Women Leaders in Public Administration Through Representative Bureaucracy Theory: An Integrative Review

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Abstract: The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in public administration remains a global challenge, despite normative, legal and institutional advances. This article analyses how the presence of women leaders in the public sector has been addressed through representative bureaucracy theory. An integrative literature review was conducted following the PRISMA 2020 protocol, with searches conducted in Scopus and Web of Science databases. After identification, screening and eligibility stages, 20 articles published between 2000 and 2025 were included. The corpus was examined through thematic analysis and organised into five themes: forms of women's representation in bureaucracy; access, merit and organisational barriers to women's leadership; effects associated with women's presence in public leadership; intersectionality and diversity of experiences; and symbolic representation, public perception and institutional legitimacy. The findings show that passive representation is treated as a necessary but insufficient condition for active representation. The corpus also indicates a recent intensification of publications, a predominance of quantitative studies and a stronger focus on operational levels than on senior management. The conversion of women's numerical presence into substantive influence depends on discretion, role congruence, critical mass, institutional legitimacy and support networks, and is constrained by masculinised organisational cultures, informal patronage networks, ambiguous merit criteria and clientelist or politically dependent contexts. The review also shows that women's leadership is associated with relevant organisational and institutional effects, including more collaborative and inclusion-oriented management styles, greater attention to social policies, support for women-sensitive agendas, mitigation of gender pay disparities and more positive perceptions of organisational climate. Nevertheless, these effects are not automatic: they are moderated by hierarchical position, formal authority, internal legitimacy, organisational socialisation and the presence of allies. Intersectional findings indicate that women's trajectories are shaped by race, ethnicity, class, age, religion, motherhood and work–family responsibilities, producing cumulative disadvantages such as double glass ceilings, tokenism, isolation and invisible emotional labour. Symbolically, women leaders may strengthen public trust, institutional legitimacy and the perception that the state is plural and accessible; however, symbolic representation can also be weakened by tokenism, accusations of favouritism, resistance to quotas and the perception that diversity policies are externally imposed. The review identifies persistent gaps, especially the predominance of Global North settings, quantitative and cross-sectional designs, operational-level analyses and limited evidence on senior women leaders in the Global South, where recruitment, discretion and legitimacy may follow distinct institutional patterns. These findings reinforce the need to examine not only the number of women in public leadership, but also the institutional conditions that allow their presence to become substantive, legitimate and transformative.

Keywords: Women in leadership, Female leadership, Representative bureaucracy, Public administration, Integrative literature review

1. Introduction

The presence of women in leadership positions in public administration has increased in recent decades, driven by institutional reforms, equality policies and social pressures for diversity (Choi, 2011; Li, 2023; Moon and Lim, 2025). However, this progress remains uneven. Gender inequality tends to intensify at higher hierarchical levels, producing vertical segregation and restricting access to senior positions (Fitzpatrick and Richards, 2019; Piatak et al., 2022). Even in formally meritocratic bureaucracies, invisible barriers such as the glass ceiling continue to limit the conversion of women's numerical presence into decision-making power (Bermudez et al., 2022; Gram and Grøn, 2020).

This asymmetry is especially relevant in public organisations, where access to authority is linked not only to individual careers, but also to democratic legitimacy, administrative responsiveness and public trust (Andrews, 2024; Piatak et al., 2022). Representative bureaucracy theory offers a useful lens for analysing how the composition of the public workforce affects institutional performance and the state–society relationship (Choi, 2011; Dolan, 2000; Li, 2023). Nevertheless, research remains concentrated in Global North contexts and at operational levels of bureaucracy, with less attention to women leaders in senior decision-making roles and to countries in the Global South (Hassan and O'Mealia, 2020; Li, 2023).

This review is guided by the following research question: How does the literature analyse the presence of women in leadership positions in public administration in the light of representative bureaucracy theory, and what patterns of representation, determining factors and associated effects are identified? Accordingly, the article analyses how the literature addresses women in public leadership through this theoretical lens, identifying analytical patterns and theoretical, methodological and empirical gaps.

