

FROM TOKENISM TO TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP: EXAMINING THE LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES, PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN IN THE IT INDUSTRY

A S Usha Sree

Research Scholar,

PG and Research Department of Commerce,
Loyola College, Chennai – 600034.

Dr. S. Remigius Mary

Assistant Professor,

PG and Research Department of Commerce,
Loyola College, Chennai – 600034.

Abstract: The increasing participation of women in the Information Technology (IT) industry has contributed to workforce diversity; however, numerical representation does not necessarily ensure meaningful inclusion, leadership participation, or career advancement. Women professionals may continue to experience tokenism through heightened visibility, gender stereotyping, social isolation, unequal recognition, and restricted access to influential networks. In this context, psychological safety may play an important role in shaping women's willingness to express ideas, participate in decision-making, exercise leadership, and pursue career opportunities. The present study examines the interrelationships among tokenism, leadership experiences, psychological safety, transformational leadership, and career advancement among women professionals in the IT industry.

The study adopts a descriptive and explanatory research design using a quantitative approach. Primary data will be collected through a structured questionnaire administered to women professionals working across different functional and organizational levels within the IT industry. The instrument will measure perceived tokenism, leadership experiences, psychological safety, transformational leadership, and career advancement using a five-point Likert scale. Secondary data will be obtained from peer-reviewed literature, academic publications, industry reports, and other credible sources. The collected data will be analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability and validity analysis, correlation, regression, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), and mediation analysis.

The study specifically examines the relationship between perceived tokenism and psychological safety and assesses the influence of leadership practices on psychological safety and career advancement. It further investigates whether psychological safety mediates the relationship between women's leadership experiences and career advancement. Transformational leadership is considered as an important organizational approach involving individualized consideration, empowerment, recognition, intellectual stimulation, participation, and developmental support. Selected

demographic and occupational characteristics will also be examined to identify variations in women's workplace experiences.

The study is expected to contribute to the literature by integrating tokenism, psychological safety, leadership experiences, transformational leadership, and career advancement within the IT industry context. It seeks to provide a framework for understanding how organizational leadership practices and psychological conditions may influence women's meaningful participation and career progression. The study also offers practical implications for IT organizations by highlighting the importance of transparent career systems, leadership development, mentoring and sponsorship, employee-voice mechanisms, equitable access to developmental opportunities, and inclusive leadership practices in supporting sustainable women's leadership and career advancement.

INTRODUCTION

The Information Technology (IT) industry has become one of the most significant drivers of contemporary economic growth, technological innovation, and organizational transformation. Characterized by rapid technological change, knowledge-intensive work, global connectivity, and evolving forms of employment, the sector has created substantial opportunities for professional participation and career development. The expansion of the IT industry has also increased the participation of women across technical, managerial, and professional roles, contributing to greater gender diversity within the workforce. However, the increasing presence of women in the IT sector does not necessarily imply a corresponding transformation in organizational power, leadership representation, workplace inclusion, or career outcomes. The persistence of gender disparities in leadership and advancement therefore raises an important question: whether women's increasing numerical representation is translating into meaningful organizational participation and sustainable career progression.

This distinction between representation and meaningful inclusion is central to understanding women's experiences in the contemporary IT workplace. An organization may demonstrate progress through the recruitment or promotion of women while simultaneously maintaining organizational structures, leadership practices, informal networks, and workplace cultures that constrain their influence and advancement. Numerical representation can therefore coexist with unequal access to authority, decision-making, developmental opportunities, recognition, mentoring, and strategic leadership positions. Consequently, the issue of women's participation in IT extends beyond the question of how many women are present within organizations to whether they possess genuine opportunities to exercise voice, influence organizational decisions, develop leadership capabilities, and progress into positions of greater responsibility and authority.

One of the critical organizational phenomena through which this distinction can be examined is tokenism. Tokenism arises when members of a socially or numerically underrepresented group are

present in sufficiently small numbers that their individual experiences may become disproportionately visible and subject to heightened scrutiny. In organizational settings, token status may expose women to increased visibility, stereotyping, social isolation, performance pressures, and expectations to represent their gender group. Such conditions can create a paradox in which women's presence is publicly interpreted as evidence of organizational diversity while their actual participation in organizational power and decision-making remains limited. Tokenism therefore represents more than numerical minority status; it concerns the quality of participation, recognition, influence, and opportunity available to individuals within the organization.

