



Access to Leadership Positions and Career Trajectories for Georgian and American Women (XX–XXI)

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Abstract

This article examines how women in Georgia and the United States have gained wider access to education and paid employment while continuing to encounter uneven access to leadership positions and interrupted career trajectories. The study adopts a qualitative comparative literature review and policy analysis, drawing on recent international reports, national statistical materials, and scholarly research on gendered organizations, role congruity, care work, and flexible work. The article argues that leadership inequality is not caused by a simple shortage of qualified women; rather, it is reproduced through organizational expectations, unequal care responsibilities, promotion cultures, occupational segregation, regional inequalities, and the unequal valuation of flexibility. The comparison shows that the United States presents a highly developed corporate pipeline with measurable gains in senior leadership, yet persistent barriers at the first step into management and continuing racialized and caregiving penalties. Georgia, by contrast, presents a more transitional labor market, where formal equality exists alongside enduring patriarchal norms, uneven regional opportunity, limited care infrastructure, and restricted access to high-quality employment. Across both contexts, flexible and hybrid work may support women's labor-force continuity, but without transparent evaluation systems and intentional leadership pathways, it can also reduce visibility, sponsorship, and promotion opportunities. The article concludes that sustainable equality in leadership requires not only individual ambition

or educational attainment but institutional redesign: transparent promotion criteria, accessible childcare, gender-responsive labor policy, mentorship and sponsorship systems, pay transparency, and protection against flexibility stigma.

Keywords: Women and leadership; career trajectories; Georgia; United States; flexible work; gender inequality; work-family conflict

Introduction

Women's access to leadership remains one of the most visible yet difficult measures of gender equality in modern labor markets. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, women in both Georgia and the United States entered universities, professions, public administration, entrepreneurship, and corporate employment in much greater numbers than previous generations. Nevertheless, their advancement has not followed a linear path from education to authority. The presence of women in the workforce has expanded more rapidly than their presence in senior decision-making positions, and the gap between participation and power continues to define gender inequality in professional life.

The comparison between Georgia and the United States is useful because the two countries represent different historical, institutional, and cultural contexts. The United States has a long-established corporate sector, extensive anti-discrimination legislation, and a large body of research documenting gender gaps in leadership. Yet even in this context, women's progress is uneven. The 2024 Women in the Workplace report by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company showed progress in women's representation in senior leadership, while also emphasizing that the pipeline remains fragile, especially at early management levels and for women of color (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2024). Georgia, meanwhile, has experienced major social and economic transitions since the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Its legal and policy framework increasingly recognizes gender equality, but economic inactivity, unpaid care work, occupational segregation, and regional disparities continue to shape women's career paths (Geostat, 2024; UN Women, 2022).

This article investigates access to leadership positions and career trajectories for Georgian and American women from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, with particular attention to contemporary barriers. It avoids treating leadership inequality as a problem of women's motivation or qualifications. Instead, it considers leadership access as an institutional process shaped by social norms, organizational cultures, care systems, labor policies, and the distribution of opportunity. The central argument is that women's careers are frequently slowed not by a single discriminatory event

but by cumulative disadvantages: missed sponsorship, biased assumptions about motherhood or flexibility, lower access to high-visibility projects, unequal domestic labor, and employment interruptions that influence wages, promotions, and retirement security.

The article is structured as follows. First, it outlines the methodological approach and theoretical framework. Second, it discusses historical and contemporary patterns in women's career advancement in the United States and Georgia. Third, it analyzes leadership barriers, flexible work, caregiving, and intersectional inequalities. Finally, it proposes institutional and policy reforms that can convert formal equality into more durable career mobility.

Methodology

The article is based on a qualitative comparative literature review and policy analysis. It synthesizes academic literature on gender and leadership with recent statistical and policy sources from international organizations, national statistical offices, and gender equality reports. The review prioritizes materials published between 2020 and 2026, while also incorporating foundational theories that remain necessary for conceptual analysis. The United States and Georgia are examined as contrasting cases: one with a mature corporate leadership research tradition and another with a post-Soviet and transitional labor-market structure in which gender norms, regional inequality, and care infrastructure remain especially important.

