



Female leadership: a systematic mapping of the literature indexed in Scopus from 2020 to 2026

Liderazgo femenino: mapeo sistemático de la literatura indexada en Scopus entre 2020 y 2026

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Female leadership has gained increasing relevance because of persistent gender inequalities in access to, recognition of, and advancement into leadership positions. **Objective:** To characterize international scientific production on female leadership and identify its main thematic and population patterns between 2020 and 2026. **Methodology:** A systematic mapping of literature indexed in Scopus was conducted. The search identified 1,084 records; after applying filters for document type and publication status, a corpus of 642 articles was obtained. Using ATLAS.ti 26, metadata, titles, abstracts, and keywords were analyzed to describe temporal evolution, geographic distribution, thematic categories, and studied populations. **Results:** Publications increased and production was geographically diverse, although concentrated mainly in the United States. Studies addressing facilitators, barriers, and conceptualizations of female leadership predominated. Regarding populations, 171 articles examined women academics or leaders, 33 examined students or future professionals, 12 included both groups, and 426 did not allow identification of a specific population. **Conclusion:** The field shows sustained growth but continues to pay limited attention to student perceptions. These findings are descriptive and should be interpreted considering the exclusive use of Scopus and the absence of full-text assessment and risk-of-bias evaluation.

Keywords: female leadership; higher education; gender; stereotypes; systematic mapping.

RESUMEN

Introducción: El liderazgo femenino ha adquirido relevancia ante la persistencia de desigualdades de género en el acceso, reconocimiento y desarrollo de posiciones directivas. **Objetivo:** Caracterizar la producción científica internacional sobre liderazgo femenino e identificar sus principales patrones temáticos y poblacionales entre 2020 y 2026. **Metodología:** Se realizó un mapeo sistemático de la literatura indexada en Scopus. La búsqueda identificó 1.084 registros; tras aplicar filtros por tipo documental y estado de publicación, se conformó un corpus de 642 artículos. Mediante ATLAS.ti 26 se analizaron metadatos, títulos, resúmenes y palabras clave para describir la evolución temporal, distribución geográfica, categorías temáticas y poblaciones estudiadas. **Resultados:** Se evidenció un aumento de publicaciones y una producción geográficamente diversa, aunque concentrada principalmente en Estados Unidos. Predominaron los estudios sobre facilitadores, barreras y conceptualización del liderazgo femenino. Por población, 171 artículos abordaron a mujeres académicas o directivas, 33 a estudiantes o futuros profesionales, 12 integraron ambos grupos y 426 no permitieron identificar una población específica. **Conclusión:** El campo presenta una expansión sostenida, pero mantiene una atención limitada a las percepciones estudiantiles. Los resultados son descriptivos y deben interpretarse considerando el uso exclusivo de Scopus y la ausencia de evaluación de textos completos y riesgo de sesgo.

Palabras clave: liderazgo femenino; educación superior; género; estereotipos; mapeo sistemático.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between gender and leadership has acquired growing importance for organizations and society. Leadership, understood as the ability to influence other people, guide collective processes, and drive transformations, plays a relevant role in contexts characterized by technological, social, labor, and educational changes. Although the incorporation of women into higher education and the labor market has increased in recent decades, this progress has not proportionally translated into their participation in management and decision-making positions. Evidence indicates that this inequality does not respond to a single cause, but rather to the interaction of cultural, social, family, and organizational factors that condition women's access, retention, and development in leadership positions [1,2].

Among the main factors associated with this inequality is the persistence of gender stereotypes. Traditionally, the figure of the leader has been associated with characteristics considered masculine, such as competitiveness, authority, autonomy, and capacity for control. Although these representations have undergone transformations, they continue to influence the way in which men and women are evaluated when they aspire to or access positions of responsibility. Tremmel and Wahl [3] show that representations of male and female leaders still contain differentiated associations with agentic and communal characteristics. Meanwhile, Feenstra et al. [4] identify an evolution toward less rigidly masculinized leadership models and a greater valuation of attributes traditionally considered feminine. This background suggests that social conceptions of leadership are changing, although gender biases have not yet disappeared.