The implications of tokenism become particularly important in relation to women's leadership experiences and professional identity. Women occupying leadership or high-visibility positions in traditionally male-dominated organizational environments may encounter heightened expectations regarding competence, authority, interpersonal behaviour, and leadership style. Their professional achievements may be evaluated through gendered assumptions, while their visibility can increase the consequences associated with both success and failure. Such experiences may influence women's perceptions of their leadership capabilities, professional legitimacy, organizational belonging, and willingness to exercise authority. Consequently, the study of women's leadership in IT requires attention not only to formal leadership positions but also to the organizational experiences through which women acquire, exercise, and sustain leadership legitimacy.

A related but distinct dimension of this experience is psychological safety. Psychological safety concerns the extent to which individuals perceive that they can express ideas, ask questions, raise concerns, acknowledge mistakes, challenge prevailing assumptions, and participate in interpersonal interactions without fear of embarrassment, punishment, exclusion, or damage to their professional standing. For women working in environments where they experience heightened visibility or minority status, psychological safety may be particularly consequential. When women perceive that their contributions are undervalued, their competence is questioned, or their mistakes may reinforce gender-based stereotypes, they may become less willing to speak up, challenge existing practices, seek opportunities, or participate actively in organizational decision-making. Conversely, psychologically safe environments may enable women to exercise voice, demonstrate competence, develop confidence, and participate more meaningfully in leadership processes.

The relationship between tokenism and psychological safety therefore represents an important area for investigation. Tokenistic conditions may generate experiences of scrutiny, marginalization, exclusion from informal networks, and constrained participation, potentially weakening women's sense of safety and belonging within the organization. However, the consequences of minority status may not be uniform across organizational contexts. Leadership behaviour, workplace culture, inclusion practices, and opportunities for participation may determine whether women experience their organizational position as restrictive or empowering. Psychological safety may consequently serve as

an important organizational condition through which women's experiences of inclusion, voice, and participation are shaped. Examining these relationships can provide a deeper understanding of why numerical representation alone may fail to produce substantive organizational inclusion.

At the same time, leadership practices represent an important organizational mechanism for shaping women's workplace experiences and career outcomes. Leaders influence the distribution of opportunities, recognition, developmental support, decision-making participation, mentoring, and access to influential organizational networks. Leadership styles that encourage participation, provide individualized support, recognize contributions, challenge stereotypes, and create opportunities for employee voice may strengthen women's psychological safety and facilitate career development. In contrast, leadership practices that reproduce exclusionary norms, tolerate gender-based stereotyping, or provide women with visibility without corresponding authority may reinforce the conditions associated with tokenism. Leadership must therefore be considered not merely as an individual characteristic of managers but as a mechanism through which organizational inclusion and career opportunities are created, sustained, or constrained.

The question of career advancement further extends this discussion from workplace experience to long-term professional outcomes. Women's career advancement in the IT industry involves more than formal promotion; it encompasses access to challenging assignments, leadership responsibilities, professional development, mentoring, sponsorship, influential networks, recognition, decision-making authority, and opportunities for progression into senior and strategic roles. Women may enter the IT workforce in increasing numbers while remaining disproportionately represented in lower or middle levels of organizational hierarchies. This creates a distinction between workforce participation and leadership progression. If tokenistic experiences and inadequate psychological safety limit women's willingness or ability to exercise voice, seek visibility, access developmental opportunities, or participate in strategic decision-making, these conditions may have implications for their long-term career advancement.

Within this context, psychological safety may represent more than an organizational outcome; it may constitute an explanatory mechanism linking leadership experiences with career advancement. Supportive and inclusive leadership may create an environment in which women feel sufficiently secure to articulate career aspirations, seek challenging opportunities, demonstrate leadership capabilities, take professional risks, build influential relationships, and participate in decision-making. These experiences may subsequently contribute to career progression and leadership development. Conversely, environments characterized by low psychological safety may discourage voice, risk-taking, networking, and leadership participation, thereby constraining opportunities for advancement. Examining psychological safety as a mediating mechanism can therefore provide insight into *how* leadership experiences translate into career outcomes rather than simply establishing whether such relationships exist.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply to increase women's representation but to create organizational conditions in which representation results in substantive participation, leadership influence, and sustainable advancement. This requires a shift from symbolic or numerical approaches to gender diversity toward leadership practices capable of transforming organizational cultures and structures. In this regard, transformational leadership provides a relevant perspective because of its emphasis on empowerment, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, shared vision, participation, and the development of followers. Transformational leadership has the potential to influence not only individual motivation and performance but also the organizational conditions under which employees experience inclusion, voice, recognition, and opportunities for development. From a gender perspective, such leadership may help organizations move beyond the symbolic inclusion of women toward environments in which women are empowered to exercise meaningful leadership and influence.

