

Women's Leadership in Accelerating Sustainable Development: A Care-Based Approach for Transformative Change

Przywództwo kobiet wsparciem dla zrównoważonego rozwoju: podejście oparte na opiece w czasie transformacji

Purnima Lenka¹, Dipti Ranjan Khatua²

¹*University of Delhi, Indraprastha College for Women,
Department of Philosophy, Delhi, India*

E-mail: purnimalenka93@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0003-1513-0396

²*Indian Institute of Technology(ISM),
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dhanbad, India
E-mail: tuguli.dipti@gmail.com*

Abstract

Sustainable development is a worldwide challenge, but its progress is excruciatingly slow. In order to accelerate our efforts it is essential to realize that sustainable developments require multidimensional effort and effective management, which will be impossible until we achieve gender equality. It's time to prioritize gender equality and women's empowerment, which helps us to move faster and more confidently toward the goals and sub-goals of sustainable development (SDGs). In order to make meaningful changes women must occupy productive and decision-making roles. They possess exceptional capabilities, skills, talents, and abilities including an effective attitude, social conscience and caring nature, and management skills. These qualities help them to recognize opportunities, tackle risks and make the right decisions that contribute to the SDGs while also reducing the gender inequality gap, child mortality, unemployment, violence, etc. For that, this paper claims that the potential, care, empathy and effectiveness of women as leaders are needed and should be recognized globally in terms of leadership, decision-making positions, and productivity, as a result, we move faster and more confidently toward fulfilling of Sustainable development goals.

Key words: business, care ethics, SDG 5, women leadership, sustainable development

Streszczenie

Zrównoważony rozwój jest światowym wyzwaniem, ale jego postęp jest niezwykle powolny. Aby przyspieszyć nasze wysiłki, musimy zdać sobie sprawę, że zrównoważony rozwój wymaga wielowymiarowego wysiłku i skutecznego zarządzania, co nie będzie możliwe, dopóki nie osiągniemy równości płci. Czas nadać priorytet równości płci i wzmocnieniu pozycji kobiet, co pomoże nam szybciej i pewniej zmierzać w kierunku celów i podcelów zrównoważonego rozwoju (SDGs). Aby wprowadzić znaczące zmiany, kobiety muszą zajmować produktywne i decyzyjne role. Posiadają wyjątkowe zdolności, umiejętności, talenty i umiejętności, w tym skuteczną postawę, świadomość społeczną i troskliwą naturę oraz umiejętności zarządzania. Te cechy pomagają im rozpoznawać szanse, stawiać czoła zagrożeniom i podejmować właściwe decyzje, które przyczyniają się do realizacji Celów Zrównoważonego Rozwoju, a jednocześnie przyczyniają się do zmniejszają nierówności płci, śmiertelności dzieci, bezrobocia, przemocy, itp. W związku z tym w niniejszym opracowaniu twierdzi się, że potencjał, troska, empatia i skuteczność kobiet jako liderów są niezbędne i powinny być uznawane na całym świecie pod względem przywództwa, stanowisk decyzyjnych i produktywności, dzięki czemu będziemy mogli szybciej i pewniej zmierzać w kierunku realizacji Celów zrównoważonego rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: biznes, etyka opieki, SDG 5, przywództwo kobiet, zrównoważony rozwój

