

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Women and leadership in non-listed private companies in an emerging country: An analysis of barriers and facilitators

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Abstract

This study explores women's barriers to accessing leadership positions within non-listed private companies in Bangladesh, drawing on the Gendered Organization Theory (GOT) as a conceptual framework. This research seeks some possible solutions to overcome these barriers. The study adopts a two-wave qualitative methodology: semi-structured interviews with 16 women professionals and subsequent focus-group discussions to explore solutions. Results reveal that women face significant barriers, such as long working hours, gender pay gaps, unclear responsibilities, biased promotion processes, lack of training, and sexual harassment. These barriers are conceptualized in terms of implicit and explicit gender biases. Research participants emphasized individual efforts like self-determination, upskilling, job switching, technology leveraging, and family support as key factors in overcoming these obstacles. The study underscores the need for organizational and governmental interventions to promote female leadership and gender equity in non-listed companies in developing countries.

KEYWORDS

gender bias, gendered organization theory, leadership barriers, women leadership

1 | INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in private and public organizations has increased worldwide in the last decade (Deng et al., 2024; Jawad et al., 2023), in line with the requirement of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #5, that is, women's empowerment and gender equality (European Commission, 2017). Also, the contribution of women to the development of the economy has received significant attention in the past years (Bilal et al., 2023). However, female

presence in leadership roles remains lower compared to the male counterpart.

The current literature stresses how women in business organizations face more barriers than men when climbing the leadership ladder (Bryan et al., 2021; Kalaitz et al., 2017). These challenges include managing dual responsibilities at work and home, glass ceiling issues and pay dispersion, surface-level discrimination, and social prejudice (Guo et al., 2024; Hossain & Noor, 2016).

According to previous studies, many women leave organizations or intend to avoid becoming leaders due to family responsibilities, such as providing domestic care to their families and long working hours (Ely et al., 2014; Mooney, 2009; Rowe et al., 2023). Many women quit their jobs because they feel that their opinions, values,

The paper aims to investigate barriers and solutions experienced by women in accessing leadership positions, specifically in non-listed companies in an emerging country.

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and preferences are not respected in the workplace; therefore, they lose the desire to be promoted (Kapoor et al., 2021; Lämsä & Piilola, 2015). Many female leaders continue to face stereotyping, limiting their influence and discouraging them from expressing opinions, fearing they will be dismissed by colleagues (Deng et al., 2024), which further hinders their career progression. Furthermore, in several sectors, employees working under female managers have less favorable views about female bosses in private and public organizations, which can be a significant demotivator for women pursuing leadership roles (Ferrari et al., 2022; Hossain & Noor, 2016; Isaac, 2011), even if women in charge can support the career development of their peers (Callahan et al., 2024; Fjendbo, 2021). Other issues include occupational sex stereotyping and sexual harassment (Mooney, 2018; Naseviciute & Juceviciene, 2024).

Similar results, like salary discrimination, poor work-life balance, incidents of harassment, gendered language, biased promotion, and lack of role models, were found in studies conducted in the healthcare and surgery fields (Ferrari et al., 2022; Govoni et al., 2023; Silver et al., 2017). In academia, some recent investigations underlined the lack of technological knowledge and family support (Islam et al., 2023; Kalaitzi et al., 2017). Some authors argue that institutional policies and apparent implicit bias in promotion pose a significant barrier to women's advancement into leadership positions (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Gupta & Garg, 2022; Lundberg & Stearns, 2019). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic made it even more difficult for women to advance into leadership positions despite their solid performance, as reported in the literature (Enciso-Alfaro et al., 2024; Meagher et al., 2021; Soares & Sidun, 2021; Uribe Bohorquez & García Sánchez, 2023). In 2020, as the pandemic was spreading, there were nearly 100 open vacancies—one-quarter of chief executive officers (CEOs) and board chair positions—at global health organizations, but none were filled by women (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). The presence of women on the board of directors was reduced following the COVID-19 pandemic, and this phenomenon was moderated only by the regulatory and policy system on gender quotas in place (García-Sánchez et al., 2024). Moreover, some authors reported how COVID-19 destabilized the progress toward gender equality since more glass ceiling issues were intensified during the pandemic (Mavin & Yusupova, 2020).

As the theme of women's access to leadership positions remains topical, it should be highlighted how most of the current studies related to the analyzed topic were conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bart & McQueen, 2013; Lim et al., 2019), predominantly in Western contexts. Furthermore, most studies concentrate on listed companies. Thus, these cannot picture the experience of women in climbing toward leadership positions in non-listed companies, which are less regulated and less scrutinized.

Moreover, an intriguing research context is represented by developing countries, which are gaining traction in management studies due to their increasing contribution to the global economic scenario (Bardy et al., 2015; Dhar et al., 2022; Khurshid et al., 2024; Sharmin et al., 2014). When it comes to female leadership and the barriers encountered by women holding managerial roles in developing

countries, the situation is not different than in Western countries (Langer et al., 2015; Lechman, 2019; Minello, 2020). Still, several studies highlight how having women in leadership positions within companies in developing countries is of utmost importance (Bart & McQueen, 2013; Birindelli et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020). Indeed, their presence benefits not only the women themselves and the companies but also contributes positively to the country (Centinaio, 2024; Traversi et al., 2024). Despite this, gender discrimination remains prevalent in those countries. Again, even in this most specific research context, previous investigations provided insights into larger listed organizations than non-listed and smaller companies.

The research gap includes the need for further qualitative research to explore additional barriers faced by women in attaining leadership roles. A particular emphasis is paid to integrating new technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), as possible facilitators but also barriers to promoting female leadership (Hossain et al., 2022; Rashid, 2023).