The distinction between tokenistic representation and transformational inclusion is therefore central to the present study. Tokenistic representation may increase the visibility of women without necessarily altering the structures and practices through which organizational power and opportunity are distributed. Transformational leadership, in contrast, provides a potential pathway for challenging exclusionary practices and creating conditions that support meaningful participation, psychological safety, leadership development, and career progression. The transition from tokenism to transformational inclusion consequently requires more than increasing women's numbers; it requires changes in leadership behaviour, organizational culture, decision-making processes, access to developmental opportunities, and the psychological conditions that enable women to participate fully in organizational life.

Despite growing scholarly attention to gender diversity, women's leadership, psychological safety, and career advancement, these dimensions are often examined independently rather than as interconnected organizational processes. Research on women's representation frequently focuses on numerical participation and leadership diversity, while studies of tokenism tend to emphasize visibility, stereotyping, and minority experiences. Similarly, psychological safety has been widely examined in relation to employee voice, team dynamics, and leadership, whereas career advancement is often investigated through individual, organizational, or structural determinants. What remains insufficiently understood is how these dimensions interact within the specific context of the IT industry, where rapid technological change, specialized expertise, organizational hierarchies, and historically gendered patterns of participation create distinctive conditions for women's leadership experiences. In particular, there is a need to understand whether psychological safety serves as a mechanism through which leadership experiences influence women's career advancement and how leadership practices can contribute to reducing tokenistic organizational conditions.

This gap is particularly important because AI-driven technological transformation, digitalization, and evolving organizational structures are changing the nature of work and leadership within the IT industry. As organizations increasingly depend on knowledge, innovation, collaboration, and highly skilled talent, the ability to create inclusive environments in which diverse professionals can contribute fully becomes strategically significant. Women's effective participation in leadership is therefore not only a matter of representation or social equity but also a consideration in organizational capability, innovation, talent retention, and sustainable competitiveness. Understanding the organizational conditions that enable women to progress from visible participation to substantive leadership is consequently relevant to both organizational scholarship and managerial practice.

Against this background, the present study, titled “From Tokenism to Transformational Leadership: Examining the Leadership Experiences, Psychological Safety, and Career Advancement of Women in the IT Industry,” investigates the relationship between tokenistic experiences, leadership, psychological safety, and career advancement among women professionals in the IT industry. The study examines the prevalence and manifestations of tokenism and its influence on women's leadership experiences and professional identity. It further investigates the relationship between perceived tokenism and psychological safety, with particular emphasis on workplace inclusion, employee voice, and participation in decision-making. In addition, the study assesses the influence of leadership styles and leadership practices on women's psychological safety and career advancement

OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the prevalence and manifestations of tokenism among women professionals in the IT industry and its influence on their leadership experiences and professional identity.
2. To examine the relationship between perceived tokenism and psychological safety among women professionals in the IT industry, with specific focus on workplace inclusion, employee voice, and participation in decision-making.
3. To assess the influence of leadership styles and leadership practices on the psychological safety and career advancement of women professionals in the IT industry.
4. To investigate the mediating role of psychological safety in the relationship between women's leadership experiences and their career advancement in the IT industry.
5. To develop and empirically validate a transformational leadership framework for reducing tokenistic practices and promoting meaningful inclusion, leadership participation, and sustainable career advancement of women in the IT industry.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

a) Kataria and Verma (2026) examined symbolic inclusion and tokenism in the Indian Information Technology sector, focusing on the relationship between perceived tokenism, psychological safety, and

contextual performance. The study found that perceived tokenism was negatively associated with psychological safety and contextual performance, while psychological safety was positively associated with contextual performance. The findings indicated that numerical representation alone does not necessarily result in meaningful inclusion and highlighted psychological safety as an important organizational condition influencing employees' workplace experiences.

b) A recent study of women IT/ITeS professionals in South India (2024) examined the relationship between career competencies and leadership aspiration among 348 women professionals. The study found that work-role salience mediated the relationship between career competencies and leadership aspiration, while achievement aspiration moderated this relationship. Occupational self-efficacy also contributed to leadership aspiration. The findings suggest that women's progression toward leadership positions is influenced by career competencies, self-efficacy, work-role orientation, and achievement-related factors, highlighting the importance of both individual and organizational conditions in women's career advancement.

c) Gierke (2024) conducted a systematic review of research on organizational factors supporting women's access to and retention in leadership positions. The review highlighted that women continue to experience barriers across different stages of the employment and leadership lifecycle, including recruitment, development, evaluation, promotion, and retention. The study emphasized the importance of organizational context, inclusive practices, leadership development, and career support in improving women's representation and sustainability in leadership positions. The findings also indicated that women may continue to experience gender-related barriers and tokenistic conditions even after entering leadership roles.

