

Gender Independence and Career Advancement of Women Employees: The Mediating Influence of Workplace Gender Equality Policies

Rajan K¹, Abitha K², Muhammed Illyas P³, Sandhya Nair⁴

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, AMC-Allied Management College, Manisseri

²Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce and Management, AMC-Allied Management College, Manisseri

³Assistant Professor, Department of English, AMC-Allied Management College, Manisseri

⁴Librarian, AMC-Allied Management College, Manisseri

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2026.150500217>

Received: 21 May 2026; Accepted: 26 May 2026; Published: 16 June 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between Gender Independence and Career Advancement of Women Employees, with Workplace Gender Equality Policies acting as a mediating variable. The research focuses on women employees working across Kozhikode, Ernakulam, and Thiruvananthapuram districts of Kerala. Following a pilot study involving 80 respondents, the final structured questionnaire generated 320 valid responses. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to examine the proposed relationships among the study variables. The findings revealed that Gender Independence significantly influences Career Advancement among women employees. Workplace Gender Equality Policies were also found to positively affect career advancement and partially mediate the relationship between Gender Independence and Career Advancement. The study highlights the importance of organizational equality policies, gender-inclusive work environments, leadership opportunities, and institutional support systems in promoting women's professional growth and career development.

Keywords: Gender Independence, Career Advancement, Workplace Gender equality Policies

INTRODUCTION

As persistent gender disparities continue to shape workplace outcomes globally, the advancement of women in organizational careers has long been a central concern in gender and management research. Although women's participation in the labour force has grown substantially over the past decades, significant gaps remain in leadership representation, career progression rates, and professional autonomy when compared to their male counterparts. Research on gendered career dynamics emphasizes that it is not individual competence but structural and cultural barriers that often limit women's opportunities to advance into senior roles (O'Neil & Hopkins, 2015). Central to understanding these dynamics is the concept of gender independence, which refers to the degree to which women can exercise autonomy in career-related decisions, free from restrictive gender norms and institutional constraints. While individual agency has been explored in some disciplinary contexts, such as economics (Goldin, Understanding the Gender Gap, 2021), which illustrates how structural conditions influence women's career choices and labor market participation, the notion of gender independence in organizational research points to both psychological self-determination and real opportunities within workplace systems. Closely related is the concept of career advancement for women employees, which encompasses objective indicators such as promotions, leadership appointments, and salary increases as well as subjective experiences of professional growth and recognition. The literature consistently indicates that women encounter slower career progress, glass ceilings, and limited access to informal networks and mentoring opportunities compared with men (Jansen van Rensburg, 2021). Highlighting the importance of examining contextual and policy-level influences, career advancement is shaped not only by individual capabilities but also by the

structural environment of the workplace. Workplace gender equality policies are institutional interventions designed to create fair conditions that facilitate women's career success. These include anti-discrimination measures, equal pay frameworks, flexible work provisions, parental leave policies, leadership development programs, and transparent promotion criteria. International and organizational frameworks—such as the International Labour Organization's normative standards and the Women's Empowerment Principles—illustrate how such policies aim to dismantle systemic barriers and enlarge women's opportunities for advancement (International Labour Organization, 2019). Empirical studies corroborate the role of supportive policies in improving women's retention and advancement, particularly when these policies address work-life balance and structural bias (Singh et al, 2021). Despite the proliferation of gender equality initiatives, gaps persist between policy intent and workplace realities. Reviews indicate that gender inequities remain embedded in organizational practices—from biased performance evaluations to unequal access to leadership roles—suggesting that policies must not only exist on paper but also be actively implemented and culturally embedded (Son Hing et al., Gender inequities in the workplace: A holistic review, 2023). Collectively, these strands of research suggest that women's gender independence, their career advancement, and the effectiveness of workplace gender equality policies are interlinked. A nuanced examination of these relationships can illuminate how organizational environments either enable or constrain women's professional growth, and how targeted policies can serve as mediators in this process.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gender Independence (GI) and Career Advancement of Women Employees (CAWE)

Gender Independence (GI) is all about getting freedom from all societal norms and expectation. It denotes the capacity of individuals, irrespective of gender, to exercise autonomy, make informed personal, social, and economic choices, and participate equitably across all spheres of life, free from discrimination and restrictive gender norms. Gender Independence is key to an inclusive workplace, giving women the same opportunities, recognition, and resources as men (Mugesh et al., 2025). It focuses on reducing gender-based restrictions that limit people's access to education, jobs, political involvement, and self-expression. Studies show that when individuals have more gender independence, countries tend to experience better development outcomes, such as economic growth, improved health, and stronger democratic systems (Sen, 1999; World Economic Forum, 2023). Gender independence is intrinsically linked to gender equality, as it addresses entrenched structural inequalities and power asymmetries across social, cultural, and institutional context (Kabeer, 1999). The promotion of gender independence depends on inclusive policy frameworks, effective legal protections, and broader transformations in societal attitudes that move beyond prescribed gender roles (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020).