The analysis is interpretive rather than experimental. It does not attempt to measure causal effects through original survey or interview data. Instead, it evaluates how existing evidence explains women's leadership access, promotion patterns, work-family conflict, and long-term economic outcomes. This method is appropriate because the research question concerns institutional patterns and comparative social processes rather than a single organization or occupation. The article also follows a life-course perspective, examining career trajectories as cumulative sequences of education, entry into employment, early promotion, family formation, flexible work, mid-career advancement, and senior leadership access.

Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical perspectives help explain why women's educational and professional progress has not automatically produced equal leadership access. Gendered organization theory argues that workplaces are not neutral structures into which men and women enter under identical conditions. Rather, organizational rules, promotion practices, time expectations, and definitions of commitment often reflect historically masculine patterns of availability and authority (Acker, 1990). In this view,

leadership inequality is not merely the result of individual prejudice. It is embedded in routine practices such as who is considered “leadership material,” who receives stretch assignments, whose family responsibilities are accommodated without penalty, and whose presence in the office is read as commitment.

Role congruity theory further explains why women continue to face contradictory expectations in leadership. Eagly and Karau (2002) argued that prejudice toward female leaders arises when stereotypical expectations about women conflict with stereotypical expectations about leadership. A more recent expansion of the theory shows that women’s leadership evaluations continue to be shaped by the perceived mismatch between communal gender expectations and agentic leadership expectations (Triana, Song, Um, & Huang, 2024). Women may be judged as insufficiently assertive when they conform to feminine expectations, but as overly aggressive when they display the agency associated with leadership. This double bind is relevant in both American and Georgian contexts, although it is expressed through different organizational and cultural languages.

Work-family conflict theory and the literature on unpaid care work are also essential. Leadership careers often depend on uninterrupted availability, mobility, overtime, networking, and participation in informal organizational spaces. When caregiving is unevenly assigned to women, career trajectories become less continuous and less visible. In Georgia, unpaid care work has been identified as a major factor shaping women’s economic inactivity and labor-market participation (UN Women, 2022). In the United States, care interruptions and the motherhood penalty are deeply connected to wage growth, promotion timing, and long-term earnings. Therefore, leadership inequality is not only about who reaches the top; it is about how career interruptions and organizational assumptions accumulate long before senior leadership selection occurs.

Intersectionality provides a final analytical lens. Women do not experience leadership barriers in the same way. In the United States, race, class, disability, immigration status, motherhood, and occupational sector shape access to advancement. In Georgia, class, region, ethnicity, rural residence, and family structure influence whether women can access high-quality employment, digital work, or professional networks. A comparative framework must therefore avoid presenting “women” as a uniform category. Leadership access is stratified, and the women most likely to benefit from formal equality are often those already positioned closer to educational, urban, and professional resources.

Historical Development of Women's Career Trajectories

In the twentieth century, women's career trajectories in the United States were shaped by industrialization, the expansion of clerical and service work, wartime labor mobilization, the civil rights movement, anti-discrimination law, feminist organizing, and the later expansion of professional education. Women entered occupations once considered male domains, and legal reforms made explicit exclusion increasingly unacceptable. However, women's entry into employment did not eliminate occupational segregation. Many women remained concentrated in lower-paid care, education, administrative, and service roles, while men remained overrepresented in higher-paying technical, managerial, and executive tracks.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries produced a new contradiction. Women's educational attainment increased dramatically, yet leadership structures changed more slowly than the credentials of the workforce. Corporate America gradually expanded women's representation in management and senior leadership, but the pace of progress remained uneven. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company (2024) describe this pattern as progress that is real but fragile. Their data show that women's representation increased across the corporate pipeline from 2015 to 2024, including at the C-suite level, while also demonstrating that women of color remain markedly underrepresented and that early promotion into management continues to be a major barrier.

Georgia's twentieth-century experience followed a different path. Under Soviet ideology, women's paid employment and education were publicly encouraged, and many women participated in professional and public life. Yet this formal inclusion coexisted with a gendered division of domestic labor and limited access to the highest positions of authority. After independence, economic restructuring, unemployment, migration, and the growth of informal and precarious work reshaped women's employment opportunities. In the twenty-first century, Georgian women are highly visible in education and many professional sectors, but their leadership trajectories remain constrained by unpaid care responsibilities, occupational segregation, patriarchal expectations, and uneven access to regional employment opportunities.