The available evidence calls into question the idea that leadership effectiveness depends directly on the gender of the person exercising it. Shen and Joseph [5] point out that gender differences in leadership effectiveness tend to be small or nonexistent and that evaluations vary according to the criteria and contexts considered. Complementarily, Farhan [6] proposes that the effectiveness of female leadership should be understood multidimensionally, considering both the capabilities of female leaders and the social and organizational conditions in which they act.

The difficulties that women face do not necessarily disappear when they reach leadership positions. The phenomenon known as the glass cliff or «acantilado de cristal» suggests that, under certain circumstances, women are more likely to be promoted to leadership positions when organizations are going through complex or risky situations. The meta-analysis by Morgenroth et al. [7] shows that this phenomenon depends on the context and cannot be interpreted as a general principle. Subsequent research has delved deeper into this relationship, showing that the nature of crises and the expectations associated with female attributes can influence the selection of women for leadership positions [8,9]. Likewise, evidence derived from the COVID-19 health crisis indicates that the relationship between the gender of leaders and organizational outcomes requires rigorous causal analyses and does not allow automatically assuming a female advantage or disadvantage [10].

In higher education, these inequalities acquire particular characteristics. Universities are institutions responsible for producing and transmitting knowledge, but they also constitute organizations in which power relations, hierarchies, institutional cultures, and expectations about who are recognized as legitimate leaders are reproduced. Fitzgerald [11] points out that women who hold senior university positions must navigate environments marked by tensions among inclusion, visibility, and power. In different contexts, women academics and administrators face difficulties related to predominantly male professional networks, stereotypes, family responsibilities, and organizational cultures that can limit their career progression [12]. Consequently, having academic training and professional competencies does not by itself guarantee equitable conditions of access to university leadership.

These difficulties also present a structural component. Institutional policies aimed at promoting equality may coexist with organizational practices and cultures that maintain inequalities, especially when formal measures do not modify the mechanisms through which opportunities for participation, recognition, and decision-making are distributed [13]. In traditionally masculinized fields, such as STEM disciplines, women also face a lower availability of female role models, difficulties in joining collaboration networks, and limited opportunities for progression to leadership positions [14]. Recent studies continue to identify sociocultural barriers, gender stereotypes, difficulties in reconciling personal and professional responsibilities, weak support networks, and limitations of institutional policies [15].

However, the analysis of female leadership should not focus exclusively on barriers. The literature also examines the factors that favor the construction and continuity of managerial trajectories. Mentoring, professional networks, the existence of visible female role models,

institutional support, and training opportunities appear as relevant mechanisms for strengthening leadership development. Manongsong and Ghosh [16] highlight the importance of mentoring for women belonging to historically underrepresented groups, although they warn that its benefits depend on these relationships recognizing the multiple dimensions of identity and inequality present in organizations. Likewise, leadership aspirations are related to interpersonal experiences and formative contexts that can favor or restrict women's readiness to project themselves into managerial positions [17,18].

Higher education also constitutes a space in which students construct representations of gender, authority, and leadership. These conceptions are relevant because those currently in training will later participate in selection, evaluation, promotion, team formation, and decision-making processes. Stereotypes developed or reinforced during the university stage can contribute to reproducing inequalities or, conversely, can foster more inclusive leadership models. Berkery and Ryan [19], in an analysis over 10 years of stereotypes about the managerial role among university business students in Ireland, identified continuities and transformations in the characteristics attributed to men, women, and managers. This finding shows that representations of leadership can change generationally and supports the need to study the perceptions of those preparing to enter the professional world.

Scientific production on female leadership in higher education is distributed between research focused on academic and managerial trajectories and studies oriented toward the perceptions of students and future professionals. Although both perspectives are developed within the educational field, they correspond to different populations and research problems. The first examines women's work experiences, institutional barriers, and development opportunities; the second analyzes how new generations interpret, value, and legitimize female leadership. Distinguishing these orientations is necessary to prevent the general presence of educational terms in a bibliographic search from being interpreted as evidence that all retrieved studies specifically investigate university students.

