seyfi & Hall, 2019; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010).

Barriers are particularly significant in the Middle East, where male-dominated norms, traditional cultural expectations, and Islamic governance intersect to influence workplace policies and social attitudes (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Elamin & Omair, 2010; Hutchings et al., 2010). Women often struggle to reach senior leadership positions due to family responsibilities, entrenched gender stereotypes, and corporate cultures that favor men (Bazazo et al., 2017; Freund & Hernandez-Maskivker, 2021). In countries such as Iran, legal and cultural restrictions limit women's professional growth, while in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, institutional mechanisms and gender control policies amplify discrimination for both national and foreign women (Öztürk, 2023; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2019; Almathami et al., 2022).

Research consistently highlights the underrepresentation of women in executive and ownership positions across the Arab world and Iran (Vij et al., 2023; Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018; Bagheri et al., 2022). Contributing factors include restrictive laws, limited access

to financial resources, family obligations, and dominant male-dominated norms that favor men's career advancement (Tlaiss, 2014; Abalkhail & Allan, 2016; Sidani et al.,

2015). Social expectations that equate leadership with masculinity further restrict women from decision-making roles and senior positions.

Historical and political developments have shaped these persistent inequalities. In Iran, the 1979 Islamic Revolution reinforced gender imbalances through conservative interpretations of religious teachings, particularly outside urban centers (Rodriguez & Scurry, 2019). While modernization efforts before the revolution expanded educational and professional opportunities for urban women, working-class women largely remained in traditional, low-paying roles (Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2009). The 1960s saw some new opportunities as Iran's oil-driven economy expanded, allowing certain urban women to enter the workforce; however, most remained in low-paying, unskilled positions with little chance for advancement. Reforms in the 1970s improved access to education and careers for middle-class urban women, but working-class women largely stayed in traditional roles with minimal financial stability and social mobility (Zahirinejad, 2024).

The 1979 revolution marked a major turning point, introducing stricter regulations that curtailed women's freedoms in both public and private life. Post-revolution laws enforced conservative dress codes and emphasized traditional family roles, prioritizing domestic responsibilities over professional ambitions (Rodriguez & Scurry, 2019). Gender inequality persisted due to limited access to education, employment, and societal privileges, while family laws such as requiring married women to obtain their husbands' permission to travel abroad, further constrained professional opportunities (Ghaderi et al., 2023).

Economic sanctions since the 1980s have compounded these challenges, contributing to job losses and reinforcing male-dominated norms. Even as educational attainment among women has risen, unemployment remains high; 42% of women aged 15 to 29 remain without work. This gap between education and employment underscores the systemic barriers preventing women from fully participating in the workforce. Iran's 2021 Global Gender Gap ranking reflects the severity of these inequalities, fueling frustration and inspiring activism. Grassroots movements, such as "Women, Life, Freedom," exemplify women's resilience and courage, as they challenge social restrictions and advocate for social and political change (Bagheri et al., 2022) which may signal the emergence of a culture that increasingly values gender equality, demonstrating that even in restrictive contexts, women are shaping pathways toward professional and social transformation.

Iranian women encounter multifaceted challenges in ascending to leadership positions, often encountering a “glass ceiling” that impedes professional advancement. This barrier is not only structural but also cultural, rooted in social norms and organizational practices that favor men (Ramezani et al., 2021). Ramezani et al. (2021) examined faculty members at Iran University of Medical Sciences and found that both men and women acknowledge the existence of the glass ceiling, though their perceptions differ. Such differences in awareness highlight the need for interventions aimed at increasing understanding of gender-based barriers. Similarly, Gilani (2022) observed that Iranian professional women face negative stereotypes and restricted access to organizational resources, which further constrain their career mobility. These challenges are often exacerbated by deeply ingrained societal expectations about women’s roles in both family and professional life (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Mentorship and sponsorship have been identified as critical mechanisms to support women in overcoming these barriers. Bahrami (2022) studied structured mentoring programs within Tehran Municipality and found that mentoring not only supports career advancement but also helps women achieve a more sustainable work-life balance. By providing guidance, advice, and advocacy, mentors and sponsors can help women navigate organizational politics, access networks, and increase their visibility for promotions and leadership opportunities (Smith, 2012). The global context underscores the importance of these programs: Gallup (2023) reports that only 40% of employees have mentors, and even fewer have sponsors, emphasizing a widespread gap in professional support structures. In Iran, formal mentorship initiatives could therefore play a transformative role by equipping women with the tools to challenge structural inequities and advance professionally (Bahrami, 2022).

Work-life balance remains another crucial factor shaping women’s leadership trajectories in Iran. Iranian women often carry disproportionate family responsibilities, which, combined with workplace expectations, create additional obstacles to professional growth (Bahrami, 2022; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Mentoring programs, flexible work policies, and supportive organizational practices can alleviate these pressures, helping women manage dual responsibilities and enhance job satisfaction. Flexible work arrangements, including telecommuting, flexible hours, and job-sharing, have been shown in both local and international research to reduce the trade-off between

career progression and family obligations (Smith, 2012; Abraham, 2013). Such policies are essential in male-dominated organizations, where traditional norms often prioritize men's career progression over women's (Tlaiss, 2014).

Cultural shifts and feminist resistance are playing an increasingly important role in challenging these systemic barriers. Historical and contemporary accounts indicate that women in Iran are actively negotiating power and agency within conservative social frameworks (Bagheri et al., 2022). For example, the story of Sara Shahverdi, a midwife who became the first female councilor in her rural community, demonstrates how women can subvert traditional patriarchal expectations to attain leadership roles (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). Tajali (2024) emphasizes the role of feminist activism in Iran, illustrating how decades of organized resistance are creating pathways for women to influence broader societal and political reforms. Such movements signal the potential for gradual cultural transformation, where women's leadership is increasingly recognized and supported (Rodriguez & Scurry, 2019).

The implications of these findings for policy and practice are significant. Comprehensive strategies are needed to dismantle structural and cultural barriers. Awareness campaigns can educate both men and women about the glass ceiling's existence and impact, promoting a more inclusive mindset across organizations (Cotter et al., 2001; Parcheta et al., 2013). Mentorship and sponsorship programs should be formalized to provide guidance, advocacy, and career support for women at all levels (Bahrami, 2022; Smith, 2012). Policies promoting flexible work arrangements and work-life integration can mitigate the dual pressures of professional and family responsibilities, thereby fostering an environment where women can thrive in leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Abraham, 2013). Additionally, cultural transformation initiatives should encourage a redefinition of gender roles in both professional and societal contexts, promoting equitable access to leadership opportunities (Bagheri et al., 2022; Tlaiss, 2014).

By integrating these approaches, Iran has the potential to break down the glass ceiling and enable women to fully participate in professional spheres. Addressing structural inequalities, enhancing mentoring support, promoting work-life balance, and encouraging cultural change are all essential steps to create a more equitable and productive workforce (Ramezani et al., 2021; Bahrami, 2022; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Studies in Iran, alongside global research, provide both the empirical evidence and practical guidance needed to inform policies that can transform women's professional experiences,

paving the way for sustained social and economic development (Rodriguez & Scurry, 2019; Smith, 2012).

#### ***2.2.4 Integration of Micro, Meso, and Macro Levels***

Risman's framework emphasizes that these levels are interconnected: individual agency is shaped by interpersonal interactions and institutional structures (Risman, 2018). For Iranian women, micro-level self-perceptions, meso-level networking and mentoring, and macro-level organizational and societal structures collectively determine career opportunities. Addressing gender inequality requires multilevel interventions, such as enhancing personal confidence, promoting professional networks, and reforming institutional policies to dismantle male-dominated practices (Bahrami, 2022; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Bagheri et al., 2022).

By applying Gender Structure Theory, researchers and policymakers can better understand the complex, systemic nature of barriers and identify points of intervention. In the Iranian context, this approach highlights how deeply entrenched cultural, organizational, and personal factors interact, offering a comprehensive lens to examine professional women's experiences and inform strategies to promote equity (Ramezani et al., 2021; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2019).

#### ***2.3 Intersectionality***

Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Crenshaw (1989), highlights how overlapping social identities, such as gender, race, age, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation, interact to create compounded experiences of discrimination or privilege. While the glass ceiling framework often examines gender barriers in isolation, intersectionality recognizes that women of color, women with disabilities, or LGBTQ+ women encounter unique challenges that differ from those faced by cisgender, able-bodied white women (Crenshaw, 1991).

In the Iranian context, intersectionality manifests in nuanced ways. For example, rural women may face both gender discrimination and socioeconomic disadvantages, while younger urban women may confront ageist perceptions alongside gendered expectations of behavior. Women with disabilities experience compounded barriers in access, mobility, and workplace acceptance (Bagheri et al., 2022). Recognizing these intersecting identities is essential because generalized policies may fail to address the unique needs of subgroups within the female workforce.

Intersectionality also shapes mentoring, networking, and sponsorship opportunities. Women who belong to marginalized ethnic or socioeconomic groups may find fewer role models and advocates in professional spaces. This limitation can reduce their visibility in organizational decision-making and impede career progression (Taleghani, Pourezat, & Faraji, 2009). Thus, intersectional analysis is crucial for understanding the full scope of the glass ceiling and for developing strategies that promote equity across diverse groups.