1. Introduction

Gender equality is a broader concept that is frequently discussed on local and international levels (Johnsson-Latham, 2007; Leach, 2016). It, directly or indirectly, affects the objectives of sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Molden et al., 2014; Baye, 2017; Reckien et al., 2017; Bilyk et al., 2022; Lenka, 2023). Undoubtedly SDG-5 (gender equality) is one of the vital components of sustainable development, focusing on different dimensions of gender equality, including women's empowerment, girl-child education, child mortality rates, early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, eliminating discrimination against women and girls, ending violence against women, appreciate unpaid care and ensuring women have all type of equality in the field of business, politics and public life (Fejerskov et al., 2019; Lenka, 2023). As Warth, & Koparanova claim *gender equality is a goal in its own right but also a key factor for sustainable economic growth, social development, and environmental sustainability* (2012). For this reason, in 1992, *the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) made important provisions for the recognition of women's contributions and their full participation in sustainable development* (Warth & Koparanova, 2012). In 2017, world leaders gathered to pledge commitment to the 17 sustainable development goals aiming to construct a new world, where low-carbon and gender equality became essential goals. As Bangert et al. argue *the need for a cross-cutting, inclusive and gender-sensitive approach is clear: without this approach, the global transformation envisaged by the SDGs will not be achieved* (2017). Gender equality must be considered a cross-cutting issue in the SDGs at all phases of policy making, implementation, monitoring, and accountability. It is impossible to ignore their significant contributions to society. Gender equalities indeed has various benefits; however, gender inequalities still exist in our society, which is a matter of concern. In order to address gender inequalities, there is a need to assist society by forming more societal groups that give women economic independence, social position, and social acknowledgement. For that, this paper discusses sustainable development, business organization and gender equality highlighting the need for women leadership to accelerate progress towards the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Business organizations have the potential to significantly influence our society, environment and economy through women empowerment, which can help to reduce unemployment, alleviate poverty, reduced child mortality and achieve other key SDG targets. The United Nations also emphasized the significance of gender equality and suggested incorporating women's empowerment and girls' child education. Additionally it suggested that, business organizations review and improve their strategies, operations, investments, and practices with the key targets of SDGs (Grosser, 2009). Thus, the present paper claims that women's potential, care, and effectiveness as women's leaders are needed and should be recognized globally in terms of leadership, decision-making positions, and productivity. They have some intrinsic attributes, such as a caring personality, future ambitions, and managerial skills, which help them to make some essential decisions toward sustainable development goals. This paper highlights that women as a leaders have care approach as a consequence handle the organizations, environment and society better in comparison to male leaders. For that reason, this paper analyses the role of women's leadership in accelerating sustainable development through a care-based approach to make a transformative change. It has been observed that, nowadays *care talk* is being used more openly across a variety of research and practices. However, caring language also be found in the post-capitalist agendas of social movements like De-growth, as well as in the philosophical design of permaculture and biodynamic practices.

2. Research objective and methodology

The primary objective of this paper is to evaluate the need for gender equality and the impact of women's leadership, to achieve key sustainable development goals in an organization. This research aims to evaluate the influence of these changes on the development of women's leadership competencies and to provide a holistic conceptual framework for their long-term sustainable development growth. Qualitative methodology is used in this work, which is based on an analytical study. The background of the study is created by looking through the literature on gender, women's leadership and sustainable development. It is grounded on secondary sources such as articles, books, and other websites.

3. Sustainable development: an overview

In 2015, United Nations Member States adopted a sustainable development goals agenda (Opoku, 2016; Swamy et al., 2018). It is a universal call to address global challenges and to bring peace and prosperity to people and the environment by 2030 (UN). This includes three targets, 17 goals and 169 agendas to focus on zero hunger, no poverty, quality education to ensure Sabka Sath Sabka Vikash, good health and well-being for a healthy lifestyle, gender equality through women empowerment, clean water, and sanitizations for healthy living, clean and affordable energy, economic growth to achieve development and enhance SMEs goals, innovation, and infrastructure, reduced inequality, strong institutions, collaboration, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, living below the waterline, life on land, and peace and justice for achieving the

sustainable goals (Galatsidas, 2015; Obersteiner et al., 2016; Sachs, 2017; Biermann et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2018; Lenka, 2023). It is not a new phenomenon; it was established two decades ago, still progress toward the sustainable development goals (SDGs) remains agonizingly slow (see figure 1). Figure 1 explicates the SDGs Index of India, developed by the NITI Aayog. NITI Aayoga is the world's first government-led sub-national indicator of SDG development. It was created to track how far all states and union territories (UTs) have progressed toward achieving the SDGs. This index is built on a cooperative and competitive federalism approach, which understands that some extraordinary action is required at all levels to achieve the key goals of sustainable development. In the year 2019, the global pandemic of COVID-19 pushed countries back on their development ambitions and caused severe barriers to achieving the SDGs. In order to elevate strategies UN committee call for everyone, to participate in SDGs. Every human being should make an effort to achieve the goal of SDGs, particularly women. Women's participation is crucial, particularly in countries like India where women make up half of the population. Their active engagement is not only necessary for achieving gender equality but also for advancing sustainable development goals that benefit entire communities and nations.