In this context, it is pertinent to organize and characterize recent scientific production, especially because the period 2020–2026 was marked by transformations in ways of working, higher education, and the exercise of leadership. Evidence shows that cultural and institutional barriers for women remain present in universities, alongside a growing appreciation of collaborative, inclusive approaches oriented toward institutional transformation [20,21]. Nevertheless, research remains distributed across studies on individual characteristics, attributions, behaviors, perceptions, and contextual conditions, which makes it difficult to construct an integrated view of the field [2].

Based on this background, the present study aims to conduct a systematic mapping of the scientific literature indexed in Scopus between 2020 and 2026 on female leadership in higher education. Specifically, it seeks to characterize the temporal evolution and geographic distribution of the production, to identify the main conceptions, perceptions, barriers, facilitators, and aspirations addressed, and to distinguish research focused on academic or managerial women from that oriented toward students and future professionals. This delimitation will make it possible to recognize trends, knowledge gaps, and areas requiring further empirical research, particularly in Latin American contexts.

METHODS

Research design

The study was conducted through a systematic literature mapping, aimed at characterizing recent scientific production on female leadership in higher education and identifying the main thematic trends present in the field. This approach made it possible to describe the temporal evolution and geographic distribution of the publications, as well as to recognize the conceptions, perceptions, stereotypes, barriers, facilitators, and aspirations addressed in the retrieved documents.

The unit of analysis was each bibliographic record indexed in Scopus that met the previously established filters. The analysis was limited to the information available in the metadata exported from the database, especially titles, abstracts, keywords, publication year, authorship, affiliation, country, and publication source. No eligibility assessment was performed through full-text reading, nor was any assessment of the risk of bias or the methodological quality of the studies conducted. Consequently, the results should be interpreted as a descriptive and thematic characterization of the retrieved scientific production, not as a synthesis of results or effects verified by the individual studies.

Source of information and analysis period

The literature search was conducted exclusively in Scopus, selected for its multidisciplinary coverage and for the availability of standardized bibliographic information for the analysis of scientific production. The period considered comprised publications from 2020 to 2026, inclusive. The final search and export of records were carried out in August 2026.

The figure corresponding to 2026 represents only the documents indexed up to the search date and, therefore, does not constitute the definitive annual total. No restrictions were applied by thematic area, due to the multidisciplinary nature of the object of study. This decision made it possible to incorporate publications from education, administration, social sciences, psychology, health, and other areas related to female leadership.

Search strategy

The search strategy was structured around three conceptual core areas: female leadership; perceptions and factors associated with gender; and education or professional training. The terms were combined using the Boolean operators AND and OR and applied to the title, abstract, and keyword fields available in Scopus (TITLE-ABS-KEY).

The search equation used was:

TITLE-ABS-KEY (("female leadership" OR "women leadership" OR "women in leadership" OR "women leaders" OR "female leaders") AND (perception* OR stereotype* OR attitude* OR gender OR barrier* OR challenge* OR aspiration*) AND ("higher education" OR universit* OR college* OR student* OR education OR "professional education" OR "professional training")) AND PUBYEAR > 2019 AND PUBYEAR < 2027

The asterisk was used as a truncation symbol to retrieve variants of the selected terms. The initial search identified 1,084 records.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The corpus was assembled using bibliographic criteria applied directly in Scopus. Records were included if they met the following conditions: a) publication between 2020 and 2026; b) retrieval through the defined search equation; c) classification as articles in the Document Type field; and d) final publication status.

Documents classified as document types other than articles, such as reviews, books, book chapters, conference proceedings, editorials, letters, or notes, were excluded, as were publications without final status. Open access was not used as an inclusion or exclusion criterion.