In this regard, one of the most promising countries is Bangladesh, one of South Asia's fastest-growing emerging areas. The picture of the Bangladeshi listed private firms is different because more than 18% of the board of directors are female, which takes the country to the top position in Asia for women's leadership (Star Business Report, 2022; The Financial Express, 2023). According to the Star Business Report (Rashid, 2023), women's leadership in the listed companies in Bangladesh increased by 1% despite the COVID-19 pandemic. These reports are optimistic for the country. However, there were only 628 listed domestic companies in Bangladesh in 2020, while more than 7000 private companies are not listed on the stock exchange (Tracxn, 2023; Trading Economics, 2023). The percentage of women in other leadership positions, that is, CEO, manager, assistant director, regional manager, general manager, etc., is unknown. Therefore, the picture of women's representation in leadership positions in Bangladeshi listed companies cannot be generalized to non-listed companies, which are commonly known for more pronounced gender bias in the male-dominated country.

Studies conducted within Bangladeshi organizations report issues that are similar to those of Western organizations. For example, many women struggle to balance extra workloads at their workplace and home responsibilities in the country's readymade garment organizations (Islam et al., 2018). Gender stereotypes, lack of time, socio-cultural norms, and family issues represent significant barriers for women working in various organizations. Moreover, organizational culture and male domination also hinder women's growth in organizations in Bangladesh (Islam et al., 2018; Munni, 2021).

In this regard, investigating women's barriers to accessing leadership positions in non-listed companies in a developing yet fast-growing country like Bangladesh presents a valuable research opportunity. Studying women in leadership roles within these less-explored organizations in a specific geographical context can offer unique insights into their professional experiences, shedding light on challenges faced in a sector that, while under-researched, constitutes the majority of enterprises.

Thus, following the identified literature gaps, the central research questions of this paper are: To what extent do women experience gender inequalities in non-listed organizations in a developing country like Bangladesh? Are these issues different from those documented in the current literature of Western countries? How do women in non-listed companies overcome those barriers?

In trying to address such research questions, the paper employs a two-wave data collection method, including semi-structured interviews followed by focus group discussions involving a group of Bangladeshi female leaders. Findings reveal several impediments to female career progression. While most of such barriers were also found in previous studies, others are novel and/or appeared to be amplified in the context of Bangladeshi smaller non-listed companies.

The article is developed as follows. The next section is devoted to an in-depth analysis of the current literature, followed by a description of the chosen methodology, the rationale, and the data collection and analysis processes. The findings are then reported and discussed according to the literature background. Some concluding remarks, limitations, practice, and policy implications end the paper.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Gendered organization theory

Gendered Organizational Theory (GOT) has been widely applied in many previous studies to explore, evaluate, and eliminate the barriers faced by women due to their gender (Clark-Saboda & Lemke, 2023). Acker (1990) proposes the theory of gendered organizations as a framework to challenge the concept of gender-neutral organizations. According to Acker's arguments, all organizations possess inherent gendered characteristics. Furthermore, this theory posits that the processes within companies are structured in a manner that privileges men while simultaneously marginalizing women, hence impeding gender equality within these organizations.

This theory further posits that the conventional gender norms within an organization are aligned with the disadvantageous treatment of women toward leadership roles, whether through direct or indirect means. Consequently, the phenomenon of women being marginalized is observed, which serves to perpetuate gender inequality and discriminatory practices (Jenson et al., 2017). Organizational procedures are heavily permeated with depictions of masculinity, which serve to diminish the significance of women and perpetuate gender segregation inside the organization (Acker, 1990). Additionally, the organization's internal policies, regulations, and organizational culture often restrict women from climbing into leadership positions, notwithstanding their skills and experiences in leadership (Mastracci & Arreola, 2016). Hence, this theory provides a rationale for the internal organizational obstacles encountered by women in their pursuit of accessing and occupying leadership roles.

According to previous studies, employers tend to prioritize hiring individuals who have fewer external distractions and can fully dedicate themselves to their work. Therefore, this prevailing inclination

fails to acknowledge women who are also typically presumed to bear the primary responsibility for familial obligations, including caring for children, partners, parents, and other family members (Burton & Rycroft-Malone, 2014; Rowe et al., 2023). Consequently, numerous employers perceive men as their preferred and committed employees (Acker, 1990).

Acker (1990) posits that the theory of gendered organizations consists of five distinct processes that contribute to the perpetuation of gender disadvantage within organizational settings. These processes encompass cultural symbols, divisions of labor, individual identities, workplace relationships, and organizational logic. The organizational logic is reflected in Acker's original critique of gendered organizations (1990). This statement highlights the significance of examining the mechanisms through which hierarchies are justified within organizational settings. This entails a comprehensive analysis of the systematic structuring of work regulations, job assessments, remuneration frameworks, and job delineations. The presence of these factors contributes to the establishment of a bureaucratic atmosphere within businesses, which often reinforces gender disparities (Simpson & Lewis, 2005).

Acker (1990) has examined the factors that lead employers to frequently rely on gender stereotypes when establishing regulations or evaluating job performance, often resulting in preferential treatment toward men and potential resistance to women.

2.2 | The importance of female leadership in non-listed companies in emerging countries like Bangladesh

Foreign direct investment flows to developing countries in Asia rose by 19% to an all-time high of \$619 billion in 2021, according to the World Investment Report 2022 published by UNCTAD (2022). This investment trend of Western companies in developing countries is expected to remain strong because of cheaper labor, availability of raw materials, social and demographic transition, and the demographic dividend (Rodriguez, 2021).