2. Conceptual Delimitations: Bureaucratic Representation and Female Leadership in the Public Sector

Representative bureaucracy theory challenges the classical view of public administration as a neutral and impersonal structure guided only by legal rationality and standardised procedures (Weber, 1946; Dolan, 2000). By treating bureaucracy as a social and political body, this perspective argues that the demographic composition of the public service has implications for state authority, policy implementation and citizens' perceptions of government.

Kingsley (1944) argues that bureaucracies reflect the values and interests of the groups from which their members are recruited. Thus, gender, race and class are not irrelevant attributes: they can influence priorities, interpretations and administrative decisions, particularly when public action involves distributive or symbolic consequences (Choi, 2011; Mosamim and Villeneuve, 2024). Mosher (1968) later systematised the distinction between passive and active representation. Passive representation refers to demographic correspondence between the bureaucracy and the population, whereas active representation concerns substantive action in defence of socially defined groups. Contemporary studies emphasise that this transition is contingent. Active representation is more likely when bureaucrats have discretion and when the issues at stake are connected to the groups they represent (Andrews, 2024; Dolan, 2000; Johnston and Houston, 2018).

The theory also includes a symbolic dimension. The presence of historically under-represented groups in state positions may affect legitimacy, trust and perceived proximity between the state and society, even when immediate policy changes are not evident (Hassan and O'Mealia, 2020; Trondal et al., 2015). Applied to gender and leadership, this perspective is strengthened by feminist organisational theory, which understands bureaucracies as gendered institutions whose routines, hierarchies and evaluation criteria have historically been organised around a masculine model of the ideal worker (Acker, 1990). Role congruity theory explains the tension between social expectations associated with femininity and traditional expectations of leadership (Eagly and Karau, 2002), while critical mass theory helps to explain why isolated women may have limited influence in male-dominated arenas (Kanter, 1977; Huang et al., 2025; Rouse, 2018). Therefore, analysing women in public leadership requires moving beyond headcounts and examining the conditions that enable diversity to become substantive influence and perceived legitimacy.

3. Methodological Procedures

This study adopts the integrative literature review method proposed by Whittemore and Knafl (2005), because it allows the synthesis of empirical and theoretical studies of different methodological designs. The protocol for conducting and reporting the review followed PRISMA 2020 recommendations, especially regarding transparency and traceability in the stages of search, selection, extraction and synthesis (Page et al., 2021). The process was organised into five stages: definition of the research question and eligibility criteria; development of the search strategy; study selection; data extraction; and thematic analysis.

The search was conducted in December 2025 in Scopus and Web of Science, selected for their interdisciplinary scope and relevance to Public Administration. The following Boolean string was used: ("representative bureaucracy" OR "bureaucratic representation" OR "passive representation" OR "active representation") AND ("public administration" OR "public sector" OR "government" OR "civil service" OR "public service") AND ("women" OR "female" OR "women leader*" OR "female leader*" OR "gender"). Filters were applied for document type (articles), language (English, Portuguese and Spanish) and access (full text available via open access). The initial search yielded 98 records: 18 from Scopus and 80 from Web of Science.

The selection followed staged screening. First, 11 duplicates were removed. The titles, abstracts and keywords of the remaining 87 records were then examined, resulting in the exclusion of 55 articles that did not fit the scope. The remaining 32 articles were read in full; 12 were excluded because they focused on non-state organisations or did not emphasise leadership or senior positions. The final corpus comprised 20 articles. Studies were included when they analysed representative bureaucracy in passive and/or active dimensions, investigated women in leadership or senior roles within public administration, and were situated in governmental

organisations. Studies centred on the private sector, the third sector, hybrid organisations, electoral representation or diversity without an explicit link to representative bureaucracy were excluded. The open-access criterion may have restricted coverage; this limitation is considered in the interpretation of the findings.