Given the nature of the mapping, a subsequent phase of thematic exclusion through full-text reading was not performed. Records that met the bibliographic filters were retained for descriptive analysis and thematic classification based on titles, abstracts, and keywords. This methodological decision allowed for examination of the general structure of the retrieved output but did not permit establishing the clinical, methodological, or substantive eligibility of each publication based on its full content.

Identification and Cleaning of Records

The initial search retrieved 1,084 records. The Subject Area = All option retained all documents because no disciplinary restrictions were established. Subsequently, the Document Type = Article filter was applied, which excluded 403 records and left 681. Next, only publications with Final status were selected, resulting in the exclusion of an additional 39 records. Thus, the corpus consisted of 642 articles.

The consistency of the export was verified in the bibliographic file obtained from Scopus. The database included 642 records and 33 bibliographic variables. All articles had an abstract; 617 reported a DOI, and 25 did not. Likewise, no duplicates were identified using the DOI and EID fields of Scopus, so it was not necessary to remove records due to duplication.

Table 1 presents the process of identification and formation of the documentary corpus. Because no thematic screening or full-text eligibility assessment was performed, a PRISMA flow diagram was not used. The table shows only the bibliographic filters applied to the records retrieved from Scopus and the formation of the final corpus used in the descriptive and thematic analysis.

Extraction and organization of information

The bibliographic information was organized into a structured matrix based on the Scopus export. For the general characterization, the following were considered: publication year, title,

authorship, source, DOI, institutional affiliation, the country corresponding to the primary affiliation, abstract, keywords, document type, publication status, and EID.

Table 1. Identification and Screening Process of Records Obtained from Scopus

Stage	Excluded records	Remaining records
Initial identification in Scopus	—	1.084
Subject area = All	0	1.084
Document type = Article	403	681
Publication stage = Final	39	642
Final corpus for descriptive and thematic analysis	---	642

Source: Own elaboration based on data retrieved from Scopus (2026).

The geographic distribution was determined using the country corresponding to the first affiliation reported in each record. When the available information did not allow the country to be unequivocally identified, the article was classified as 'unidentified country'. This procedure was applied uniformly to the 642 records.

For the thematic analysis, 3 deductive dimensions were defined based on the study objective and the conceptual cores used in the search strategy:

1. Conceptions and perceptions of female leadership.
2. Conditions for access to and development of women's leadership.
3. Female leadership in higher education.

The first dimension comprised the following categories: conceptualization of female leadership; associated attributes and competencies; perceptions of and attitudes toward women leaders; and gender stereotypes and biases. The second included barriers, facilitators, and opportunities, as well as aspirations and leadership development. The third differentiated research focused on academic women or women managers, studies on students or future professionals, and studies that incorporated both populations.

The thematic categories corresponding to the first two dimensions were not mutually exclusive. Each article was considered a documentary unit and could receive more than one code when its title, abstract or keywords contained information corresponding to different thematic categories. The assignment was recorded in a dichotomous manner: presence of the category = 1 and absence = 0. For this reason, the frequencies of these categories should not be added to each other and their percentages can exceed 100% within the same dimension. On the other hand, for the population classification of the third dimension, each article was assigned to a single mutually exclusive category.

Thematic classification and validation procedure

The thematic classification was performed automatically using ATLAS.ti 26. For this purpose, the titles, abstracts, and keywords of the 642 articles were incorporated into the program as document units. Previously, a codebook was developed based on the dimensions and categories defined from the study objectives. Each category had an operational definition, guiding terms, and inclusion and exclusion rules intended to maintain uniform criteria during the analysis.

The first dimension included the codes conceptualization of female leadership, attributes and competencies associated with leadership, perceptions of and attitudes toward women leaders, and gender stereotypes and biases. The second comprised barriers to access to and development of leadership, facilitators and opportunities, and leadership aspirations and development. For the third dimension, differentiated codes were established for research focused on academic or managerial women, students or future professionals, both populations, and other approaches or unidentifiable populations.