In this regard, Bangladesh stands out as one of the most promising destinations for Western companies, as the country has many distinctive characteristics that are lucrative to foreign investors, for example, demographic dividend, low labor cost, economic growth potential, and growing internal consumer purchasing power (Rahman, 2023). Along with these unique benefits, the government of Bangladesh is also offering special economic zones equipped with comprehensive production and business facilities for foreign investors (Noyon & Rayhan, 2023). As a result, the number of foreign investors, especially Western ones, has increased over the last decade.

However, many of these organizations urge for greater gender inclusion or diversity in the leadership positions of companies because the critical decision-makers in Western companies find that women tend to be more inclusive and empathetic leaders with an ambitious and hardworking attitude that contributes to better organizational performance (Field et al., 2023). Female leaders often demonstrate a

heightened sensitivity to the needs of diverse stakeholders, including employees, customers, and local communities (Cambrea et al., 2024). They possess communal qualities and tend to be more stakeholder-oriented, participative, and democratic compared with men (Setó-Pamies, 2015; Zhang et al., 2023). Women in management positions are more diligent than men (Pucheta-Martínez et al., 2021). They tend to be more risk-averse and more concerned with ethical issues when making decisions (Schubert, 2006). Some recent studies (Gao et al., 2024; Naciti et al., 2022) clearly indicate a positive relationship between female participation and financial performance under different aspects (e.g., return, risk, cost of capital, fraud, etc.), and it underlines that women in leadership roles contribute to enhanced decision-making and a more robust corporate reputation. Additionally, firms with more women in top management exhibit higher environmental performance (Birindelli et al., 2019; Burkhardt et al., 2020). Despite these acknowledged benefits, the number of women in leadership roles within non-listed companies remains significantly lower than that of men due to various barriers (Hera, 2020; Rashid, 2023). Given the advantages of having women in leadership, it is crucial for the country to implement initiatives to promote women's empowerment, especially in smaller and non-listed companies, which still constitute the majority of active firms (Mehrads & Rostan, 2021).

On the other hand, the number of educated women in Bangladesh is growing every year. However, reports indicate that the increase in female leaders needs to keep pace (Hossain, 2022; TBS Report, 2023). This can be alarming for the country's ambition of achieving women's empowerment and gender equality by 2041, as part of its goal to become a developed nation. According to recent studies (Hera, 2020; Rashid, 2023) many of the women working in the corporate sectors have leadership potential but due to different barriers, they are side-lined from leadership positions or are discouraged from postulating for such positions. Besides the corporate realm, Bangladesh, as a country, was ranked the fourth worst country in the Asia-Pacific region for girls' rights and opportunities in leadership (Ali, 2021). This highlights the significant challenges that are preventing women from advancing into leadership positions especially in non-listed companies. Indeed, there are very few women holding key leadership positions such as CEO, corporate head, regional manager, financial manager, or head of marketing in non-listed companies.

In this regard, their experiences of overcoming the challenges they encountered on the road to becoming leaders can provide valuable insight for future women executives, contributing to the current literature, practice, and policy. Thus, the present study examines the barriers, that is, organizational forces that prevent women from entering leadership positions, using the framework of GOT.

3 | METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a two-wave data collection method, including semi-structured interviews followed by focus group discussions based on a qualitative research approach. Such a methodology was selected as it allows researchers to explore detailed descriptions of the complex

phenomenon, that is, women's experiences (Dal Mas & Paoloni, 2019) and the interpretation of events by actors (Saunders & Lewis, 2017; Sofaer, 1999), in this case, women working for various non-listed companies in Bangladesh. Furthermore, this method is particularly valuable for amplifying the voices of those whose views are rarely heard (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Islam et al., 2023).

The study adopted a purposive sampling strategy, which allows researchers to apply their judgment to select a sample (Fraenkel et al., 2023; Saunders & Lewis, 2017). According to Fraenkel et al. (2023), purposive sampling allows researchers to select a sample based on prior information and knowledge to collect data. Aligning the purpose of the research objectives, the researchers of this study targeted non-listed companies to identify women working in leadership positions such as CEO, manager, assistant director, regional manager, and general manager. Moreover, participants in this study were also selected based on their educational qualifications, specifically requiring at least a bachelor's degree. This is because advancing to leadership positions in businesses typically necessitates a certain level of education. There is a notable gap in research focusing on this specific group of women—those who possess the necessary educational and professional qualifications but remain underrepresented in leadership roles.

The interview protocol was shared with the respective company officials, and they were informed that the research was solely for academic purposes. The interview outline comprised an invitation letter and the scheme of the semi-structured interview questions. Most themes were borrowed from the most recent literature, as done in other studies (Cavazza et al., 2023; Dal Mas et al., 2022). Table 1 reports the starting topics and the primary academic references.

Company officials, as well as potential participants, were assured that the anonymity of the company and participants would be strictly maintained, and no third party was involved in the study. Moreover, the researchers also clarified that the semi-interview would take only 20–30 min (Alsehibany, 2021). The target participants or higher management of the non-listed companies were informed that they could withdraw their interviews anytime. The researchers highlighted that there was no remuneration or pressure to participate in this study.

Despite these assurances, most officials from the non-listed companies declined to share any information and showed little interest in cooperating with the research. However, officials from 12 companies agreed to collaborate with researchers and allowed their female professionals in leadership positions to take part in the study. Participant referrals from these companies also helped identify suitable participants from other organizations. The researchers proceeded with the inclusion of participants and the administration of semi-structured interviews until the point of data saturation was reached.