The screening was conducted independently by the authors, with discussion and consensus in cases of doubt. The selection flow is presented in Figure 1. For data extraction, a categorisation matrix was developed with information on authorship, year, context, objectives, methodological design, main findings and gaps. The synthesis was conducted through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), with a predominantly inductive approach. Although codes emerged from the corpus, interpretation was guided by the concepts of passive, active and symbolic representation. Five thematic categories resulted from this process: forms of female representation in the bureaucracy; access, merit and organisational barriers; effects associated with women in public leadership; intersectionality and diversity of experiences; and symbolic representation, public perception and institutional legitimacy.

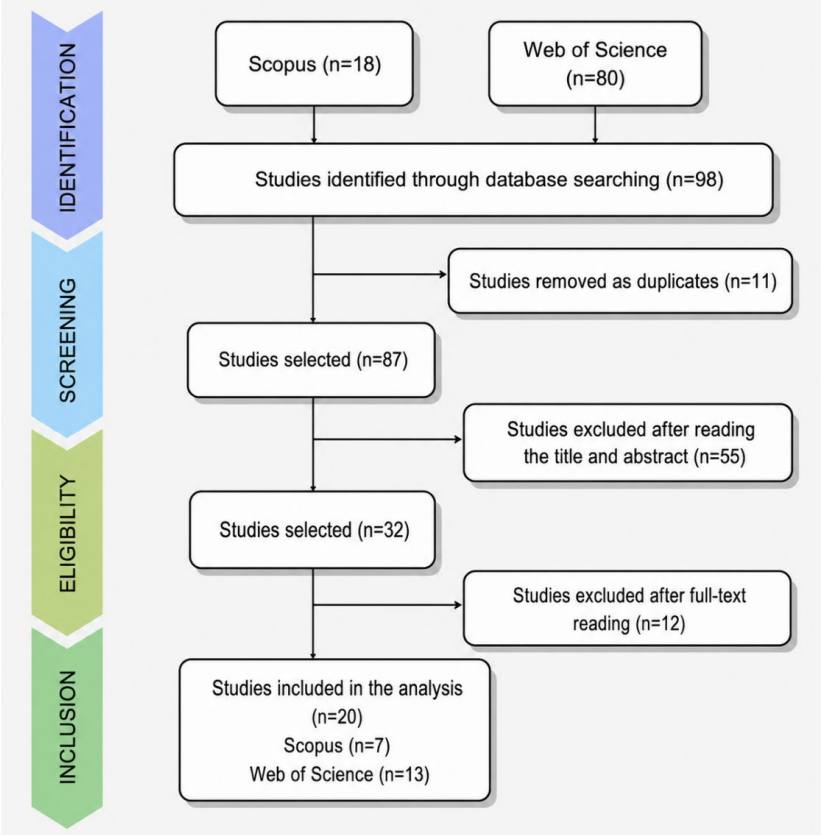


Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart, adapted

4. Results

The analysis of the 20 selected articles reveals a field with diverse geographical coverage, including studies conducted in Europe, North America, Asia and Africa. Even so, the distribution is asymmetrical, with a predominance of Global North contexts and limited evidence from the Global South. Empirical quantitative studies predominate (14 articles), while 6 adopt qualitative or mixed approaches, indicating a tendency to examine associations between demographic variables and organisational or institutional outcomes.

Publication is concentrated in the most recent period. Between 2000 and 2016, studies were sparse; from 2017 onwards, output intensified, and the period between 2018 and 2025 accounts for most of the corpus. The years 2024 and 2025 represent 20% of publications, confirming the current relevance of the debate on women, leadership and representative bureaucracy.

Thematic analysis identified five axes that structure the literature: (1) forms of female representation in bureaucracy; (2) access, merit and organisational barriers to women in leadership; (3) effects associated with women in public leadership; (4) intersectionality and diversity of experiences; and (5) symbolic representation, public perception and institutional legitimacy.

Figure 2 synthesises these themes and their analytical connections. Overall, the corpus favours quantitative approaches, focuses strongly on operational levels and offers fewer analyses of senior management and Global South settings. The results also reveal that the five themes are not isolated: barriers to access condition the possibility of active representation; intersectional markers shape women's experiences of authority; and symbolic legitimacy depends on whether women leaders are granted real decision-making space. Therefore, the synthesis indicates a field that has expanded empirically, but still requires stronger attention to the institutional mechanisms that connect presence, influence and legitimacy.

