

Access to Leadership Positions and Career Trajectories among Georgian and American Women in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

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Abstract

This article examines how institutional, organizational, and care-related factors shape women's access to leadership positions and career trajectories in Georgia and the United States. Its objective is to identify the principal mechanisms that facilitate or constrain women's progression from education and labour-market entry to managerial and senior leadership positions and to compare how these mechanisms operate across two distinct national contexts. The study uses a qualitative comparative literature review and policy analysis. It primarily draws on peer-reviewed research, official statistics, and institutional reports published between 2020 and 2026, while selected foundational theoretical works and historical evidence are used to contextualize developments across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The analysis is organized around five interrelated dimensions: organizational culture and promotion practices, caregiving responsibilities, flexible work arrangements, intersectional inequalities, and structural access to career-development opportunities. The findings indicate that women's limited representation in leadership cannot be explained by insufficient qualifications or ambition. In the United States, measurable progress in senior leadership coexists with persistent barriers at the first promotion into management, unequal access to sponsorship, motherhood-related penalties, and racialized

inequalities. In Georgia, formal gender equality and high levels of female educational participation coexist with unpaid care burdens, occupational segregation, regional disparities, limited care infrastructure, and enduring patriarchal expectations. Across both contexts, flexible and hybrid work may support employment continuity, but they may also weaken visibility, sponsorship, and promotion opportunities when performance evaluation and career-development systems are not transparent. The article concludes that sustainable leadership equality requires institutional reforms, including transparent promotion criteria, accessible care services, gender-responsive labour policies, sponsorship systems, pay transparency, and protection against flexibility-related stigma.

Keywords: Women and leadership; career trajectories; Georgia; United States; flexible work; gender inequality; caregiving; intersectionality

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 representation in senior decision-making positions, and the continuing gap between participation and authority remains a central feature of gender inequality in professional life (Acker, 1990; Eagly & Karau, 2002; LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2024; OECD, 2025).

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; United Nations Georgia, 2024).

The objective of this article is to examine and compare the institutional, organizational, cultural, and care-related factors that shape women's access to leadership positions and career progression in Georgia and the United States. More specifically, the study seeks to identify how organizational promotion practices, caregiving responsibilities, flexible work arrangements, intersectional inequalities, and unequal access to professional opportunities influence women's progression across different stages of the career trajectory.

The article addresses the following research question: How do institutional structures, organizational practices, care responsibilities, and intersectional inequalities shape women's access to leadership and career advancement in Georgia and the United States?

Rather than treating leadership inequality as a consequence of women's motivation, ambition, or educational qualifications, the study conceptualizes career advancement as a cumulative institutional process. It therefore examines how disadvantages arising at the education-to-employment transition, initial promotion, family formation, flexible work participation, mid-career advancement, and senior leadership selection may interact and accumulate over time.

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.

Original Contribution of the Study

The original contribution of this study lies in its comparative reading of women's leadership trajectories in Georgia and the United States through a shared analytical framework. Rather than treating the two countries as directly equivalent cases, the article uses comparison to identify how similar gendered outcomes may be produced through different institutional histories, labour-market structures, care systems, and cultural expectations. This article contributes to gender and leadership research, policy documents, official statistical sources, and contemporary academic literature to clarify both common barriers and context-specific mechanisms. In doing so, it contributes to gender and leadership research by connecting corporate pipeline debates, post-Soviet labour-market transition, unpaid care work, and flexible work arrangements within one comparative sociological analysis.

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 primarily includes materials published between January 2020 and June 2026. 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 historical scope of the article and the publication period of the reviewed literature serve different analytical purposes. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries constitute the historical period discussed in the article, whereas 2020–2026 represents the principal publication window used to identify current empirical evidence, statistical trends, and policy developments. Earlier publications were included selectively when they provided foundational theoretical concepts or historically significant evidence necessary for interpreting long-term changes in women’s career trajectories.

Research Strategy

The study adopts a qualitative comparative research strategy based on a structured review of academic literature and policy documents. Its purpose is not to generate original empirical evidence, but to critically synthesize and compare existing scholarly, statistical, and institutional sources on women’s access to leadership positions and career progression. This strategy is appropriate because the research question concerns institutional patterns, social norms, and comparative processes rather than the measurement of a single causal variable. The comparison between Georgia and the United States was selected because the two cases differ in historical development, labour-market structure, welfare and care arrangements, and the availability of corporate leadership data, while both demonstrate persistent gaps between women’s educational participation and leadership access.