Not all the participants allowed the researchers to record the interviews; therefore, manual notes were taken. Notes were then cross-checked by every participant after every interview and focus group discussion to ensure that their opinion was correctly reported and understood. Firstly, the researchers conducted interviews on the barriers women face in accessing leadership positions. Secondly, after the initial findings, a focus group discussion was conducted

(Kitzinger, 1995) to explore how women can access leadership positions in non-listed companies. Four focus groups were created, ranging from three to five participants each. One researcher with a psychology

background led the discussion and collected data. Again, recording was not allowed, but written notes were taken and double-checked with participants to ensure accuracy, and results were compared among groups. Two-wave data collection has been used to reduce the bias issue in the data collection simultaneously (O'Grady et al., 2018).

TABLE 1 Semi-structured interview questions and references.

Question	(Eventual) academic reference
<i>Section 1: Demographic details and warm-up questions</i>	
Level of education	
Marital status	
Working experience in terms of years	
Age range	
<i>Section 2: Challenges in accessing leadership positions</i>	
Perceived barriers in general terms	(Bryan et al., 2021; Kalaitzi et al., 2017)
Top management support	(Callahan et al., 2024)
Colleague support	(Fjendbo, 2021)
Family support	(Ely et al., 2014; Mooney, 2009; Rowe et al., 2023)
Policy support	(Chamberlain et al., 2008; Gupta & Garg, 2022; Lundberg & Stearns, 2019)
Potential role of technology	(Hossain et al., 2022; Rashid, 2023)
Eventual sexual harassment issues	(Mooney, 2018; Naseviciute & Juzeviciene, 2024)
<i>Section 3: Solutions in accessing leadership positions</i>	
Desired/wished solutions	
Experienced/successful solutions/facilitators	

Data were analyzed manually due to the small size of the sample and the participants' requests (Islam et al., 2023; Saldana, 2015). The analysis conducted in this study was of a thematic nature, with the primary objective being to comprehensively interpret the opinions expressed by the participants in their responses. The qualitative data were subjected to manual analysis to examine it thoroughly. Initially, the threads for the coding process were identified to establish the categories. These categories served as the foundation for the subsequent development of themes, which were then used for the analysis and subsequent debate. In this regard, data saturation was achieved in the 15th interview. However, researchers continued till the 16th interview to make sure no new information emerged. Participants' details are reported in the following Table 2.

4 | RESULTS

The analysis of the data revealed several impediments to the progression of women to leadership positions. Some of these barriers were also found in previous studies and confirm the main literature streams, which can be common for female leaders globally, regardless of the type of organization (listed vs. non-listed). Still, some other barriers were novel and appeared to be amplified in the context of Bangladeshi non-listed companies compared to listed companies. The issue of sexual harassment, for instance, seems to be significant yet under-reported in non-listed organizations. The following sections discuss the main findings supported by participants' quotes.

TABLE 2 Participants' details and demographics.

No.	Position	Education	Marital status	Job tenure (in years)	Age range
1	Manager of Product Development	Masters	Married	11	41–45
2	Assistant general manager (AGM)	Masters	Married	11	41–45
3	Head of Marketing	Masters	Married	9	36–40
4	Manager of Marketing	Masters	Single	6	31–35
5	General Manager	Masters	Married	9	36–40
6	Operations Manager	Masters	Married	10	
7	Financial Manager	Masters	Single	8	36–40
8	Manager HR	Bachelors	Married	10	41–45
9	Public Relations Manager	Masters	Married	12	46–51
10	Head of Merchandiser	Masters	Married	14	46–51
11	Head of Finance	PhD	Married	10	41–45
12	Manager	Masters	Married	12	
13	Project Manager	Masters	Married	11	41–45
14	Senior General Manager	Masters	Single	6	31–35
15	Manager of Marketing	Masters	Married	14	46–51
16	General Manager	Masters	Married	15	46–51

4.1 | Barriers

4.1.1 | Long working hours as a gendered disadvantage

All the participants in this study opined that long working hours impact their leadership aspirations. Moreover, seeing their female leaders stuck in the office for a long time every day discourages younger colleagues from pursuing their career aspirations. Participant 1, a manager, outlined that:

When I took the managerial role, I didn't know that I would have to stay in the office for such a long time. It is not about an internal official duty job because after my regular office time, I have to work from home. So, others, I mean my female juniors, see my frustration because of my lengthy work. They tell me, they will not sign up for a leading role because of lengthy work hours required.

Participant 8 stresses a cultural aspect related to the extended working times:

Long working hours in my company is a problem and I think this culture is common in organizations of this country. You know as a leader; I have to show that it is my company and I have to be ready all the time. I come early to the office and I have to leave late. So, I become tired and my personal life is affected in many ways.

4.1.2 | Obfuscated responsibilities as a gendered construction

Vague and uncertain responsibilities also create barriers for women in their career progression. All the participants in this study have outlined that they have no specific job roles or responsibilities. As a result, they have to stay ready all the time to work on whatever is required by the organization. Participant 2 outlined that:

You know, as an assistant general manager, I am assigned jobs by higher management. Sometimes, they do not inform me earlier so that I can prepare. This is normal in corporate, I know, but as a woman, I feel pressure because I have a family to give time. In such a context, it demotivates me to stay in the position.

Participant 7, a Financial Manager, opined that:

In my company, the leadership role holders have to work beyond their duties regardless of gender. There are no specific roles. As a result, I find the position complicated. It demotivates me, and I think future potential women leaders as well.