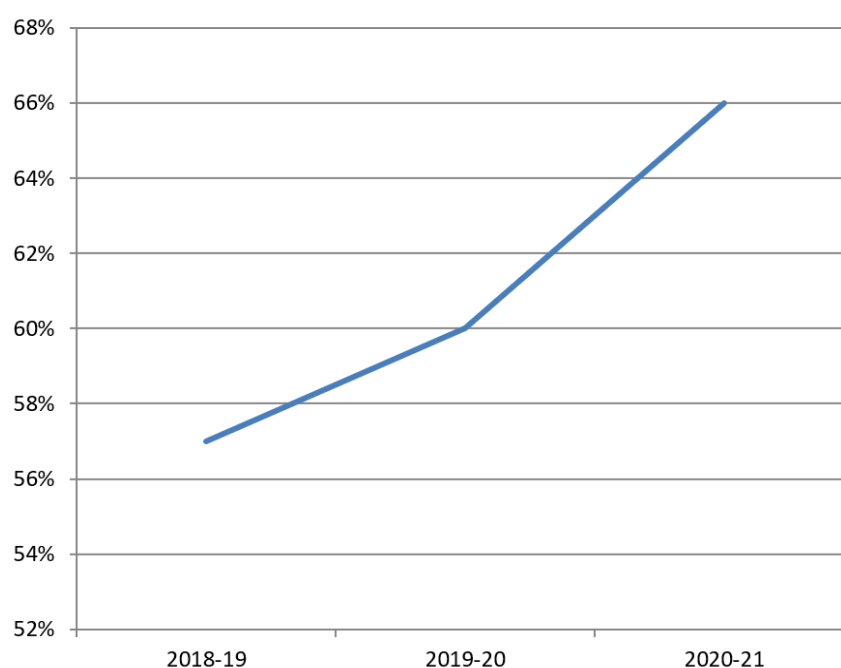


Figure 1. SDG India Index & Dashboard by NITI Aayog, source: compiled by the authors from Economic survey; India's overall score on the NITI Aayog SDG India Index & Dashboard

4. Promoting gender equality for sustainable development

The milestone of the 2030 sustainable agenda is the inclusion of SDG 5, dedicated to gender equality because *gender inequalities are extracting high economic costs and leading to social inequities and environmental degradation around the world* (Stevens, 2010). In order to resolve these intricacies leaders, practitioners, and researchers should understand the impact of gender equality in various fields including economics, politics and policymaking to lead the key objectives of sustainable development. Women's participation is vital particularly country like India where half of the population are women. Their involvement in SDG practice is essential for fostering better growth and development. As Nagarajan, & Karthikeyan, (2015) arguably stated delinquency hostile to women is a hurdle to sustainable development. Time has come to understand the link between gender equality and sustainable development goals (SDGs). Several scholars suggested that gender equality can eradicate poverty, unemployment, and child mortality and improve societal, economic and environmental status (Gupta et al., 2019; Sen, 2019; Agarwal, 2018; Domańska, 2019; Arora-Jonsson et al., 2019; Lenka, 2023). Still, gender equality concepts are ignored because *many proponents of gender equality were concerned that gender was only 1 out of 17 goals of the SDGs compared to 1 out of 8 goals of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and this mindset was perceived as a weakening of our commitment toward gender equality* (Kim, 2017). Gender equality cannot be automatically improved with economic or social growth. Education, employment, and empowerment efforts must be integrated to achieve gender equality. It depicts, that there is a need to adopt strategies, plans, and government efforts. On the way to addressing the basic causes of ongoing gender inequity, there is a need to create culturally sensitive and contextualized methods. For that, this paper highlights the significance of business organization.

