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THE ROLE OF WOMEN LEADERS IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT: LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS, TEAM PERFORMANCE, AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT. This article examines how women leaders contribute to project management through leadership effectiveness, team functioning, and organizational outcomes. It combines a critical narrative review of peer-reviewed studies with descriptive analysis of publicly reported data from the Project Management Institute (PMI), Association for Project Management (APM), and recent empirical research. PMI reports that 20% of surveyed women and 23% of men held management roles in its 2022 survey; APM reports a fall in women project directors from 28% in 2023 to 18% in 2025 in its UK survey. A study of 3,500 Asian Development Bank projects found a positive association between women project leaders and efficiency ratings, while several other outcome associations were not statistically significant. The article distinguishes descriptive differences from causal effects, identifies limitations of cross-source comparisons, and proposes evidence-informed organizational actions without claiming to test a new causal model.

Keywords: women leaders; project management; leadership effectiveness; team performance; gender equality; organizational success; inclusive leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Project management increasingly requires more than the control of time, scope, and budget. Projects operate through temporary teams, interdependent stakeholders, changing technologies, and strategic priorities. Leadership therefore influences how a project team coordinates work, resolves disagreements, learns from setbacks, and connects delivery to organizational value.

Women remain underrepresented in many project leadership pipelines. PMI's State of Women in Project Management (2023), based on a global survey conducted in 2022, reported that men outnumbered women in the project profession by approximately three to one. Such figures make the question of access to leadership important, but they do not by themselves indicate whether projects led by women perform better or worse.

Three analytical levels structure the article. At the individual level, leadership effectiveness refers to behaviors such as communicating purpose, making decisions, supporting team members, and handling uncertainty. At the team level, performance concerns coordination, trust, participation, psychological safety, and reliable delivery. At the organizational level, success

concerns strategic benefits, talent retention, fairness, and sustained capability, in addition to project outputs.

This article is a secondary-source analysis, not an original survey or field experiment. Its conclusions are limited to the available evidence. Differences between countries, industries, dates, and definitions mean that reported percentages cannot be pooled into a single population estimate. The analysis prioritizes peer-reviewed research published in 2024–2025 and major professional surveys, while retaining selected earlier meta-analyses for historical context.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A meta-analysis by Paustian-Underdahl and colleagues (2024) reviewed 50 years of evidence on evaluations of leadership behaviors across 13 meta-analyses. Its broad scope illustrates that observed differences depend on the specific behavior and evaluation context rather than a universal gender-based leadership advantage.

An integrative review by Buss, Andler, and Tiberius (2025) examined 247 empirical studies published between 2003 and 2023 and emphasized the fragmented nature of research on women's emergence into leadership and their effectiveness. This supports a contextual interpretation: organizational settings and career pathways are relevant alongside personal capabilities.

Earlier quantitative evidence is similarly nuanced. Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, and Woehr (2014) analyzed 99 independent samples from 95 studies and found no overall gender difference in perceived leadership effectiveness across all contexts. When only ratings supplied by others were considered, women were rated more effective. This divergence warns against interpreting self-ratings, peer ratings, and objective project metrics as interchangeable.

Gierke (2025) synthesized 87 articles concerning organizational conditions that help women obtain and retain leadership positions. The review organized the evidence across recruitment and selection, learning and development, performance appraisal, and reward and retention. This life-cycle perspective is especially relevant to project-based organizations, where repeated short assignments and informal sponsorship can shape promotion.

Taken together, these sources support a mechanism-focused argument: leader gender is an incomplete explanation; leadership behavior, team climate, and institutional support help explain when projects and organizations benefit.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a structured narrative literature review and descriptive secondary-data analysis. Peer-reviewed studies and PMI and APM reports were selected based on their relevance to women's leadership, project management, team performance, and organizational outcomes, as well as the availability of identifiable methods and publication details.

The analysis involved extracting key study characteristics, categorizing findings at individual, team, project, and organizational levels, comparing gender representation indicators, and evaluating evidence based on statistical significance and potential bias. The evidence table summarizes empirical findings, while the figure compares women's representation in selected UK project management roles in 2023 and 2025.

Key limitations include self-reported data, sampling bias, geographic differences, and limited comparability between surveys. PMI indicators originate from its 2022 survey, while APM

findings reflect the UK context. As a secondary-data review, the study identifies associations rather than causal relationships.

Research integrity was maintained through source attribution and the exclusion of fabricated observations or unverified data. Further project-level research is needed to establish causal effects.

LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

Effective project leadership is best assessed through observable practices and project-specific outcomes. Competencies include stakeholder negotiation, prioritization, conflict resolution, decision quality, risk escalation, and the ability to create shared understanding across professional boundaries.

Women leaders may bring a range of approaches to these tasks, but the research does not justify assigning a fixed "female leadership style" to all women. Gender categories contain substantial individual variation. Moreover, a collaborative approach is useful in some project phases while decisive direction may be required during safety incidents, severe delays, or urgent regulatory changes.

PMI's 2023 report observed that surveyed women were more likely than men to report the use of agile and hybrid approaches and to place higher value on interpersonal "power skills." These are descriptive patterns in respondents' reported practices. They do not show that a specific methodology automatically improves outcomes when implemented by women.