4.1.3 | Persisting gender pay gap

Lack of salary equality represents a significant problem for women leaders. Participant 3, Head of Marketing, shared that:

Lack of salary for women is a significant barrier for women to access leadership positions. The amount I'm given now is less than the amount of the previous head of marketing in this company. When I came to know about it, I felt very frustrated. Job duties, pressure and contributions, etc. have increased, but my salary is less than my expectation and in comparison with the previous male manager.

Participant 9, a Public Relations Manager also added that:

When you give more jobs but you give less money to the same position holders. It does not motivate anyone. So, girls in corporate do not like to take the position that may ruin their personal family life. It is a crucial barrier because salary discrimination in Bangladeshi companies is common.

Participant 16, a General Manager, similarly explained that:

I tell you, less salary for females is a barrier. Higher management does not acknowledge it. But they apply it. So, when an enthusiastic female knows about it. She would not apply for the position where she will have to work more.

4.1.4 | Bias promotional process

Every participant in this study presented the existence of biased promotional processes in the non-listed companies. They similarly think that the biased promotional process creates a barrier for women to be leaders. Participant 2, an assistant general manager, opined that:

I got a promotion more than 7 years later. I started my job now waiting for another promotion. But you know for the last 4 years, I didn't get it. It is because of the biased promotion process here. My immediate junior left the company because of this issue. I am thinking the same.

Participant 8, an HR Manager, pointed out that:

Although I work in the HR department, I can tell you, I have to follow what the owners of the company tell me. So, promotion is not merit-based. It depends on the will of the owners. This demotivates ladies in the company. Because bosses prefer boys.

4.1.5 | Lack of training and development opportunities

All the participants in the study shared that they lack training and development opportunities in the company where they work. They also informed me that these opportunities are also rare in other companies. As a result, they believe these are significant barriers to women's access to leadership positions in Bangladeshi non-listed companies. Participant 1, Manager of Product Development outlined that:

Most of the women are not sent to the leadership development training, therefore, they cannot be prepared for these roles. As a result, they cannot apply even though they might be interested in being a leader. Here boys are given preference because higher management thinks male colleagues are better.

Participant 9, a Public Relations Manager, reported that:

Training is expensive. If companies don't share the cost, nobody goes for training. In companies, especially in non-listed companies, we don't have enough money for higher and impactful training. But without proper training we cannot expect someone who has knowledge and skills to be a leader. Thus, you know, lack of training and development is a significant barrier for women's progression.

Participant 16, a General Manager, also outlined this issue as a significant barrier. She explained that:

I can tell you, most of the companies do not have any training for leadership skills and knowledge development for women. Some training opportunities are there but those are for specific works not for leadership roles. So, this is a significant barrier that you need to keep in mind.

All the other participants opined that women cannot develop themselves as leaders due to the lack of training and development opportunities. The participants believe that the lack of training and development opportunities in the non-listed companies is the most important barrier to women's access to leadership positions.

4.1.6 | Negative attitude of colleagues

The negative attitude of colleagues toward women professionals is a significant barrier for women in accessing leading positions. Eleven participants reported this issue. Participant 5, a General Manager, clarified that:

Some of my colleagues, especially male colleagues, have a negative attitude towards women leadership. They create problems for me. You know everyone knows this issue. So, you can imagine why a female would be in a rollercoaster when she knows. But I strived for it because of my passion to be a leader.

Participant 13, a Project Manager, opined that:

Negative attitude of colleagues is an important barrier because it demotivates suitable and capable ladies to go into leading roles. I took a longer time to be in this position only because of this issue but I had to become a project manager otherwise, I cannot stay in this company. But now I see some colleagues don't like to listen to my instructions.

4.1.7 | Sexual harassment

The prevalence of sexual harassment in the non-listed companies of Bangladesh was reported by eight participants in this study. Participant 3, a Head of Marketing, said that:

Most women do not express that they are sexually harassed by colleagues. But it is a problem that hinders women from obtaining leadership positions. Most boards or management committees consist of more than 90% men, in such scenario, women are harassed being minor, you know what I mean.

Participant 9, a Public Relations Manager, requested the interviewer to quote her voice as reported below:

Some owners have family problems, they are not happy with family so they try to take advantage of women, who work under them! Such situations are increasing. In these situations, women cannot grow to leading positions where they have to work with bosses, I mean owners.

Participant 11, a Head of Finance informed that:

In my previous organisation, some women were sexually harassed by male colleagues. but authority didn't take any action against the culprits. You know, boys do not take actions against boys, I could not say anything because I was scared. Eventually, I left. Now you understand the situation, you know what I mean. Sexual harassment is a major barrier, you know.



4.2 | Solutions

During the focus group discussions, participants were primarily asked about the processes that enabled them to access leadership or managerial positions. All of them provided valuable insights into the individual and technological processes that helped them to gain leadership positions. However, none of them gave any insights regarding the organizational and government support for their access to leadership positions in the non-listed companies. Hence, the opinions on individual and technological processes provided by the respondents were outlined below:

4.2.1 | Individual and technological processes

Self-determination

All the participants in the focus-group discussions unanimously opined that their self-determination has been one of the most essential processes for accessing their leadership positions in the non-listed companies. However, the Participant 1 shared that:

In most cases, women are not sent to the training and development programs in the organizations. However, I have seen that some of the women employees in my company sign up for the weekend training programs with their own money. They do it because they are determined regarding access to leading positions.

Similarly, Participant 16, a General Manager, outlined that:

Wherever I am now just because of my self-determination. I set goals and worked on them. My confidence and I think others would also agree that our confidence and determination and integrity help us, you know, help women to take leading roles in such male dominated companies, which are rarely regulated.

Other participants have also opined similarly and shared that their self-determination was crucial for their access in the leading positions of the non-listed companies.

