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Exploring Perceptions of Barriers and Enablers for Women's Career Advancement in The Pharmaceutical Industry

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Abstract

Women have fought fiercely for their emancipation over the centuries, and today, they constitute nearly 50% of the workforce in the European Union and the United Kingdom. Most are employed in traditional female occupations, with only a small fraction holding positions in male-dominated professions. Furthermore, senior leadership roles are predominantly occupied by men. Research shows that women encounter numerous barriers throughout their career trajectories, reinforcing gender inequalities in top management. Nevertheless, certain factors facilitate their career advancement. Our qualitative phenomenological research involved six male and six female leaders in the pharmaceutical sector from the UK and Greece, recruited directly or indirectly from the researcher's professional network. Eligibility criteria included holding a leadership role for at least twelve months, either at the time of the research or in the past and having a team reporting directly to them. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, which subsequently underwent thematic analysis. This study addressed five research questions including perceptions of barriers and facilitators impacting women's professional growth. Core themes identified as barriers included individual setbacks, relational interactions, gender-based biases, stereotypes, and environmental and structural determinants. Key subthemes encompassed career-personal life complexities, self-promotion gap, imposter syndrome, female societal expectations and fear of backlash, skewed allocation of family responsibilities, intragender competition, discriminatory behaviours, sexual harassment, positive discrimination, organisational and national culture. Managers may influence women's ascent to hierarchy both positively and negatively. Conversely, individual catalysts, relational interactions, environmental and structural determinants emerged as core themes for enablers. Major subthemes included the pursuit of career opportunities, family support mechanisms, female role models and mentoring engagements. These enablers act as Ariadne's thread, facilitating navigation through the labyrinth of female leadership.

Keywords: bias; gender; labyrinth; leadership; stereotypes