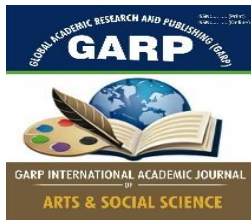


# GARP INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



<https://garp.org.ng/gijass>

**Vol.1, Issue 1, Pp.106-117; APR., 2026**

## MEDIATING GENDER EQUITY: A GLOBAL ANALYSIS OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES, MEDIA REPRESENTATION, AND DIGITAL ADVOCACY

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### ABSTRACT

#### ARTICLE INFO

Received Date: 4<sup>th</sup> Apr., 2026

Date Revised Received: 15<sup>th</sup> Apr., 2026

Accepted Date: 25<sup>th</sup> Apr., 2026

Published Date: 2<sup>nd</sup> May. 2026

Citation: Oghenekokoeya, FO & Imhanobe, HJ (2026): Mediating Gender Equity: A Global Analysis of Leadership Development Programmes, Media Representation, and Digital Advocacy: GARP INTER J. of Arts and Social Sci. Vol. 1 Issue 1 Pp.106-117; Apr. 2026

This article examines the relationship between leadership development programme and gender equity through a global media lens, focusing on representation, visibility, and digital advocacy. Despite sustained global attention to gender inclusion, women remain underrepresented in leadership across political, corporate, and social domains (World Economic Forum, 2023). While leadership development programme seek to address this imbalance by enhancing women's skills, networks, and opportunities (Northouse, 2018), their broader impact is shaped by media processes that influence visibility and public discourse. Drawing on a qualitative global media analysis of international news content, digital platforms, and institutional publications, the study explores how leadership initiatives are framed and circulated. The analysis is informed by Agenda-Setting Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Feminist Theory, enabling a critical interrogation of media power in shaping gendered leadership narratives. The findings identify a persistent imbalance in media coverage: gender inequality is widely reported, yet leadership development programme receive limited and fragmented attention. This "visibility gap" constrains public awareness and weakens the trans-formative potential of such initiatives. At the same time, digital media platforms function as alternative communicative spaces in which women construct leadership identities and mobilise advocacy. The article argues that advancing gender equity in leadership requires not only institutional interventions but also strategic engagement with media systems to enhance visibility, challenge dominant representations, and support inclusive narratives of leadership.

**Keywords:** Leadership development, gender equity, media representation, digital media, agenda-setting

## Introduction

Gender equity has become one of the most significant global development concerns of the twenty-first century. Across political institutions, corporate organizations, academia, and governance systems, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions despite decades of policy reforms, advocacy campaigns, and educational advancement. While progress has been recorded in some regions, structural inequalities continue to limit women's access to decision-making roles and positions of influence (World Economic Forum, 2023). The persistence of these disparities suggests that gender inequality in leadership is not merely a matter of individual capability but a reflection of deeper institutional, cultural, and communicative barriers. Globally, women occupy fewer executive, parliamentary, and board-level positions than men. Leadership pathways are often shaped by gendered expectations, stereotypes, discriminatory recruitment systems, and unequal access to professional networks. These barriers reinforce what scholars describe as the "glass ceiling," where women may advance within organizations but encounter invisible obstacles at senior leadership levels (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Consequently, the struggle for gender equity has shifted from access alone to the broader question of representation, visibility, and influence.

In response to these challenges, leadership development programmes have emerged as strategic interventions aimed at empowering women and expanding their leadership opportunities. Such programmes are designed to enhance competencies including strategic thinking, communication, negotiation, emotional intelligence, and decision-making. They also provide mentorship, sponsorship, networking opportunities, and leadership exposure that are often unavailable through conventional institutional pathways (Northouse, 2019). In many countries, these initiatives have become central to governmental, corporate, and non-governmental efforts to increase women's participation in leadership structures. However, the effectiveness of leadership development programmes does not depend solely on internal training outcomes. Their broader success is significantly influenced by public awareness, social legitimacy, and cultural acceptance. This is where media becomes critically important. Media institutions shape public understanding by deciding which issues receive

visibility, how they are framed, and whose voices are amplified. Through agenda-setting and framing processes, media influences perceptions of leadership, competence, and gender roles (McCombs, 2005).