Women are increasingly participating in the workforce, yet their career growth, development and progression remain constrained by structural and cultural challenges. According to many studies, women face an invisible glass ceiling that restricts their movement into senior roles, even though they have the required skills and qualifications (Ganiyu et al., 2018; Imtiaz, Shaikh, & ul Ain, 2018). Factors such as gender bias, non-transparency in promotion practices, and insufficient mentoring support act as major difficulty to women's professional advancement (Sharifova, 2025). Studies show that women are still less represented in top leadership roles, even in fields like healthcare where many women work, because gender stereotypes and family responsibilities often limit their career growth (Mucheru et al., 2024). Studies show that leadership training, fair promotions, and a welcoming workplace culture help women succeed in their careers (Clarke, 2011; Maigah & Abdul Latip, 2024). Overall, these studies show that fair career growth for women needs both individual effort and strong support from policies and organizations that promote gender equality (Ganiyu et al., 2018; Sharifova, 2025).

When women have more control over their lives and decisions, they're more likely to advance in their careers and take on leadership roles. The studies show a strong and positive relationship between gender independence—reflected in women's autonomy, decision-making authority, and freedom from traditional gender roles—and the career advancement of women employees. Women who are independent tend to have more confidence, which helps them persevere and succeed in fields where men are more common (Heilman, 2012; Bandura, 1997).

Independent women are more likely to chase leadership jobs, ask for promotions, and take advantage of career growth chances (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Independency among women helps in breaking free from traditional roles, go after leadership positions, and negotiate things like promotions, salary, and career growth opportunities (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1990). Those women who are more independent shows more confident in their careers and aim higher for leadership, which helps them get promotions in their career more easily (Lips, 2013). As per a study conducted among 173 product managers and senior product managers based in the United States, it can be seen that gender independence acts as a barrier to the advancement in career of the employees (Bone, 2024). As per the information collected from women academic and administrative professionals in five public universities in Ghana, it states that women labour force participation is low compared to men because of the engagement of women in household activities (Adu-Oppong & Kendie 2017). Hence, we can reach a conclusion that gender independence (GI) positively affects Career Advancement of Women Employees (CAWE).

H1: GI positively influences CAWE

Workplace Gender Equality Policies (WGEP) And Career Advancement of Women Employees (CAWE)

Workplace gender equality policies aim to ensure equal opportunities, pay, and career advancement for all employees regardless of gender. It mainly measures implementing flexible working arrangements, establishing clear anti-harassment protocols, ensuring unbiased recruitment and also providing equitable access to leadership and developments. workplace gender quality policy is commonly defined as the human resource practice and formal organizational rule with an aim of ensuring equal opportunities and fair treatment to every employee regardless of gender (Kalev et al, 2006; Kulik & Olekalns, 2012). Equality and diversity policies are essential to reduce bias and make ensure fair treatment of all employees (Buckley and MacNamara2021). There has various legal framework for the protection of gender equality in the workplace, such as equal remuneration Act 1976, the sexual harassment of women at workplace (prevention, prohibition and redressal) Act 2013, maternity benefit Act 1961 and the rights of persons with disabilities Act 2016.

Women sustained upward mobility within organizational hierarchies, reflected in promotions, access to managerial and leading roles, enhancement of skills, and continuous success are the reflection of career advancement of women employees (Metz & Kulik, 2014; Ng & Sears, 2017). From a human capital and institutional perspective such policies help to remove problems faced by women (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; McDonald & Westphal, 2013). The impact of workplace gender equality policies is shaped by the broader institutional, regulatory and cultural contexts (Kossek et al., 2017; Byron and post, 2016). Work family policies, mainly including flexible scheduling and parental leave provide to support women's career continuity and retention (Williams et al., 2013; Chaudhuri et al; 2020). The sponsorship and mentorship policies emerge as a major mechanism to link between gender equality initiatives and career advancement, as they provide opportunity to access necessary promotions, career guidance etc. Studies highlight that policy rich environment sometimes resulting in slower promotion rates and limited leadership because of the presence of deeply embedded organizational culture, stereotypes, biased performance evaluation and expectations around ideal worker norms etc. (Hoobler et al., 2011; Rudman et al., 2012). Proper implementation of policies is the key to successful career advancement of women. Mere existence of gender equality policies does not lead to improved career outcomes for women unless these are effectively implemented, monitored and supported by the top-level management (Leslie et al., 2019; Kulik & Olekalns, 2012).