Intersectionality further reveals that discrimination is not merely additive but multiplicative, meaning that the convergence of marginalized identities can produce unique forms of exclusion that cannot be understood through gender alone (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). For instance, an Iranian woman who is also from a minority ethnic group such as Kurdish, Baluchi, or Arab communities, may experience compounded barriers tied to linguistic discrimination, regional hierarchies, and cultural stereotyping (Moradi & Hasanpoor, 2021). These barriers often intensify workplace exclusion, as employers may harbor biases regarding accent, regional identity, or perceived social status. Such multilayered disadvantages illustrate how intersectional identities shape women's professional trajectories in ways that exceed the explanatory scope of gender-only analyses.

Another critical dimension of intersectionality relates to socioeconomic status. Women from lower-income backgrounds often enter the labor market with fewer educational opportunities, limited access to professional development, and reduced exposure to influential networks (Karimian & Ebrahimzadeh, 2020). In Iran, where class distinctions significantly shape access to high-quality schooling and professional connections, socioeconomic identity interacts with gender to influence hiring outcomes, job mobility, and leadership prospects. Research indicates that women from wealthier urban families tend to access professional mentorship and career resources more readily, while women from rural or economically disadvantaged regions remain systematically underrepresented in professional sectors (Rahbari, 2019). Such disparities highlight the need for interventions that address both gender inequality and class-based inequities within organizational and educational systems.

Additionally, intersectionality underscores the unique challenges faced by younger and older women, who both navigate age-based stereotypes in professional settings. Younger women may be perceived as inexperienced or overly emotional, leading to

diminished credibility, while older women may face assumptions of reduced adaptability or technological proficiency (Posthuma & Campion, 2009; Eagly & Carli, 2007). These stereotypes intersect with gendered expectations regarding motherhood, marital status, and caregiving. For example, young Iranian women are frequently questioned about their future plans for marriage and children, which can influence hiring decisions or lead employers to hesitate in assigning them long-term responsibilities (Gilani, 2022). Similarly, older women may be overlooked for leadership positions due to entrenched ageist and patriarchal assumptions about authority and productivity (Bagheri et al., 2022). Such age-gender intersections highlight how multiple social identities jointly influence career advancement.

Finally, intersectionality provides a more holistic lens for designing inclusive policies and interventions. Anti-discrimination strategies that focus solely on gender may overlook the needs of marginalized subgroups, resulting in reforms that primarily benefit women who already hold privileged identities (Cho et al., 2013). For Iranian policy-makers and organizations, adopting an intersectional approach means recognizing disparities rooted in ethnicity, age, disability, and social class when creating mentorship programs, leadership development initiatives, or anti-bias training. Evidence shows that programs tailored to intersectional identities such as leadership networks for disabled women, ethnically diverse mentorship circles, or rural women's career training programs, are more effective at promoting equitable opportunities and dismantling hidden barriers (Tlaiss, 2015; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2019). Thus, intersectionality enriches the understanding of gender inequality by identifying structural inequities that operate across multiple dimensions, enabling more targeted and transformative solutions.

#### ***2.4 Bias and Stereotypes***

Gender bias refers to the systematic privileging of one gender over another, a process that subtly shapes hiring practices, promotion decisions, performance evaluations, and routine workplace interactions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These biases often function implicitly, operating below conscious awareness, which makes them especially difficult to detect and challenge (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). In organizational contexts, particularly in male-dominated sectors, men are frequently assumed to possess stronger leadership potential, strategic competence, and decision-making capacity, while women's skills may be discounted, overlooked, or subjected to heightened scrutiny (Block & Crawford, 2013; Heilman, 2012). Even when women exhibit identical or

superior qualifications, gendered assumptions often lead evaluators to interpret their behaviors through a biased lens, resulting in unequal access to advancement opportunities (Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

Stereotypes play a central role in reinforcing these biases by promoting overgeneralized and oversimplified assumptions about gendered traits. Women are often stereotypically characterized as communal, caring, cooperative, and relationship-oriented whereas leadership roles are associated with agentic qualities such as assertiveness, independence, and rationality (Eagly & Koenig, 2006; Schein, 2001). This incongruence between stereotypically “feminine” traits and culturally valued leadership attributes contributes to what Eagly and Karau (2002) term role congruity theory, wherein women who aspire to leadership contradict traditional expectations and therefore face prejudice both for being leaders and for being women. Women who display assertive or authoritative behavior are frequently judged more harshly than men exhibiting the same traits, resulting in a “double bind” where neither conforming nor deviating from gender norms is fully accepted (Catalyst, 2007).

These dynamics become even more pronounced in societies where gender norms are strongly shaped by cultural, religious, or traditional expectations. In Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, the intersection of workplace expectations with domestic and familial roles intensifies the effect of stereotypes (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Hutchings et al., 2010). Women are often expected to prioritize caregiving and household responsibilities, leading employers to assume they are less committed, less available for long hours, or less suitable for leadership roles that require visibility and flexibility (Karimi, 2022). Such assumptions can contribute to occupational segregation, where women are channeled into roles perceived as more compatible with feminine norms, administrative, supportive, or low-authority positions while men dominate decision-making roles (Moghadam, 2004). Over time, these patterns reinforce the glass ceiling by limiting women’s access to critical developmental opportunities, high-visibility projects, and influential networks needed for career progression.

Research shows that bias and stereotypes do not merely influence individual perceptions but become embedded within organizational structures, evaluation criteria, and informal workplace cultures (Acker, 2006). For example, performance assessments may penalize women for behaviors that are rewarded in men, such as assertiveness or ambition, while undervaluing competencies like collaboration or emotional intelligence that often align with stereotypically feminine strengths (Heilman & Caleo,

2018). Similarly, biased judgments can influence how managers assign tasks, with men more likely to receive strategic or challenging assignments that facilitate advancement, while women are allocated routine or “office housework” tasks that offer limited career benefits (Williams & Dempsey, 2014).

Addressing these biases is essential for fostering equitable and inclusive workplaces. Evidence shows that organizations that implement bias-awareness training, structured evaluation systems, and transparent promotion criteria significantly reduce the influence of subjective judgments and discriminatory norms (Bohnet, 2016). Additionally, initiatives such as mentorship and sponsorship programs help counteract limited informal access to networks and support structures, which women often lack in male-dominated environments (Smith, 2012; Suraj-Narayan, 2005). Sponsorship, in particular, plays a vital role in making women more visible in promotion processes and ensuring their achievements are recognized and rewarded.

Ultimately, reducing gender bias requires sustained organizational commitment to cultural change. By acknowledging the presence of implicit stereotypes, redesigning evaluation systems to minimize subjectivity, and promoting leadership diversity as a strategic priority, organizations can mitigate barriers that perpetuate the glass ceiling and create pathways for women to advance based on competence rather than gendered expectations (Bohnet, 2016; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore and analyze the experiences of Iranian women who encounter the glass ceiling in professional environments. It seeks to uncover the invisible barriers that restrict women's career advancement and limit their access to leadership roles in both public and private sectors in Iran.

To achieve this, a qualitative research method was adopted, allowing an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and feelings regarding gender inequality in the workplace. Quantitative approaches would not have captured the subtle emotions, cultural influences, and personal struggles embedded in these experiences; therefore, a qualitative design was considered the most appropriate.

Through one-to-one semi-structured interviews, the research aimed to examine how women perceive gender bias, cultural norms, and organizational structures that hinder professional growth. The study also focused on the strategies women employ to navigate these barriers, and the emotional and social consequences they face while doing so.

A phenomenological approach was employed, as it captures the essence of experience and interprets how individuals make meaning of their reality. According to McLeod (2024), phenomenological research allows the researcher to explore participants' "unique and primordial meanings," making it well-suited for understanding the subjective dimensions of Iranian women's experiences under the glass ceiling.

### ***3.1 Data Collection***

Data were collected through interviews with professional Iranian women from diverse occupational backgrounds, including law, accounting, education, healthcare, and managerial roles in private and public sectors. This diversity allowed for a broader exploration of how gender barriers manifest across various fields.

Interview questions were developed based on key themes in the literature on gender inequality, glass ceiling theory, and Gender Structure Theory, drawing particularly on the foundational work of Cotter et al. (2001) on the glass ceiling effect and Eagly and Carli's (2007) leadership labyrinth framework, which together provide the primary conceptual basis for identifying the barriers explored in this study. The questions

mainly covered ten main areas: cultural norms, career progression challenges, workplace bias, work-life balance, representation and mentorship, pay inequality, male-dominated environments, organizational policies, the glass ceiling at different career stages, and strategies for overcoming barriers.

Most interviews were conducted in Persian, the participants' native language, to ensure natural expression and comfort, then they were translated into English with careful attention to preserving cultural and emotional nuances; and some were carried out in English. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes. Participants were informed about the academic and confidential nature of the research, and informed consent was obtained before recording. They were also reminded of their right to withdraw at any time.

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom and/or WhatsApp video between September and November 2025. All interviews were audio / video recorded and later transcribed. Persian transcripts which were translated into English by the researcher along with the transcripts of English interviews, formed the basis for the thematic analysis. They provided consistency across topics while allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on personally significant experiences.