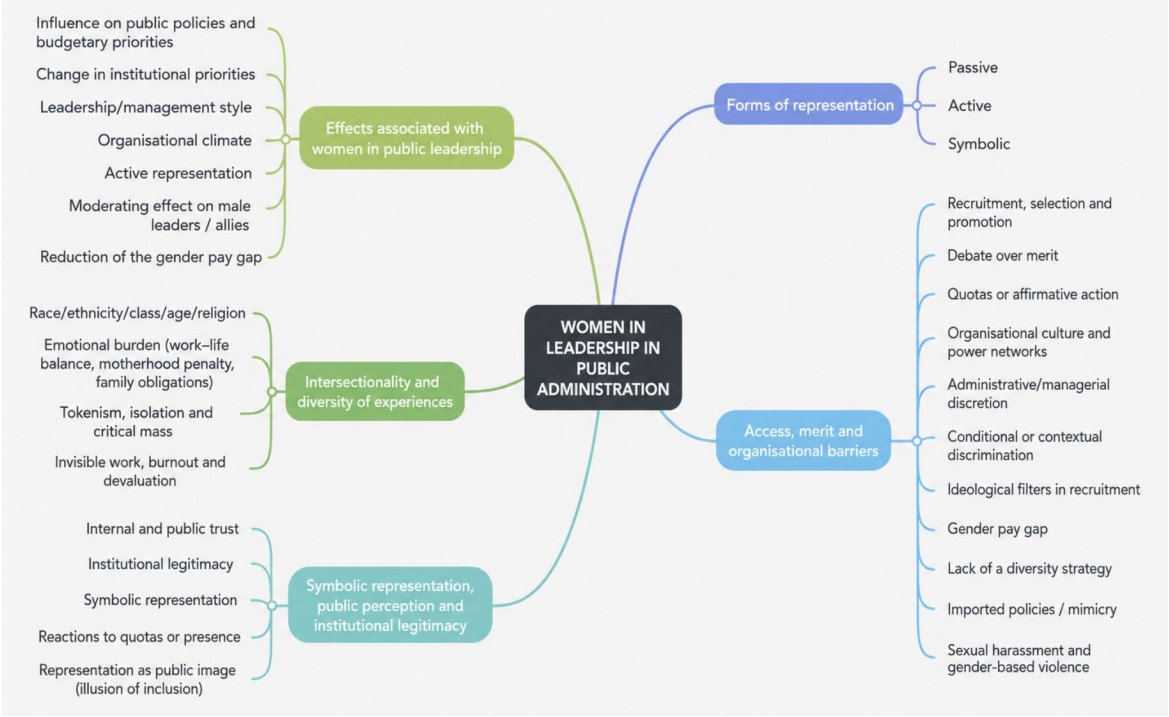


Figure 2: Thematic map

5. Discussion

5.1 Forms of Female Representation in the Bureaucracy

The analysed literature remains structured around the distinction between passive and active representation. Passive representation is usually operationalised as the numerical presence of women in bureaucracy and leadership. Recent studies, however, add indicators of vertical and horizontal segregation, showing that headcounts do not necessarily imply redistribution of decision-making power or change in institutional inequality regimes (Bermudez et al., 2022; Choi, 2011; Fitzpatrick and Richards, 2019; Mosamim and Villeneuve, 2024). Active representation is understood as the substantive promotion of women's interests, but the literature indicates that it depends on individual discretion, critical mass and favourable institutional conditions (Andrews, 2024; Dolan, 2000; Huang et al., 2025). Organisational socialisation and masculinised professional cultures may limit this conversion (Johnston and Houston, 2018; Trondal et al., 2015).

A third dimension, symbolic representation, also emerges. Women's presence may produce effects of gender congruence, legitimacy and organisational trust, even when direct substantive action is not immediately observable (Moon and Lim, 2025; Piatak et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the review identifies a scarcity of empirical models capable of measuring how passive, active and symbolic representation interact, reinforce or neutralise each other.