4.1. Integrating gender equality and sustainable development in business practices

Organizations play a significant role, people's perceptions of welfare and a decent life are influenced by economic circumstances, political clout, and social status, as well as by their attitudes, moral convictions, and interactions with others such as people, environment, and other factors. Their policy systems and strategic management affect the key objective of sustainable development goals (SDGs). For this reason, the UN suggests that organizations rethink strategies that help to accelerate SDGs and indirectly sustain business organizations. Organizational sustainability (economic) plays an essential role in SDGs because business (economic) sustainability is one of the targets among the three aspects of sustainability namely environment and society (Figge et al., 2002; Rosati & Faria, 2019; Mio et al., 2020; Pizzi et al., 2021). Three of them are interconnected and essential for healthy growth because focusing on the environmental and social components of sustainable development in the absence of economics overlooks the development parts that are required for progress. Similarly focusing on the economic growth (profit) in the absence of environment and society leads organizations towards inequality. Time has come to understand that it's next to impossible to achieve successful and strong business organizations in a world of escalating inequality, including poverty, crises, climate change etc. In order to resolve this inequality the SDG agenda provides a unique opportunity for business organizations to adopt and recognize it as a driver for successful business strategy. Sustainable development goals as a foundation ensure organizational growth by reducing poverty and inclusively conserving the environment. Business executives should recognize that operating sustainability and sustainable development models in business organizations have enormous potential benefits. As a consequence, organizations are adopting various sustainable models because the cost of inaction often outweighs the cost of action, particularly when it comes to the growing threat of climate change and environmental pollution. Business executives realized that nowadays, the scenario of the market has changed the competitive market requires integrity, social performance, and environmental responsibility as criteria to compete with other organizations. Still, there is too much hesitation among corporate executives and stockholders to adopt a sustainable model. Maintaining profit with sustainability is still a challenge for business organizations. Because from a business standpoint, profit is more important than the other two factors, including society and the environment; however, from a societal standpoint, the economy, society, and the environment all play an equal role in achieving sustainable development. It depicts organizations should practice such strategies which build connections between business and key objectives of sustainable development with the aim to lead towards healthy growth of our society. Accordingly, scholars suggest various models to guide organizations to maintain sustainable development but still, we are unable to achieve the target (Buffa et al., 2018; Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008). It means our existing development model has to be radically rethought to deal with complex and challenging social, economic, and environmental issues, which define the requirements of relational leadership practice. For that, his paper suggests women leaders especially their caring nature as a perspective to achieve the key objectives of SDGs in business organizations. In addition to that, this paper conceptually explores, how the moral theory of care helps to illuminate the ethical dimension of rational leadership for sustainability. It the time to move our focus towards women's empowerment, on the one hand, it reduces gender inequality and on the other hand moves us towards SDGs. Highlighting gender equality and empowering women in business organizations not only reduces gender inequality but also ends discrimination, violence, and early marriage, and ensures social protection, women's equal rights, girl child education, sanitation etc. In addition to that, this paper conceptually explores, how the moral theory of care helps to illuminate the ethical dimension of leadership for sustainability. It is time to move our focus towards women's empowerment, on the one hand, it reduces gender inequality and on the other hand moves us towards SDGs. Highlighting gender equality and empowering women in business organizations not only reduces gender inequality but also ends discrimination, violence, and early marriage, and ensures social protection, women's equal rights, girl child education, sanitation etc. In addition to that, *the gender equality agenda embraces all three dimensions of sustainability: ecological, economic and social* (Johnsson-Latham, 2007). Bayeh also argue the same point, stating that women empowerment reduces gender inequality and other sub-goals of SDG-5 in his research, *The Role of Empowering Women and achieving gender equality in the Sustainable Development of Ethiopia* (2016). But the question is how it will be possible? the answer is through business organizations. This paper claim this could be possible only when stakeholder and oriented organizations adopt such strategies focusing on gender equality and women's leadership. This process can entail challenges to organizational *success*, overall happiness, and well-being as viable goals for creating organizational values. Still, it is time to create awareness of leaders' relational skills for *reconstructing value* in tackling global sustainability concerns in stakeholder-centred enterprises. The Evolving Landscape of Leadership: Advancing Women Leaders. In the year 1970, academic research started to study the topic of gender and leadership (Komives, 2011). The basic question raised at that time was, can women lead? The question raised the ability of women. There was a time when the majority of women spent their entire lives in the house making and meeting the needs of their family members. Nowadays the scenario has changed, now, the question may arise, are women leaders more effective than male leaders? Does a woman maintain the sustainability paradigm better than a man? Do women leaders maintain a good relationship with em-