All collected materials (audio files, transcripts, and notes) were stored securely in encrypted digital formats. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Izmir University of Economics (Approval No: E-97429853-050.04-96108 dated: 27.03.2025). Participants' identities were protected through anonymization, and coded names were used throughout the transcripts and data analysis.

To ensure alignment between the study's research aims and the qualitative data collection process, the interview questions were developed directly from dominant themes identified in the literature on gender inequality, the glass ceiling, and Gender Structure Theory. Table 1 presents the full set of interview questions, along with the frequency with which participants referred to each theme during the interviews. This provides a clear overview of the thematic relevance and analytical significance of each category within the dataset.

Table 1. Interview Questions, Themes, and Academic Justification

| Theme                                           | Interview Question(s)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Cultural and Social Norms</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do cultural and societal views on gender roles affect women's opportunities at work, especially in leadership?</li> <li>• Are there cultural or religious factors that influenced your career opportunities?</li> </ul> |
| <b>2. Challenges to Career Progression</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you feel you have the same chances as everyone else to progress in your career?</li> <li>• What challenges have you faced in moving up to leadership roles?</li> </ul>                                                   |
| <b>3. Gender Bias &amp; Workplace Culture</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you noticed gender bias at work? Can you give examples?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>4. Work–Life Balance &amp; Flexibility</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does work–life balance affect your opportunities for promotion?</li> <li>• Do family expectations influence your career decisions?</li> </ul>                                                                               |
| <b>5. Representation &amp; Mentorship</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How important is it to see women in leadership?</li> <li>• Do you have mentors or role models who helped you?</li> </ul>                                                                                                    |
| <b>6. Pay Gap &amp; Salary Negotiation</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you seen differences in salary between men and women?</li> <li>• What has been your experience with salary negotiations?</li> </ul>                                                                                    |
| <b>7. Male-Dominated Environments</b>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What strategies helped you succeed in a male-dominated workplace?</li> <li>• Have you faced resistance from male colleagues?</li> </ul>                                                                                     |
| <b>8. Organizational Policies &amp; Support</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What policies could help women overcome workplace barriers?</li> <li>• Are current diversity policies effective?</li> </ul>                                                                                                 |
| <b>9. Glass Ceiling at Career Stages</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When did you first notice the presence of a glass ceiling?</li> <li>• Does it become more visible at higher levels?</li> </ul>                                                                                              |
| <b>10. Overcoming Barriers</b>                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What helped you overcome challenges in your career?</li> <li>• What should organizations do to support women?</li> </ul>                                                                                                    |

### 3.2 Sample

In qualitative research, the primary aim of sampling is to obtain rich, detailed, and meaningful insights into the phenomenon under study, rather than numerical representation. Depth and quality of data are prioritized, enabling a comprehensive understanding of participants experiences. As Gill (2020) notes, qualitative sampling seeks narratives that capture the complexity of social reality.

Accordingly, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted, selecting Iranian women with substantial professional experience who had encountered visible or subtle forms of gender-based discrimination. A total of 15 Iranian professional women participated in the study. They represented a range of sectors including law, accounting, education, healthcare, and private industry. Each participant had at least five years of professional experience, and their ages ranged from 25 to 60. All were university-educated and held positions from entry-level to senior roles.

The diversity of the sample enabled the researcher to examine how the glass ceiling operates differently across industries while also identifying shared experiences among women regardless of sector. As not all participants were fluent in English, most interviews were conducted in Persian to ensure authenticity and depth of response.

Table 2. Demographic and Professional Profile of Participants

| Participants | Age Range | Sector            | Position / Role        | Years in profession |
|--------------|-----------|-------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| P1           | 35–40     | Human Resource    | IT Specialist/ Clerk   | 21                  |
| P2           | 30–35     | Medical Care      | Nurse                  | 10                  |
| P3           | 25–30     | Bank              | Clerk                  | 7                   |
| P4           | 40–45     | University        | Lecturer               | 12                  |
| P5           | 50–55     | Education         | Teacher                | 27                  |
| P6           | 50–55     | University        | Head of Department     | 15                  |
| P7           | 25–30     | Project Organizer | Clerk                  | 5                   |
| P8           | 50–55     | Judiciary         | Lawyer                 | 14                  |
| P9           | 40–45     | Art               | Painter and Researcher | 11                  |

|     |        |                                   |                     |    |
|-----|--------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|----|
| P10 | 55-60  | Education                         | Lecturer            | 28 |
| P11 | 40-45  | Administrative                    | Educational Manager | 21 |
| P12 | 25-30  | International Logistic<br>Company | Employee            | 7  |
| P13 | 40-45  | Media                             | Journalist          | 20 |
| P14 | 50-55  | Mining Firm                       | Commercial Manager  | 15 |
| P15 | 40- 45 | University                        | Lecturer            | 20 |

All participants provided rich insights into how gender expectations, workplace cultures, and family responsibilities intersect to create structural barriers for women's advancement.

The interview data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, following the six-step framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected because it systematically identifies, organizes, and interprets patterns of meaning within qualitative data, making it especially suitable for studies exploring subjective experiences. All interviews were first transcribed verbatim and repeatedly reviewed to ensure close familiarity with the content. During initial readings, key phrases, recurrent expressions, and emotional signals were highlighted. Open coding was then applied to capture initial ideas and recurring patterns. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories, from which overarching themes were generated.

The analysis involved both descriptive and interpretive coding. Descriptive coding reflected participants' explicit statements, whereas interpretive coding examined underlying meanings and socio-cultural implications. To enhance trustworthiness and validity, a sample of transcripts was re-examined by a second academic reviewer, and interpretations were discussed to reduce researcher bias. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process, with the researcher acknowledging her positionality as a woman and MBA student studying gender dynamics within the Iranian context.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings derived from semi-structured interviews with fifteen Iranian professional women working across diverse sectors, including education, journalism, logistic, banking, law, art/ graphic design, in private or public sector. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic approach, which involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, clustering codes into potential themes, reviewing and refining themes, and producing a coherent analytic narrative. A phenomenological lens guided the interpretation, emphasizing participants' experiences and the meanings they attribute to gendered inequalities in their workplaces (McLeod, 2011).

Building on this methodological foundation, the thematic analysis sought to remain closely aligned with participants' narratives, allowing themes to emerge inductively while also being interpreted within the broader theoretical frameworks of gender studies. The iterative reading and re-reading of transcripts enabled the researcher to identify subtle patterns, contradictions, and recurring motifs within women's accounts of discrimination, resilience, and organizational cultures. This process helped ensure that the findings remained grounded in participants' own words while also reflecting the deeper social and structural mechanisms shaping their experiences (Nowell et al., 2017).

The phenomenological orientation of the study further enriched this process by prioritizing the subjective and emotional dimensions of women's accounts. Rather than treating discrimination as a purely structural issue, this approach allowed the researcher to explore how gendered barriers are *felt*, internalized, and negotiated in everyday professional contexts. This emphasis on meaning-making aligns with contemporary feminist qualitative research, which conceptualizes lived experience as a critical site for understanding how social inequalities are reproduced and resisted (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Gilligan, 2015).

Additionally, the multi-sector composition of the sample strengthened the analytical depth of the study by revealing both shared and domain-specific patterns of inequality. Although participants worked in diverse professions, their narratives converged around common constraints such as gendered expectations, discriminatory norms, limited mobility, and the emotional burden of navigating male-dominated environments.

At the same time, sector-specific nuances emerged; for example, women in law and banking described more formalized barriers linked to hierarchical promotion systems, whereas women in design and media highlighted the impact of informal networks and cultural stereotypes. These cross-sectoral insights contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how gender inequality operates across organizational contexts in Iran (Tlaiss, 2014; Bahrami, 2022).

The themes were interpreted through the lens of Gender Structure Theory (Risman, 2004, 2018), which conceptualizes gender as a multi-level social structure operating at institutional, interactional, and individual levels. This theoretical framework supported a more comprehensive understanding of how gendered inequalities are embedded both in organizational systems and in everyday professional interactions.

Gender Structure Theory was particularly valuable for articulating how these levels interact dynamically rather than functioning as isolated categories. At the institutional level, organizational practices, policies, and hierarchical norms shape women's access to leadership positions and opportunities for advancement. These structures operate alongside interactional processes, where gendered expectations influence daily workplace encounters, communication patterns, and decisions made by supervisors or colleagues (Risman, 2018; West & Zimmerman, 2009). This multi-level approach made it possible to trace how small, routine interactions cumulatively reinforce broader systemic inequalities.

Furthermore, the theory illuminated how individual experiences are not merely personal but reflect internalized social norms that shape self-perception, confidence, and professional aspirations. Women's narratives frequently demonstrated this interactional-individual relationship, as many participants described adjusting their behavior or suppressing ambition to fit gendered expectations within their organizations. Such patterns reflect Risman's (2018) argument that gender operates as both a constraint and a structure within which individuals negotiate their identities and choices. This lens allowed the researcher to connect personal accounts of hesitation, self-doubt, or adaptive strategies to broader socio-cultural forces that define "appropriate" femininity in the Iranian context (Ramezani et al., 2021).

