

"THE ROLE OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN ADVANCING SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS PRACTICES: A ROMANIA CASE STUDY "

Research Paper

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“Abstract ”

This paper explores the impact of female leadership on the advancement of sustainable business practices within Romanian companies in the industrial and consumer goods sectors. With increasing pressure from stakeholders, sustainability has become a critical business imperative. However, despite substantial research on leadership, there is a gap in understanding how female leaders drive sustainability efforts. This paper aims to identify leadership strategies and attributes that support sustainability, evaluate challenges faced by female leaders, and propose a conceptual framework linking female leadership characteristics with sustainable outcomes. By focusing on Romania's unique economic context and gender dynamics, the research will offer valuable insights into the role of female leadership in achieving sustainable growth, contributing to both academic and practical applications in business management.

Keywords: Sustainability, Female Leadership, Management, Business Practices

1 Research Scope

The research has the following specific objectives:

- (i) To identify and analyse the specific strategies and leadership attributes employed by female leaders to facilitate the adoption and implementation of sustainable business practices, particularly in relation to the principles of the Triple Bottom Line theory.
- (ii) To evaluate the challenges female leaders face in implementing sustainable business practices and assess their impact on organizations' long-term sustainability performance.
- (iii) To develop a conceptual framework that links female leadership characteristics with the effectiveness of sustainability efforts, providing a model that can be applied beyond Romania.

Through this study, the research aims to provide valuable insights into the role of female leadership in driving sustainable growth, thereby contributing to the literature on sustainable leadership.

1.1 Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in the Triple Bottom Line theory, which integrates economic, social, and environmental sustainability. It also draws on sustainable leadership models that highlight the skills necessary for leading sustainable change. Integrating these theories with the concept of female leadership provides a framework for analyzing how female leadership attributes align with sustainability goals.

The theoretical framework is organized into three thematic sections:

- (iv) Triple Bottom Line Theory.
- (v) Sustainable Leadership Models.
- (vi) Female Sustainable Leadership.

This structure is designed to facilitate a clearer exploration of the relevant theories and existing research, setting the stage for the empirical analysis that follows.

1.1.1 Triple bottom line theory

Traditional business models, focused exclusively on profit and less concerned with the needs of society at large, are rapidly becoming outdated. The concept of sustainable development, defined as “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Butlin, 1989), is central to the discourse on new business models. This definition encompasses the three pillars of sustainable development: economic advancement and progress, environmental protection, and social equity and well-being (Mensah, 2019; Milenković, Vaseashta and Vasović, 2021).

To align with sustainable development, companies are shifting their focus from purely financial gains to a broader consideration of the value they bring to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) areas (Chen, Song, and Gao, 2023). This shift is supported by the “Triple Bottom Line” approach, introduced by Elkington (1994), which integrates economic, social, and environmental sustainability, collectively known as the 3Ps: profits, people, and planet (Slaper and Hall, 2011). Stakeholders and investors increasingly recognize a company's overall impact on its surrounding context, making the integration of social and environmental concerns into corporate strategies essential for securing long-term competitive advantage (De Souza Barbosa et al., 2023). This evolution in business practices has gained significant momentum and is now a central topic in political, academic, and managerial discussions (Hall, Daneke, and Lenox, 2010; Shinbrot et al., 2019).

Companies are increasingly using the Triple Bottom Line framework to assess their responsibilities and embed sustainable business practices across all aspects of their operations, aiming not only to generate profit but also to create positive societal and environmental outcomes (Ortiz-de-Mandojana and Bansal, 2015).

1.1.2 Sustainable leadership models

The transition to sustainable business practices, as outlined in the Triple Bottom Line framework, requires companies to redefine their policies and strategies to balance economic, social, and environmental goals. Leadership plays a key role in this transformation, as leaders are essential in steering organizations toward sustainable change (Metcalf and Benn, 2012). Effective leadership is crucial in motivating and influencing followers to align with the organization's mission and achieve its objectives (Winston and Patterson, 2006).