Automatic coding was executed through searches for terms and expressions related to the operational definitions. ATLAS.ti 26 identified matches present in the titles, abstracts, and keywords and assigned the corresponding codes. The thematic categories were not mutually exclusive; therefore, the same article could receive several codes when its bibliographic information addressed more than a single component. The presence of each code was recorded only a single time per article, regardless of the number of matches found within the documentary unit.

After automatic coding, both authors reviewed the matches within their context to rule out assignments produced solely by the isolated occurrence of a term and to confirm their correspondence with the operational definitions. Ambiguous cases or differences in criteria were

examined jointly and resolved by consensus. When a discrepancy revealed shortcomings in a definition or assignment rule, the codebook criteria were reviewed and the corresponding search was run again. This procedure was maintained until agreement was reached between both authors on the definitive classification.

After validation was completed, the final frequencies of articles associated with each code were obtained from ATLAS.ti 26. To guarantee the traceability of the procedure, the authors prepared and preserved the codebook, the operational definitions, the decision rules, the expressions used in the automated coding, the code assignment matrix, and the results exported from the program. These records constituted the methodological support used to review and validate the final thematic classification.

Analysis strategy

The analysis was developed in two stages. In the first, a descriptive characterization of scientific production was carried out according to year of publication and country corresponding to the primary affiliation. For each variable, absolute frequencies and percentages were calculated, using the total corpus of 642 articles as denominator.

In the second stage, the dimensions and thematic categories identified in the titles, abstracts, and keywords were analyzed. Because these categories were not mutually exclusive, the same article could receive more than a single code. Consequently, the percentages express the proportion of the corpus in which each theme was identified and should not be interpreted as parts of a distribution that totals 100 %.

To specifically examine the relationship with the education of future professionals, the articles were differentiated according to the population or focus indicated in the bibliographic information: a) academic or managerial women; b) students or future professionals; c) both populations; and d) other approaches or populations not identifiable through the title, abstract, and keywords. This classification made it possible to avoid the mere presence of educational terms in the search equation being interpreted as evidence that one article directly studied students' perceptions.

Processing, thematic coding, frequency retrieval, and construction of the results matrices were performed using ATLAS.ti 26. Results are presented using absolute frequencies and percentages, accompanied by a narrative description of the observed trends. No meta-analysis, risk-of-bias assessment, or synthesis of the empirical results of the articles was carried out, due to the documentary scope of the mapping and because the full texts were not reviewed.

Transparency and reproducibility

To support the traceability of the study, the authors retained the search equation, the execution date, the original Scopus export, the matrix with the 642 records, the codebook, and the thematic classification matrix. The codebook contains the operational definitions, the guiding terms, and the inclusion and exclusion rules used to assign the articles to each category. These records made it possible to document the decisions adopted during the automated coding and its subsequent contextual validation by both authors.

The study has limitations arising from the exclusive use of Scopus and from the analysis restricted to metadata, titles, abstracts, and keywords. These sources make it possible to characterize general trends, but they do not always contain sufficient information to accurately determine the population, methodological design, or results of each study. Consequently, thematic frequencies represent mentions identified in the bibliographic information and not evidence regarding the effectiveness, magnitude, or quality of the phenomena examined.

RESULTS

General characterization of scientific production

The bibliographic search and cleaning yielded a corpus of 642 articles indexed in Scopus and published between 2020 and August 2026. The general characterization considered the year of publication and the country corresponding to the primary affiliation registered in the database.

In 2020, 67 articles were identified (10.4%), and in 2021, 66 were registered (10.3%). In 2022, 91 publications were counted (14.2%), and in 2023, 88 were identified (13.7%). The highest number corresponded to 2024, with 127 articles (19.8%), followed by 2025, with 115 (17.9%). In 2026, 88 publications were registered (13.7%). This last value comprises only the documents indexed up to

August 2026 and does not represent the complete annual production.

Overall, 509 articles (79.3%) were published between 2022 and 2026. The complete annual distribution is shown in Table 2.