Moreover, applying Gender Structure Theory facilitated the identification of interconnected pressures across the institutional, interpersonal, and personal domains. For example, when participants described being excluded from male-dominated networks, this interactional barrier was linked not only to discriminatory workplace cultures but

also to institutional norms and individual-level outcomes, such as reduced confidence or slower career advancement. This aligns with scholarly work emphasizing the need for multi-layered analysis to reveal how gendered constraints accumulate over time (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Tlaiss, 2014). Overall, the theory provided an integrative framework that captured the complexity of women's experiences and demonstrated how the glass ceiling is sustained by the ongoing interaction of structural, cultural, and personal forces.

As Risman (2018) explains, gender structures are continually reproduced and reshaped through routine practices and institutional expectations. Therefore, understanding women's career experiences requires examining how personal choices and coping strategies interact with broader cultural and structural constraints. Applying this theoretical perspective made it possible to connect women's personal narratives of discrimination, stalled advancement, and subtle exclusion to wider sociocultural and institutional forces that sustain the glass ceiling in Iranian workplaces.

Additionally, the application of this framework helped to highlight the intensify nature of gender inequality across women's career trajectories. Many participants described subtle but repeated instances of marginalization such as being excluded from male networking spaces, being assigned supportive rather than strategic tasks, or receiving muted feedback compared to male colleagues, which gradually restricted their opportunities for advancement. These everyday experiences reflect the ongoing reproduction of gender norms at the interactional level but also underscore how deeply embedded institutional cultures normalize male privilege in leadership pipelines (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Tlaiss, 2014). By situating these experiences within Gender Structure Theory, the analysis reveals that the glass ceiling is not the result of isolated discriminatory acts, but rather a systemic pattern arising from the interaction of personal, interpersonal, and structural forces that collectively constrain women's professional mobility in Iran.

Through thematic analysis, four overarching themes and several subthemes were identified:

1. Cultural and Social Norms
2. Challenges to Career Progression and Overcoming Barriers
3. Gender Bias & Workplace Culture
4. Male-Dominated Environments

The following sections present each theme and subtheme in detail, supported by verbatim quotations from participants' interviews.

Table 3. Interview Themes frequency in participants' answers

| Theme                                | Frequency | Strength    |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| 1. Cultural and Social Norms         | 14/15     | Very High   |
| 2. Challenges to Career Progression  | 15/15     | Strongest   |
| 3. Gender Bias & Workplace Culture   | 14/15     | Very High   |
| 4. Work–Life Balance & Flexibility   | 12/15     | High        |
| 5. Representation & Mentorship       | 8/15      | Medium      |
| 6. Pay Gap & Salary Negotiation      | 9/15      | Medium      |
| 7. Male-Dominated Environments       | 13/15     | Very High   |
| 8. Organizational Policies & Support | 10/15     | Medium–High |
| 9. Glass Ceiling at Career Stages    | 11/15     | High        |
| 10. Overcoming Barriers              | 14/15     | Very High   |

#### ***4.1 Cultural and Social Norms***

##### ***4.1.1 Traditional Gender Norms and Perceptions***

Participants consistently emphasized that cultural and social expectations continue to shape perceptions of women's capabilities in professional environments. Although women have become more visible across sectors, many participants reported that leadership is still viewed as inherently masculine, and behaviors considered “strong” when displayed by men are often interpreted negatively when shown by women.

Participants highlighted these double standards in communication and behavior.

As one participant expressed:

“In Iran, there is a strong belief that women must stay at home to be mothers or manage the household. That is often seen as the highest level of leadership women can have.” (P14)

These accounts illustrate that traditional gender norms continue to act as invisible boundaries. Women felt pressure to adjust their tone, emotional expression, and communication style to avoid being judged as “aggressive” or “difficult,” creating a persistent psychological burden.

One participant summarized this challenge by saying:

“In many situations, you must behave very carefully as a woman because people quickly judge you if you are direct or firm.” (P6)

The other one added: “Even in companies that look modern, you can still feel traditional thinking, there is always this idea that men are naturally better leaders and women should just follow.” (P12)

P11 believed that “In Iran, people still have this view that women should stay at home and be mothers. They don’t see women as leaders, so they question your ability immediately.”

Supporting this, P2 from the nursing sector described similar gendered assumptions rooted in cultural and religious context: “Cultural and religious beliefs prioritize women’s roles as wives and mothers over their professional careers.” She further emphasized unequal expectations around competence: “Gender stereotypes suggest women cannot make logical decisions under pressure.”

While vice versa to these participants, P10 claimed:

“In my university, they say women are more organized, more precise, more patient. That’s why many people prefer female faculty heads.”

P15 spoke directly about cultural expectations and self-limitation shaped by society and emphasized how cultural expectations shape women’s choices from a young age. She explained that the jobs she pursued were those that were “accepted by society for a girl,” noting, “I was allowed to have this job because it was endorsed by the society for women” (P15). She added that even when families appear supportive, cultural and religious norms subtly guide which roles women are encouraged to take, highlighting how gender expectations influence career paths long before entering leadership tracks (P15).

#### ***4.1.2 societal views on gender roles along with cultural or religious factors***

Several participants emphasized that societal views on gender roles, deeply shaped by cultural and religious norms, strongly influence how women's behavior is interpreted in the workplace. They explained that expectations about modesty, emotional restraint, and deference, which are often culturally prescribed for women, create a double standard in professional settings. Behaviors viewed as appropriate or even admirable in men, such as assertiveness or decisiveness, were frequently interpreted as emotional, aggressive, or inappropriate when displayed by women. Participants noted that these societal expectations extend into workplace communication, where even neutral or task-oriented statements can be judged negatively if voiced by a woman, compelling many to closely monitor their tone, expressions, and word choice. Such dynamics reinforce traditional gender norms that associate authority and rationality with men, while positioning women as compliant and soft-spoken. As a result, women described a constant need for self-regulation to avoid cultural or religiously influenced judgments, illustrating how broader social beliefs continue to shape professional interactions and constrain women's ability to express themselves freely.

As one participant explained, "In many workplaces, women's ideas are not readily accepted. Even if I suggest a program or calculate its costs carefully, management often challenges it. If a man suggested the same thing, it would be much easier for them to accept it." (P7)

The other one highlighted this contrast directly:

"If I talk firmly in a meeting, they say I am emotional, but when a man talks the same way, they say he is strong." (P13)

Cultural and religious norms were frequently described as barriers shaping women's professional opportunities. Participants working in legal and governmental sectors, in particular, explained that traditional expectations regarding women's roles continue to influence perceptions of their career commitment and suitability for leadership.

These norms frame women's primary identity as caregivers, limiting how employers evaluate their long-term potential. As one participant stated:

"In our culture, a woman's role as a mother is always seen as more important than her job. People believe a woman should prioritize family before any career ambitions." (P8)

This illustrates how culturally embedded gender expectations, rooted in wider social and religious norms, shape daily interactions and influence how women's professional identities are constructed and evaluated.

## ***4.2 Challenges to Career Progression and Overcoming Barriers***

### ***4.2.1 Unequal Promotion Practices***

A second major theme centered on structural inequalities within organizations, which participants described as ongoing and deeply rooted in workplace culture. These inequalities were not experienced as isolated incidents but rather as recurring patterns that shaped daily professional life. Participants frequently mentioned that leadership roles, promotions, and high-visibility assignments were systematically offered to men, even when female employees had higher levels of experience or stronger performance records. Many expressed that advancement opportunities seemed predetermined, with men being viewed as the “natural” choice for positions involving authority or strategic decision-making. P1 shared that even after 18 years of experience, she remained stuck: “I’ve been working eighteen years, and I’m still at the specialist level. If I were a man, I’d probably be a manager by now.”

Others had nearly the same experience:

“Even when I worked harder than men, I wasn’t chosen because they said a woman shouldn’t be in that position. They always preferred a man.” (P11)

“I saw exhibitions and opportunities go to men even when women had more expertise; our opinions were questioned, and theirs were accepted immediately.” (P9)

In addition, participants noted that organizational processes surrounding evaluation and promotion often lacked transparency, making it difficult to challenge or understand the basis of these decisions and since women were frequently excluded from these spaces, their accomplishments were overlooked, and they were less likely to be considered for advancement. These structural barriers created long-term limitations on career growth and contributed to feelings of frustration, diminished motivation, and a reduced sense of organizational fairness.

One participant described her experience:

“I have been in my industry for ten years, but promotions always go to men, even the ones with less experience.” (P13)

Another reinforced this perspective:

“I did all the work of a head trainer, but they replaced me with a young man I had trained myself.” (P3)

These examples highlight a pattern in which women's contributions are recognized less, and advancement opportunities remain limited.

#### ***4.2.2 Informal Networks and Exclusion from Decision-Making***

While explicit discrimination was rare, participants noted that exclusion often occurred in subtle ways through informal networks, limited access to key conversations, and assumptions about gender roles. Many women emphasized that important decisions or opportunities were frequently shaped in spaces outside formal meetings such as social gatherings, private conversations, or male-dominated networks, from which they were not invited or did not feel welcome. These informal dynamics created an environment in which men were more visible to decision-makers and more likely to be considered for leadership roles or high-impact projects. Participants also described how gendered expectations caused colleagues to overlook women for tasks requiring authority or strategic insight, assuming instead that they would be better suited for supportive or administrative responsibilities. Over time, these subtle forms of exclusion accumulated, limiting women's influence and participation in organizational decision-making and reinforcing systemic disparities in career advancement.