Sustainable leadership, a critical aspect of this transformation, requires specific skills such as motivating employees, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving (Metcalf and Benn, 2012; Tideman, Arts, and Zandee, 2013). These skills are necessary for leaders to guide their organizations toward generating benefits for both the present and future, while enhancing the well-being of all stakeholders involved (McCann and Holt, 2010).

In the context of corporate sustainability, Brandt (2016) identifies four types of leadership: transactional leaders, transformational leaders, servant leaders, and sustainable leaders. Among these, sustainable leaders stand out for incorporating environmental and social considerations into their leadership style, with a focus on achieving long-term organizational sustainability (Brandt, 2016). This leadership style aligns closely with the Triple Bottom Line framework by promoting practices that ensure not just economic gains but also positive environmental and social outcomes.

Despite these insights, the current literature still lacks a comprehensive understanding of how the characteristics, competencies, behaviours, and actions of sustainable leadership are interconnected and influence business outcomes (Sajjad, Eweje, and Raziq, 2023). Further research is needed to explore these relationships and to develop a more holistic view of effective sustainable leadership.

1.1.3 Female sustainable leadership

Building on the notion of sustainable leadership, female leaders often exhibit attributes that closely align with the principles of sustainable business practices. Research indicates that women tend to emphasize collaboration, long-term planning, and social responsibility—qualities essential for driving sustainable business practices. These characteristics are in line with the core values of sustainable leadership, which focus on integrating environmental and social considerations into decision-making processes (Pierli, Murrura, and Palazzi, 2022).

Female leaders play a significant role in promoting and implementing environmental and social practices, thereby facilitating the transition to more sustainable business models. Studies suggest that women are more likely to champion forward-looking initiatives, while male leaders often adhere to more conventional methods (Adams and Funk, 2012; Francis et al., 2021). This proactive approach by female leaders enhances their ability to promote long-term sustainability within organizations.

Moreover, women are particularly adept at balancing the diverse and sometimes conflicting interests of various stakeholders, including communities, employees, suppliers, and customers. This ability to manage multiple stakeholder interests is key in addressing the profit-driven priorities of business shareholders while simultaneously promoting sustainable practices (Brammer, Millington, and Pavelin, 2007; Harrison and Coombs, 2011). Cicchiello et al. (2021) found that boards of directors with a greater representation of women are more committed to adopting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to taking responsibility for external sustainability reporting.

Additionally, female leaders tend to be more stakeholder-oriented compared to their male counterparts, who are often more focused on shareholder-centric perspectives (Glass, Cook, and Ingersoll, 2015). Women are also noted for their ability to build trust among employees and resolve conflicts effectively, fostering a collaborative work environment. In contrast, men are more likely to adopt a dominant leadership style (Westermann, Ashby, and Pretty, 2005; Carli and Eagly, 2016).

Female leaders further contribute to sustainability through their entrepreneurial spirit, team-building capabilities, and effective decision-making, especially during crises (Acevedo-Duque et al., 2021). They promote diversity in perspectives and opinions, which is crucial for innovation and problem-solving in dynamic business environments (Weiner, Cyr, and Burton, 2019). Adaptability and creativity, highlighted by Birsan et al. (2022), are essential traits in making female entrepreneurship models resilient and economically sustainable, particularly during times of crisis.

By integrating these qualities into their leadership styles, female leaders align closely with the sustainable leadership models, contributing to both the social and environmental goals of their organizations.

1.1.4 Gaps and further research

While existing literature provides insights into sustainable leadership, there is a noticeable lack of empirical research directly linking female leadership attributes to measurable outcomes in sustainable business practices. Previous studies have not sufficiently examined how the specific qualities and strategies of female leaders contribute to the successful implementation of sustainability initiatives. This research seeks to address this gap by offering a comprehensive analysis of how female leadership influences sustainable business practices and organizational outcomes.