ployees, the environment, and society in comparison to male leaders? Since the year 1980, research and interest have grown in the topic of women entrepreneurs (NWBC, 2004). With the release of *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics* in 1993, feminist economics, in its modern form, started to bloom (Ferber and Nelson). Since then, other schools of feminist thought have emerged in response to concerns about the definition, approach, philosophy, economics, and policy. It's a fact that women leaders are not different from male leaders, but they have exceptional leadership ability in their nature from the time of birth. These qualities help them to maintain their relationship with others such as subordinates with whom they work, the society where they live, and the environment where they collect the living materials. Before delving into the notion of women's leadership, it is necessary to understand the concept of leadership. Leadership is primarily about transformation, what leaders do is develop the processes and organizations that managers require and eventually, raise them to a whole new level or adapt in some fundamental ways to benefit from new opportunities (John P. Kotter). In this sense, women are better leaders; they have skills to recognize opportunities and take risks and as a homemaker, she has management skills (Ruderman et al., 2002; Hejase et al., 2013). It has been noticed that women are natural leaders, with some specific qualities such as caring, empathy, connection, and concern (Boulouta, 2013; Costa et al., 2017). Even though the motivations for men and women to start businesses are similar, still women have some exceptional management skills. Undoubtedly, women's participation in today's business organizations is increasing, but still, it is limited, especially in the leadership position. Figure 4 depicts women make up over half of the workforce in many nations, but they are still underrepresented in business and political leadership roles (figure 4). Since the 17th century, women have been the driving force behind successful business organizations. Figure (2) depicts the number of main force female workers in Indian business organizations. Unfortunately, there are few in leadership positions (see Figure- 3). Women should engage in leadership activities, their exceptional character offers a unique viewpoint and lived experience, which is essential for facing challenges and generating solutions. For that the UN SDGs agenda suggests to *ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life* (UN, 2015). Several examples are there which elucidate the effectiveness of women as leaders in various fields such as Kamala Harris vice president of the United States, Nirmala Shitaraman finance minister in the Ministry of India, Sandra Day O'Connor former supreme court justice, Emmiline Pankhurst British political activist, Marry Barra, CE at general motors are some of them (LaMantia & Ma, 2022). This paper claims that, when there are more women at the table, the outcome is different, and the potential impact is even higher. Women leaders are better at leading business organizations and they also take sustainability initiatives. More women in leadership positions change the workplace environment. Several scholars demonstrate a clear correlation between women leaders and pro-environmental outcomes, they claim when women engage in decision-making they make beneficial decisions for the environment and society. In order to prove this claim this section presents figure 4. Which depicts women leaders performing better than male leaders even in odd situations. At the time of COVID-19 women leaders proved that they can perform better than men. They can make quick decisions in challenging periods in comparison to men.