As one participant stated:

“The important conversations happen outside the office, and women aren’t invited.”  
(P5)

Another one mentioned: “Men always gather together, and in those moments decisions happen. Because I couldn’t sit with them, they never saw me, and I lost many chances.” (P11)

These reflections highlight the significant impact that exclusion from informal, male-dominated networks has on women's access to influence and decision-making power. Participants noted that crucial conversations, strategic planning, and relationship-building often happened in settings outside formal meetings, such as after-work gatherings, casual social events, or private discussions, in which women were either not invited or did not feel welcome. Because these informal environments function as hidden arenas of power, being excluded meant that women were less visible, less informed, and less likely to be perceived as natural candidates for leadership roles. As a result, their contributions remained unnoticed, and they were frequently overlooked for advancement opportunities and important assignments. This dynamic illustrates how subtle, everyday practices can reinforce broader organizational inequalities.

P15 provided a clear example of exclusion within male-dominated informal networks. Describing her experience in a university department, she noted that male colleagues formed a close-knit group that left female instructors feeling isolated: “It was a small group of men being close to each other... the rest of us felt marginalized” (P15). She added that this exclusion created a sense of not belonging, saying, “I felt like I don’t belong in this workplace” (P15), reflecting how informal power structures reinforce gendered inequalities even when formal discrimination is not apparent. Such informal barriers restrict women’s visibility and influence in strategic processes.

#### ***4.2.3. Pay Inequality***

Concerns about unequal pay were also common among participants. Several reported discovering significant wage differences only by coincidence, often through informal conversations or accidental disclosures rather than transparent organizational processes. This lack of clarity around compensation created uncertainty and frustration, as women felt they were contributing equally, or even more, yet receiving less recognition in financial terms. Participants emphasized that pay disparities were rarely acknowledged openly, making it difficult to raise concerns without fearing negative reactions or being labeled as confrontational.

In addition, many participants expressed that unequal pay was not only a financial issue but also a symbolic one, reflecting broader inequalities in how their work was valued. Some described feeling discouraged when learning that male colleagues with less experience or lower responsibilities earned more, interpreting it as a message that their effort and expertise were undervalued. Others highlighted that compensation inequality affected their long-term career growth, reducing motivation and diminishing their trust in organizational fairness. These accounts underscore that wage disparities reinforce existing gender hierarchies and contribute to a wider sense of professional inequity.

One participant shared:

“I found out by accident that a man with less experience earns more than me.” (P14)

Another mentioned: “On paper everything looks equal, but in reality, men always have the upper hand, promotions, support, even being taken seriously in meetings.” (P12)

P11 was upset and said: “When I asked for a higher salary, they said, ‘You’re not married, you don’t need more money.’ They never say this to men.”

These reflections indicate that organizational structures may reinforce gender disparities through untransparent compensation practices.

### ***4.3. Gender Bias & Workplace Culture***

#### ***4.3.1. Conflicting Expectations in Professional and Domestic Roles***

Many participants described significant challenges in balancing professional responsibilities with culturally rooted expectations around domestic duties, explaining that these pressures operated simultaneously and often without acknowledgment from their workplaces. While men were admired for long work hours and seen as hardworking or ambitious, women reported being questioned or criticized for the same behavior, with colleagues and even supervisors implying that their professional dedication came at the expense of family obligations. Participants emphasized that this double standard made it difficult to fully commit to career advancement without facing judgment, as assumptions about caregiving were often projected onto them regardless of their actual family status. Several women noted that even the possibility of future motherhood shaped how their capabilities were assessed, leading to doubts about their reliability, availability, or long-term commitment. These experiences created a constant emotional tension, as women felt compelled to demonstrate their professionalism at work while simultaneously being held responsible for maintaining traditional domestic roles at home. This dual burden reinforced gendered expectations and contributed to a persistent imbalance in how men's and women's work efforts were perceived and valued.

One participant stated:

“When a man stays late, they call him hardworking, but when I stay late, they ask who will take care of my family.” (P4)

Another said:

“They didn’t promote me because they said I might have children soon.” (P8)

These show how workplace judgments are shaped less by women’s actual performance and more by cultural assumptions about their expected domestic responsibilities. Participants described being judged not on their performance, but on expectations that they should prioritize family responsibilities over professional ambitions. Working late, a behavior praised in men, was interpreted as a sign of neglecting family when done by women, reinforcing the belief that caregiving is their primary duty. Similarly, the assumption that women are likely to become mothers was used to justify withholding promotions, even before pregnancy occurred. Together, these accounts show how

gendered expectations create structural barriers that limit women's career progression regardless of their actual choices or capabilities.

P2 similarly described how long, inflexible hours intensified strain for women:

"Long shifts create physical and emotional stress... women lack opportunities for rest or family time."

P10 emphasized that "Women have children, housework, so many responsibilities. Sometimes nothing is left of them."

P15 highlighted the unequal expectations surrounding caregiving responsibilities, noting that women are often expected to prioritize family regardless of their workloads. She explained that even when her child was seriously ill, she felt unable to miss work: "My child had a fever of 40 degrees, but I was the one who went to work. My husband stayed home instead" (P15). She reflected that while men can openly miss work for family reasons, women "cannot say I can't do this because I'm a mother," revealing how internalized pressure reinforces structural inequalities. These reflections show how assumptions about women's personal lives and future motherhood continue to influence their professional paths.

#### ***4.3.2. Work-Home Role Conflict***

Participants repeatedly emphasized the strain of managing full-time professional and domestic responsibilities. Many explained that the expectations placed on them at home did not decrease when their workload increased, resulting in a continuous cycle of obligations that left little room for rest or personal time. Several women described feeling as though they were fulfilling two separate jobs each day, one in the workplace and one within the household, both of which demanded high levels of energy and attention. This constant balancing act created feelings of exhaustion and pressure, reinforcing the sense that women were expected to excel professionally while simultaneously maintaining traditional domestic roles without additional support.

As one summarized: "Women work a full-time job at home and another full-time job at work." (P3); and another said "My male colleagues can work until ten at night, but I can't, I must go home, cook, take care of everything, and then come back to work again." (P8); while P1 described extreme limitations in taking time off: "In eighteen years, I've never taken a full ten days of vacation. Men do it all the time."

These perceptions reveal that work-life balance remains a significant challenge due to structural and cultural expectations.

#### ***4.4. Male-Dominated Environments***

#### ***4.4.1. Overcompensation and Increased Effort***

Despite facing systemic challenges, participants described a range of strategies they developed to adapt and resist. Many emphasized that navigating the workplace required constant awareness, emotional regulation, and deliberate communication choices to counteract gendered assumptions. Some participants explained that they became highly strategic about how and when to express their opinions, anticipating how their words might be interpreted differently compared to their male colleagues. Others relied on building supportive peer networks or seeking mentorship from women in higher positions to cope with exclusionary practices and reinforce their sense of belonging. These strategies functioned as both practical tools for survival and subtle forms of resistance within organizational structures that often overlooked or undervalued women's contributions:

"I had to work ten times harder than my male colleagues to prove myself." (P5)

"Even if your family supports you, society may still doubt your abilities. They may not want to give you responsibility or managerial roles simply because you are a woman." (P14)

P1 explained her long-term strategy: "I focus on professional growth, new skills, new certifications, whatever makes me stronger."

Many participants also believed they had to work harder than male colleagues to be perceived as equally competent. They described exerting additional effort to avoid mistakes, demonstrate reliability, or exceed expectations, knowing that their performance was more closely scrutinized. This pressure to constantly prove themselves created a heightened sense of responsibility and, at times, emotional fatigue. Several women noted that while this extra effort sometimes led to recognition, it more often became an unacknowledged requirement placed upon them simply because of their gender. These reflections highlight how women continually adapt to systemic biases by increasing their workload, even when the inequities that necessitate such effort remain unaddressed.

One participant explained:

"I always had to work harder than men to prove I was serious." (P14)

Some emphasized:

"You can't make mistakes, because they judge women more quickly." (P6); "I had to become tougher when I go to work, I leave my softness at the door because otherwise people don't take me seriously." (P8), and P2 described similar self-driven efforts

and the importance of support networks: “I focus on improving knowledge and skills... asserting equality in teamwork.”

These reflections demonstrate that women carry an added performance pressure in their professional roles.

#### ***4.4.2. Peer Support and Solidarity***

Several women described forming informal support networks to navigate workplace challenges and share experiences, emphasizing that these relationships often served as critical sources of emotional strength, validation, and practical guidance. Participants explained that connecting with other women who faced similar obstacles helped them feel less isolated and provided a sense of solidarity in environments where they felt overlooked or undervalued. These networks were described as spaces where women could openly discuss unfair treatment, strategize about how to handle difficult situations, and encourage one another to pursue opportunities that might otherwise feel inaccessible. In some cases, these connections evolved into mentorship-style relationships that offered advice on career advancement, coping with bias, or building confidence in male-dominated settings. Overall, participants viewed these informal networks as essential tools for resilience, compensating for the lack of institutional support and helping them maintain their motivation and sense of belonging within the organization.

As one said:

“We support each other because the system doesn’t support us.” (P9)

P1 echoed this insight:

“Companies need cultural change, not just policies. True support for women requires challenging entrenched gender biases.”