5.2 Access, Merit and Organisational Barriers to Women in Leadership

This is the most recurrent category in the corpus. The studies converge in showing that women's advancement to public leadership remains constrained by institutional and cultural mechanisms that reproduce gender inequality, even where meritocracy is formally adopted. Merit criteria often remain ambiguous, subjective and associated with masculine career paths, such as unrestricted availability, assertiveness and technical rationality (Foley et al., 2022; Rouse, 2018). Selective processes by exception and informal appointment practices can circumvent diversity rules and preserve male dominance in bureaucratic elites (Fitzpatrick and Richards, 2019).

Recruiters may tolerate atypical or risky profiles for men, while requiring linear and flawless trajectories from women (Gram and Grøn, 2020).

Masculinised organisational cultures and old boys' networks operate as exclusionary mechanisms. Women are frequently channelled into care-related or lower-status sectors and remain distant from strategic decision-making centres (Bermudez et al., 2022; Choi, 2011; Rouse, 2018). In public security, the literature describes a cult of masculinity in which women's acceptance may depend on assimilation to male norms (Johnston and Houston, 2018; Rutherford and Mee, 2022). Hostile environments, micro-sexism, silencing, sexual harassment and gender-based violence also appear as mechanisms that punish women who occupy or seek positions of power (Bermudez et al., 2022; Fitzpatrick and Richards, 2019; Mosamim and Villeneuve, 2024; Rutherford and Mee, 2022).

Role incongruence is another recurring barrier. Assertive women may be judged as aggressive, while communal leadership styles can be interpreted as evidence of limited authority (Piatak et al., 2022). Gender congruence between leader and subordinate may mitigate perceptions of inequality and increase support, mentoring and encouragement (Hatmaker and Hassan, 2023; Moon and Lim, 2025). Recruitment and promotion are also affected by ideological filters and gatekeeping. Evaluators' political orientation can shape perceptions of competence and representativeness (Baekgaard and George, 2018), while male elites who control appointments may replace transparent meritocratic processes with patronage and loyalty networks (Fitzpatrick and Richards, 2019; Huang et al., 2025; Rouse, 2018).

Wage inequality emerges as one outcome of these dynamics. Women remain concentrated in lower pay grades, and female presence at the top may mitigate disparities (Andrews, 2024; Choi, 2011; Moon and Lim, 2025). However, salary supplements, discretionary bonuses and the devaluation of feminised sectors reproduce inequalities (Bermudez et al., 2022). Institutional strategies to reduce under-representation vary. In Kenya, China, Nepal and Afghanistan, quotas or formal mandates have increased presence but may produce tokenism, selective implementation or resistance when oversight is weak and male networks remain dominant (Hassan and O'Mealia, 2020; Huang et al., 2025; Jamil and Baniamin, 2020; Mosamim and Villeneuve, 2024). In the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Hong Kong and Macau, non-mandatory affirmative action and diversity management tools predominate, but their effects remain vulnerable to organisational resistance, austerity and meritocratic rhetoric (Choi, 2011; Fitzpatrick and Richards, 2019; Foley et al., 2022; Li, 2023; Rutherford and Mee, 2022). The reviewed studies therefore show that formal inclusion instruments require monitoring and organisational legitimacy; otherwise, they may increase numerical presence without changing the informal rules that structure access to authority.

5.3 Effects Associated with Women in Public Leadership

The reviewed studies associate women in public leadership with substantive and symbolic effects, especially changes in organisational priorities, management styles and perceptions of support. Women's leadership is often described as more collaborative and inclusion-oriented, with greater attention to subordinates and organisational justice (Hatmaker and Hassan, 2023; Piatak et al., 2022). Diverse management teams may expand cognitive boundaries and make organisational environments more open to innovation (Huang et al., 2025).