d) Taban and Le Loarne (2025) examined the gendered psychological contract experiences of female managers working in major global digital technology companies. Based on qualitative evidence from female managers, the study identified perceived imbalances between women's contributions and organizational returns, along with experiences of stalled career progression, undermining behaviours from male colleagues, and gender-related discriminatory practices. The findings demonstrate that women's experiences in technology organizations are shaped not only by formal career structures but also by gendered organizational expectations, workplace interactions, and barriers to advancement.

e) A recent systematic review by Gierke (2025) examined organizational practices and contextual factors associated with women's leadership development and career progression. The study emphasized that interventions aimed at improving women's leadership should extend beyond developing individual competencies and address organizational structures, workplace culture, career development practices, evaluation processes, and opportunities for advancement. The findings support the need for an integrated approach to women's leadership that considers organizational inclusion, supportive

leadership, psychological conditions, and sustainable career progression rather than focusing solely on women's individual capabilities.

RESEARCH GAP

Although women's participation in the Information Technology industry has received increasing scholarly attention, the existing literature presents several limitations that warrant further investigation. Previous studies have examined women's representation, workplace experiences, leadership, and career advancement as relatively distinct areas of research. While research on tokenism has highlighted issues such as heightened visibility, stereotyping, social isolation, and performance pressure, comparatively limited attention has been given to how perceived tokenism influences women's leadership experiences and professional identity within the IT industry. Consequently, numerical representation of women within organizations may not necessarily translate into meaningful participation in organizational decision-making, authority, influence, or leadership.

Another important gap relates to the relationship between tokenism and psychological safety. Existing research suggests that employees' perceptions of inclusion, interpersonal risk, leadership support, and organizational acceptance influence their willingness to express opinions, raise concerns, and participate in organizational processes. However, greater empirical attention is needed to understand how women's experiences of tokenism affect psychological safety within IT workplaces. In particular, the influence of heightened visibility, stereotyping, exclusion from informal networks, and perceptions of unequal treatment on women's willingness to speak up, participate in organizational discussions, and exercise leadership requires further investigation.

A further limitation concerns the role of leadership practices in shaping women's workplace experiences and career advancement. Existing literature has examined transformational, inclusive, ethical, and supportive leadership in relation to employee engagement, empowerment, psychological safety, and organizational outcomes. However, these perspectives have not been sufficiently integrated with women's experiences of tokenism and career advancement within the IT industry. There is therefore a need to examine whether supportive and transformational leadership practices can create organizational conditions that mitigate tokenistic experiences and facilitate meaningful participation, leadership development, and career progression among women professionals.

Another significant research gap concerns the potential mediating role of psychological safety in the relationship between women's leadership experiences and career advancement. Previous studies have

established associations between psychological safety and employee voice, participation, learning, and engagement, while research on women's career advancement has emphasized mentoring, networking, organizational support, career competencies, and developmental opportunities. However, comparatively limited attention has been given to examining psychological safety as a mechanism through which women's leadership experiences may influence their career advancement. Investigating this mechanism can provide deeper insight into how organizational experiences are translated into long-term career outcomes.

There is also a contextual gap in the existing literature. Although research on gender and leadership has expanded considerably, a substantial proportion of the literature examines women's workplace experiences across broad organizational settings rather than focusing specifically on the IT industry. The IT sector is characterized by rapid technological change, knowledge-intensive work, specialized expertise, project-based collaboration, evolving organizational structures, and increasing dependence on innovation. These characteristics may create distinctive opportunities and challenges for women's leadership participation and career progression. The increasing significance of digital transformation and AI-driven technologies further reinforces the need to understand whether women's numerical representation is translating into meaningful participation, leadership influence, and sustainable career advancement within technology-oriented organizations.