P2 described her view as follows:

“If companies had childcare, food service, support systems, it would be easier for women. Women need organized support.”

Such networks functioned as emotional and practical resources in environments perceived as unsupportive or inequitable.

#### ***4.4.3. Advocacy for Visibility and Recognition***

Participants also highlighted the need for structural change, emphasizing that individual coping strategies could only go so far in addressing the challenges they faced. Many noted that personal strength, resilience, and extra effort were insufficient to overcome systemic inequalities that were embedded in organizational cultures and

decision-making processes. They explained that while women often adapt, work harder, or find creative ways to navigate biases, these efforts do not eliminate the underlying structures that privilege men. Several participants stressed that without organizational reforms like transparent promotion systems, equitable leadership pipelines, and mechanisms to address gender bias, women would continue to face barriers regardless of their qualifications or commitment. This perspective reflects a broader call for institutions to move beyond expecting women to compensate for inequality and instead take responsibility for creating fair and inclusive workplaces.

One participant summarized:

“Women are ready to lead; they just need the chance to be seen and heard.” (P12)

Another one believed:

“My knowledge was always my biggest weapon. I made sure I knew more than everyone else; that was how I stayed ahead in male-dominated spaces.” (P14)

This statement reflects a broader call for organizations to re-evaluate practices, challenge biases, and create environments in which women’s leadership is recognized and supported.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter provides an in-depth interpretation of the findings presented in Chapter 4 through the lens of Gender Structure Theory (Risman, 2004, 2018), the glass ceiling literature, and broader feminist scholarship. While Chapter 4 detailed the experiences of Iranian professional women, this chapter situates those findings within existing theoretical and empirical debates, highlighting the implications for gender inequality, organizational practices, and the socio-cultural environment in Iran. The discussion emphasizes how gendered constraints emerge and interact across institutional, interactional, and individual levels, reinforcing persistent barriers to women's advancement. It also outlines theoretical contributions, practical implications, and future directions for research.

The results of this study align with a substantial body of research documenting the persistence of gender inequality in professional settings. Across sectors, participants experienced gendered expectations, discriminatory organizational structures, work-life conflicts, and the ongoing need to adapt to patriarchal norms. These findings reinforce global literature that describes the glass ceiling not as a single barrier but as a complex system of institutional and cultural constraints (Cotter et al., 2001; Baxter & Wright, 2000; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The themes also support research showing that women must work harder, self-monitor more closely, and strategically navigate professional spaces in ways not required of their male peers (Hoobler et al., 2011; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). This aligns with Eagly and Karau's (2002) role incongruity theory, which argues that leadership expectations conflict with cultural stereotypes of femininity, producing biased evaluations of women's competence and behavior.

In the Iranian context, the findings echo previous studies documenting how cultural norms, religious expectations, and structural gender roles constrain women's career progression and shape perceptions of their suitability for leadership (Tlaiss, 2014; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2019; Bagheri et al., 2022). These findings highlight the importance of interpreting gender inequality within broader socio-cultural frameworks rather than viewing it solely as an organizational issue.

### ***5.1 Cultural and Social Expectations Through Gender Structure Theory***

Gender Structure Theory conceptualizes gender as a social structure that operates at three interconnected levels: institutional, interactional, and individual (Risman, 2018). The first major theme in Chapter 4, cultural and social norms, reflects the powerful macro-level forces that shape Iranian women's professional experiences.

Traditional norms continue to define leadership as a masculine domain and femininity as inherently softer, emotional, and oriented toward caregiving. These cultural narratives influence hiring decisions, leadership evaluations, and interpersonal interactions, reinforcing the expectation that women should remain modest, compliant, and non-confrontational (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The findings demonstrate how macro-level ideologies filter into everyday workplace judgments, resulting in women being scrutinized more harshly than men for identical behaviors.

These cultural expectations also intersect with religious interpretations of women's roles, which further frame domestic responsibilities (motherhood, caregiving, emotional labor) as central to women's identities (Moghadam, 2004; Al-Ahmadi, 2011). As a result, women's career aspirations are frequently questioned, and their professional achievements undervalued. Even in modern organizations, these underlying norms persist, revealing the resilience of gender ideologies despite social and economic modernization.

Furthermore, several participants internalized these cultural messages earlier in life, affecting their confidence, career choices, and leadership ambitions. This internalization reflects the individual dimension of Gender Structure Theory, showing how gendered ideologies shape women's self-perceptions before they encounter organizational barriers. As Risman (2018) argues, individuals often reproduce gender expectations not because they consciously believe in them, but because these norms are deeply embedded in socialization processes.

#### ***5.1.1 Organizational Barriers, Discrimination, and the Glass Ceiling***

The findings show that Iranian workplaces continue to reproduce gender inequality through their structures, norms, and decision-making processes. These barriers reflect the institutional level of gender structure, where formal and informal systems restrict women's access to leadership roles.

Unequal promotion practices, described by participants across sectors, mirror global evidence that women face biased evaluations, lack access to high-visibility projects, and experience slower advancement even when equally or more qualified (Hoobler et

al., 2011; Sharma & Kaur, 2019a). Promotion criteria are often vague and subject to subjective judgments that favor men, especially in hierarchical environments typical of banking, law, or public administration.

Informal male networks emerged as a major barrier. Decisions occurring in private conversations, after-hours gatherings, or male-only spaces excluded women from critical opportunities for visibility and leadership consideration. This finding aligns with Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism, which explains how women's minority status in leadership pipelines reinforces their marginalization. Informal networks operate as gatekeeping mechanisms that regulate access to power, even when formal policies appear gender-neutral (Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

Pay inequality, although difficult to quantify due to salary opacity, clearly persists. Participants' experiences reflect global patterns in which structural discrimination, negotiation bias, and gendered assumptions about financial need create wage gaps (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Babcock & Laschever, 2003). In Iran, cultural beliefs that men are primary breadwinners intensify these disparities and justify unequal compensation.

Overall, organizational practices in Iran reinforce the glass ceiling described by Cotter et al. (2001), whereby invisible structural barriers accumulate across the career path, preventing women from advancing despite merit and effort. These structural constraints undermine women's professional aspirations and contribute to long-term gender disparities in leadership.

### ***5.1.2 Work-Life Balance and the Gendered Division of Labor***

The findings illustrate how deeply gendered expectations around domestic responsibilities limit women's career opportunities. Many participants reported being evaluated not only based on their performance but according to assumptions about their availability, family obligations, and potential motherhood.

This reflects existing literature showing that employers often perceive women as less committed or less flexible due to caregiving roles, even in the absence of actual family responsibilities (Marinakou, 2014; Williams, 2014). Participants experienced doubts about their suitability for promotion because they might have children, illustrating the anticipatory discrimination well documented in gender studies.

The double workload, full-time employment combined with disproportionate domestic labor, has been widely recognized as a key barrier to women's advancement (Hochschild, 1997; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Despite shifts toward modern lifestyles,

Iranian households often maintain traditional divisions of labor, with women carrying the responsibility of maintaining the household alongside their professional duties.

This imbalance contributes to emotional exhaustion, reduced time for career development, and a diminished ability to engage in networking or leadership preparation. These findings demonstrate how macro-level cultural norms and micro-level organizational practices converge to intensify women's workload and restrict long-term career mobility.

### ***5.1.3 Adaptation, Resistance, and Women's Agency***

Despite systemic barriers, women demonstrated remarkable agency and resilience. The strategies they employed (overcompensating, self-monitoring, acquiring additional qualifications, seeking peer support, and asserting themselves strategically) reflect the interactional level of Risman's (2018) framework, where individuals navigate gender norms in real time.

While these strategies allowed women to survive and progress within patriarchal structures, they also highlight how labor-intensive and emotionally costly adaptation can be. Feminist scholars argue that requiring women to modify their behavior to fit male-centered norms reinforces inequality rather than challenging it (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Gilligan, 2015).

Peer support networks emerged as a key resource for emotional resilience and professional encouragement. This mirrors Ragins and Kram's (2007) emphasis on mentorship as critical for navigating gendered environments. However, the reliance on informal support also illustrates the absence of institutional mechanisms that should protect and promote women.

Importantly, several participants recognized the limits of individual adaptation, asserting the need for systemic organizational change. Their perspectives align with contemporary feminist arguments that gender inequality cannot be dismantled solely through women's personal efforts; instead, institutional reforms are necessary to address the root causes of discrimination (Acker, 2006; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016).

## ***5.2 Theoretical Contributions to Gender Structure Theory***

This study extends Gender Structure Theory in several ways.