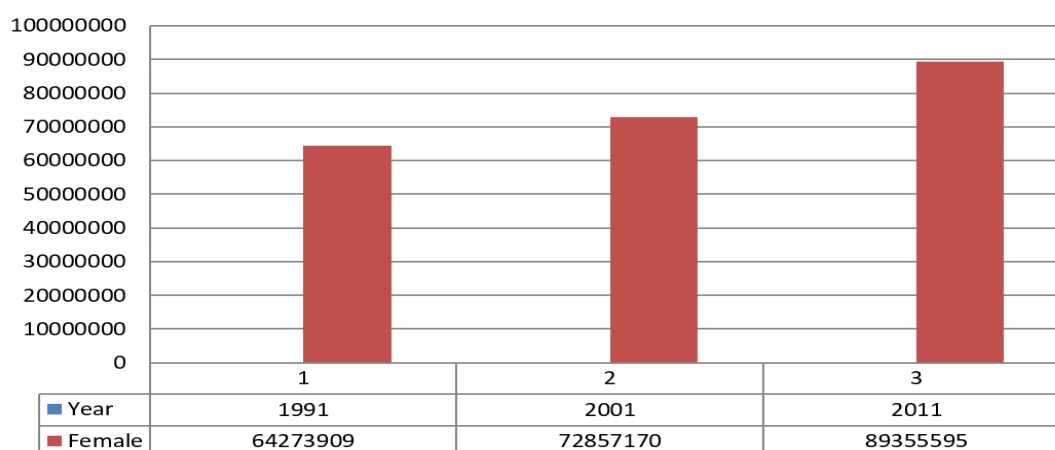


Figure 2. Main force of female workers in India, source: compiled by the authors from (Census 1991, 2001, 2011)

Figure (4) depicts that at the time of the pandemic, female leaders were rated as more engaged and effective in comparison to male leaders. Mariah Levin (2021) surveys show that women had a higher level of engagement skills even during the time of COVID-19. They have some exceptional qualities such as building relationships, displaying high integrity and honesty, inspiring and motivating others, and are always ready to face the challenges that make women different from men see (table 1). Women as a leaders have the ability to terraform as per situation demand. Lenka and Kar also discussed the importance of transformative quality in leadership in their work entitled *Transformational leadership: An approach of business sustainability during the COVID-19 pandemic with special reflection to India* (2021). Leaders must have this quality, this quality make them to face any challenges and ability to change their strategies as per situations.

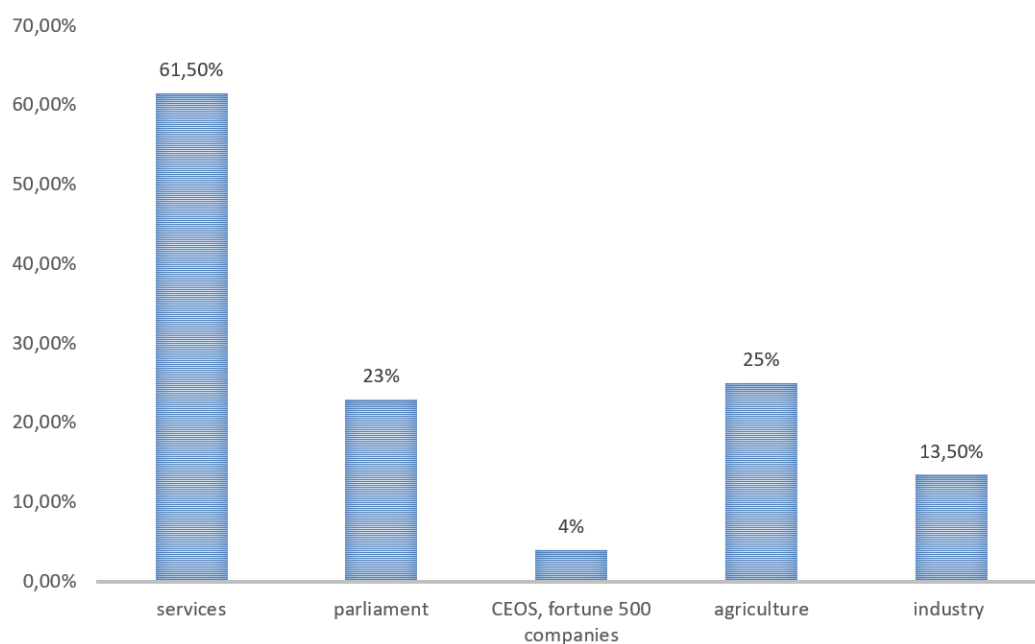


Figure 3. Women in the global workforce, source: compiled by the authors from UNwomen.org