Regarding geographic origin, the United States recorded 182 articles (28.3%), followed by South Africa with 39 (6.1%), the United Kingdom with 30 (4.7%), and Indonesia with 27 (4.2%). Canada and Australia each recorded 18 publications (2.8%), while India recorded 17 (2.6%). In Chile, 10 articles (1.6%) were identified. Other countries together accounted for 258 publications (40.2%), and for 43 records (6.7%), the country of the primary affiliation could not be unequivocally determined.

Table 2. General characterization of the articles retrieved from Scopus

Variable	Category	n	%
Year of publication	2020	67	10,4
	2021	66	10,3
	2022	91	14,2
	2023	88	13,7
	2024	127	19,8
	2025	115	17,9
	2026*	88	13,7
Country	United States	182	28,3
	South Africa	39	6,1
	United Kingdom	30	4,7
	Indonesia	27	4,2
	Canada	18	2,8
	Australia	18	2,8
	India	17	2,6
	Chile	10	1,6
	Other countries	258	40,2
	Not identified	43	6,7

Source: Own elaboration based on data obtained from Scopus (2026).

Note: *The 2026 data correspond to publications indexed up to August 2026.

Conceptions and perceptions of female leadership

The first dimension comprised four categories: conceptualization of female leadership, gender stereotypes and biases, perceptions of and attitudes toward women leaders, and attributes and competencies associated with leadership. These categories were not mutually exclusive; therefore, the same article could be assigned to more than a single category.

The conceptualization of female leadership was identified in 416 articles (64.8%). The content recorded in this category related to management styles, participation in decision-making, exercise of authority, relationship building, and influence within teams and organizations.

Gender stereotypes and biases were present in 258 articles (40.2%). This category comprised mentions of the association between leadership and masculinity, differentiated expectations regarding the behavior of men and women, biases in selection or promotion processes, and recognition of the legitimacy of women in positions of authority.

Perceptions of and attitudes toward women leaders were identified in 245 articles (38.2%). The content associated with this category addressed the acceptance, recognition, valuation, and evaluation of leadership exercised by women in educational, labor, and organizational contexts.

The attributes and competencies associated with female leadership were present in 226 articles (35.2%). The content recorded included communication, empathy, collaboration, negotiation, resilience, decision-making, strategic thinking, authority, problem-solving, and orientation toward results.

Table 3. Distribution of articles within the dimension of conceptions and perceptions of female leadership

Thematic category	n	%
Conceptualization of female leadership	416	64,8
Gender stereotypes and biases	258	40,2
Perceptions and attitudes towards women leaders	245	38,2
Attributes and competencies associated with leadership	226	35,2

Source: Own elaboration based on data obtained from Scopus (2026). Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive. The same article may address more than a single category; therefore, frequencies should not be added together, and percentages do not total 100%.

Conditions for access to and development of female leadership

The second dimension comprised three categories: facilitators and opportunities; barriers to access and to leadership development; and aspirations and leadership development. These categories were also not mutually exclusive.

Facilitators and opportunities were identified in 487 articles (75.9%). Content classified within this category included mentorship, professional networks, institutional support, availability of female role models, leadership training, support from colleagues, and promotion opportunities.

Barriers to access to and development of female leadership were present in 470 articles (73.2%). The content recorded included gender stereotypes, masculinized organizational cultures, limited access to professional networks, lack of promotion opportunities, absence of institutional policies, family responsibilities, and differences in recognition or performance evaluation.

Aspirations and leadership development were identified in 229 articles (35.7%). This category included content on motivation to assume managerial responsibilities, expectations of professional progression, willingness to apply for leadership positions, confidence, assertiveness, self-efficacy, and development of managerial capabilities.

Female leadership in higher education and the training of future professionals

The classification of the 642 articles according to the population or main focus identified in their titles, abstracts, and keywords revealed 4 mutually exclusive groups. The largest group comprised other leadership contexts or records whose population could not be sufficiently identified from the bibliographic information, with 426 articles (66.4%).