Additionally, focusing on Romania presents an opportunity to explore leadership dynamics in a context characterized by a developing economy, significant gender disparities, and a traditionally

male-dominated corporate culture. The findings will provide context-specific insights and propose a conceptual framework that connects female leadership traits with effective sustainability strategies. This framework will be designed to be applicable beyond the Romanian context, offering a nuanced understanding of gender and leadership in the business environment.

1.2 Research objectives

This study investigates the strategies and leadership styles female leaders use to advance sustainable business practices, with a focus on Romanian companies in the industrial and consumer goods sector. It seeks to understand the challenges these leaders face and how their efforts impact long-term organizational sustainability. The primary research questions guiding this study are:

- (i) What challenges do female leaders encounter in driving sustainable business practices?
- (ii) What strategies do female leaders implement to overcome these challenges and promote sustainability?
- (iii) What key attributes define effective female sustainability leaders?
- (iv) How do female leadership practices measurably impact the sustainability and performance of organizations over the long term?

Romania serves as a compelling case study, given its developing economy, persistent gender parity issues, and male-dominated corporate culture. Between 2018 and 2023, Romania's gross domestic product (GDP) growth nearly doubled the global average of 1.86, highlighting the country's potential (The Future of Growth Report 2024, 2024). However, despite this growth, Romania faces ongoing challenges in achieving and maintaining sustainable development goals. The country's sustainability score of 51.7 in the same report, while above the global average, indicates that significant progress is still needed. Moreover, Romania ranks 68th out of 146 countries in the most recent global gender gap report, with a gender parity score of 0.717 (Global Gender Gap Report 2024, 2024). Specifically, the country ranks 83rd in economic participation and opportunity for women and has a score of 4.82 for women's advancement in leadership roles. These dynamics make Romania an essential case study for examining how female leaders address sustainability challenges in a traditionally male-dominated environment.

1.3 Research approach

Building on the theoretical foundations and gaps identified in the literature review, this study employs a mixed-methods approach (Creswell and Clark, 2007) to provide a thorough analysis of the role of female leaders as sustainability leaders. This approach combines qualitative and quantitative methods to leverage the in-depth, contextual insights from qualitative data with the broader, generalizable findings from quantitative data. By doing so, the research addresses the need for empirical evidence linking female leadership attributes to measurable sustainability outcomes, as discussed in the literature review.

1.3.1 Multiple-case study

The primary method utilized in this research is a multiple-case study approach (Yin, 2009), which allows for an in-depth exploration of leadership attributes, decision-making processes, and leadership styles. The aim is to compare different cases, identify patterns, and draw meaningful conclusions across various contexts.

The study will include a selection of three to five case studies of Romanian companies in the industrial and consumer goods sector where women hold leadership roles. This sector includes a diverse range of

industries such as manufacturing processes, consumer goods production, food processing, utilities and services. The rationale for choosing this category is twofold:

- (i) **Environmental Impact:** By focusing on this sector, the study can explore how female leaders address complex environmental challenges and drive the adoption of sustainable business practices.
- (ii) **Economic Significance:** Examining female leadership in these sectors allows the study to assess how sustainable business practices can contribute to long-term economic sustainability.

The selection criteria for these cases include the company's size, industry influence, and the level of female representation in leadership positions:

- (i) **Company size:** Both large and small and medium-sized enterprises will be included to explore how company size influences leadership and sustainable business practices.
- (ii) **Industry influence:** Companies that are considered industry leaders or have a significant market share will be prioritized, as their practices can set trends for the broader sector.
- (iii) **Female representation:** Only companies with women in key leadership roles will be considered to ensure that the study directly addresses the influence of female leadership.

Data will be collected through a structured questionnaire, follow-up interviews and document analysis. The qualitative questionnaire will be designed to capture in-depth responses, with sections focused on leadership styles, sustainability strategies, and organizational outcomes. Open-ended questions will allow participants to provide detailed insights into their experiences, while multiple-choice questions will help quantify trends and patterns across the different cases. Follow-up interviews will be conducted to dive deeper into specific challenges and strategies, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. To complement the data collected from questionnaires and interviews, the study will also involve the analysis of relevant public company documents, such as sustainability reports and financial reports. This will help to triangulate the findings and ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the companies' sustainable business practices.