Leadership effectiveness also depends on organizational legitimacy. Women may encounter different expectations about assertiveness, authority, and care. An evaluation system that rewards identical behavior differently by gender can distort performance appraisals and promotion decisions. Transparent criteria and multiple performance indicators are therefore important.

The 2025 PMI Pulse of the Profession report reinforces the importance of competencies beyond gender. It found that project professionals with high business acumen more frequently met business goals (83% versus 78%), adhered to budgets (73% versus 68%), and adhered to schedules (63% versus 59%) than the comparison group. These differences describe business-acumen groups, not women versus men, and should never be presented as gender effects.

An effective organization can combine behavioral assessment with delivery evidence. Examples include structured stakeholder feedback, documented issue-resolution times, employee turnover, quality outcomes, and verified benefits realization. The purpose is to reward contribution rather than stereotype-based impressions.

At the same time, leadership evaluation must account for project difficulty. Leaders assigned failing or politically sensitive projects may produce valuable improvements without achieving every original target. Comparisons should therefore adjust, where feasible, for budget, sector, team size, uncertainty, and starting conditions.

TEAM PERFORMANCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS

Shahzad et al. (2025) provide project-specific evidence that inclusive leadership relates positively to citizenship behavior: discretionary actions through which team members help the project beyond narrowly defined job requirements. Such behavior may include sharing expertise, supporting colleagues under pressure, and proactively raising risks. However, inclusive behavior is not exclusive to women and should be developed across the entire leadership workforce.

The large-team study presented at the Academy of Management in 2025 suggests that team cohesion can vary by the interaction between a leader's gender, leadership style, and communication of purpose. This is consistent with the view that effective project leadership requires a fit between team expectations, situational needs, and communication practices.

The project evidence from the Asian Development Bank is especially useful because it links leader gender to actual project ratings rather than perceptions alone. Its statistically significant association with efficiency is noteworthy; the lack of statistical significance for several other dimensions requires restraint. A positive point estimate is not equivalent to a reliably established effect.

DESCRIPTIVE EVIDENCE AND RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes selected indicators and research findings. It deliberately preserves differences in population, method, and outcome rather than combining them into an artificial score.

Table 1 presents selected empirical findings on women's leadership, project performance, and organizational outcomes. The results highlight key relationships while accounting for differences in study populations, research methods, and performance indicators, ensuring a balanced interpretation of the evidence.

TABLE 1

Empirical Evidence on Women's Leadership and Project Performance (2018–2025)

Study / Year	Sample (N)	Statistical evidence	Key findings and implications
Kaur (2024)	3,500 projects	Regression and entropy matching	Female leadership positively associated with project efficiency; other outcomes statistically insignificant.
Hoobler et al. (2018)	117,639 organizations	78 studies (meta-analysis)	Women's leadership representation is associated with financial performance, with effects varying by cultural context.
Alhmoudi & Rashid (2025)	404 paired responses	Mean = 3.294/5 (65.9%)	Women's leadership effectiveness is significantly associated with economic support factors.
Essel (2023)	475 respondents	Response rate ≈ 73.1%	Female managers' leadership positively linked to teamwork and organizational performance.
Guzmán et al. (2021)	875 projects	Women ≈ 13% of team members	Gender diversity positively associated with fundraising and project survival.
Porkodi (2024)	24 empirical studies	$\beta = 0.90$ (organizational performance); $\beta = 0.93$ (trust)	Agile leadership strongly associated with organizational outcomes; not gender-specific.

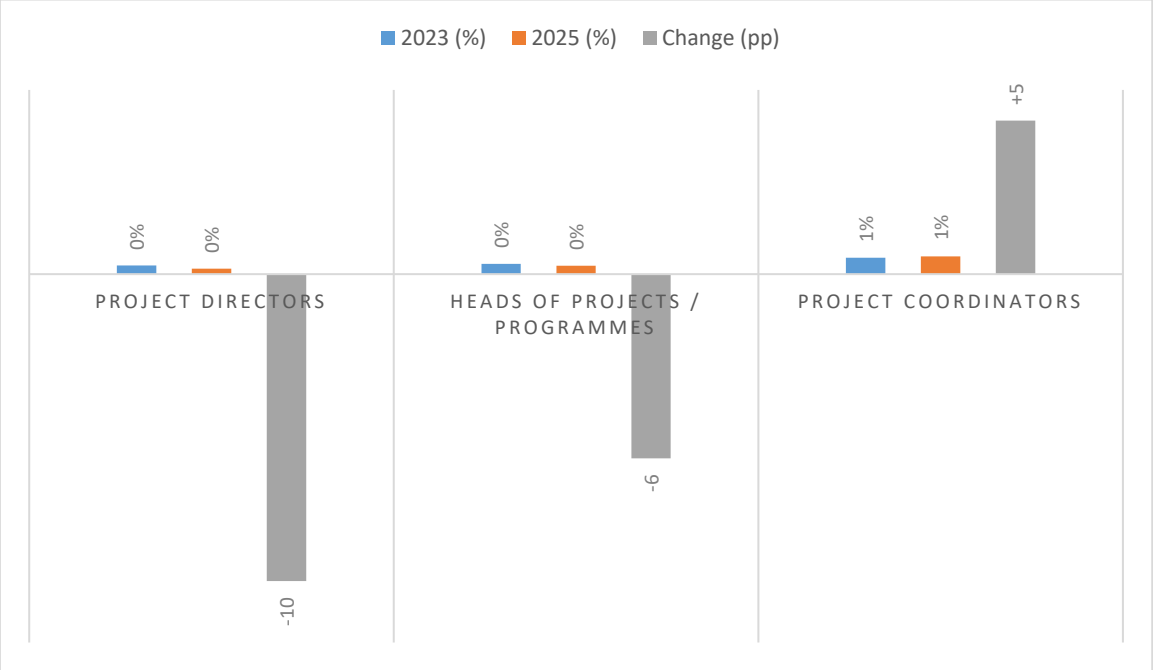
Source: Compiled from published academic studies.