Table 4. Distribution of articles within the dimension of conditions for access to and development of female leadership

Thematic category	n	%
Facilitators and opportunities	487	75,9
Barriers to access and leadership development	470	73,2
Aspirations and leadership development	229	35,7

Source: Own elaboration based on data obtained from Scopus (2026). Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive. The same article may address more than a single category; therefore, frequencies should not be summed, and percentages do not total 100%.

Research focused mainly on women academics or women leaders comprised 171 articles (26.6%). These studies addressed the experiences of women academics, professors, researchers, deans, rectors, unit directors, and other women who held or aspired to positions of responsibility in higher education institutions. Their main foci were career trajectories, access to leadership positions, institutional barriers, promotion opportunities, mentoring, professional networks, and the exercise of leadership.

Studies focused exclusively on students or future professionals comprised 33 articles (5.1%). These analyzed perceptions of female leadership, gender stereotypes, attributed competencies, leadership aspirations, training experiences, and women's participation in student representation positions. Study populations included university students, STEM students, participants in professional training programs, residents, and individuals in equivalent training processes.

Another 12 articles (1.9%) jointly included students or future professionals and women academics or women in management positions.

These studies examined, among other aspects, the relationship between the presence of women in university leadership positions and the perceptions, aspirations, experiences, or development opportunities of those who were in training.

When the 2 categories that included students were considered jointly, 45 articles (7.0% of the corpus) linked to students or future professionals were identified. Similarly, 183 publications (28.5%) included academic or managerial women, whether as an exclusive focus or in combination with student populations. These results show that the inclusion of educational terms in the search equation does not imply that all records directly study the training or perceptions of future professionals.

Table 5. Distribution of articles according to population or study focus

Population or main focus	n	%
Women academics or managers	171	26,6
Students or future professionals	33	5,1
Both populations	12	1,9
Other approaches or non-identifiable population	426	66,4
Total	642	100,0

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data obtained from Scopus (2026). The categories in this table are mutually exclusive. Each article was classified into a single category, according to the population or main focus identifiable in its title, abstract, and keywords.

DISCUSSION

The results show that female leadership constitutes a multidimensional field of growing scientific interest. The concentration of 509 publications (79.3%) between 2022 and 2026 indicates a recent intensification of production, although the value corresponding to 2026 should be interpreted as partial, because the search was carried out in August of that year. The geographic distribution shows an uneven international production: the United States concentrated 182 articles (28.3%), whereas Chile recorded only 10 (1.6%). This disparity shows the limited representation of Latin American contexts within the corpus and warrants caution when transferring its trends to different institutional and cultural realities. The geographic and thematic breadth observed is consistent with the fragmented and interdisciplinary character noted by Buss et al. [2], who organize research on female leadership around individual characteristics, attributions, behaviors, perceptions, and contextual factors.

The first dimension shows that the conceptualization of female leadership was the most frequent category, identified in 416 articles (64.8%), followed by gender stereotypes and biases, present in 258 (40.2%); perceptions of and attitudes toward women leaders, recorded in 245 (38.2%); and the attributes and competencies associated with leadership, identified in 226 (35.2%). The coexistence of these categories indicates that female leadership is not examined solely on the basis of women's performance, but also through the social representations used to recognize and evaluate their authority. Tremmel and Wahl [3] found that images of male and female leaders continue to be differentiated through agentic and communal characteristics, whereas Feenstra et al. [4] observed a higher valuation of qualities traditionally considered feminine. In turn, Shen and Joseph [5] argue that gender differences in leadership effectiveness are usually small and depend on evaluation criteria and contexts. In this sense, the simultaneous presence of relational and strategic competencies in the corpus challenges the rigid division between masculine and feminine ways of leading.

The second dimension shows that female leadership trajectories are studied through the interaction between obstacles and support mechanisms. Facilitators and opportunities appeared in 487 articles (75.9%), while barriers were present in 470 (73.2%). The high co-occurrence of both categories can be explained by the fact that numerous studies simultaneously analyze the conditions that hinder women's access and the measures that could favor their development. Factors addressed include mentoring, professional networks, female role models, institutional support, promotion opportunities, stereotypes, masculinized organizational cultures, family responsibilities, and lack of recognition.