The comparison shows that leadership inequality is not produced by identical mechanisms in every country. In the United States, the problem is often measured through corporate promotion rates, executive representation, pay gaps, and racialized leadership pipelines. In Georgia, the issue is more closely connected to the interaction between legal equality, economic transition, family norms, care infrastructure, and urban-rural differences. Nevertheless, both contexts reveal the same central pattern: women's

participation in education and employment does not automatically translate into authority, income growth, or institutional power.

Leadership Access in the United States

The contemporary American leadership landscape is characterized by visible gains at the top and persistent weakness in the early and middle pipeline. The 2024 Women in the Workplace report notes that women today hold a larger share of senior leadership positions than a decade ago, yet it also warns that progress is fragile because companies are reducing commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion at a moment when sustained effort remains necessary (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2024). The report's concept of the "broken rung" remains important: when women are promoted into first-level management at lower rates than men, the imbalance widens at every later stage of the corporate ladder.

This problem is not only numerical. First-level management is where employees begin to control budgets, supervise staff, gain visibility, and enter sponsorship networks. When women are underrepresented at this step, they are less likely to accumulate the managerial experience required for director, vice-president, and executive roles. This produces a delayed and narrowed leadership pipeline even when entry-level hiring appears relatively balanced. For women of color, the problem is compounded by racial bias, lower access to sponsors, and greater exposure to microaggressions and skepticism about competence.

The American case also illustrates the difference between representation and power. A company may increase women's presence in leadership titles while still assigning women to roles with less profit-and-loss responsibility, fewer succession opportunities, or narrower paths to chief executive positions. Leadership access, therefore, must be measured not only by headcounts but by the quality of leadership roles, the authority attached to those roles, and the likelihood that a role leads to further advancement. A symbolic increase in representation can coexist with continued exclusion from strategic decision-making.

Flexible work further complicates the American leadership trajectory. Remote and hybrid work can support women's labor-force continuity, especially for mothers and caregivers. However, research on remote work and organizational design shows that flexibility may become stigmatized when it is associated with lower commitment or reduced availability (de Laat, 2023). If remote workers are excluded from informal conversations, mentoring, high-impact projects, or leadership visibility, flexibility may preserve employment while reducing promotion prospects. The issue is not flexibility itself but flexibility without accountability, evaluation, transparency, and equal access to career-building opportunities.

Leadership Access in Georgia

In Georgia, women's leadership trajectories must be understood within the country's post-Soviet transformation, labor-market restructuring, demographic challenges, and persistent gender norms. Georgian women have made important gains in education, professional participation, civil society, and public life. However, their labor-market outcomes remain shaped by economic inactivity, unpaid care work, regional disparities, and occupational concentration. The National Statistics Office of Georgia's Women and Men in Georgia publication presents labor-force participation and earnings as key areas for evaluating gender equality, emphasizing that participation in employment is central to broader social and economic empowerment (Geostat, 2024).

The World Bank Gender Data Portal reports that female labor-force participation in Georgia remains below male participation, a difference that reflects not only job availability but also the organization of family care, access to transport, regional employment patterns, and expectations about women's domestic responsibilities (World Bank, 2025). UN Women's research on unpaid care work in Georgia similarly identifies domestic and caregiving duties as a major reason for women's economic inactivity (UN Women, 2022). These factors influence leadership access because women who leave the labor market, enter informal work, or accept lower-quality flexible jobs often lose the continuity and visibility needed for advancement.

Georgian women's leadership barriers are also shaped by the structure of opportunity. In Tbilisi and other urban centers, professional women may access higher education, international organizations, banks, universities, private firms, and civil society networks. In rural areas and smaller regions, opportunities may be more limited, transportation may be weaker, childcare options may be fewer, and digital skills programs may be less accessible. Leadership development, therefore, cannot be separated from regional development. A woman's career trajectory in Georgia may depend not only on her education or ambition but on whether she lives near institutions that offer professional growth, mentoring, digital employment, and advancement pathways.