Traditional media has historically reproduced gender stereotypes by portraying women leaders differently from men. Male leaders are often represented in terms of authority, competence, and achievement, whereas women leaders are more likely to be framed around personality, appearance, emotional, or family roles (Tuchman, 1978; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Such portrayals can weaken public confidence in women's leadership and discourage participation. Beyond biased representation, omission is equally consequential. When leadership development programmes receive limited media attention, potential beneficiaries may remain unaware of available opportunities, while policymakers and institutions may underestimate their value. Thus, what the media ignores can be as influential as what it highlights. Limited visibility creates a "recognition gap" in which transformative programmes exist but fail to achieve broader societal impact.

The rise of digital media has introduced new possibilities for challenging these traditional patterns. Social networking platforms, blogs, podcasts, and online advocacy campaigns now allow women to represent themselves, build professional identities, share leadership experiences, and mobilize around equity issues without relying entirely on traditional gatekeepers (Castells, 2012). Digital advocacy movements such as hashtag activism have demonstrated the capacity of online spaces to reshape public discourse and demand institutional accountability. Nevertheless, digital platforms also present contradictions. While they democratize visibility, they may simultaneously reproduce harassment, misinformation, algorithmic bias, and unequal access that disproportionately affect women. Therefore, digital media serves as both a site of empowerment and attestation. Against this backdrop, this study examines the relationship between leadership development programmes, media representation, and digital advocacy in promoting gender equity globally. It argues that gender equity cannot be achieved solely through institutional interventions such as training programmes; rather, it also requires strategic communication systems that normalize women's leadership, amplify opportunities, and challenge

stereotypes. The study contributes to scholarship in leadership studies, gender studies, and mass communication by offering an integrated perspective on how leadership development, media systems, and digital advocacy interact to shape women's advancement into leadership roles.

### Statement of the Problem

Despite the proliferation of leadership development programme globally, women remain significantly underrepresented in political, corporate, and public leadership structures. Existing interventions often focus on capacity building while neglecting the communicative environment in which leadership legitimacy is socially constructed. Traditional media frequently prioritizes narratives of inequality without adequately highlighting available leadership solutions. In addition, persistent stereotypes continue to shape portrayals of women leaders, thereby undermining their credibility. Although digital media offers alternative opportunities for advocacy and self-representation, its role remains uneven and under-explored. There is therefore a need for a comprehensive analysis of how leadership development programme are mediated through global communication systems and how this affects gender equity outcomes.

### Aim of the Study

To examine how leadership development programme, media representation, and digital advocacy interact to influence gender equity in leadership globally.

### Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

1. Examine how media coverage prioritizes gender inequality narratives over leadership development programme as solutions to leadership disparities.
2. Assess the level of visibility given to leadership development programme in international news media, digital platforms, and institutional publications.
3. Determine how gender stereotypes are constructed and reproduced in media representations of women leaders.
4. Explore how digital media platforms serve as alternative spaces for women's empowerment, self-representation, and leadership advocacy.
5. Investigate emerging shifts in media narratives toward more balanced and

inclusive portrayals of women in leadership.

### Literature Review

The relationship between media representation, leadership development programme, and gender equity has become an important area of interdisciplinary scholarship within communication studies, leadership studies, and gender studies. Although global efforts to improve women's representation in leadership have expanded considerably, media systems continue to shape public perceptions of leadership legitimacy, visibility, and access. Traditional media institutions influence which issues are prioritized, while digital platforms increasingly create alternative spaces for advocacy and self-representation. This review examines five key dimensions: media prioritization of gender inequality narratives over solutions, visibility of leadership development programme, gender stereotypes in portrayals of women leaders, digital media as spaces of empowerment, and emerging shifts toward inclusive narratives.

### Media Prioritization of Gender Inequality Narratives over Leadership Development Programme

A major theme in the literature is that media coverage often emphasizes gender inequality as a persistent social problem while giving comparatively less attention to leadership development programme designed to address that inequality. Agenda-setting theory explains that media influences public attention by selecting certain issues for prominence while neglecting others (McCombs, 2005). In this context, stories about discrimination, under-representation, wage gaps, and exclusion frequently receive substantial coverage, whereas programme focused on mentors-hip, leadership pipelines, executive training, and sponsorship initiatives are less visible. Recent experimental research shows that the way gender gaps are framed affects emotional and behavioural responses. When leadership disparities are framed as "men's over-representation" rather than "women's under-representation," audiences perceive stronger injustice and show greater support for corrective action. This suggests that framing does not merely describe inequality; it shapes public willingness to support solutions.