Upskilling

All the participants opined that regular upskilling by attending training and development programs with their own money was effective in their journey to leadership positions. The Participant 3 told that:

Upskilling helped me to stay relevant and demanding in the job market. Hence, I always give importance to how I can enhance my skills so that my skills are relevant to the needs of the organisations and industries.

The Participant 8, also opined that:

Upskilling helps to harness skills that actually enhance confidence and allow us to stay determined. You know self-efficacy is improved, when you know the skills required and you have those skills to take roles. I think upskilling is so helpful for everyone, especially if anyone wants to be a leader.

The Participant 14 underlined that:

Upskilling not only enhances skills, determination or self-efficacy but also helps women to adapt to changes and make good networks with professionals of other companies.

All other participants also outlined that upskilling has a critical contribution in taking leading positions in the business organizations of the competitive market.

Technologies adoption

Nine out of 16 participants in the four focus group discussions agreed that technologies, especially AI-based tools, played a valuable role in their career progression, especially concerning the ability to use them in a proper and profitable way. Participant 6, an operations manager, opined that

I think different technologies such as computers, smart-phones and now artificial intelligence tools chatGPT, Gemini etc. have important roles in my career. I got a career progression because I used to know about computers, software etc. Now I use AI tools that help me make decisions quicker than my colleagues. As a result, I am respected and I think I will apply for the promotion after this year because my performance, especially as an Operations Manager has been better than ever before as I use AI tools frequently.

Participant 13, a project manager, confirmed that:

I cannot think for a minute in the workplace without technology. My technological knowledge and skills help a lot to manage projects. I think every woman should strive to learn technological aspects and develop her technological skills to gain leadership roles in the future.

Participant 16 shared that:

Recent development of technologies, especially AI tools, has helped to provide data-driven decisions that have been very helpful. I think leadership roles are all about making decisions and managing people. The AI tools can help women to make decisions based on data

and facts and thus, they can manage people. So they must know technologies as I know. Now, I suggest every woman professional should learn AI tools, otherwise, they will be out of the market soon.

Job switching

Eight out of 16 participants opined that job switching represented a key opportunity for career progression, especially when joining other firms, leveraging on the existing skills and experience.

Participant 11 outlined that:

I was assistant head in the finance department, however, due to some issues I left the job but when I applied for a senior position, you know Head of Finance based on my previous experience. I got the job and I am playing my role as a head of finance so far successfully. I think women who do not get the promotions and opportunities to take the leading roles in their companies, I mean in the non-listed companies, should try to get better jobs in other companies. They will get it. It is my experience and practical recommendation, you know,

Participant 15, a marketing manager, also opined similarly that:

I have switched 4 jobs in the last 15 years. I did so because my bosses were not interested in promoting me or willing to give me the opportunity to take the leading positions. Sometimes, you need to get out of your comfort zones. I did it successfully and now I am in a leading position in my organisation.

The remaining six participants also shared similar information, underlining the value of changing job for career promotion.

Family support

Apart from the above processes, four participants stated that family support from their partners or parents was also instrumental in their journey to leadership positions in non-listed companies. In detail, Participant 2 opined that:

I had to get back home from work late. My parents were supportive. Fortunately, my husband has shown support, a rare occurrence in Bangladesh.

Participant 6 shared that:

“My husband is very supportive of me, as well as very optimistic about my career growth.” For this reason, I can work without any hassles from my husband, you know.

Similarly, Participant 15 also stated that:

Today I am here only because of the encouragement of my husband and his support, especially since he helped me a lot to take part in many training programmes so that I could develop myself. Even during the job switch, he was always with me. His support was very important to stay resilient during the job switching periods.

However, all the participants shared that they did not experience any direct or even indirect support from organizations in their journey toward leadership positions. Similarly, they also opined that there is no direct government support for their access to leadership positions in non-listed companies.

5 | DISCUSSION

Private organizations are typically busy workplaces with several responsibilities for both male and female professionals, as reported in the literature (Ely et al., 2014; Islam & Jantan, 2017). However, the lack of clarity around responsibilities means that the job is never truly finished, significantly adding to the workload and hours. This is particularly challenging for women in general and for those belonging to specific cultural groups, like in Bangladesh, in particular. Indeed, in the Bangladeshi culture, home responsibilities represent a female domain after work, making it difficult to achieve an effective work-life balance. While this issue was largely documented for listed firms (Mooney, 2018), no literature reported the extent of such a problem in smaller and non-listed companies. A culture that sees the mandatory presence at work for leaders for long working hours, no matter if there are real time-consuming activities to be handled, does not favor female leadership and, in contrast, represents a barrier for younger female professionals to aspire to a career progression. The results of this study indicate that organizations must annihilate the long-working-hour culture to increase the presence of women in leadership positions, especially when not really needed. Moreover, heavy workloads often do not correspond with a salary increase for women, contributing to a significant gender pay gap. As non-listed companies are often small, they may lack financial resource to award the extra working time. Women are often paid less than their male colleagues or previous chiefs, therefore, salary discrimination in non-listed companies represents a significant barrier for women aspiring to leadership roles.

The perception that the promotion process is biased in most non-listed organizations represented a major concern for all the participants, limiting ambitions. This result is consistent with the literature (Lundberg & Stearns, 2019). The lack of training and development opportunities as a barrier to women's progress toward leadership positions has not been found in the previous literature, highlighting a need for policies that support dedicated training programs for women

(Dal Mas et al., 2023). These findings are consistent with the GOT's propositions that the lack of career-building opportunities can restrict women's career progress (Mastracci & Arreola, 2016). Although training can be expensive in terms of both money and time for smaller businesses, its benefits can support both the employee and the company's growth.