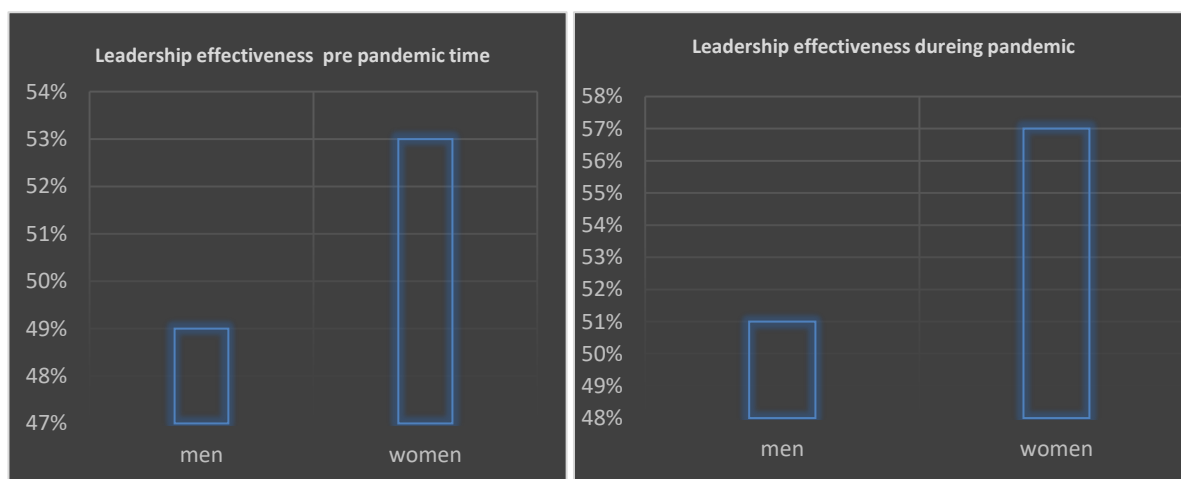


Figure 4. Leadership Effectiveness percentage During Crises, compiled by the authors from (Levin M & Ganay G, 2021)

Table 1. Competencies women against man, source: compiled by the authors from (Folkman J & J Folkman, 2020)

Competencies	Women	Men
Takes Initiative	60	50
Learning Agility	59	50
Inspired and Motivated Others	59	52
Develop Others	58	49
Build Relationship	58	51
Display High Integrity and Honesty	57	49
Communicates Powerfully and Prolifically	57	52
Collaboration and Teamwork	56	50
Champion Change	56	51
Makes Decisions	56	49
Innovates	56	53
Solve Problems and Analyze Issues	56	53
Customer and External Focus	56	54
Drive for Results	55	48
Value Diversity	55	45
Establish Stretch Goals	55	50
Develops Strategic Perspective	55	54
Technical or Professional Expertise	53	55
Takes Risk	52	51

In addition to the above-mentioned tables, this section discussed an example of contemporary women leadership demonstrating the impact of women's leadership in achieving SDGs. The example focuses on the 21st-century business icon who proves that women are no less than male leaders. In the year 2021, she got Padma Shri in the trade and industry category. She is Jaswantiben Jamnadas Popat, the founder of Lijjata Papad. Her leadership demonstrated to our society that women executives can successfully lead organizations and make a change in their surroundings. Her organization *Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad* began spontaneously in 1959; it all started with a group effort by seven ladies to make papad on the terrace of their flats. Its major product, papad, has a relatively long shelf life, maybe roasted or fried, and is eaten as a snack or with meals. Many papads have been produced and kept at home throughout India for generations, but her initiatives made remarkable changes in the papad industry. This progressively leads to women being active agents of their emancipation. This approach to self-empowerment emphasized the agency of organized women. It entailed gathering women from comparable backgrounds and with similar needs and establishing a space for them to choose their priorities. It was a grass-roots level movement with self-sustaining and self-propelling growth. The women who founded the Lijjat organization wanted to enhance their family's income by practising the craft of papad-making. Employment gives them confidence, as well as economic potential. Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad was a model endeavour to make women economically self-sufficient, paving the way for their parallel empowerment in other aspects of their lives. Because women leaders understand the interconnectedness (because of their caring nature), that helps them to connect others with themselves. As a result, women leaders are more cautious at the time of the decision, they always look at the effects. Gibson-Graham's studies highlight the potential of women to care, which arises from connectivity or attachment rather than separation or detachment, which she further contextualizes in the reconstruction of the evolution of feminine thought. She claims that women have some virtues such as compassion, connectivity, attention, particularity, difference, and concreteness, which argues to be accounted care as an alternative approach to moral deliberation.