Scholars argue that persistent problem-focused coverage can unintentionally produce fatalism,

where audiences become aware of inequality but less aware of actionable interventions. News logic often privileges conflict, crisis, and controversy over gradual institutional programme, making structural solutions less newsworthy. As a result, leadership development initiatives may remain peripheral despite their long-term significance. Moreover, media narratives that focus narrowly on barriers without highlighting successful pathways may discourage aspiring women leaders. This imbalance creates what may be termed a solution visibility gap, where the public knows the problem but not the mechanisms available to address it. Consequently, the communicative environment may constrain the effectiveness of leadership development programme even when such programme exists.

### **Visibility of Leadership Development Programme in News Media, Digital Platforms, and Institutional Publications**

Visibility is central to programme legitimacy, public awareness, and stakeholder engagement. Leadership development programme gain broader influence when they are consistently reported, discussed, and recognized across communication channels. However, the literature suggests that their visibility remains uneven across media ecosystems.

In mainstream news media, leadership development initiatives are often mentioned episodically rather than as sustained policy or institutional priorities. News organizations tend to prioritize personalities, scandals, elections, or crises over long-term capacity-building programme. This reduces public familiarity with women-focused leadership pipelines and mentorship structures. Institutional publications such as reports from the United Nations, UN Women, and World Economic Forum provide more systematic coverage of women's leadership initiatives, but such publications often circulate within professional or policy audiences rather than mass publics. Thus, their influence may be substantial among elites but limited among general audiences.

Digital platforms partially compensate for this gap by enabling organizations and individuals to publicize programme directly through social media, webinars, podcasts, newsletters, and community networks. Unlike traditional media, digital channels allow recurring visibility without newsroom gatekeeping. However, discoverability often depends on platform algorithms, follower networks, and communication resources. Studies of media

representation globally continue to show women underrepresented as expert voices and authoritative sources, which indirectly limits visibility for women-centered leadership programme. Therefore, visibility is not simply about the presence of programme but about who gets recognized as credible leaders, experts, and change agents.

### **Construction and Reproduction of Gender Stereotypes in Media Representations of Women Leaders**

A substantial body of research confirms that media portrayals of women leaders are frequently shaped by gender stereotypes. Role Congruity Theory argues that leadership is often associated with a genetic traits such as assertiveness, dominance, and decisiveness, traits historically coded as masculine. Women, by contrast, are stereotyped as communal, nurturing, and relational, creating a perceived mismatch between femininity and leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Recent scholarship finds that although stereotypes have evolved, leadership remains masculinized in many contexts. Reviews of leadership stereotypes show men are still more readily associated with leadership competence, while women face higher scrutiny. Media studies also find that women leaders are more likely to be evaluated through appearance, tone, family status, emotional, or personality than male leaders.

Research on politicians demonstrates that stereotypes about who "looks like a leader" continue to influence perceptions, though some change is occurring over time. Similarly, analyses of mediated professionalization show women politicians often receive more focus on personal traits and negative tone than men. These stereotypes are reproduced through headlines, imagery, interview framing, language choices, and selective emphasis. Even seemingly positive portrayals such as describing women as compassionate or resilient can reinforce gendered expectations when not paired with recognition of competence and authority. Thus, symbolic representation remains a major site where inequality is normalized.

### **Digital Media as Alternative Spaces for Women's Empowerment, Self-Representation, and Leadership Advocacy**

The rise of digital media has transformed communication power relations by allowing decentralized content creation and direct audience

engagement. Unlike traditional media systems that rely on institutional gatekeepers, digital platforms enable women to narrate their own experiences, build leadership identities, and mobilize support networks (Castells, 2012). Social media platforms such as Linked-In, X, Instagram, and YouTube are increasingly used for visibility, thought leadership, mentoring communities, and advocacy campaigns. Women leaders can bypass traditional gatekeepers by publishing directly, sharing achievements, discussing barriers, and networking globally.