Cultural expectations also matter. In many Georgian families, women's employment is increasingly accepted and valued, yet caregiving and household management often remain feminized. This produces a "double presence": women are expected to contribute economically while continuing to carry disproportionate responsibility for domestic life. For leadership careers, the burden is especially significant because managerial roles often demand travel, evening communication, networking, and uninterrupted professional availability. When organizations interpret these expectations as

neutral, they reproduce gender inequality by rewarding workers whose private lives are supported by someone else's unpaid labor.

Flexible Work, Visibility, and Promotion Penalties

Flexible and hybrid work has become a central issue in women's career advancement. The pandemic accelerated remote work across many sectors and made visible the possibility of organizing professional labor outside the traditional office. For many women, especially mothers and caregivers, flexibility created a pathway to remain employed, reduce commuting burdens, and better manage household responsibilities. Yet the same arrangement can create new forms of exclusion when organizations continue to value physical presence as a sign of seriousness.

Recent research on remote work suggests that organizational design determines whether flexibility promotes equality or reinforces inequality. De Laat (2023) found that remote work is shaped by work design and workplace culture, not only by formal policy. A workplace may offer remote work on paper while still treating remote employees as less committed, less available, or less suitable for leadership. The Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise's systematic literature review similarly emphasizes that remote work raises questions about career and salary development, productivity, and sustainable work-life balance from a gender equality perspective (Grip & Åkerlund, 2025).

For women, the risk is especially acute because flexibility is often interpreted through gendered assumptions. When a father works remotely, he may be seen as efficient or modern; when a mother does so, she may be assumed to be prioritizing family over career. This difference in interpretation can influence who receives stretch assignments, who is invited into leadership conversations, and who is considered ready for promotion. A flexible arrangement can therefore become a hidden career tax if it is not supported by transparent performance evaluation and equal access to sponsors.

In the United States, hybrid work has become part of the debate over corporate culture, mentorship, and promotion visibility. In Georgia, the issue is newer but equally important. Remote and hybrid employment could open opportunities for women outside major urban centers, particularly if digital infrastructure and skills training are expanded. However, without formal labor protections and clear workload expectations, remote work can also blur boundaries between paid employment and unpaid domestic labor. Women may become simultaneously more employable and more overburdened. The central policy challenge is to design flexibility as a right connected to career equality, not as an informal accommodation that quietly removes women from promotion pipelines.

Care Work and the Long-Term Economics of Interrupted Careers

Career trajectories are cumulative. A brief exit from the workforce, a period of part-time employment, or several years outside a promotion track can influence earnings far beyond the immediate period of absence. Reduced hours can affect wage growth, pension contributions, professional networks, confidence, and employer perceptions. The Urban Institute's analysis of lifetime employment-related costs of caregiving shows that caregiving-related reductions in employment can reduce earnings, retirement income, and wage growth, especially when caregivers miss promotions or move into lower-paying work (Johnson, 2022).

In the United States, the long-term cost of caregiving is shaped by limited paid leave, high childcare costs, occupational segregation, and unequal domestic labor. Women often make employment decisions within a system that frames caregiving as a private family matter rather than a public economic issue. This privatization of care produces career penalties that appear individual but are structurally generated. A mother who turns down travel, reduces hours, or accepts remote work may appear to be making a personal choice, while the conditions that made the choice necessary remain invisible.

In Georgia, unpaid care work is even more directly connected to women's economic inactivity and labor-market exclusion. UN Women (2022) identifies unpaid care work as a major constraint on women's participation in paid employment. When care services are limited, expensive, geographically uneven, or culturally underused, women's career mobility is restricted before leadership selection even begins. The result is a narrower pool of women who can accumulate continuous experience and compete for senior positions.

The economic consequences are not limited to individual women. When women's skills are underused, households lose income, employers lose talent, and national economies lose productivity. The World Bank's Gender Strategy 2024-2030 emphasizes that gender equality is central to poverty reduction, inclusive growth, and productivity (World Bank, 2024). Leadership inequality, therefore, has macroeconomic as well as personal consequences. Societies invest in women's education but fail to capture the full social and economic return when women are diverted from leadership paths by care burdens and institutional bias.