The lack of childcare facilities is in line with GOT, which argues that organizations are developed concentrating on male professionals rather than females, who might have children (Jenson et al., 2017). However, the previous literature has not highlighted the lack of childcare facilities as a peculiar barrier, even if some recent works in Japan underlined paternity leave as a valuable resource to improve female leadership (Min & Kim, 2024). This finding conveys a significant message for industry planners to develop these facilities and for researchers to investigate this issue further.

According to GOT, an organizational structure is not gender-neutral (Jenson et al., 2017). Therefore, this finding is consistent with the theory, as it reveals that male executives and employees often have a negative attitude toward women's leadership in non-listed companies, creating a blockade toward women's progression to leadership even when they possess the relevant skills and experience (Ibarra et al., 2010, 2013; Mastracci & Arreola, 2016). Owing to the biased gendered organizational structure, the prevalence of sexual harassment represents a significant issue for women because it is a taboo to talk about in and outside the organization and, thus, goes unpunished (Schwanke, 2013). This finding reflects the tenet of GOT that sexual harassment persists in organizations because males in charge are reluctant to punish other men (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Gupta & Garg, 2022). That is why changing jobs may represent a unique opportunity for women to value their skills and knowledge. Still, this process may mean, for small businesses, losing precious competencies, which may be hard to replace.

However, some individual processes through which women have advanced their careers into leadership roles are not in line with the previous studies. For example, this study found that self-determination is the key to women's access to leadership positions, which was consistent with the study of Naseviciute and Juceviciene (2024), who reported that women's lack of confidence created barriers to taking on leadership roles. Even in emerging countries, women seem more and more willing to sign up for training programs and upskilling opportunities, even at their own expense. Additionally, the effective use of modern AI-based tools is emerging as crucial in boosting decision-making and building a positive reputation among junior colleagues, which can serve as a strategic asset for career advancement, even in smaller businesses. These findings encourage women professionals from non-listed companies as well as smaller businesses to learn AI tools to advance their careers in the competitive job market. Last but not least, family support from partners and parents also plays a crucial role in boosting self-determination, facilitating job changes, and upskilling by gaining new competencies, also in high-tech fields. Despite the predominant cultural view that sees the role of woman as a mother, a housekeeper, and a caregiver,

supportive family members can significantly contribute to female empowerment toward career progressions.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

Our study directly challenges GOT's fundamental principle that organizations are not gender-neutral, highlighting the obstacles women face in reaching leadership positions. We add to the literature informed by this theory by demonstrating that there are many barriers for women to access leadership positions. As recommended by several authors in the previous literature (Bart & McQueen, 2013; Birindelli et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020) our investigation deepens the conditions to improve female leadership in smaller non-listed companies in emerging countries. As women leaders play a significant role in organizations, addressing these barriers is essential for improving their access to leadership positions.

Deepening the context of Bangladesh, we identified that non-listed companies are more prone to impede women's career progression compared to listed companies, probably due to their smaller size and lack of resources. In fact, these companies often lack resources to improve salaries and feature a strong culture that sees managers being present in the workplace for long hours, regardless of the real activities required, impeding a proper work-life balance. Moreover, such organizations often lack accountability toward government and other stakeholders, resulting in a gendered work environment that hinders women's access to leadership positions. As observed by Acker (1990) and other GOT theorists (Burton & Rycroft-Malone, 2014; Jenson et al., 2017; Mastracci & Arreola, 2016), women professionals struggle in their career growth when organizations are gendered. It is argued that gendered organizations may reduce women's aspirations to take leading roles, but these can be detrimental to the industry and eventually to the country where women's existence in leading roles is an urgent imperative in non-listed companies.

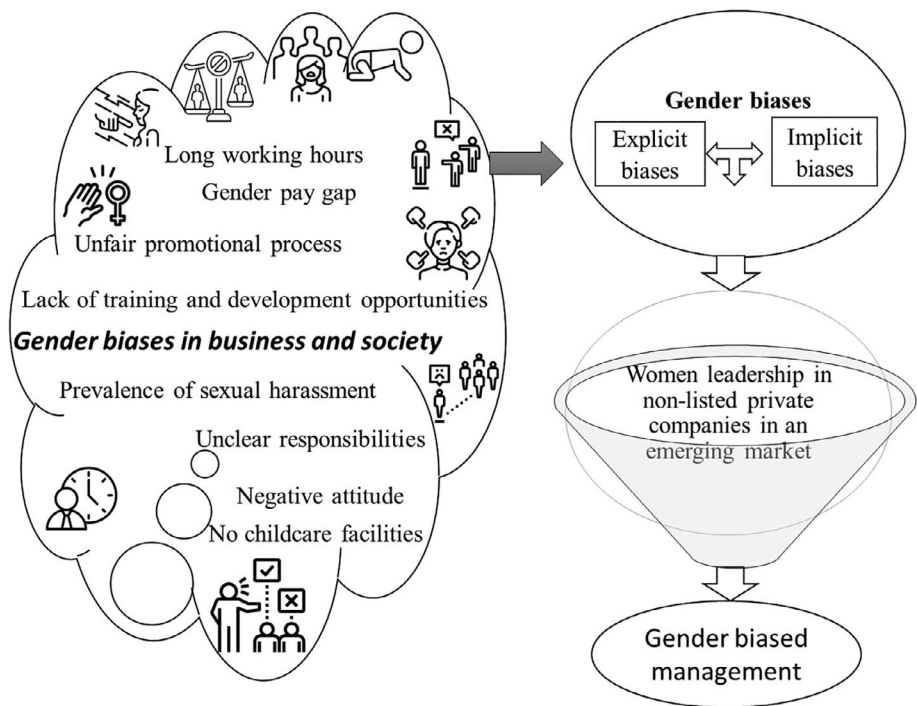
Figure 1 conceptualizes gender biases as falling into two categories: implicit and explicit biases. Implicit gender biases (e.g., negative attitudes toward female chiefs, lack of childcare) are unconscious and inherent to broader society and filter into the organizational processes latently. In contrast, explicit gender biases (e.g., long working hours, gender pay gap, unfair promotions, lack of training and development opportunities, sexual harassment, unclear responsibilities) are more consciously constructed within organizations, and crystalized in the culture over time.