Firstly, while Risman (2018) describes gender as a structure operating across three levels, this study demonstrates how these levels intersect in particularly complex and mutually reinforcing ways within the Iranian socio-cultural context (Acker, 2006; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Rather than functioning as separate layers, cultural norms,

institutional policies, and individual adaptations form a tightly woven system in which each level strengthens the others (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Cultural expectations around femininity, motherhood, and modesty shape organizational assumptions about women's commitment and leadership potential, which in turn influence workplace policies and everyday interactions (Acker, 2006; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). These institutional practices then feed back into individual choices, leading women to self-monitor, adjust their behavior, or limit their aspirations in anticipation of gendered judgments (Hochschild, 1983; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). As a result, gender inequalities are produced not by a single source but through an interconnected web of norms and structures that operate simultaneously across society, organizations, and personal experience (Acker, 2006; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This multi-level reinforcement helps explain why gendered barriers persist even when women demonstrate high competency, ambition, and resilience (Acker, 2006; Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

Secondly, participants experienced discrimination not on the basis of their current behavior or job performance, but rather on assumptions about their future motherhood or caregiving responsibilities (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). This reveals an important temporal dimension of gender inequality: women are evaluated not only for who they are in the present but for who institutions expect them to become (Williams, 2000). Such anticipatory bias means that decisions about hiring, promotion, and workload distribution are shaped by imagined future scenarios in which women are presumed to be unavailable, distracted, or less committed due to family obligations (Correll et al., 2007; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014). This dynamic adds nuance to institutional-level analysis by illustrating how gender operates across time, extending beyond immediate interactions into speculative projections about women's life trajectories (Risman, 2018). It also highlights how deeply ingrained cultural expectations around motherhood are embedded within organizational decision-making, ultimately restricting women's opportunities long before any actual caregiving demands arise (Correll et al., 2007).

Thirdly, women described the constant need to modulate their tone, behavior, and emotional expression in order to avoid negative judgments (Hochschild, 1983; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). This ongoing self-regulation demonstrates how interactional gender norms become especially intensified within patriarchal cultural contexts, where deviations from expected femininity are more harshly sanctioned (Brescoll, 2016). The

pressure to appear polite, calm, and non-assertive reflects an environment in which women must continually monitor themselves to fit socially acceptable boundaries (Hochschild, 1983). This dynamic reinforces Risman's argument that gender is not merely a structural condition but is actively enacted and reproduced through everyday practices, shaping how women participate in professional spaces and how their competence is perceived over time (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Risman, 2018).

Finally, while Gender Structure Theory emphasizes that individuals possess the capacity to resist or renegotiate gender norms, the findings of this study reveal that such resistance is often constrained by fear of punishment, reputational harm, or further exclusion from opportunities (Risman, 2018; Kandiyoti, 1988). Participants described moments when they wanted to challenge unfair treatment or assert themselves more openly, yet hesitated because doing so could result in being labeled "difficult," overlooked for promotions, or pushed out of influential networks (Rudman, 1998; Catalyst, 2007; Heilman, 2012). In this sense, agency exists, but it is tightly bounded within the institutional and cultural limits that shape acceptable behavior for women (Acker, 2006). This highlights a critical nuance in Risman's framework: the ability to resist gender norms is deeply context-dependent and may be significantly restricted in environments where organizational cultures remain male-dominated and hierarchical (Acker, 2006; Risman, 2018).

These contributions demonstrate the value of applying Gender Structure Theory to Middle Eastern contexts, where gendered ideologies intertwine with cultural, religious, and legal frameworks in distinctive ways.

### ***5.3 Practical and Policy Implications***

The study's findings point to several urgent areas for organizational policies.

Clear criteria can reduce subjective judgments and minimize bias in leadership selection (Bohnet, 2016; Heilman, 2012). When organizations rely on transparent, competency-based standards, decisions are less influenced by personal preferences, gendered assumptions, or informal networks (Castilla, 2008; Acker, 2006). Such structures also provide women with clearer pathways for advancement, allowing them to understand what is required and to challenge unfair practices when expectations are not applied consistently (Bohnet, 2016). In this way, formalized criteria function as a safeguard against the discretionary decision-making processes that often disadvantage women (Acker, 2006; Castilla, 2008).

Formal mentorship and sponsorship programs increase women's visibility and access to leadership pipelines (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010; Hewlett, 2013). By institutionalizing transparent processes and evaluation standards, organizations ensure that women are not overlooked due to informal networks or subjective perceptions of leadership potential (Kram, 1985; Ragins & Kram, 2007). Increased visibility enables women to be considered for strategic roles more equitably, reducing reliance on male-dominated gatekeeping (Hoobler et al., 2011). Over time, such structural reforms help normalize women's presence in leadership trajectories and disrupt patterns that have historically limited their advancement (Ely et al., 2011).

Consistent with this, several participants described how the absence of formal mentorship left advancement decisions dependent on informal relationships, while those who had access to senior advocates reported greater visibility in promotion discussions and project allocation.

Flexible scheduling, parental leave, and childcare support help reduce the strain created by women's dual roles at home and work (Williams, 2000; Eagly & Carli, 2007). These policies acknowledge the unequal distribution of domestic labor and offer concrete mechanisms for reducing its impact on women's professional lives (Hochschild, 1997). By easing time pressures and enabling women to balance caregiving with career responsibilities, such supports function as institutional correctives to cultural expectations that position women as primary caregivers (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014). When implemented consistently and without stigma, these measures can improve retention, reduce burnout, and create more equitable conditions for women's long-term career growth (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). In the interviews, participants frequently noted that flexible arrangements were beneficial only when they did not signal reduced commitment, emphasizing that supportive policies must be paired with cultural acceptance to be effective.

Training can address implicit biases and reshape gendered interactional norms (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006; Bohnet, 2016). Well-designed programs help employees recognize subtle forms of discrimination, challenge automatic stereotypes, and develop more equitable communication practices (Heilman, 2012). By promoting awareness and accountability at the interpersonal level, such training contributes to shifting everyday behaviors that sustain gender hierarchies, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and respectful organizational culture (Acker, 2006).

Some participants described becoming more aware of biased interactional patterns only after organizational discussions or workshops, noting that recognition was a first step toward challenging unequal treatment in meetings and evaluations.

Pay audits, open salary policies, and structured negotiation guidelines help close wage gaps (Blau & Kahn, 2017). Regular audits make disparities visible, enabling organizations to identify patterns of inequity and take corrective action (Castilla, 2008). Transparent salary structures reduce the influence of informal networks or subjective judgments on compensation decisions, while standardized negotiation procedures ensure that women are not disadvantaged by biased assumptions about assertiveness or entitlement (Heilman & Caleo, 2018). Together, these measures create a more accountable compensation system and promote long-term pay equity (ILO, 2020). Participants reported uncertainty about pay-setting criteria and limited access to negotiation information, suggesting that transparency could reduce ambiguity and perceived unfairness.

Organizations must actively eliminate male-only spaces where decisions are made informally (Ibarra, 1993; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). This requires intentionally restructuring social and professional environments so that access to influential conversations is not restricted to men (Bourdieu, 1986). By ensuring that networking events, informal gatherings, and decision-shaping interactions are inclusive and transparent, institutions can prevent the reproduction of gendered power dynamics that marginalize women (Acker, 2006). Creating alternative, mixed-gender spaces for collaboration and discussion strengthens equity and helps redistribute opportunities for visibility, influence, and leadership (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Several women noted that key decisions were often discussed in informal settings from which they felt excluded, reinforcing the importance of inclusive organizational practices.

Implementing such initiatives can create more equitable workplaces and support women's long-term career development.

#### ***5.4 Limitations and Directions for Future Research***

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the research process was affected by unstable internet connections and restricted access to certain digital platforms due to internet filtering in Iran. These technical constraints occasionally interrupted interviews, limited the use of video-based communication, and required rescheduling or alternative communication methods.

Although all interviews were ultimately completed, such disruptions may have influenced the depth of discussion, the flow of interaction, and participants' comfort in sharing sensitive experiences.

Second, the sample size, while appropriate and consistent with the goals of qualitative phenomenological research, limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized beyond the study participants. The sample reflects the experiences of a specific group of Iranian professional women and may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across different regions, organizational types, industries, age groups, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Future research could benefit from including a broader and more diverse participant pool to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gender inequality and the glass ceiling manifest across varied contexts in Iran.

Third, the study relies on self-reported accounts of participants' experiences, which may be subject to recall bias, social desirability bias, or selective interpretation. Participants may consciously or unconsciously emphasize certain experiences while downplaying others. However, this limitation is inherent in qualitative research focused on lived experience, and the use of verbatim quotations and systematic thematic analysis helps preserve authenticity and reduce misinterpretation.

Finally, the study focuses exclusively on women's perspectives in order to center their lived experiences of gender inequality. While this approach provides valuable insights into how women perceive and navigate the glass ceiling, it also means that the perspectives of organizational leaders, male colleagues, human resource managers, and policymakers are not included. Incorporating these viewpoints in future studies could offer a more holistic understanding of how gendered barriers are reproduced or challenged within organizations and could help identify points of intervention from multiple organizational levels.

Future research would benefit from comparative studies between public and private sector organizations to examine how differences in institutional structures and organizational practices influence women's career advancement. Comparing these sectors can help identify whether gender barriers are shaped more strongly by state regulations, organizational culture, or management practices, and can clarify how promotion systems and workplace norms affect women differently across sectors.

Another important area for future research is intersectional analysis that considers factors such as ethnicity, social class, age, or disability alongside gender. Examining these dimensions together would allow researchers to better understand how multiple forms

of inequality overlap and shape women's experiences in the workplace. This approach can reveal differences among women's career paths that may be overlooked when gender is examined in isolation.

Research conducted over time that follows women's career paths across different career stages would provide deeper insight into how gender inequality develops and changes throughout different stages of professional life. Tracking women across multiple years would help identify key moments when barriers emerge, intensify, or shift, and would clarify how early career experiences influence long-term outcomes.