Therefore, the present study seeks to address these gaps by developing an integrated framework examining the relationships among tokenistic experiences, women's leadership experiences, psychological safety, transformational leadership, and career advancement in the IT industry. Specifically, the study examines the manifestations and influence of tokenism on women's leadership experiences and professional identity; investigates the relationship between perceived tokenism and psychological safety; assesses the influence of leadership practices on psychological safety and career advancement; and examines the mediating role of psychological safety in the relationship between women's leadership experiences and career advancement. In addition, the study aims to develop and empirically validate a transformational leadership framework for reducing tokenistic practices and promoting meaningful inclusion, leadership participation, and sustainable career advancement among women professionals in the IT industry. The study is therefore expected to contribute to the integrated understanding of tokenism, psychological safety, leadership, and women's career advancement while providing practical insights for organizations seeking to strengthen inclusive leadership and create supportive environments for women's sustained professional development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive and explanatory research design to examine the relationships among tokenism, leadership experiences, psychological safety, transformational leadership, and career advancement among women professionals in the Information Technology (IT) industry. The research focuses on women employees working in IT organizations across different functional areas, including

software development, IT services, project management, consulting, data and analytics, technical support, and managerial and leadership positions. A purposive sampling technique will be employed to select women professionals who have relevant experience in the IT industry. The study will collect primary data using a structured questionnaire comprising demographic questions and statements related to perceived tokenism, leadership experiences, psychological safety, transformational leadership, and career advancement. The questionnaire will be developed using established and validated measures from previous studies to ensure the reliability and relevance of the collected data.

The study primarily relies on a quantitative research approach to analyse women's perceptions and experiences of leadership, workplace inclusion, psychological safety, and career advancement in the IT industry. Secondary data will be gathered from peer-reviewed research journals, books, conference proceedings, industry reports, government publications, and other reliable academic sources to support the theoretical foundation of the study. The collected data will be systematically organized and analysed using appropriate statistical techniques, including descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, reliability and validity analysis, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Mediation analysis will be conducted to examine the role of psychological safety in the relationship between women's leadership experiences and career advancement. The study will also examine the influence of selected demographic and occupational factors on the major study variables. The findings are expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of how tokenistic experiences and leadership practices influence psychological safety and career advancement among women professionals in the IT industry and contribute to the development of a transformational leadership framework for promoting meaningful inclusion, leadership participation, and sustainable career advancement.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to both academic knowledge and organizational practice by providing a comprehensive understanding of tokenism, leadership experiences, psychological safety, transformational leadership, and career advancement among women professionals in the Information Technology (IT) industry. From a theoretical perspective, the study addresses an important gap in the existing literature by examining these dimensions within an integrated framework. While previous studies have frequently examined women's representation, tokenism, psychological safety, leadership, and career advancement as separate areas of research, the present study explores their interconnected relationships. In particular, the study contributes to understanding how experiences of tokenism may influence women's psychological safety and leadership participation and how psychological safety may function as a mechanism linking leadership experiences with career advancement.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study can assist organizations in developing more inclusive leadership practices and workplace policies that support women's meaningful participation and career progression. By identifying the organizational conditions associated with tokenistic

experiences and psychological safety, the study can provide valuable guidance to organizational leaders, human resource professionals, and diversity and inclusion practitioners in designing effective leadership development, mentoring, sponsorship, employee voice, and career advancement initiatives. The study also emphasizes the importance of leadership practices that provide women with genuine opportunities to participate in decision-making, demonstrate their capabilities, access developmental opportunities, and progress into positions of greater responsibility and authority.

Furthermore, the study has particular significance for the IT industry, where rapid technological transformation, changing work structures, specialized expertise, and increasing demand for skilled professionals make effective utilization and retention of diverse talent increasingly important. The findings can help IT organizations understand the difference between numerical representation and meaningful inclusion and identify organizational practices that can strengthen women's psychological safety, leadership participation, and career advancement. The study may also provide insights into how transformational leadership practices, including individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and participative leadership, can contribute to creating supportive organizational environments for women professionals.

The study is also significant for women professionals because it highlights the organizational and psychological factors that may influence their leadership experiences and career progression. By examining psychological safety as a potential mediating mechanism, the research can provide greater understanding of how employees' perceptions of workplace safety, voice, inclusion, and leadership support may influence their willingness to participate, express ideas, undertake challenging responsibilities, and pursue career opportunities. Such understanding can contribute to the development of workplace environments in which women are able to exercise leadership without being limited by tokenistic expectations or exclusionary organizational practices.

Finally, the study has implications for policymakers, professional bodies, and organizations seeking to promote gender-inclusive workplaces and greater representation of women in leadership. The empirically validated transformational leadership framework proposed in the study can provide a basis for developing organizational interventions aimed at reducing tokenistic practices and promoting meaningful inclusion, leadership participation, and sustainable career advancement. Overall, the research is expected to contribute to the development of evidence-based organizational strategies that move beyond symbolic representation of women toward workplaces characterized by psychological safety, equitable opportunities, inclusive leadership, and sustainable women's leadership in the IT industry.

SOURCES OF DATA

This study will utilize two primary sources of data collection: primary data and secondary data.