Hashtag activism has become especially influential. Campaigns focused on harassment, equal pay, political inclusion, and workplace bias have drawn global attention and pressured institutions to respond. Digital spaces also enable peer mentoring, community building, and transnational solidarity among women professionals. However, empowerment is uneven. Online harassment, trolling, gendered abuse, algorithmic bias, and unequal internet access can suppress participation. Women in visible leadership roles often face disproportionate hostility online. Thus, digital media offers expanded opportunity but not automatic equality. Nevertheless, compared with legacy media, digital platforms provide greater narrative autonomy. They allow women to present themselves as experts, strategists, founders, policymakers, and innovators rather than relying on externally imposed frames.

### **Emerging Shifts Toward Balanced and Inclusive Media Portrayals of Women Leaders**

Although stereotypes persist, the literature also identifies gradual shifts toward more balanced portrayals. Increased public awareness of gender bias, newsroom diversity efforts, advocacy campaigns, and broader social change have pressured media institutions to improve representation. Recent meta-analytic work reviewing fifty years of leadership evaluation research suggests that perceptions of leadership behaviours are becoming more nuanced, though bias has not disappeared. Studies indicate that audiences increasingly recognize participation, ethical, and trans-informational leadership styles often associated with effective women leaders.

There is also growing evidence of counter-stereotypical representation. Coverage of women leading during crises, heading major corporations, and occupying senior political offices has challenged traditional assumptions.

Some media outlets increasingly foreground policy expertise and governance competence rather than novelty or appearance. Nonetheless, progress is uneven across regions and sectors. Reviews of women politicians in Southern Africa still find persistent emphasis on emotion and personality over competence. Similarly, recent election audits in the United Kingdom found male voices still dominated coverage, marginalizing women's concerns. Therefore, current media discourse is transitional: older exclusionary frames coexist with newer inclusive narratives. The struggle is no longer only for visibility, but for substantive, competence-based, and normalized representation.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that media remains central to gender equity outcomes in leadership. Coverage often emphasizes inequality more than solutions, limiting visibility for leadership development programme. Women leaders continue to face stereotypical portrayals, though digital platforms provide alternative spaces for self-representation and advocacy. At the same time, emerging shifts toward more inclusive narratives indicate that media discourse is evolving. Sustainable progress in gender equity will depend not only on leadership programme themselves but also on how communication systems frame, amplify, and normalize women's leadership.

The study adopts a global perspective, focusing on leadership development programme and media representation across international news media, digital platforms, and institutional publications. It addresses contemporary discourse on women's leadership in political, corporate, academic, and civic sectors.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present study is anchored on three interrelated theoretical perspectives: Agenda-Setting Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Feminist Theory. These frameworks provide a multidimensional basis for understanding how media representation influences public perceptions of leadership, shapes gender norms, and affects the visibility and effectiveness of leadership development programme aimed at promoting gender equity. Together, these theories explain not only how media prioritizes issues, but also how audiences internalize media messages and how communication systems reproduce or challenge structural inequalities.

## Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory was originally developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their seminal 1972 study on media influence. The theory posits that while the media may not always determine what people think, it significantly influences what people think **\*\*about\*\*** by assigning prominence to certain issues over others (McCombs, 2004). According to this perspective, issues that receive frequent and prominent media coverage are perceived by the public as more important than issues receiving little attention. Through repetition, placement, framing, and headline emphasis, media organizations shape public agendas and policy conversations. Within the context of this study, Agenda-Setting Theory is highly relevant because media coverage of gender issues often emphasizes discrimination, under-representation, violence, and inequality, while giving comparatively limited attention to leadership development programme as practical solutions. When audiences are repeatedly exposed to narratives of inequality without equivalent coverage of empowerment initiatives, they may become more conscious of the problem than the available pathways for change.

This imbalance may produce what can be described as a solution-awareness deficit, where the public recognizes leadership disparities but remains unaware of mentor-ship schemes, training opportunities, scholarship initiatives, and institutional reforms designed to address them.

The theory therefore helps explain:

1. Why gender inequality dominates media discourse
2. Why leadership programmes may remain invisible despite their existence
3. How issue prioritization influences public support for women's advancement
4. How media salience can shape policy attention toward gender reform

Thus, Agenda-Setting Theory provides a useful lens for analyzing how communication systems mediate gender equity outcomes through selective visibility.

## Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory was advanced by Albert Bandura in 1977. The theory argues that individuals learn behaviour, values, attitudes, and

expectations through observation, imitation, and modelling. People are influenced by watching others, especially when those others are socially rewarded or presented as successful. Mass media functions as one of the most influential sources of observational learning because it provides symbolic models of behaviour, identity, and success. Television, news platforms, films, and digital media all communicate messages about who can lead, who is valued, and what forms of behaviour are rewarded.

In relation to this study, media portrayals of women leaders can significantly shape public attitudes toward female leadership. When women are consistently represented as competent executives, policymakers, innovators, or thought leaders, audiences are more likely to normalize women's presence in leadership positions. Young girls and emerging professionals may also develop stronger leadership aspirations through positive role modelling. Conversely, when media coverage minimizes women's achievements or emphasizes emotionality, domestic roles, or appearance, audiences may internalize limiting stereotypes. Such portrayals may reduce confidence in women leaders and discourage women from pursuing leadership opportunities.

Social Learning Theory therefore explains:

1. How role models influence leadership aspirations
2. How repeated portrayals normalize or marginalize women leaders
3. How media stereotypes become socially learned attitudes
4. Why representation matters for future leadership participation

The theory is particularly useful for understanding the motivational and aspirational impact of visible women leadership in both traditional and digital media.

## Feminist Theory

Feminist Theory provides a critical framework for examining how institutions, structures, and cultural systems reproduce gender inequality. It challenges social arrangements that privilege male authority while marginalizing women's voices, opportunities, and representation. Within media studies, feminist scholarship argues that communication systems are not neutral spaces; rather, they often reflect patriarchal assumptions embedded within wider

society (Tuchman, 1978; Van Zoonen, 2017). Women are frequently underrepresented, trivialized, sexualized, or framed in stereotypical ways that diminish authority and competence. The concept of symbolic annihilation, introduced by Gaye Tuchman, explains how omission or trivial representation communicates that women are less socially significant. Even where women appear in media narratives, they may be portrayed through restrictive frames that reinforce dependency or emotional weakness.

Applied to this study, Feminist Theory enables a critical examination of:

1. Gender bias in coverage of women leaders
2. Unequal visibility of leadership development programmes for women
3. Patriarchal assumptions about leadership and authority
4. Media power in sustaining or resisting gender inequality

The theory also supports calls for more inclusive communication systems that accurately represent women's capabilities, achievements, and leadership potential.

### Integration of the Theoretical Framework

The three theories complement one another:

1. Agenda-Setting Theory explains what issues receive visibility
2. Social Learning Theory explains how audiences internalize media portrayals
3. Feminist Theory explains why gender bias exists within representation systems

Together, they provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the intersection of leadership development, media discourse, and gender equity.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach using global media analysis to examine how leadership development programmes are represented across selected communication platforms. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret meanings, narratives, discourse patterns, symbolic representation, and framing processes embedded in media texts rather than quantify numerical variables. It allows for deep exploration of how gender equity and leadership are socially constructed through communication systems.

Qualitative methods are especially valuable in media studies because they reveal hidden assumptions, ideological patterns, and representational practices that may not be captured through statistical methods. The study employs a descriptive qualitative research design. This design enables systematic examination and interpretation of textual materials drawn from global media sources. Descriptive qualitative design is suitable because it focuses on understanding communication content within real-world contexts, particularly how leadership development programme and gender issues are framed, prioritized, and narrated across platforms (Brennen, 2025). The design was selected because of its strength in producing rich contextual insights regarding: Media visibility; Gender representation; Narrative framing; Public discourse construction

### Sources of Data

Data were drawn from three major categories of media content to ensure diversity and analytical depth:

- International News Media: Global news organizations were selected because they shape mainstream public discourse and influence policy agendas through widely circulated reporting.
- Digital Media Platforms: These included social networking platforms, blogs, podcasts, online forums, and advocacy pages. Such platforms provide user-generated and participatory narratives that often challenge traditional media gate-keeping (Castells, 2012).
- Institutional Publications: Reports, statements, and publications from international organizations such as United Nations, UN Women, World Economic Forum, and development agencies were analyzed to capture policy-oriented perspectives.

The study adopted purposive sampling, a non-probability method commonly used in qualitative research. This approach allows deliberate selection of information-rich texts directly relevant to the study objectives.