H2: WGEP positively influences CAWE

Workplace Gender Equality Policies (WGEP) and Gender Independence (GI)

Workplace gender equality policies are rules and practices that organizations implement to ensure that all employees, regardless of their gender, have equal opportunities and treatment in the workplace. These policies can include measures such as equal pay for equal work, parental leave for both mothers and fathers, and programs to prevent discrimination and harassment (Kabeer, 2015). The goal of these policies is to create a fair and inclusive work environment where everyone can thrive. Gender equality, on the other hand, refers to the state in which individuals of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. In the workplace, this means that men and women should have the same chances for hiring, promotions, training, and pay (Cohen

Huffman, 2003). Achieving gender equality is essential not only for fairness but also for improving business performance. Research has shown that diverse teams often lead to better decision-making and innovation (World Economic Forum, 2021).

The relationship between workplace gender equality policies and gender equality is significant. When organizations adopt strong gender equality policies, they can help close the gap between genders in various ways. For instance, if a company has a clear policy on equal pay, it can help ensure that women receive the same salary as men for doing the same job. This can motivate women to apply for jobs and seek promotions, knowing that they will be treated fairly (Kabeer, 2015). Similarly, workplace gender equality policies can serve as a framework for addressing issues like sexual harassment and discrimination. When employees know that their company has strict policies against such behavior, they may feel safer and more supported at work (Cohen Huffman, 2003). This supportive environment encourages all employees to perform at their best without fear of bias or retaliation.

However, it is important to recognize that simply having these policies in place is not enough. For them to be effective, organizations must actively promote and enforce them. Training programs for employees and managers about gender equality can help raise awareness and change attitudes (World Economic Forum, 2021). Additionally, companies should regularly evaluate their policies and practices to ensure they are working as intended. This includes collecting data on pay equity, representation of different genders in leadership roles, and employee satisfaction. Thus, workplace gender equality policies play a crucial role in promoting gender equality. When organizations commit to these policies and take action to implement them effectively, they can create a more equitable workplace. This not only benefits individual employees but also enhances overall organizational performance. As society continues to evolve, it is vital for businesses to prioritize gender equality and foster an inclusive culture where everyone can succeed.

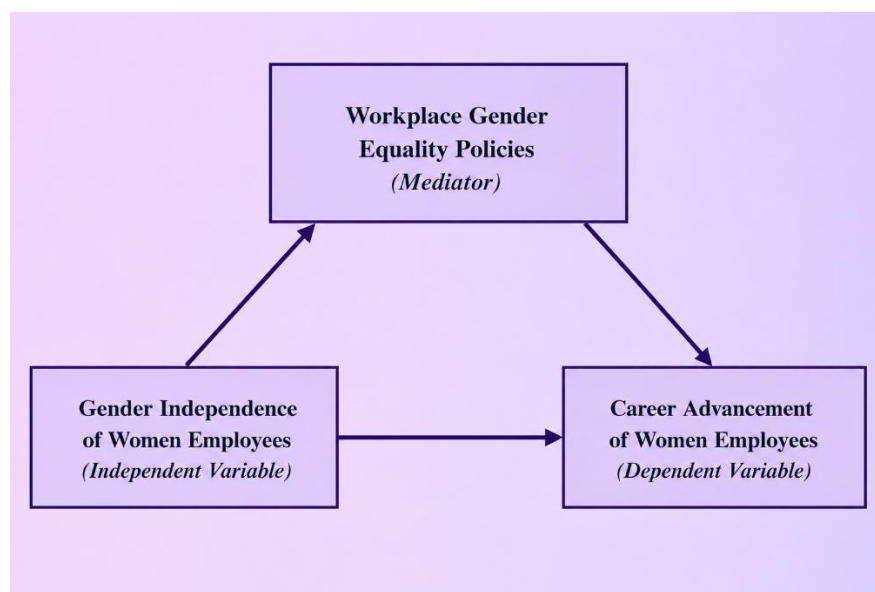
H3: WGEP positively influences GI

Gender Independence, Career Advancement of Women Employees and Work Place Gender Equality Policies