Primary Data Collection Method

Primary data will be collected through a structured questionnaire administered to women professionals working in the Information Technology (IT) industry across different functional areas, including software development, IT services, project management, consulting, data and analytics, technical support, and managerial and leadership positions. The questionnaire will consist of two sections: the first section will gather demographic and occupational information, including age, educational qualification, job role, organizational level, years of professional experience, and organizational tenure, while the second section will include statements related to perceived tokenism, leadership experiences, psychological safety, transformational leadership, and career advancement. The questionnaire will be designed using a five-point Likert scale to capture respondents' perceptions and workplace experiences. To facilitate wider participation and convenience, the questionnaire will be distributed primarily through online platforms such as Google Forms, email, professional networking platforms, and relevant professional groups. Participation will be voluntary and anonymous, and respondents will be informed about the academic purpose of the study to encourage honest and unbiased responses.

Secondary Data Collection Method

Secondary data will be collected from a variety of reliable academic and professional sources to provide theoretical support and contextual understanding for the study. These sources will include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, conference proceedings, government publications, industry reports, professional reports, and credible online academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and ResearchGate. Relevant reports and publications from organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and other recognized professional and industry bodies will also be considered. Emphasis will be placed on recent literature published during 2024–2026 relating to tokenism, women's leadership, psychological safety, transformational leadership, workplace inclusion, and career advancement in the IT industry. The secondary data will be used to review existing research, identify research gaps, develop the conceptual framework and research objectives, support the formulation of hypotheses, and provide a basis for interpreting the findings of the study. The integration of primary and secondary data will provide a comprehensive understanding of women's leadership experiences, psychological safety, and career advancement and support the development of an empirically validated transformational leadership framework for meaningful inclusion in the IT industry.

FINDINGS

1. The study is expected to find that tokenism remains a relevant workplace experience among women professionals in the IT industry, particularly in organizational environments where women constitute a small proportion of technical, managerial, or senior leadership positions.
2. The findings are expected to indicate that heightened visibility is one of the prominent manifestations of tokenism, with women perceiving that their performance, behaviour, and professional decisions receive greater scrutiny because of their gender.

3. The study is expected to identify stereotyping and gender-based expectations as important dimensions of tokenistic experiences, particularly in relation to perceptions of technical competence, leadership capability, authority, and professional behaviour.
4. The findings may indicate that social isolation and exclusion from informal professional networks affect women's workplace experiences, particularly where access to influential colleagues, mentors, sponsors, and decision-making networks is limited.
5. The study is expected to demonstrate that perceived tokenism is negatively associated with psychological safety. Women who experience greater visibility, stereotyping, exclusion, or unequal treatment may report lower levels of comfort in expressing ideas, questioning decisions, raising concerns, or acknowledging mistakes.
6. The findings are expected to show that psychological safety is positively associated with employee voice and participation in organizational decision-making, indicating that women who perceive their workplaces as psychologically safe may be more willing to contribute ideas and express professional opinions.
7. The study may find that leadership support is an important factor influencing women's psychological safety. Leaders who demonstrate respect, openness, recognition, accessibility, and support may contribute to a workplace environment in which women feel more comfortable participating and exercising their voice.
8. The findings are expected to indicate that inclusive leadership practices can reduce the negative workplace experiences associated with tokenism by providing women with meaningful opportunities to participate, contribute, and influence organizational decisions rather than merely increasing their numerical representation.
9. The study is expected to establish a positive relationship between transformational leadership and psychological safety, particularly through leadership behaviours involving individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and recognition of employee contributions.
10. The findings may indicate that transformational leadership is positively associated with women's career advancement, particularly where leaders provide challenging assignments, developmental opportunities, leadership responsibilities, recognition, mentoring, and access to professional networks.
11. The study is expected to show that women's leadership experiences are significantly associated with career advancement, suggesting that access to leadership support, decision-making participation, recognition, developmental opportunities, and organizational influence may be relevant to women's perceptions of career progression.
12. The findings are expected to demonstrate that psychological safety is positively associated with career advancement. Women who feel safe to express ideas, take professional risks, seek

opportunities, and participate in organizational processes may report more favourable perceptions of their career progression.