To enhance methodological transparency, the literature review followed a systematic multi-stage screening process. Initially, potentially relevant academic publications, institutional reports, and statistical documents were identified through keyword-based searches focusing on women’s leadership, career progression, gender inequality, organizational culture, flexible work, unpaid care responsibilities, and labour market participation. The retrieved sources were then screened for relevance, methodological quality, publication date, and institutional credibility. Finally, the selected materials were comparatively analyzed through thematic coding in order to

identify recurring institutional mechanisms, country-specific differences, and common patterns influencing women's leadership trajectories.

Source Selection

Sources were selected through a purposive academic and policy-oriented search strategy. The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, foundational theoretical works, official national statistics, reports by international organizations, and policy documents addressing gender equality, women's leadership, labour-market participation, career advancement, flexible work, unpaid care work, and work-family conflict. Particular attention was given to recent materials published from 2020 onward in order to reflect current labour-market and policy developments. Foundational works, including gendered organization theory and role congruity theory, were retained because they remain central to the conceptual interpretation of leadership inequality.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they directly addressed at least one of the following themes: women's leadership, occupational advancement, organizational inequality, gendered promotion systems, unpaid care responsibilities, flexible or remote work, labour-force participation, or country-specific evidence from Georgia or the United States. Preference was given to peer-reviewed academic publications and reports issued by recognized institutions such as national statistical offices, UN agencies, the World Bank, the OECD, and major research organizations. Sources were excluded if they were unrelated to the comparative objectives of the study, lacked clear authorship or institutional credibility, duplicated evidence already used in the review, or consisted primarily of opinion commentary without analytical or empirical grounding.

Analytical Framework

The analysis follows a thematic interpretive framework. Evidence from the selected sources was organized around several analytical dimensions: historical career trajectories, organizational culture, promotion and sponsorship systems, care responsibilities, flexible work arrangements, labour-market structures, regional inequalities, and intersectional barriers. The study compares how these dimensions operate in the United States and Georgia and identifies points of convergence and divergence. Because the article is based on literature review and policy analysis rather than original survey or interview data, the findings are interpreted as analytical syntheses rather than statistical results. This distinction also informs the cautious framing of policy implications throughout the article.

To ensure conceptual consistency throughout the article, the comparative analysis is organized around five interconnected analytical dimensions rather than statistically measured variables. These analytical dimensions are: (1) organizational culture and promotion practices, (2) caregiving responsibilities and care infrastructure, (3) flexible work arrangements, (4) intersectional inequalities, and (5) structural access to professional opportunities. Together, these dimensions provide the conceptual basis for examining how women's career trajectories develop within different institutional contexts in Georgia and the United States.

The study additionally adopts a life-course perspective in order to explain how these analytical dimensions influence women's careers over time. Rather than viewing leadership access as a single outcome, the article conceptualizes career progression as a cumulative process extending across several successive career stages. These stages include educational attainment, entry into paid employment, first promotion into management, family formation and caregiving responsibilities, participation in flexible or remote work arrangements, mid-career advancement, and eventual access to senior leadership positions. Examining career trajectories through these stages allows the analysis to demonstrate how relatively small institutional disadvantages experienced early in professional life may accumulate into more substantial inequalities in promotion, authority, earnings, and leadership representation later in women's careers.

Across each career stage, the analysis examines how organizational culture, promotion systems, care responsibilities, flexible work arrangements, labour-market structures, regional opportunity, and intersectional inequalities may either facilitate or constrain women's progression toward leadership. The same analytical framework is applied consistently to both Georgia and the United States, while recognizing differences in their historical development, institutional arrangements, and labour-market contexts.

Definition of Key Concepts

For the purposes of this study, **career trajectories** refer to the cumulative sequence of educational, occupational, and professional transitions through which individuals progress over the course of their working lives. Career trajectories include entry into paid employment, promotion opportunities, career interruptions, and movement into leadership positions.

Leadership access is understood as women's opportunity to obtain managerial and decision-making positions within organizations. It refers not only to formal appointment to leadership roles but also to equal access to promotion, authority, strategic decision-making, and career advancement.

Caregiving responsibilities refer to unpaid or underpaid activities related to childcare, eldercare, household management, and the support of

dependent family members. These responsibilities may influence women's labour-market participation, career continuity, and opportunities for promotion.