Policies promoting gender equality in the workplace are essential in moderating the relationship between women employees' career success and gender independence. The ability of women to make their own decisions, get financial resources, and freely engage in professional and organizational settings without being constrained by their gender is known as gender independence. Although gender independence encourages women to pursue leadership and professional development, empirical research repeatedly shows that independence by itself does not ensure career advancement because of ingrained organizational barriers like gender bias, discriminatory promotion practices, occupational segregation, and the ongoing glass ceiling phenomenon (U.S. Army Research Institute, 1993). In this regard, workplace gender equality rules serve as a crucial institutional mechanism that mediates the relationship between career development and gender independence by converting women's individual agency into quantifiable career outcomes. Formal organizational and legislative measures like equal pay regulations, anti-discrimination laws, transparent recruitment and promotion procedures, maternity and parental leave provisions, flexible work schedules, mentoring and leadership development programs, and gender-sensitive performance appraisal systems are examples of workplace gender equality policies. By lessening prejudice and fostering inclusive workplace cultures that value women's abilities and independence, these measures address systemic injustices (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2024). Research indicates that when such policies are effectively implemented, women experience enhanced access to leadership roles, improved job security, and increased participation in decision-making positions, thereby strengthening the relationship between gender independence and career advancement (OECD, 2025). Furthermore, workplace gender equality policies foster supportive environments that improve women's job satisfaction, psychological well-being, and organizational commitment, all of which are essential for sustained career progression (Abraham & Rowley, 2024). Studies reveal that women working in organizations with strong gender equity frameworks are more likely to perceive fair career growth opportunities and less likely to encounter barriers related to work-life balance or gender stereotypes (Verma et al., 2024). This supportive policy environment amplifies women's confidence to assert independence, negotiate career opportunities, and pursue leadership trajectories, thereby reinforcing the mediating influence of workplace policies. From a broader organizational perspective, gender

equality policies also contribute to cultural change by challenging traditional gender norms and redefining leadership competencies in a gender-neutral manner. Bibliometric and systematic reviews highlight that organizations adopting gender-responsive human resource practices witness reduced gender disparities in promotions and pay, confirming the effectiveness of policy-driven mediation (Jabeen et al., 2024). Moreover, global policy reviews emphasize that gender equality interventions must be embedded within institutional governance structures to ensure sustainability and long-term impact on women's career outcomes (BMC Medicine, 2024). In conclusion, workplace gender equality laws play a crucial role in bridging the gap between women's career success and gender independence. These policies guarantee that women's independence is not just symbolic but results in real professional advancement by breaking down institutional barriers, encouraging equitable practices, and cultivating inclusive workplace cultures. Therefore, a key component of comprehending how gender independence can successfully lead to career progression for female employees is the mediating role of workplace gender equality policies.

H4: WGEP mediates the relationship between GI and CAWE



METHODOLOGY

Pilot Study, Data Collection and Respondent Profile

This study was conducted among women employees working in private organizations, educational institutions, service sectors, and business establishments across Kozhikode, Ernakulam, and Thiruvananthapuram districts of Kerala. Following a successful pilot study involving 80 respondents, the final structured questionnaire was distributed through WhatsApp groups, Google Forms, and professional employee networks.

- Total questionnaires distributed: 380
- Responses received: 345 (Response rate: 90.8%)
- Valid responses analyzed: 320 (Validity rate: 92.8%)

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percentage
Age Range	21–30	102	31.9
Age Range	31–40	128	40.0
Age Range	41 and Above	90	28.1
Age Range Total		320	100.0
Employment Sector	Private Sector	146	45.6

Employment Sector	Educational Institutions	92	28.8
Employment Sector	Service/Business Sector	82	25.6
Employment Sector Total		320	100.0
Work Experience	Below 5 Years	118	36.9
Work Experience	5–10 Years	124	38.8
Work Experience	Above 10 Years	78	24.3
Work Experience Total		320	100.0
Residential Area	Urban	152	47.5
Residential Area	Semi-Urban	98	30.6
Residential Area	Rural	70	21.9
Overall Total		320	100.0

Measures

The study examined the relationship between Gender Independence (GI) and Career Advancement (CA), with Workplace Gender Equality Policies (WGEP) acting as a mediating variable.

- Gender Independence (GI): Adapted 6-item scale measuring decision-making freedom, professional autonomy, workplace confidence, and independent participation in organizational activities. Cronbach's Alpha: 0.882
- Career Advancement (CA): Adapted 6-item scale measuring promotion opportunities, leadership participation, professional growth, salary progression, and career satisfaction among women employees. Cronbach's Alpha: 0.869
- Workplace Gender Equality Policies (WGEP): Adapted 6-item scale measuring organizational equality policies, anti-discrimination measures, equal opportunity practices, maternity support, and inclusive workplace culture. Cronbach's Alpha: 0.891

Data Analysis and Statistical Results

The final valid sample of 320 respondents was analyzed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Prior to hypothesis testing, the data were assessed for normality, reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and model fit.