Substantive effects appear when women leaders have discretion, critical mass and alignment between policy issues and institutional mission. The literature links women's leadership to greater responsiveness to social policies, including education, health, the environment and women-sensitive agendas (Dolan, 2000; Huang et al., 2025). Female representation on boards is also associated with reductions in the gender pay gap, suggesting an internal redistributive effect (Andrews, 2024). However, in patriarchal or unstable contexts, substantive action may be restricted. In Kenya, appointments may follow ethnic role congruence, while in Afghanistan women's representation has often remained symbolic and fragile (Hassan and O'Mealia, 2020; Mosamim and Villeneuve, 2024).

Group dynamics are central. Women can act as femocrats or critical actors, mobilising resources, mentoring other women and changing organisational culture from within, especially when more than one woman occupies senior management (Dolan, 2000; Fitzpatrick and Richards, 2019; Huang et al., 2025). Conversely, in male-dominated settings, socialisation may pressure women to assimilate masculine perspectives, reducing their willingness to challenge established norms (Johnston and Houston, 2018; Rouse, 2018; Rutherford and Mee, 2022). Political dependence and patronage networks may also limit autonomy, while formal written rules may be necessary to legitimate women's authority before male subordinates (Huang et al., 2025; Piatak et al., 2022). Thus, the effects of female leadership depend on internal legitimacy, discretion, allies, critical mass and

institutional protection (Andrews, 2024; Hatmaker and Hassan, 2023; Li, 2023). A further effect concerns the moderating and educational influence of women leaders on male peers and subordinates. The presence of women in boards, managerial teams or public safety units can broaden attention to equity, diversify leadership practices and create normative pressure for more inclusive conduct (Andrews, 2024; Huang et al., 2025; Rutherford and Mee, 2022).

5.4 Intersectionality and Diversity of Experiences in Public Leadership

The intersectional approach shows that gender alone does not explain the inequalities faced by women leaders. Race, ethnicity, class, age and religion interact with gender and generate cumulative disadvantages (Bermudez et al., 2022; Choi, 2011; Rouse, 2018). Age discrimination may affect selection processes for senior roles (Baekgaard and George, 2018). Women from racial, ethnic or religious minorities face additional barriers, including a double glass ceiling that keeps minority women more under-represented at the highest levels than white women or minority men (Choi, 2011). In Global South contexts, caste, ethnicity, region and conflict-related hierarchies mediate access to strategic positions (Hassan and O'Mealia, 2020; Jamil and Baniamin, 2020; Rouse, 2018).

At the same time, several studies still treat "women" as a homogeneous category, which obscures the specific barriers experienced by marginalised women and reduces the explanatory power of the analyses. The literature also highlights the emotional and symbolic costs of leadership. Motherhood and unequal family responsibilities affect progression, as women with children may be perceived as less available or committed (Foley et al., 2022). In Denmark, men reach executive positions faster than women in high-prestige central-government careers, a difference linked to family-related interruptions (Gram and Grøn, 2020). Work–life balance measures may legally exist, but can produce professional and salary penalties (Bermudez et al., 2022). Tokenism, isolation, hypervisibility and pressure to conform to masculine norms are recurrent in public safety and senior administration (Dolan, 2000; Fitzpatrick and Richards, 2019; Rutherford and Mee, 2022). Women leaders also perform invisible emotional labour, such as conflict mediation and psychological support, which is rarely recognised in merit systems and may contribute to burnout and demoralisation (Bermudez et al., 2022; Moon and Lim, 2025).

5.5 Symbolic Representation, Public Perception and Institutional Legitimacy

The studies indicate that women in positions of authority may increase public and internal trust by signalling that the state is accessible, plural and inclusive (Moon and Lim, 2025; Trondal et al., 2015). Symbolic representation can reinforce democratic legitimacy and perceptions of justice, particularly where bureaucracy must reflect the diversity of the population to secure acceptance of decisions (Jamil and Baniamin, 2020; Trondal et al., 2015). In transition democracies and post-colonial contexts, women's presence in senior positions may be perceived as a sign of administrative modernisation and political inclusion (Jamil and Baniamin, 2020; Li, 2023; Mosamim and Villeneuve, 2024). In public security, women's presence can encourage reporting of gender-based violence, although structural barriers limit this potential (Rutherford and Mee, 2022).