Flexible work arrangements include organizational practices such as remote work, hybrid work, flexible working hours, and alternative employment arrangements designed to improve work-life integration while maintaining labour-market participation.

Intersectional inequalities describe the ways in which gender interacts with other social characteristics including race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, and region to shape unequal opportunities and career outcomes. Rather than affecting all women equally, these intersecting dimensions may create different patterns of advantage and disadvantage across institutional contexts.

Contemporary women's career trajectories refer to the patterns of career development experienced by women within contemporary labour markets, particularly in the context of the twenty-first century. These trajectories are characterized by increasing educational attainment, greater participation in paid employment, expanding opportunities for flexible and hybrid work, and growing representation in professional occupations. At the same time, women's career progression continues to be influenced by organizational practices, caregiving responsibilities, occupational segregation, intersectional inequalities, and unequal access to leadership opportunities. In this study, the concept is used to examine how these institutional and structural factors shape women's long-term career development and access to leadership positions in Georgia and the United States.

Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical perspectives help explain why women's educational and professional progress has not automatically produced equal leadership access. Gendered organization theory, developed by Joan Acker (1990), argues that organizational structures, practices, and definitions of the ideal worker are not gender-neutral. 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, proposed by Alice Eagly and Steven Karau in 2002, explains that prejudice toward female leaders emerges from the perceived inconsistency between stereotypically feminine characteristics and stereotypically masculine expectations of leadership. Recent scholarship shows that women's leadership evaluations continue to be shaped by perceived mismatch between communal gender expectations and agentic

leadership expectations (Triana, Song, Um, & Huang, 2024). Related research on leadership stereotypes also demonstrates that assumptions about typical, male, and female leaders remain deeply gendered and continue to influence evaluations of authority and competence (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). 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, originally developed by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), explains that conflict arises when the demands of work and family roles are mutually incompatible, making participation in one role more difficult because of participation in the other. Beyond 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.

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, provides an additional analytical lens for understanding how gender interacts with race, ethnicity, class, disability, region, and other social positions. 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.

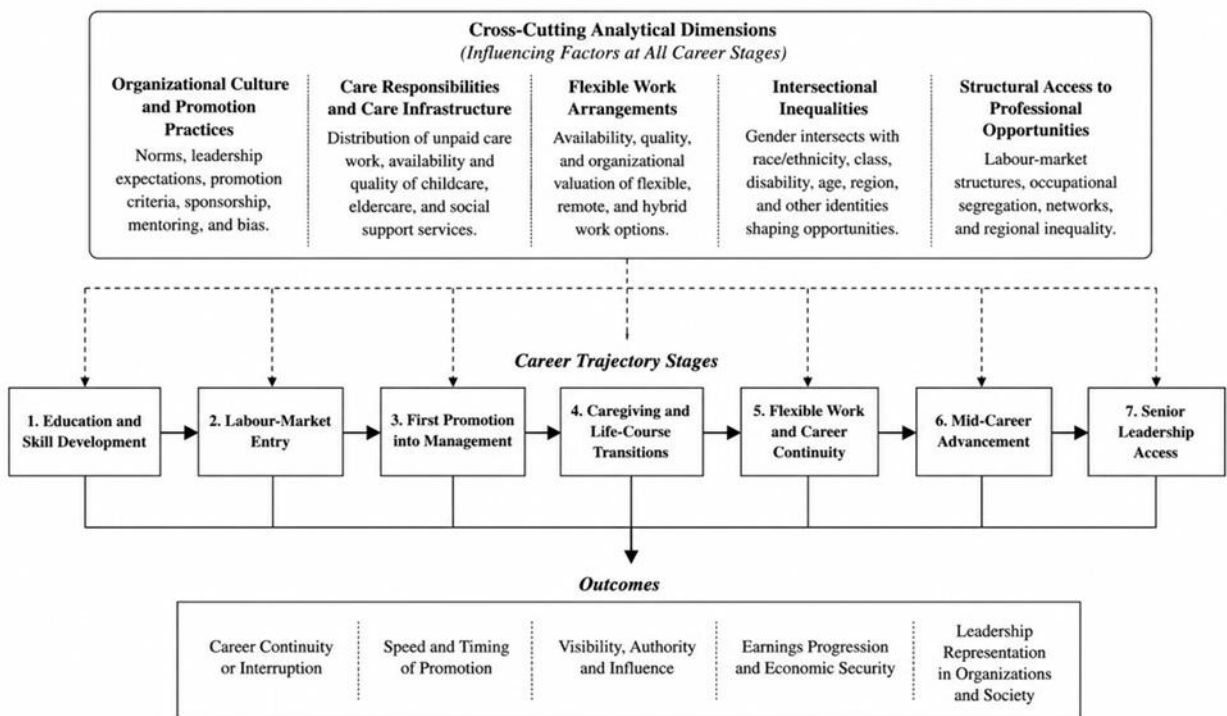


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Women's Career Trajectories and Leadership Access.