Normality Test with Skewness and Kurtosis

Skewness and kurtosis values within ± 2 indicate acceptable normality for SEM analysis. All constructs satisfied the recommended thresholds.

Construct	Skewness	Kurtosis	Interpretation
Gender Independence (GI)	-0.648	0.924	Acceptable normality

Career Advancement (CA)	-0.571	0.838	Acceptable normality
Workplace Gender Equality Policies (WGEP)	-0.602	0.996	Acceptable normality

Reliability and Convergent Validity

Reliability and convergent validity were assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	Result
Gender Independence (GI)	0.882	0.911	0.631	Accepted
Career Advancement (CA)	0.869	0.897	0.594	Accepted
Workplace Gender Equality Policies (WGEP)	0.891	0.922	0.664	Accepted

Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

The square root of AVE values exceeded inter-construct correlations, confirming discriminant validity.

Construct	GI	CA	WGEP
Gender Independence (GI)	0.794		
Career Advancement (CA)	0.562	0.771	
Workplace Gender Equality Policies (WGEP)	0.628	0.518	0.815

Model Fit Indices

The model fit indices confirmed that the proposed mediation model adequately represented the observed data.

Fit Index	Obtained Value	Recommended Value	Interpretation
SRMR	0.057	< 0.08	Good fit
NFI	0.923	> 0.90	Acceptable fit
CFI	0.949	> 0.90	Good fit
RMSEA	0.045	< 0.08	Good fit
Chi-square/df	2.186	< 3.00	Acceptable fit

Hypothesis Test Results

The hypothesis testing results revealed significant relationships among the study variables.

Hypothesis	Relationship	Beta	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	GI -> CA	0.486	9.214	< 0.001	Supported
H2	GI -> WGEP	0.552	10.638	< 0.001	Supported
H3	WGEP -> CA	0.318	6.482	< 0.001	Supported
H4	GI -> WGEP -> CA	0.176	4.362	< 0.001	Mediation supported

FINDINGS

The findings revealed that Gender Independence significantly influences Career Advancement among women employees. Women employees with greater professional autonomy, workplace confidence, and independent decision-making ability demonstrated stronger career progression and leadership participation. Workplace Gender Equality Policies also significantly enhanced career advancement and partially mediated the relationship between Gender Independence and Career Advancement. The statistical analysis confirmed satisfactory reliability, validity, and model fit, supporting the robustness of the proposed research model.

Limitations of the Study

- The study was limited to women employees working in Kozhikode, Ernakulam, and Thiruvananthapuram districts of Kerala; therefore, the findings may not be fully generalizable to women employees in other regions or countries.
- The study adopted a cross-sectional research design, which captures responses only at a single point in time and limits the ability to examine long-term changes in career advancement and workplace equality practices.
- The data were collected using self-reported questionnaires, which may be influenced by personal bias, social desirability bias, or subjective perceptions of workplace experiences.
- The study focused only on Gender Independence, Career Advancement, and Workplace Gender Equality Policies. Other important factors such as organizational culture, leadership style, family responsibilities, work-life balance, and socio-economic conditions were not included in the model.
- The sample size was restricted to 320 valid respondents, which may limit broader statistical generalization across different employment sectors and organizational settings.

Future Research Suggestions

- Future studies may expand the geographical scope by including respondents from additional states, countries, or multinational organizations to improve generalizability.
- Researchers may adopt longitudinal research designs to examine the long-term impact of gender independence and workplace equality policies on women's career growth and organizational outcomes.

- Future studies can include additional mediating or moderating variables such as organizational support, leadership style, work-life balance, job satisfaction, employee motivation, and psychological empowerment.
- Comparative studies between public and private sector organizations or between male and female employees may provide deeper insights into workplace gender dynamics and career advancement opportunities.
- Future research may employ mixed-method approaches incorporating interviews, focus group discussions, and qualitative analysis to obtain richer and more comprehensive insights into women employees' workplace experiences.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Gender Independence and Workplace Gender Equality Policies play a significant role in promoting Career Advancement among women employees. Organizations should strengthen equality policies, leadership opportunities, anti-discrimination measures, and inclusive work environments to support women's professional development. The findings provide practical implications for organizational leaders, policymakers, and human resource managers in creating gender-inclusive workplaces that encourage women's empowerment and long-term career growth.

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