13. The mediation analysis is expected to examine whether psychological safety mediates the relationship between women's leadership experiences and career advancement. A significant indirect effect would suggest that leadership experiences may contribute to career advancement partly through the psychological safety experienced by women in the workplace.
14. The findings may indicate that leadership practices and psychological safety jointly provide a stronger explanation of career advancement than either factor considered independently, highlighting the importance of both supportive leadership behaviour and a safe organizational environment.
15. The study is expected to identify differences in perceptions of tokenism, psychological safety, leadership experiences, and career advancement across selected demographic and occupational characteristics, such as organizational level, years of professional experience, job role, and organizational tenure.
16. The findings may indicate that women in senior or managerial positions do not necessarily experience complete freedom from gender-related organizational barriers, suggesting that formal advancement into leadership positions does not automatically eliminate experiences associated with tokenism or unequal treatment.
17. The study is expected to demonstrate that numerical representation alone is insufficient to establish meaningful workplace inclusion. Meaningful inclusion is more closely associated with women's access to authority, decision-making, recognition, leadership opportunities, psychological safety, and career development.
18. Overall, the findings are expected to support the development and empirical validation of a transformational leadership framework for moving organizations from tokenistic representation toward meaningful inclusion and sustainable career advancement. The framework is expected to emphasize supportive and transformational leadership, psychological safety, employee voice, equitable developmental opportunities, participation in decision-making, and access to leadership pathways as interconnected elements of women's advancement in the IT industry.

LIMITATIONS

The study has certain limitations that should be considered while interpreting its findings. Since the study focuses specifically on women professionals in the Information Technology (IT) industry, the findings may not be directly generalizable to women working in other industries or organizational contexts. The use of purposive and convenience sampling may also limit the representativeness of the sample, as participation depends on the accessibility and willingness of respondents. In addition, the study relies primarily on self-reported responses collected through a structured questionnaire, which may be influenced by respondents' personal perceptions, experiences, recall, or reluctance to disclose

sensitive workplace experiences related to gender, tokenism, leadership, and career advancement. The cross-sectional nature of the study also limits the ability to establish causal relationships among tokenism, leadership experiences, psychological safety, and career advancement over time.

Another limitation is that women's experiences may vary considerably according to organizational culture, industry segment, job role, organizational level, geographic location, work experience, and type of leadership. Although the study considers selected demographic and occupational characteristics, it may not capture all contextual factors that influence women's leadership experiences and career progression. Furthermore, transformational leadership is examined as an important leadership approach within the proposed framework, while other leadership styles and organizational factors may also influence psychological safety and career advancement. The study therefore provides an empirical examination of the selected variables within the defined IT context rather than a complete explanation of all factors affecting women's career advancement. Future research could address these limitations through larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal research designs, comparative studies across industries and countries, and mixed method approaches that combine quantitative evidence with detailed qualitative accounts of women's workplace experiences.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that women's participation in the IT industry should extend beyond numerical representation to include meaningful inclusion, leadership participation, psychological safety, and equitable career advancement. Tokenistic experiences such as heightened visibility, gender stereotyping, social isolation, unequal recognition, and limited access to influential networks can negatively affect women's workplace experiences and their willingness to participate fully in organizational processes. Psychological safety emerges as an important organizational condition that can enable women to express ideas, raise concerns, participate in decision-making, demonstrate leadership capabilities, and pursue career opportunities.

The study further highlights the importance of supportive and transformational leadership in creating organizational environments that promote women's psychological safety and career advancement. Leadership practices involving individualized consideration, recognition, empowerment, participation, developmental support, and access to challenging opportunities can contribute to meaningful inclusion and leadership development. Overall, the study proposes that moving from tokenism to transformational leadership requires organizations to combine women's representation with genuine access to authority, decision-making, professional development, and leadership opportunities. The proposed framework therefore provides an integrated basis for understanding and promoting sustainable career advancement and meaningful leadership participation among women professionals in the IT industry.

SUGGESTIONS

- Establish transparent promotion criteria: IT organizations should develop clearly defined and measurable promotion criteria so that career progression is based on demonstrated competencies, performance, leadership potential, and documented achievements rather than informal perceptions or subjective judgments.
- Introduce structured sponsorship programmes: Organizations should establish formal sponsorship programmes in which senior leaders actively support the career development of high-potential women by recommending them for strategic assignments, leadership opportunities, and advancement pathways.
- Strengthen succession planning for women: Organizations should incorporate gender-inclusive succession planning into their talent-management systems by identifying qualified women for future leadership positions and providing them with planned developmental experiences.
- Create formal leadership development pathways: IT companies should provide structured leadership programmes covering strategic decision-making, negotiation, stakeholder management, communication, technology leadership, and organizational influence to prepare women for senior and strategic roles.
- Develop objective performance-evaluation systems: Organizations should periodically review performance appraisal processes to identify potential gender-related inconsistencies in ratings, feedback, recognition, and promotion decisions. Greater use of evidence-based performance indicators can improve consistency in evaluation.
- Provide access to high-visibility assignments: Women professionals should receive equitable opportunities to lead important projects, client engagements, technology initiatives, innovation programmes, and cross-functional teams. Such assignments can provide valuable experience required for progression into higher organizational responsibilities.
- Create safe mechanisms for reporting workplace concerns: IT organizations should provide confidential and accessible channels through which employees can report exclusion, stereotyping, discriminatory behaviour, or other workplace concerns without fear of retaliation.
- Institutionalize employee-voice mechanisms: Organizations should establish regular forums such as leadership dialogues, employee advisory groups, structured feedback sessions, and anonymous suggestion mechanisms through which women professionals can contribute to organizational decisions and workplace improvements.
- Promote cross-functional networking opportunities: Organizations should facilitate professional networking across technical, managerial, business, and leadership functions. This can help women develop broader organizational visibility and relationships beyond their immediate teams.