Note. Developed by the authors based on the analytical framework of the study.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Women's Trajectories and Leadership Access

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework that guides the comparative analysis developed in this study. Rather than treating women's leadership as the outcome of a single factor, the framework conceptualizes career advancement as a cumulative process extending across successive stages of the career trajectory, from education and labour-market entry to senior leadership positions.

The framework demonstrates that women's progression throughout these career stages is continuously shaped by five interconnected analytical dimensions: organizational culture and promotion practices, caregiving responsibilities and care infrastructure, flexible work arrangements, intersectional inequalities, and structural access to professional opportunities. These dimensions operate throughout the entire career trajectory and may either facilitate career continuity and leadership advancement or contribute to cumulative disadvantages that result in delayed promotion, reduced visibility, interrupted careers, and underrepresentation in leadership positions.

The same conceptual framework is applied consistently to both Georgia and the United States. While the institutional expression of these analytical dimensions differs across the two national contexts, the framework

enables a systematic comparison of how organizational, social, and structural factors influence women's access to leadership and long-term career development.

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 comparative evidence demonstrates that gender disparities in senior positions are not produced by identical mechanisms across countries. 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 measurable gains in women's representation at senior levels alongside persistent barriers within the early and middle stages of organizational advancement. The *Women in the Workplace 2024* report indicates that women's representation has increased across several levels of the corporate pipeline since 2015, including senior leadership, but that progress remains uneven and particularly limited at the first transition into management (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2024). The report describes this early promotion gap as the "broken rung," emphasizing that unequal access to first-level management reduces the number of women positioned to advance into director, vice-president, and executive roles. This contemporary evidence is consistent with broader academic research showing that women's leadership underrepresentation is produced through interconnected individual, organizational, and structural barriers rather than through a shortage of qualified women (Sim & Bierema, 2025).

The significance of the first promotion into management extends beyond numerical representation. Entry into first-level management often provides access to supervisory responsibility, strategic assignments, decision-making authority, and professional networks that become important for subsequent advancement. When women are promoted into these positions at lower rates, they have fewer opportunities to accumulate the managerial experience and organizational visibility generally expected of candidates for senior leadership.

Access to sponsorship is particularly important at this stage. Unlike mentoring, which primarily offers advice and professional support, sponsorship involves the active use of a senior person's influence to secure high-visibility assignments, introductions, promotion opportunities, and access to decision-making networks. Recent qualitative research demonstrates that sponsors can provide women leaders with strategic visibility, legitimacy, and career opportunities that are difficult to obtain through formal performance alone (Gröschl et al., 2025). Unequal access to influential sponsors may therefore contribute to cumulative differences in promotion even when women and men enter organizations with comparable qualifications.

Motherhood represents another significant source of cumulative career disadvantage in the United States. Experimental and audit research has shown that equally qualified mothers may be evaluated as less competent and less committed than women without children and may consequently receive weaker hiring and advancement recommendations (Correll et al., 2007). The motherhood penalty is therefore not limited to periods of employment interruption or reduced working hours; it may also operate through organizational assumptions about availability, ambition, and commitment. These assumptions can influence access to challenging assignments, promotion consideration, compensation, and long-term leadership development even when actual performance differences are absent.

The American case also demonstrates that numerical representation does not necessarily indicate equal organizational power. Leadership access should therefore be evaluated not only through the number of women holding managerial titles but also through the authority, resources, strategic visibility, and succession opportunities attached to those roles. Women may be represented in leadership while remaining concentrated in positions with narrower decision-making authority or fewer pathways toward the highest executive levels.

Research on executive Black women further demonstrates that formal leadership status does not eliminate exclusion. Smith et al. (2019) found that executive Black women frequently navigated a paradoxical combination of invisibility and heightened scrutiny, requiring them to develop strategies for establishing credibility, visibility, and organizational legitimacy. These findings indicate that access to leadership titles may coexist with unequal access to influence, belonging, and further career progression. A meaningful assessment of leadership equality must therefore consider the quality and strategic significance of leadership roles, not only organizational headcounts.