Selection criteria included: Relevance to leadership development programme, Focus on gender equity or women leadership, Credibility of source platform, adequate narrative depth for analysis, Geographic diversity of content. Sample size is qualitative research guided by thematic

saturation, the point at which additional data no longer produce new insights (Guest et.al., 2020). Based on established qualitative standards, approximately 35–45 media texts were selected across the three source categories. This range was considered sufficient for interpretive depth and analytical consistency. The study employed Thematic Analysis as the primary analytical technique. Thematic analysis is widely recognized as a rigorous and flexible method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The analysis followed six stages:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Initial coding of texts
3. Theme generation
4. Theme review
5. Theme definition and naming
6. Interpretation and reporting

#### **The major themes explored included:**

- Media emphasis on inequality versus solutions
- Visibility of leadership programmes
- Gender stereotypes in leadership narratives
- Digital empowerment and advocacy
- Emerging inclusive representations

This iterative process ensured depth, coherence, and credibility in findings.

#### **Ethical Considerations**

Since the study relied on publicly available media content, no direct human subjects were involved. Nevertheless, ethical standards of citation, accurate representation, and intellectual honesty were maintained throughout the study.

#### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study reveal a significant disconnect between the growing presence of leadership development programme designed to advance women's participation in leadership and the limited extent to which these initiatives are represented within global media systems. Although many governments, corporations, universities, and international organizations have introduced mentor-ship schemes, executive training, networking platforms, and policy interventions to support women's advancement, such programme remain under reported in mainstream communication spaces. This suggests that the success of leadership interventions depends not

only on programme design and implementation, but also on visibility, public legitimacy, and communicative reach.

From the standpoint of Agenda-Setting Theory, advanced by Maxwell McCombs, the study demonstrates that media institutions continue to prioritize narratives of inequality, discrimination, exclusion, and crisis over solution-oriented narratives centered on leadership development. Since media salience strongly influences public perceptions of importance, repeated attention to gender disparity without corresponding attention to corrective initiatives may lead audiences to perceive inequality as permanent, systemic, and unresolved. This pattern may generate issue awareness but not solution awareness. In practical terms, public become familiar with the problem while remaining insufficiently informed about available pathways for change such as scholarships, mentor-ship programme, board readiness initiatives, and leadership fellowships.

The findings further suggest that the imbalance between problem framing and solution framing has policy implications. Media attention often shapes donor priorities, institutional responsiveness, and political urgency. Where leadership development programme are marginalized in coverage, they may receive less social support, weaker funding attention, and reduced public engagement. Thus, communication visibility functions as a form of symbolic policy capital.

Using Social Learning Theory, associated with Albert Bandura, the study also shows that media representation plays an important role in shaping leadership aspirations and social attitudes. Individuals often learn acceptable roles and expectations through observation of symbolic models. Where women leaders are inadequately represented, or where their achievements receive less prominence than their appearance, family status, or emotional tone, audiences may internalize restrictive assumptions about who qualifies as a leader. This may be especially consequential for girls, young professionals, and emerging leaders who rely on visible examples to imagine future possibilities.

The limited visibility of women leaders also weakens what may be called the aspirational pipeline. Leadership development programme may train women effectively, but if the wider symbolic environment rarely normalizes female authority, participants may still face external resistance and

reduced confidence. Hence, institutional training and public representation must operate together.

The findings are equally consistent with Feminist Media Theory, which argues that media institutions often reproduce broader patriarchal power structures. The persistence of gender stereotypes in news and digital narratives confirms that representation is not neutral. Women leaders continue to be framed through emotionality, relational identity, personal appearance, domestic obligations, or “exceptional woman” narratives, while men are more frequently associated with competence, authority, rationality, and expertise. Such framing reinforces masculine-coded leadership norms and subtly questions women’s legitimacy in authority positions.

Importantly, the study finds that symbolic exclusion today is not only about absence, but also about mode of presence. Women may be visible in media while still being trivialized, personalized, or judged through double standards. This modernized form of symbolic marginalization continues to shape leadership culture globally. However, a major counter-trend emerges within digital media environments. Unlike legacy media systems dominated by institutional gate-keeping, digital platforms provide women with decentralized opportunities for self-representation, leadership branding, advocacy, mentor-ship networking, and transnational solidarity. Through platforms such as LinkedIn, X, Instagram, podcasts, blogs, and online communities, women increasingly construct independent narratives that challenge stereotypes and amplify achievements.