1.3.2 Questionnaire-based survey

In addition to the qualitative case studies, this research will employ a quantitative method through a structured questionnaire-based survey (Nardi, 2018). The aim is to gather measurable data that can be statistically analysed to identify trends, correlations, and potential causal relationships between female leadership attributes and sustainable business practices.

The quantitative questionnaire will be structured to collect data on various aspects of leadership and sustainability. It will include demographic data, as well as information on leadership styles, sustainability strategies and organizational outcomes. The survey will target a larger sample of female leaders across industrial and consumer goods sector, not limited to the case study companies. A sample size of approximately 100 respondents will be sought to ensure statistical significance and the ability to generalize the findings. The survey will be distributed via email, social media and online platforms, ensuring wide reach and ease of access for participants. Quantitative data collected from the survey will be analysed using statistical software. The analysis will include descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis.

1.3.3 Data integration

The qualitative case studies will inform the development of the quantitative survey by revealing specific leadership behaviours, strategies, or challenges that are not adequately covered in existing

literature. These insights will guide the creation of targeted survey questions and refine existing hypotheses, ensuring the survey captures the real-world experiences of female leaders. Additionally, the qualitative findings will identify industry-specific challenges that influence the effectiveness of female leadership in sustainability. This allows the survey to address factors such as economic constraints that impact leadership practices, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences among female leaders.

By providing context for the quantitative survey results, qualitative insights help explain relationships and conditions under which certain leadership practices are effective. This integration of qualitative and quantitative data enhances the study's validity and reliability, offering a thorough understanding of the research questions. Furthermore, the qualitative findings will help assess the generalizability of the quantitative results, identifying patterns that may apply to a broader population of female leaders. This integrative approach ensures that the study's conclusions are both contextually relevant and broadly applicable, offering valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners.

1.4 Expected findings and practical implications

This research is expected to uncover important insights into the unique challenges and strategies employed by female leaders in promoting sustainability within their organizations. By examining the strategies and attributes of female leaders, the research adds depth to the existing body of knowledge on sustainable leadership and gender diversity.

- (i) **Building on the Triple Bottom Line Theory:** The study illustrates how female leaders effectively balance economic, social, and environmental goals, enhancing the understanding of the Triple Bottom Line theory.
- (ii) **Alignment with Sustainable Leadership Models:** The findings support existing sustainable leadership models by highlighting the unique qualities female leaders bring to sustainable business practices.
- (iii) **Addressing Gaps in Empirical Evidence:** This research fills gaps in the literature by providing empirical data on the practices of female leaders and linking these practices to measurable sustainability outcomes.

The findings of this research will have significant implications for both businesses and policymakers, contributing to both theory and practice in leadership and sustainability:

- (i) **For businesses:** The research could guide the development of more inclusive leadership practices that leverage female leaders' strengths in driving sustainability, helping organizations achieve their goals more effectively.
- (ii) **For policymakers:** The study could inform the creation of policies that encourage greater female participation in leadership roles, particularly in sectors relevant to sustainable development.

1.5 Conclusion

This paper highlights the critical role of female leadership in promoting sustainable business practices, focusing on Romanian companies in the industrial and consumer goods sector. By examining leadership strategies and attributes aligned with sustainability goals, this research aims to enrich the understanding of sustainable leadership and gender diversity. The proposed mixed-methods approach will provide comprehensive insights into the unique challenges and contributions of female leaders in driving organizational sustainability.

Although the study's findings may be limited by the selected sample size and sectoral focus, they will offer valuable theoretical and practical implications. Businesses can leverage these insights to develop more inclusive leadership practices that harness the strengths of female leaders, while policymakers

can use the research to inform initiatives that promote gender diversity in leadership roles. Future research should consider expanding the study across different industries and regions to further explore the intersection of gender, leadership, and sustainability.

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