Both implicit and explicit biases are challenging to address. While policymakers can help by setting new regulations (e.g., gender quotas) and focused financial support (e.g., promoting training and technological investments, ...), cultural aspects are hard to overcome, especially in smaller organizations.

6 | CONCLUSION

Non-listed companies represent unique workplaces, operating with less regulatory oversight compared to listed companies, especially in

FIGURE 1 The construction of gender disadvantage through implicit and explicit biases. *Source:* Authors' elaboration



emerging yet fast-growing countries like Bangladesh. As a result, the employment practices of these over 7000 non-listed companies often go unnoticed and operate outside conventional norms. It is important for these organizations to have women in leading positions to comply with legislation and also contribute to organizational growth in this emerging economy (Bart & McQueen, 2013; Birindelli et al., 2020; Centinaio, 2024; Kirton & Greene, 2015; Lim et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020; Traversi et al., 2024).

Our study has outlined several barriers faced by women that echo the findings of previous studies from different contexts and industries. However, these barriers remain particularly pronounced in the context of non-listed companies in emerging economies, largely due to the lack of systematic research in this area. This study offers new insights into the barriers faced by women toward attaining leading positions in the non-listed organizational context, drawing upon GOT. Consequently, the study calls for both employers and policymakers to take action to dismantle these barriers and promote more women into leadership roles, as this is not only an ethical imperative but also beneficial from a business perspective (Bart & McQueen, 2013; Birindelli et al., 2020; Kirton & Greene, 2015; Liu et al., 2020; Nielsen & Huse, 2010).

6.1 | Practical implications

As highlighted in the study's background, there are many barriers for women in climbing toward leadership positions in organizations, yet these barriers mainly reflect the Western organizational contexts. Hence, the outcomes of our study can be particularly relevant for emerging countries where managers, practitioners, researchers,

policymakers, and aspiring women to leadership positions might need to reconsider and revisit current plans, policies, and strategies to enhance women's representation in leadership roles. Given that Bangladesh is one of the fastest-growing emerging economies and a significant destination for Western investment, failing to address and eliminate these identified barriers could hinder the country's ability to attract investment from Western investors.

On the other hand, policymakers need to address these barriers in their policymaking processes to ensure that women's progression is supported across all types of companies, whether listed or non-listed. In particular, non-listed companies represent the core of the economy, are relevant employers for residents, and may lack financial and cultural resources because of their limited size.

As female engagement in leadership positions is advisable as it brings several advantages (Bart & McQueen, 2013; Birindelli et al., 2020; Centinaio, 2024; Lim et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020; Traversi et al., 2024), employers should take these barriers into account in their decision-making processes, especially in promoting employees regardless of their gender to develop organizational performance and sustainability. Additionally, employers should work to reduce long working hours, clarify responsibilities, and eliminate salary discrimination. Providing training is also crucial, and it should be supported by the companies themselves and/or by governmental funds. New technologies, like those based on AI, offer valuable opportunities for both employees and businesses to grow. Women can rely on upskilling and high-tech competencies to advance their career progression, even without the need to change their occupations to gain a better position.

Training and development opportunities, along with the availability of childcare facilities, are crucial for improving work-life balance



and supporting women in achieving leadership roles. The study has also highlighted the issue of lack of security as a critical barrier. Hence, employers must ensure that women professionals are given better protection so that they feel empowered and safe in their leading function. Additionally, the study has also highlighted the negative attitudes of colleagues toward women leaders, along with the prevalence of sexual harassment as key issues. Therefore, these challenges also have implications for employers and management personnel of non-listed companies to foster a respectful organizational environment where women professionals are valued equally to their male counterparts. Such aspects may also be supported and mitigated when smaller companies work in a broader ecosystem, which includes larger organizations and Western partners, who may be more used to female engagement, gender quotas, and non-discrimination policies also fostered by corporate social responsibility action plans.

While most of the solutions can be implemented by a single business or industry and supported by policymakers, cultural barriers and opportunities related to the personal sphere also emerge. Indeed, most of the enquired female leaders underlined the crucial role played by family support. When partners and family members back a woman's career ambitions, it can make a substantial difference. This support often allows working longer hours, investing time and money in training and upskilling, and adapting the workplace to help women secure better roles.

6.2 | Research limitations and future directions

Our study provides valuable insights into the barriers faced by women and processes that helped them access leadership positions in non-listed companies. However, like all research, this study has its limitations. Although saturation was reached, the sample size remains limited. A larger-scale survey, potentially endorsed by some industrial associations, could help the collection of more generalized data. Therefore, future researchers are recommended to conduct quantitative studies using surveys to include a broader range of respondents from different locations and various types of companies. Moreover, future longitudinal studies could explore how modern trends, including new policies and the use of advanced technologies, might reshape the landscape, leading to new regulations, funding opportunities, and knowledge translation activities.

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