Flexible work further complicates the American leadership trajectory. Remote and hybrid work can support women's labour-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 challenge is not flexible work itself but the absence of accountability, transparent evaluation.

Beyond overall gender representation, leadership barriers in the United States are also shaped by the intersection of gender, race, class, caregiving status, disability, and other social positions. Women of color may encounter forms of exclusion that cannot be explained through gender alone, including racialized evaluations of competence, reduced access to influential

professional networks, heightened visibility, and simultaneous organizational invisibility. A systematic review of intersectional leadership research demonstrates that women and other multiply marginalized groups experience more complex and context-dependent barriers within organizational structures, leadership processes, and career advancement than those explained by gender alone (Sim & Bierema, 2025). Research focusing specifically on executive Black women similarly shows that racialized and gendered expectations influence credibility, legitimacy, organizational belonging, and access to strategic leadership opportunities even after women attain senior positions (Smith et al., 2019). These findings suggest that apparent progress in women's overall representation may conceal substantial inequalities among different groups of women. Consequently, evaluating leadership equality requires an intersectional perspective that considers how multiple systems of advantage and disadvantage interact throughout women's career trajectories rather than relying solely on aggregate gender comparisons.

Leadership Access in Georgia

In Georgia, women's leadership trajectories must be understood within the country's post-Soviet transformation, labour-market restructuring, demographic change, and the persistence of gendered social norms. Although women have achieved high levels of educational attainment and participate actively in many professional sectors, their progression into senior leadership continues to be influenced by institutional legacies, occupational segregation, unpaid care responsibilities, and unequal access to career-development opportunities (Abesadze, 2023; Geostat, 2024; United Nations Georgia, 2024). Georgian women have made important gains in education, professional participation, civil society, and public life. However, their labour-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 labour-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 labour-force participation in Georgia remains below male participation, a difference that reflects not only employment opportunities but also persistent gender imbalances in labour-market participation, occupational segregation, and family-care responsibilities (World Bank, 2025; Abesadze et al., 2025). UN Women's research on unpaid care work in Georgia similarly identifies domestic and caregiving duties as major contributors to women's economic inactivity (UN Women, 2022). Recent peer-reviewed research likewise concludes that although women's employment and labour-market participation

have increased in recent years, gender inequalities remain particularly evident in wages, regional employment opportunities, occupational distribution, and career advancement (Abesadze et al., 2025). Recent country-level analyses also emphasize that women's economic empowerment in Georgia is closely related to care infrastructure, decent employment, and institutional support (UN Women, 2024; United Nations Georgia, 2024). These factors influence leadership access because women who leave the labour 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 unequal regional opportunities and spatial differences in labour-market development. Evidence indicates that gender inequalities in employment, wages, and career opportunities are more pronounced across different regions of Georgia than they appear at the national level (Abesadze et al., 2025; World Bank, 2025). Women living in Tbilisi and other large urban centres generally have greater access to universities, international organizations, financial institutions, civil society organizations, and private-sector employers. By contrast, women residing in rural areas and smaller municipalities often encounter fewer professional opportunities, weaker transport infrastructure, limited childcare services, and fewer opportunities to participate in leadership development, digital employment, and professional networking (World Bank, 2025; United Nations Georgia, 2024). 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 policies. Women's opportunities for career advancement depend not only on educational attainment and professional qualifications but also on the availability of institutional support, local labour-market opportunities, digital infrastructure, mentoring networks, and access to organizations capable of supporting long-term career progression (Abesadze et al., 2025). 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 play an important role in shaping Georgian women's career trajectories. Although women's participation in paid employment is increasingly accepted and valued, household management and caregiving responsibilities remain disproportionately assigned to women. Evidence from Georgia indicates that unequal unpaid care responsibilities create time poverty and reduce women's opportunities to participate fully in paid employment, professional development, and career advancement (UN Women, 2022; United Nations Georgia, 2024). This simultaneous responsibility for paid employment and unpaid domestic labour may be

understood as a double burden, whereby women are expected to maintain continuous involvement in both professional and family spheres.

The consequences are particularly significant for managerial and leadership careers, which are frequently organized around assumptions of long working hours, schedule flexibility, mobility, networking, and uninterrupted availability. Research on the gendered ideal worker norm demonstrates that many organizations implicitly reward employees who can prioritize paid work over responsibilities outside the workplace and who can remain continuously visible and available to employers (Acker, 1990; Brumley, 2014; Kelly et al., 2010). Because caregiving and household labour remain unequally distributed, women may have less access to after-hours networking, travel, high-visibility assignments, and other informal opportunities that contribute to promotion.