This finding aligns with network society scholarship, which argues that communication power is increasingly dispersed across digital nodes rather than concentrated solely in traditional institutions. Digital advocacy campaigns have expanded awareness around equal pay, representation, harassment, political participation, and workplace bias. In this regard, digital media has become both a corrective space and a leadership incubator. Nevertheless, the study also recognizes that digital empowerment remains uneven. Structural constraints such as algorithmic bias, platform toxicity, online harassment, misinformation, and unequal internet access continue to shape who benefits from digital visibility. Women leaders, particularly those from marginalized racial, geographic, or socioeconomic contexts, may face intensified abuse online. Therefore, digital platforms offer opportunity but not automatic equality.

Overall, the findings indicate that gender equity in leadership cannot be fully achieved through organizational interventions alone. Leadership development programme are necessary but insufficient when disconnected from communication ecosystems. Sustainable progress requires integration between institutional reform, media representation, public discourse change, and digital participation.

The study contributes to scholarship in communication and gender studies by introducing the concept of a visibility gap the disparity between the existence of leadership development initiatives and the degree to which they are publicly recognized through media systems. It further contributes theoretically by integrating Agenda-Setting Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Feminist Theory into a unified explanatory framework for understanding how communication processes mediate leadership equity outcomes.

## Conclusion

This study has established that leadership development programme remain critical instruments for promoting women’s advancement into political, corporate, academic, and civic leadership. Through mentor-ship, training, confidence building, professional networking, and skills acquisition, these programme create pathways for addressing long-standing structural inequalities.

However, the study concludes that programme effectiveness is deeply influenced by media representation. Where leadership initiatives receive weak, fragmented, or inconsistent coverage, public awareness declines, stakeholder engagement weakens, and societal impact becomes limited. Similarly, when media narratives continue to portray women leaders through stereotypes rather than competence, progress toward normalized female leadership is slowed.

The research also concludes that contemporary media discourse is dualistic. Traditional media often reproduces exclusionary norms, while digital media increasingly offers alternative spaces for empowerment, visibility, and advocacy. Yet digital opportunities remain constrained by unequal access and online hostility.

Ultimately, meaningful gender equity requires more than policy commitments or leadership programme in isolation. It demands an integrated model in which institutional reform is supported by inclusive media representation, strategic

communication, digital participation, and broader cultural change.

The future of gender equity in leadership therefore depends not only on who is trained to lead, but also on who is seen, heard, trusted, and legitimized within communication systems.

### Recommendations

1. News organizations should provide sustained and evidence-based coverage of leadership development programme for women rather than limiting attention to inequality crises alone.
2. Editorial policies should discourage stereotypical portrayals and prioritize competence, innovation, governance capacity, and achievement when covering women leaders.
3. Media houses should improve newsroom diversity to reduce unconscious bias in framing and sourcing decisions.
4. Governments should enact and enforce media equity guidelines that encourage balanced representation of women in leadership discourse.
5. Public agencies should fund awareness campaigns highlighting scholarships, fellowships, mentoring schemes, and leadership pathways for women.
6. National digital inclusion policies should expand affordable internet access and cyber-protection mechanisms for women users.
7. Universities, corporations, NGOs, and professional bodies should integrate strategic media communication into leadership development programme to increase visibility and impact.
8. Institutions should build partnerships with journalists, digital creators, and advocacy groups to showcase women leadership success stories.
9. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks for leadership programme should include communication reach, public engagement, and media visibility indicators.
10. Social media companies should strengthen responses to online harassment, abuse, and coordinated misogynistic attacks targeting women leaders.
11. Platforms should improve algorithmic transparency to reduce bias that suppresses women's voices and leadership content.

12. Future studies should employ mixed methods, cross-country comparisons, and longitudinal analysis to measure how media visibility affects women's actual leadership outcomes over time.

13. Further research should also examine intersections of gender with race, disability, class, age, and geography in leadership representation.

Gender equity in leadership is not only an organizational challenge; it is also a communication challenge. Until women's leadership is routinely visible, fairly represented, and publicly normalized, institutional progress will remain incomplete.

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