Symbolic representation, however, is not automatically positive. In hostile or culturally resistant contexts, women's inclusion may be perceived as artificial, externally imposed or illegitimate. This appears in Afghanistan, where imported policies were undermined by political instability, and in Kenya, where managers may avoid appointing women to frontline positions when female authority is seen as incongruent with local expectations (Hassan and O'Mealia, 2020; Mosamim and Villeneuve, 2024). Symbolic presence without real decision-making power may also mask exclusionary structures, creating an illusion of inclusion (Rouse, 2018). Moreover, quotas and affirmative action may be framed as threats to meritocracy, stigmatising women's careers and undermining legitimacy (Fitzpatrick and Richards, 2019; Foley et al., 2022; Jamil and Baniamin, 2020). Overall, symbolic effects depend on women's capacity to exercise real influence and on institutional contexts that recognise their authority (Huang et al., 2025; Piatak et al., 2022).

6. Concluding Remarks

This study analysed how the literature addresses women in leadership positions in public administration through representative bureaucracy theory. The integrative review shows that women's presence in public leadership has expanded, but its conversion into active representation remains conditioned by institutional, cultural and symbolic factors. The findings reinforce that passive representation is necessary but insufficient: substantive influence depends on discretion, critical mass, legitimacy, organisational support and access to strategic networks.

The review also indicates that the literature has advanced by incorporating symbolic representation, role congruence and intersectionality, moving beyond a strict passive–active dichotomy (Hassan and O'Mealia, 2020; Moon and Lim, 2025). However, evidence remains geographically and methodologically concentrated. Studies are predominantly located in the Global North, often quantitative and cross-sectional, and frequently focused on operational levels. There is still limited knowledge about women at the top of administrative hierarchies, where disputes over legitimacy, strategic resources, political dependence and control of agendas are more intense (Fitzpatrick and Richards, 2019; Gram and Grøn, 2020; Huang et al., 2025; Trondal et al., 2015). This gap is especially relevant for Global South contexts, where institutional fragility, patrimonialism, colonial legacies and centre–periphery dynamics may shape representation in different ways (Hassan and O'Mealia, 2020; Li, 2023; Mosamim and Villeneuve, 2024).

Methodologically, future research should deepen qualitative, longitudinal and comparative approaches capable of explaining how representation operates in everyday organisational life, including authority relations, informal coalitions, discretionary practices and forms of resistance or support for women leaders. More data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, class, age and religion are also necessary to understand intragroup inequalities among women leaders and the combinations of social markers that shape access, progression and retention (Rouse, 2018; Rutherford and Mee, 2022).

The review has limitations. The search was restricted to Scopus and Web of Science and to full-text articles available through open access, which may have reduced the diversity of the corpus and under-represented non-open-access journals. Thematic analysis also involved interpretative decisions, although these were theoretically grounded and discussed among the authors.

Despite these limitations, the findings have implications for public management. Increasing the number of women in leadership is important, but insufficient without institutional conditions that allow authority to be exercised. Diversity policies should be combined with clear targets, monitoring, transparent recruitment and promotion criteria, formal protection of women leaders' authority and organisational cultures that reduce tokenism, harassment and meritocratic stigma. These measures are relevant because the review suggests that the same institutional arrangements that formally promote inclusion can also neutralise it when appointments are symbolic, isolated or dependent on male patronage networks.

By systematising this evidence, the study contributes to debates on how public administration can address gender inequalities through bureaucratic arrangements and offers directions for future research on leadership, representation and organisational behaviour in the public sector.

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Ethics Declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for this research, as it is an integrative literature review based on previously published and publicly available studies, and did not involve primary data collection from human subjects or animals.

AI Declaration: Artificial intelligence tools were used exclusively as instrumental support for preliminary screening (initial organisation of records), textual systematisation (preliminary structuring of topics), and final spell-checking. All decisions regarding inclusion and exclusion criteria, the final definition of codes and themes, as well as the analytical interpretation of the results, were carried out solely by the authors, preserving the intellectual responsibility and scientific integrity of the research.

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