Table 1 presents evidence from six studies examining women's leadership, project effectiveness, team performance, and organizational success. Kaur (2024), analyzing 3,500 Asian Development Bank projects, found a significant positive association between female leadership and project efficiency, but not relevance, effectiveness, or sustainability.

Hoobler et al. (2018), reviewing 78 studies covering 117,639 organizations, showed that the relationship between women's leadership and financial performance varies across institutional and cultural contexts. Alhmoudi and Rashid (2025), based on 404 paired responses, reported a mean leadership performance score of 3.294/5, emphasizing organizational and economic support.

Essel (2023), using 475 responses, identified positive relationships between female leadership, teamwork, and organizational effectiveness. Similarly, Guzmán et al. (2021), examining 875 projects, found that women constituted approximately 13% of team members, while gender diversity was positively associated with fundraising and certain measures of project survival.

FIGURE 1. WOMEN IN SELECTED UK PROJECT ROLES, 2023 AND 2025



Source: Association for Project Management (APM). (2025). *Salary and Market Trends Survey 2025*. Comparative data from the 2023 and 2025 surveys. Author's visualization based on APM statistics.

Figure 1 shows changes in women's representation in project management roles between 2023 and 2025. The proportion of female project directors declined from 28% to 18% (−10 percentage points; −35.7%), while women heading projects and programmes decreased from 33% to 27% (−6 percentage points; −18.2%). In contrast, female project coordinators increased from 53% to 58% (+5 percentage points; +9.4%).

These trends suggest greater female representation in coordination roles than in senior leadership. However, differences in survey samples prevent conclusions about individual career progression. The findings emphasize the need to strengthen equal opportunities for women in senior project management positions.

INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS

Figure 1 presents an uneven pattern across organizational levels. The reported proportion of women in project coordinator roles increased by five percentage points, while the proportions in project director and head-of-projects roles decreased by ten and six percentage points respectively. This divergence is consistent with a possible advancement bottleneck, although the surveys alone cannot identify its cause.

The percentage-point changes are not the same as percentage changes. For example, the project-director indicator decreased by 10 percentage points (28% minus 18%), equivalent to approximately 35.7% relative to its 2023 value. Such a calculation is purely descriptive and does not establish that the number of women directors fell by the same proportion.

The PMI results add an international perspective but use different respondents and definitions. Its 20% versus 23% management-role comparison refers to the proportion of women and men respondents who reported a management role; it is not the share of all management posts occupied by women or men.

These distinctions matter because misleading comparisons can exaggerate both progress and disadvantage. Responsible interpretation requires specifying denominators, collection years, geography, occupational definitions, and uncertainty.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that leadership effectiveness depends on organizational context, managerial competencies, and performance measures rather than gender alone. Research highlights the importance of inclusive leadership, business acumen, and equitable access to senior positions.

Project management offices should establish transparent promotion and project assignment criteria, provide equal access to strategic projects, and support leadership development. Performance evaluations should consider delivery reliability, stakeholder value, quality, team retention, risk management, and benefits realization, using consistent standards to minimize gender bias.

Leadership training should emphasize communication, participation, conflict resolution, and psychological safety for all employees. Organizations must also address unequal access to high-budget projects, which can limit women's advancement despite their qualifications.

However, survey findings and observational studies establish associations rather than causation. Future research should employ longitudinal data, multilevel analysis, and mixed methods to examine how leadership practices, organizational opportunities, and team dynamics influence project outcomes.

CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

This review concludes that women's leadership effectiveness in project management reflects managerial competence, team processes, and organizational opportunities rather than inherent gender differences. Inclusive leadership and equitable advancement opportunities can contribute to project and organizational performance.

Professional surveys indicate persistent gender disparities in project management. PMI's 2023 report identified gender imbalance, while APM's 2025 UK survey showed declining female

representation in certain senior roles compared with 2023, alongside increased representation among project coordinators. These findings reflect different contexts and do not establish a global trend.

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary data from different contexts and methodologies, without primary or causal analysis. Future research should examine whether equitable assignments, mentoring, and inclusive leadership improve measurable project outcomes.

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