These results are consistent with Alshdiefat et al. [15], who identified sociocultural, organizational, and institutional barriers in university leadership, and with Manongsong and Ghosh [16], who highlighted the importance of mentoring that is sensitive to different dimensions of identity and inequality. Aspirations and leadership development, present in 229 articles (35.7%), must be understood within these conditions and not solely as individual dispositions, since opportunities, networks, and family responsibilities can strengthen or restrict them [17,18].

The population-specific classification substantially modifies the interpretation initially attributed to the training of future professionals. Only 33 articles (5.1%) focused exclusively on students or individuals in professional training, and another 12 (1.9%) jointly included students and academic or managerial women. In total, 45 publications (7.0%) addressed students or future professionals fully or partially. In contrast, 171 articles (26.6%) focused exclusively on academic or managerial women, and 12 included both populations, reaching 183 publications (28.5%). On the other hand, 426 records (66.4%) corresponded to other approaches or did not provide sufficient bibliographic information to unequivocally identify the main population. These results demonstrate that the inclusion of terms such as education, university, and student in the search equation expanded document retrieval, but this does not mean that all articles directly examine university students. Even so, the 45 identified studies confirm the existence of a line aimed at understanding how individuals in training construct perceptions, stereotypes, and aspirations related to female leadership. The studies by Berkery and Ryan [19] and Yeoward and Nauta [17] support the relevance of this line by showing that university experiences and interpersonal influences may be related to leadership representations and aspirations.

The mapping makes it possible to recognize a gap between research devoted to the trajectories of academic or managerial women and that focused on the perceptions of students from different disciplines. This gap supports the need to develop studies that compare how future professionals in management, engineering, computer science, health, education, and social sciences value female leadership and what role stereotypes, attributed competencies, the presence of role models, and training experiences play. However, these findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations. The analysis was restricted to a single database and to the information contained in metadata, titles, abstracts, and keywords. In addition, automated coding with ATLAS.ti 26 made it possible to organize a broad corpus, although it depended on operational definitions, search expressions, and contextual validation by the authors. Therefore, the frequencies represent the presence of content in the bibliographic information and not the magnitude, quality, or effectiveness of the results reported in the full texts. Subsequent studies could expand the databases consulted, examine the complete articles, and evaluate in greater depth the differences between disciplinary and geographical contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

The systematic mapping of 642 articles indexed in Scopus between 2020 and August 2026 made it possible to characterize recent scientific production on female leadership. The results show an intensification of publications since 2022 and an unequal geographic distribution, with a significant concentration in the United States and a limited presence of Chile and other Latin American contexts. The analysis made it possible to organize the production around conceptions and perceptions of female leadership, the conditions for its access and development, and the populations addressed in the educational and professional spheres.

Thematic frequencies show that the literature pays particular attention to the conceptualization of female leadership, gender stereotypes and biases, perceptions of women leaders, and the competencies attributed to their performance. Likewise, the high simultaneous presence of barriers and facilitators indicates that leadership trajectories are examined as a result of the interaction among personal, family, organizational, and sociocultural conditions. In this context, mentorship, professional networks, female role models, institutional support, and promotion opportunities appear as recurring themes, together with obstacles related to stereotypes, masculinized organizational cultures, family responsibilities, and inequality in professional recognition.

The classification by population allowed us to specify that 45 articles (7.0%) incorporated students or future professionals, either totally or partially, while 183 publications (28.5%) included academic or managerial women. This difference confirms that student perceptions represent a less developed line of research and justifies new research comparing disciplinary areas and cultural contexts, especially in Latin America. These conclusions should be interpreted considering

that the study used exclusively Scopus and analyzed metadata, titles, abstracts, and keywords through automated coding with ATLAS.ti 26 and contextual validation by both authors. Therefore, the frequencies obtained represent the presence of themes in the bibliographic information and do not allow for establishing the methodological quality, the specific results, or the effectiveness of the leadership described in the full articles.

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