Intersectional Barriers and Unequal Career Risks

A comparative analysis must also ask which women face the greatest barriers. In the United States, the leadership gap is racialized. Women of color remain underrepresented in senior leadership, and their career trajectories are affected by both gendered and racialized evaluations of

competence, authority, and belonging. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company (2024) reported that women of color hold a much smaller share of C-suite roles than white women, demonstrating that gender progress does not benefit all women equally. Class and caregiving status further divide women’s experiences: professional women may negotiate hybrid work, while low-wage workers may have little schedule control and few promotion pathways.

In Georgia, intersectionality operates through region, class, ethnicity, language, age, family status, and access to digital resources. Women in rural areas may be formally included in national equality policies but practically excluded from high-quality employment. Ethnic minority women may encounter language barriers, weaker institutional access, and limited representation in decision-making spaces. Younger women may be highly educated yet face skepticism about family plans, while older women returning after care breaks may be pushed toward informal or lower-status work. These differences show why leadership reform cannot be limited to women already near professional centers.

Disability also deserves greater attention in both countries. Women with disabilities may face discrimination not only in hiring but also in assumptions about leadership capacity, mobility, communication, and workplace adaptation. If organizations treat accommodation as charity rather than equal access, women with disabilities are unlikely to be included in leadership development pipelines. A serious leadership equality agenda must therefore connect gender policy with disability inclusion, regional development, and class-sensitive labor protections.

Table 1: Comparative Patterns Shaping Women’s Leadership Access

Dimension	United States	Georgia
Primary institutional context	Mature corporate sector with measurable leadership pipeline data, anti-discrimination law, and continuing racialized promotion gaps.	Post-Soviet and transitional labor market with formal equality commitments, uneven regional opportunity, and strong care-related constraints.
Key leadership barrier	The “broken rung” into first-level management, sponsorship gaps, motherhood penalties, and underrepresentation of women of color.	Economic inactivity, unpaid care work, occupational segregation, patriarchal norms, and limited regional access to high-quality jobs.
Flexible work risk	Remote and hybrid work may reduce visibility if performance and promotion systems are not transparent.	Remote work may expand regional opportunity, but can intensify unpaid care burdens without workload protections.
Policy priority	Transparent promotion systems, sponsorship, pay transparency, childcare support, and protection from flexibility stigma.	Care infrastructure, regional digital employment programs, formal remote-work protections, leadership training, and inclusive labor policy.

Note. Prepared by the authors based on a comparative synthesis of LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company (2024), Geostat (2024), UN Women (2022), and World Bank (2024, 2025).

Policy and Institutional Reform

The evidence suggests that women's leadership equality requires institutional redesign rather than symbolic support. First, organizations should make promotion criteria transparent. Vague criteria such as "executive presence," "cultural fit," or "readiness" can hide gendered assumptions. Transparent criteria should identify the experience, skills, results, and leadership behaviors required for promotion. Promotion data should be reviewed by gender and, where legally and ethically appropriate, by race, disability, caregiving status, and work arrangement. If flexible workers or mothers are consistently promoted more slowly, the organization should treat this as a structural warning, not an individual pattern.

Second, mentorship alone is insufficient unless it is connected to sponsorship. Mentors provide advice; sponsors use influence to create opportunities. Women frequently receive encouragement but not access to high-stakes assignments, strategic networks, or senior advocates. Leadership development programs in both the United States and Georgia should therefore include sponsorship, measurable outcomes, and accountability for managers. In Georgia, such programs could be especially valuable in universities, public administration, civil society, banks, healthcare, and regional development initiatives.

Third, care policy must be treated as leadership policy. Childcare, eldercare, parental leave, and fathers' involvement directly affect women's career continuity. In the United States, affordable childcare and paid leave remain central to reducing career penalties. In Georgia, expanding accessible childcare and care services outside major cities would strengthen women's employment continuity and leadership readiness. Care infrastructure should not be viewed as a private family concern; it is part of the economic architecture that determines whether women can build uninterrupted careers.

Fourth, flexible work must be governed through equality principles. Employers should define workload expectations, meeting norms, availability boundaries, and promotion protections for remote and hybrid workers. Performance should be assessed by outcomes rather than visibility alone. Managers should receive training on proximity bias, and high-impact projects should be distributed transparently. In Georgia, legal and institutional frameworks for remote work could help prevent informal arrangements from becoming a source of exploitation or invisibility.