When such expectations are treated as neutral indicators of commitment or leadership potential, organizations may reproduce gender inequality without relying on explicitly discriminatory rules. Employees whose domestic responsibilities are supported by another person's unpaid labour are generally better positioned to conform to the organizational ideal-worker norm, whereas workers with substantial caregiving responsibilities may be perceived as less available or less committed (Acker, 1990; Kelly et al., 2010). Consequently, unequal distributions of unpaid care work continue to influence not only women's labour-market participation but also their visibility, promotion opportunities, and long-term access to leadership positions in Georgia (UN Women, 2022; Abesadze et al., 2025).

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 labour 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 labour protections and clear workload expectations, remote work can also blur boundaries between paid employment and unpaid domestic labour. 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 labour. 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 labour-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 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 labour protections.

Beyond examining these dimensions separately, an intersectional perspective demonstrates that multiple forms of disadvantage often interact and accumulate throughout women's careers. For example, a woman from a low-income household who belongs to an ethnic minority, lives in a rural community, or has a disability may face overlapping barriers that substantially reduce access to education, professional networks, leadership opportunities, and career advancement. These intersecting factors shape women's experiences in different ways across institutional contexts and reinforce the importance of developing policies that address multiple sources of inequality simultaneously rather than focusing on gender alone.

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 labour 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 labour 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 reviewed in this article suggests that women's leadership equality is unlikely to result from symbolic support alone. However, because this study is based on literature review and policy analysis rather than original empirical testing, the following proposals should be understood as policy implications derived from the reviewed evidence, not as causal claims tested by the authors. The first implication is that 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 behaviours 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 should be treated as part of 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 should 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. This policy direction is consistent with broader international discussions that continue to identify leadership underrepresentation as a persistent gender equality issue (OECD, 2025).

Discussion

The comparative analysis of Georgia and the United States reveals both difference and convergence. The countries differ in economic scale, institutional history, labour-market structure, and cultural context, yet the literature consistently demonstrates that women's leadership trajectories are shaped by the interaction of organizational practices, gender norms, caregiving responsibilities, and institutional structures rather than by differences in women's educational attainment or professional competence (Acker, 1990; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Sim & Bierema, 2025). Yet both contexts demonstrate that women's advancement remains constrained when organizations reward uninterrupted availability and undervalue caregiving responsibilities, a pattern that is consistent with Gendered Organization Theory and Work-Family Conflict Theory (Acker, 1990; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). 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 labour 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, rather than through individual deficiencies or a lack of ambition (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Sim & Bierema, 2025).

The analysis also shows the ambiguity of flexibility. The literature reviewed in this article indicates that 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. At the same time, the authors interpret this evidence as showing that 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 may reproduce inequality. The implication is not to reject flexibility but to design 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 labour 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.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several methodological limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, because the research is based on a qualitative comparative literature review and policy analysis, it does not generate original empirical evidence or establish causal relationships. Instead, the conclusions represent an analytical synthesis of existing scholarly, statistical, and institutional sources. Second, differences in the quantity, scope, and methodological approaches of the available literature for Georgia and the United States inevitably influence the depth of comparison. Third, leadership indicators are not always measured consistently across national contexts, making direct comparison challenging. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as context-sensitive analytical observations rather than universally generalizable conclusions.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could strengthen this topic through original empirical studies involving women in different sectors, regions, and career stages in both countries. Interviews with women leaders, employers, human resource managers, and policymakers would help clarify how promotion decisions, flexible work arrangements, and caregiving responsibilities are experienced in practice. Quantitative studies could also examine the relationship between career interruptions, flexible work, promotion outcomes, and income trajectories. In Georgia, further research is especially needed on regional differences, ethnic minority women, and the relationship between care infrastructure and professional advancement. In the United States, future studies could deepen intersectional analysis by examining race, class, disability, motherhood, and occupational sector together rather than separately.

Conclusion

Women’s access to leadership positions in Georgia and the United States has improved, but progress remains incomplete and uneven. Educational attainment and labour-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 gender disparities in career advancement accumulate over time. It begins early in career evaluation, deepens through caregiving and flexible work penalties, and becomes visible later as underrepresentation in senior leadership. Reform should 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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