Women's caring nature is the inner quality, which they have from time of birth. Caring is the essential nature of women, this quality enable them as leaders to work for the benefit of all universes. This quality forces the leaders to make decision for the well-being of all stakeholders including the environment and society at large (Nodding, 1984). Several care ethicists believe that an ethic of care is the best moral standard for the corporate sector. Business organizations are the world of multiple, dynamic, and interwoven relationships that demand attention to well-being and, hopefully, constructive cultivation. Caring must demonstrate and cultivate the characteristics of devotion, constancy, patience, trust, humility, and courage in oneself as well as in others, that quality helps business leaders to build relationships with their subordinates, society, and the ecology where they work. Nowadays care for our universe is needed, for the betterment of our societal life. Some social activists and environmentalists suggest that this is the time to change our focus from duty and result-based ethics to care-based responsibility. These are requisite qualities in business organizations to address environmental issues, relationship issues, and trust building. Gibson-Graham proposes that economic actions be completely rethought to reflect ecological care and responsibility (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Gibson-Graham also proposes that economic actions be completely rethought so that they might reflect environmental care and responsibility (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Several care ethicists suggest care as an appropriate ethical framework for contemporary business organizations (Hawk, 2011b; Thomas, 2011). Here one may ask why employees consider ethics of care as the primary ethical standard. They should consider ethics of care as a basic standard because employees are all interconnected in a network of overlapping personal and professional interactions that shape employees, in varying degrees, matter to us and to others with whom we are in relationships. In an organization, employees have the opportunity to engage in relationships of care with their subordinates and also enhance the awareness of the ethical characteristics of most, if not all. As employees of organizations, they have a variety of connections that should be characterized by a strong sense of compassion for the good of everyone involved in the work that is done in business organizations. The ethics of care approach suggests to business executives how business organizations make relational wealth (Sander-Staudt, 2011). This act creates a valuable resource for business organizations, that not only impresses the stakeholders but also sustains the environment and society in a better way. In the time of transformation, *businesses dare to experience another way of knowing and to consider holistic and multi-dimensional approaches based on an ethic of care* (Spiller et al., 2011). These activities can create multi-dimensional well-being through better personal relationships and better relationships with the natural world (Spiller et al., 2011). In the era of the twenty-first century, the relationship is essential, particularly in business organizations to manage an organization appropriately. It will happen when business organizations give leadership positions and decision-making roles to women. Several studies show that women are good at maintaining relations; they have the quality of interconnectedness. Women are caring by nature; they are better at valuable relationships better than the man. Women easily analyze the importance of interdependence. Due to these qualities, they highlighted a better perception of environmental problems (Gigillan 1977, 1982). The ethic of care emphasizes skills like inquiry, listening, observing, attentiveness, responsiveness, and responsibility and instructs individuals confronting moral quandaries to engage in genuine, polite, and moral dialogue (Ayim, 1997). Women have some essential virtues in their nature that guide

them towards relationship building with their employees, employees take the key to productivity and the understating of inter-depended moves them to make some decisions towards sustainability. No doubt ethics of care is an emerging theory for business organizations; care for humans and non-humans is on the edge of the debate for practitioners, researchers, and activists still we should move towards it for healthy and sustainable growth.

6. Conclusions

From the aforementioned analysis, this paper concludes that there are lots of reasons justify why women leader's approach to sustainable development goals is better than men's. However, their natural dispositions and qualities such as caring and maintaining interpersonal relationships enable them to run the business organization sustainably and lead them towards SDGs. These qualities help them to maintain their relationships with employees and customers by maintaining the parameters of sustainable development. Women play a significant role in the development process by playing a crucial role in business management, including conservation, exploitation, and utilization either as consumers or educators. Findings suggest that businesses characterized by gender-diverse leadership teams are more effective than other organizational strategies. Depth analysis and surveys are indeed needed to justify the effects of women leaders on achieving sustainable development.

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