Future studies should also focus on assessing the impact of gender equality policies and organizational practices after they have been implemented. Evaluating initiatives such as mentorship programs, flexible work arrangements, and transparent promotion systems can help determine whether these measures produce meaningful improvements or remain limited in practice. Such assessments are necessary to inform evidence-based policy development.

In addition, examining men's views on gender roles and workplace equality is essential for understanding how organizational cultures are maintained or challenged. Exploring how male employees and managers perceive gender equality efforts can help identify sources of resistance or support and can contribute to the development of more effective strategies for promoting fair and inclusive workplaces.

These would deepen understanding of gendered organizational dynamics and provide a clearer picture of how inequalities are produced, reinforced, and experienced across different workplace contexts. By capturing a wider range of perspectives, researchers can identify more precise leverage points for change and develop interventions tailored to the specific cultural and structural conditions of Iranian organizations. Ultimately, such insights would support the design of policies and practices that more effectively promote gender equity and long-term career advancement for women.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the experiences of Iranian professional women and to examine how gendered inequalities shape their career path within contemporary organizational contexts. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with fifteen women working across diverse sectors, the research investigated how cultural norms, organizational structures, and interpersonal dynamics interact to sustain the glass ceiling. The findings were analyzed through the lens of Gender Structure Theory (Risman, 2004, 2018), which conceptualizes gender as a multi-level social structure operating at institutional, interactional, and individual levels. By integrating women's narratives with this theoretical framework, the study offers a delicate understanding of how gender inequality is produced, experienced, and navigated in Iranian workplaces.

The findings demonstrate that gender inequality is not the result of isolated incidents or individual shortcomings but rather a cumulative and systemic process. Across sectors, participants reported similar challenges related to cultural expectations, discriminatory organizational practices, work-life imbalance, and the ongoing need to adapt to male-dominated professional norms. These experiences confirm that the glass ceiling remains deeply embedded in organizational life, reinforced by both formal policies and informal practices that limit women's access to leadership roles, recognition, and decision-making power.

One of the central conclusions of this study is that cultural and social expectations continue to play a foundational role in shaping women's professional experiences. Participants consistently described leadership as being implicitly associated with masculinity, while femininity was linked to emotionality, caregiving, and compliance. These deeply embedded cultural assumptions influenced how women were evaluated, how their behavior was interpreted, and how their competence was perceived. Even when women demonstrated confidence, assertiveness, or ambition, these traits were often reinterpreted negatively, illustrating the persistence of gendered double standards. This finding underscores the enduring power of cultural norms in shaping workplace dynamics, even within modern or apparently talent-based organizations.

At the institutional level, the study highlights how organizational structures and practices reproduce gender inequality. Participants described unequal promotion practices,

limited access to high-visibility projects, wage disparities, and opaque evaluation systems that favored men. Importantly, discrimination was rarely clear. Instead, it operated through informal mechanisms such as male-dominated networks, subjective judgments, and assumptions about women's future caregiving responsibilities. These findings align with the broader glass ceiling literature, which emphasizes that structural barriers are often subtle, cumulative, and normalized within organizational cultures. The study demonstrates that even when women possess equal or superior qualifications, institutional arrangements continue to privilege men as the "default" leaders.

The interactional level of Gender Structure Theory was particularly evident in participants' accounts of everyday workplace interactions. Women described the constant need to monitor their tone, emotional expression, and communication style in order to avoid being labeled as aggressive, emotional, or unprofessional. This ongoing self-regulation reflects how gender is enacted and reinforced through routine practices, rather than through formal rules alone. Interactional norms shaped women's participation in meetings, their willingness to speak up, and their perceived legitimacy as leaders. Over time, these micro-level dynamics accumulated, contributing to reduced visibility, limited influence, and slower career progression.

A significant contribution of this study lies in its examination of work-life balance and domestic pressures as structural constraints rather than personal challenges. Participants consistently emphasized that women are expected to carry primary responsibility for household labor and caregiving, regardless of their professional commitments. These expectations shaped organizational decisions, with women being judged not on actual performance but on presumed future roles as mothers or caregivers. This anticipatory discrimination illustrates how gender operates temporally, affecting women's careers based on imagined future responsibilities rather than present realities. The findings reinforce the argument that work-life conflict is not an individual failure to "balance" roles, but a product of gendered social arrangements and institutional inflexibility.

Despite these barriers, the study shows that women adapt and remain resilient, even though their autonomy is limited. Participants described working harder than male colleagues, acquiring additional qualifications, carefully managing their behavior, and relying on informal peer support networks. While these strategies enabled women to survive and, in some cases, advance within restrictive environments, they also came at

significant emotional and psychological cost. Importantly, participants recognized the limits of individual effort, emphasizing that personal resilience alone cannot eliminate systemic inequality. This finding reinforces feminist critiques that place responsibility for change on institutions rather than on women's capacity to adapt.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that gender inequality in Iranian workplaces is sustained through the interaction of cultural expectations, organizational structures, and everyday practices. Women's experiences reveal a persistent glass ceiling that limits advancement not through explicit exclusion, but through subtle, normalized, and cumulative processes. By centering women's voices and applying Gender Structure Theory, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how gender operates in professional life and underscores the need for systemic, institutional change to create more equitable workplaces.

Table 4. Overview of Interview Themes and Participant Emphasis

| Themes                         | Subthemes                                                                     |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cultural & Social Expectations | Gendered leadership norms, motherhood expectations, religious/cultural values |
| Workplace Discrimination       | Promotion inequality, wage gaps, role segregation                             |
| Informal Networks              | Exclusion from male-dominated networks, decision-making spaces                |
| Work-Life Balance              | Double workload, caregiving expectations, lack of flexibility                 |
| Adaptation Strategies          | Overcompensation, self-monitoring, skill accumulation                         |
| Peer Support                   | Informal women's networks, emotional support                                  |
| Institutional Barriers         | Opaque policies, lack of transparency, limited mentorship                     |
| Autonomy & Resistance          | Speaking up, strategic compliance, long-term resilience                       |

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## **APPENDIXES**

### **APPENDIX A- Interview Questions**

#### **1. Cultural and Social Norms**

- How do societal views on gender roles affect women's opportunities at work, especially in leadership?
- Are there any cultural or religious factors that have influenced your career opportunities?

#### **2. Challenges to Career Progression**

- Do you think you have the same chances like everyone else at work?
- What challenges or obstacles have you faced in moving up to leadership roles in your workplace?
- How do you think gender stereotypes affect your career? Can you give any examples?

#### **3. Gender Bias and Workplace Culture**

- Have you noticed gender bias at work? How has it affected your chances to move ahead in your career?
- How would you describe your workplace culture in terms of supporting both men and women? Do you think it helps or holds women back?

#### **4. Work-Life Balance and Flexibility**

- Does having (or not having) flexible work options affect your career growth?
- Do you feel your workplace helps you balance work and life? How does this compare with the support men receive in their careers?

#### **5. Representation and Mentorship**

- How important do you think it is to see women in leadership roles to break the glass ceiling? Do you have any mentors who have helped you?

- Do you think having more women leaders would help others advance in your industry? How?

## **6. Pay Gap and Salary Negotiation**

- Can you share your experiences with salary negotiations? Have you faced any challenges as a woman?
- Do you believe men and women are paid equally in your industry? How has this affected your own career growth?

## **7. Male-Dominated Environments**

- What strategies have you used to succeed in workplaces dominated by men?
- Have you ever faced pushback from male colleagues or leaders when trying to move into a leadership role? How did you handle it?
- How does it feel to be excluded?

## **8. Policies and Support**

- What kinds of company policies do you think would help women move into leadership roles?
- Do you think the current policies on gender diversity and inclusion are working? Why or why not?

## **9. Glass Ceiling at Different Career Stages**

- At what stage in your career did you first notice the glass ceiling? Do you think it's more noticeable at higher levels?
- How do you think the glass ceiling looks at lower, middle, and senior levels of management in your field?

## **10. Overcoming Barriers**

- What strategies have helped you overcome barriers in your career?
- What can companies do to better support women in overcoming challenges in the workplace?

## APPENDIX B-Ethical Board Approval



HİZMETE ÖZEL

T.C.  
Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Etik Kurulu



Sayı : E-97429853-050.04- 96108  
Konu : Etik Kurul Kararı ( The Perceptions of  
Iranian Female Employees on Glass  
Ceiling)

15.04.2025

SAYIN DR.ÖĞR.ÜYESİ ALEV OZER TORGALÖZ  
ÖĞRETİM ÜYESİ

The Perceptions of Iranian Female Employees on Glass Ceiling başlıklı projenizin etik uygunluğu konusundaki başvurunuz sonuçlanmıştır.

27.03.2025 tarihinde sizin başvurunuzun da içinde bulunduğu bir gündemle toplanmış ve Etik Kurul üyeleri projeleri incelemiştir.

Sonuçta 27.03.2025 tarihinde " **The Perceptions of Iranian Female Employees on Glass Ceiling**" konulu projenizin etik açıdan uygun olduğuna oy birliğiyle karar verilmiştir.

Gereği için bilgilerinize sunarım

Prof. Dr. Murat BENGİSU  
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