Fifth, leadership equality should be linked to regional and digital inclusion. In Georgia, women outside Tbilisi need access to digital training, professional networks, remote work platforms, entrepreneurship support, and regional leadership programs. In the United States, low-wage women and women in non-remote occupations need predictable scheduling, wage protections, training pathways, and advancement ladders. Without attention

to regional and class inequality, leadership reform will mainly benefit already privileged women.

Discussion

The comparison between Georgian and American women reveals both differences and convergence. The countries differ in economic scale, institutional history, labor-market structure, and cultural context. Yet both demonstrate that women's advancement is limited when organizations reward uninterrupted availability and undervalue care. In the United States, women may enter large corporate pipelines but encounter the broken rung, sponsorship gaps, and racialized barriers. In Georgia, women may achieve high educational outcomes but face a narrower labor market, unpaid care burdens, and regional limits on advancement. In both settings, the problem is not simply whether women are allowed to work; it is whether work is organized in a way that permits women to accumulate authority over time.

The analysis also shows the ambiguity of flexibility. Flexible work can be a lifeline, especially for mothers, caregivers, women in regions far from professional centers, and workers seeking to remain employed during life transitions. However, flexibility becomes a barrier when it is treated as a private accommodation rather than a normal and respected mode of work. If flexible workers are absent from leadership conversations, if remote work is associated with lower ambition, or if caregiving is quietly interpreted as a lack of commitment, flexibility reproduces inequality. The goal should not be to reject flexibility but to redesign it so that it supports advancement rather than merely preserving employment.

A further implication concerns the meaning of leadership. Leadership equality should not be measured only by the number of women at the top. It should also be measured by women's access to line roles, budgets, decision-making authority, institutional voice, and succession pathways. A woman who holds a title without authority remains symbolically included but structurally limited. Likewise, a policy that celebrates women entrepreneurs while ignoring childcare, credit access, and regional infrastructure does not fully address career inequality.

Finally, the article emphasizes that comparative gender research should avoid assuming that Western corporate categories automatically explain all contexts. Terms such as "glass ceiling," "broken rung," and "leadership pipeline" are useful, but they must be interpreted through national histories and institutions. In Georgia, the leadership gap is not only a corporate issue; it is also connected to family norms, regional development, post-Soviet labor transitions, migration, and the organization of unpaid care. In the United States, the issue is deeply tied to race, class, corporate

accountability, and the uneven implementation of equality policies. A careful comparison, therefore, strengthens rather than simplifies the analysis.

Conclusion

Women's access to leadership positions in Georgia and the United States has improved, but progress remains incomplete and uneven. Educational attainment and labor-force participation have created new opportunities, yet leadership trajectories continue to be shaped by gendered organizational cultures, unequal care responsibilities, biased promotion systems, and unequal access to networks and high-visibility work. The American case shows that even extensive corporate data and legal protections do not automatically eliminate the broken rung or intersectional leadership gaps. The Georgian case shows that formal equality and women's educational achievements are insufficient without care infrastructure, regional opportunity, and institutional pathways into leadership.

The central conclusion is that women's leadership inequality is cumulative. It begins early in career evaluation, deepens through caregiving and flexible work penalties, and becomes visible later as underrepresentation in senior leadership. Reform must therefore begin before the executive level. Organizations and governments should address promotion transparency, sponsorship, care policy, pay equity, remote-work protections, and regional inclusion. When leadership systems are redesigned to recognize care, measure outcomes fairly, and distribute opportunity transparently, flexibility can become a pathway to advancement rather than a quiet form of exclusion. For Georgia and the United States, the challenge is not only to increase the number of women leaders but to transform the conditions under which leadership careers are built. Equal access to leadership requires institutions that do not force women to choose between family responsibility and professional authority, between flexibility and visibility, or between participation and power.

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Author Contributions

Salome Tcharbadze (First Author) conceived and designed the study, conducted the literature review, performed the comparative analysis, interpreted the findings, and prepared the original manuscript.

Prof. Dr. Tamar Shioshvili (Second Author) provided academic supervision, methodological guidance, critical review, and editorial support throughout the development of the study.

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