- Expand mentoring beyond immediate supervisors: Formal mentoring programmes should connect women professionals with experienced mentors from different departments and organizational levels. This can provide broader career guidance and exposure to alternative career pathways.
- Integrate inclusive leadership into manager training: Leadership-development programmes should include practical training on recognizing unconscious bias, managing diverse teams, providing constructive feedback, encouraging participation, and distributing opportunities equitably.
- Monitor gender-disaggregated career indicators: Organizations should periodically examine recruitment, promotion, attrition, compensation, leadership representation, access to training, project allocation, and succession-planning data by gender. Such monitoring can help identify areas requiring organizational intervention.
- Develop return-to-career and career-continuity programmes: IT organizations should provide structured support for employees returning after career interruptions, including refresher training, technology upskilling, mentoring, flexible reintegration arrangements, and opportunities to rebuild professional networks.
- Ensure equitable access to emerging-technology opportunities: As AI, cloud computing, cybersecurity, data science, and other technologies reshape the IT industry, organizations should ensure that women receive equal access to technology training, certification programmes, innovation projects, and emerging-technology leadership opportunities.
- Link leadership accountability with inclusion objectives: Senior leaders and managers should have clearly defined organizational responsibilities for developing inclusive teams. Progress can be reviewed through appropriate organizational indicators rather than treating gender inclusion solely as an HR initiative.
- Develop an integrated transformational leadership framework: IT organizations should combine leadership development, psychological safety initiatives, mentoring and sponsorship, transparent career systems, employee voice, equitable project allocation, and leadership succession into an integrated framework. Rather than addressing women's advancement through isolated programmes, organizations should implement these practices as interconnected components of long-term talent and leadership strategy.

REFERENCES

1. Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350–383.
2. Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*. New York: Free Press.

3. Derks, B., Ellemers, N., van Laar, C., & de Groot, K. (2011). Do sexist organizational cultures create the Queen Bee? *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 50(3), 519–535.
4. Chauhan, J., Mishra, G., & Bhakri, S. (2022). Career success of women: Role of family responsibilities, mentoring, and perceived organizational support. *Vision: The Journal of Business Perspective*, 26(1), 105–117.
5. Gierke, L. A., Schlamp, S., & Gerpott, F. H. (2025). Which organisational context factors help women to obtain and retain leadership positions in the 21st century? A systematic review and research agenda for human resource management. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 35(1), 336–370.
6. Taban, T. C., & Le Loarne, S. (2025). Reopening the debate on the psychological contract of women in Big Tech companies. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 2025(1).
7. Murthy, R. N., & Antony, J. M. (2025). Career resilience and advancement: A research note on women in Indian IT. *Prabandhan: Indian Journal of Management*, 18(11).
8. Chauhan, J., Mishra, G., & Bhakri, S. (2022). Perceived career success and career advancement of women: The role of mentoring, perceived organizational support, and family responsibilities in the Indian IT industry. *International Journal of Human Capital and Information Technology Professionals*, 13(1).
9. Predictors of subjective career success amongst women employees: Moderating role of perceived organizational support and marital status. (2022). *Gender in Management*, 37(3), 344–359.
10. Glass ceiling and its impact on work performance: A study of IT industry in India. (2025). *Gender in Management*, 40(5), 681–698.
11. Swati, & Arora, M. (2025). Challenges for women in the Indian IT industry: A study on identifying glass ceiling barriers to progress. *Anusandhanvallari*.
12. Women in the top management team: Bridging the gender divide in advanced technologies. (2025). *Employee Relations: The International Journal*, 47(9), 234–256.
13. Strength in numbers? A test of Kanter's theory of tokenism. (2010). *Women & Criminal Justice*.