

Climbing Through Gender Workplace Bias: Exploring How Emotional Intelligence Can Help Women Navigate Barriers to Career Advancement and Satisfaction

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Women face invisible barriers and obstacles that hinder their career advancement, often referred to as the broken rungs on the corporate ladder. This exploratory study examined whether emotional intelligence (EI)—conceptualized as perceived relationship awareness and leader-member exchange (LMX)—contributes to explaining women’s career advancement and career satisfaction, beyond the effects of self-reported gender biases in the workplace. The study assessed six related but distinct gender-related workplace biases: self-shielding, unequal standards, queen bee effect, lack of mentorship, challenges to competence, and glass cliff. The research design was a cross-sectional survey that adapted validated multi-item scales, with a sample of 165 full-time employed women across various industries. Findings indicate a more consistent negative relationship between self-reported gender workplace biases and career satisfaction versus career advancement. Relationship awareness and LMX each had significant positive relationships to both career variables. However, in hierarchical regression analyses, only LMX had a significant positive additive impact for explaining both career advancement and career satisfaction, beyond controlling for demographic and gender workplace bias variables. Relationship awareness had a significant positive additive impact for only career advancement. These results reinforce awareness that relational competencies can add to understanding career outcomes for professional women beyond experienced gender workplace biases.

Early Career Barriers and the Broken Rung

The McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org Women in the Workplace 2023 (2023) report focused on the challenges faced by women in corporate America, predominantly in terms of gender diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Women in the Workplace 2023 report raised awareness of the inequities and hurdles women face in their professional careers. An example of these hurdles would be to compare the unfairness to a game where certain players, especially employed women, face additional barriers and disadvantages versus employed men (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2023).

Women’s chances of promotion diminish at the beginning of their careers, a phenomenon coined as the ‘broken rung’ by McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org (2023), which makes it harder for women to catch up with their male professional peers in senior positions. As stated in the Women in the Workplace 2023 study, eight out of ten women desire advancement within their professional careers. However, in the 2023 report, for every 100 male promotions from entry-level positions to a manager-level position, only 87 women were promoted, revealing a career barrier to achieving senior leadership roles as the broken rung (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2023).

Despite the emerging recognition of the broken rung

phenomenon, there has been insufficient empirical research to date that takes a closer look at how career barriers impact career advancement and career satisfaction in women’s careers. This study explores how reported experiences of gender workplace bias influence career advancement and career satisfaction.

This study tests the relationships between emotional intelligence—operationalized as relationship awareness and leader-member exchange (LMX)—and career advancement and satisfaction. It also examines the incremental contribution of these factors to career outcomes beyond the influence of gender workplace biases.

The research question guiding this study is: to what extent do perceived relationship awareness and leader-member exchange (LMX) enhance professional women’s career advancement and career satisfaction beyond the effects of gender workplace biases?

Literature Review

General Theoretical Framework

This study examines the incremental impacts of emotional intelligence theory and leader-member exchange on women’s career advancement and career satisfaction beyond perceived gender workplace biases. Many scholars have studied the adverse effects of self-reported or perceived biases and gender microaggressions that may lead

to career dissatisfaction (Correll, 2017; Haines et al., 2016; Kumar & Soni, 2022). Bohren et al. (2019) emphasized that women are consistently undervalued compared to men, even when they achieve higher performance levels in their evaluations. Complicating their career advancement, this bias forms a cycle in which women deliver quality work compared to their male peers, yet still receive evaluations that are inequivalent to those of their male peers. Additionally, Wald et al. (2024) note that the negative bias and underconfidence women often hold about their career abilities, particularly in male-dominated fields, impact their career advancement because women internalize the social biases and stereotypes that suggest they are less qualified than men. A stark statistical reminder of this issue: women currently hold only 10% of CEO roles in Fortune 500 firms, with only 30% of board member seats held by women (Horowitz, 2023). Emphasizing self-doubt and biases can be detrimental, especially during the early career stages when women are still developing their professional identity and lack the experience to ward off these negative perceptions (Wald et al., 2024). There are three potential sources of discrimination Bohren et al. (2019) mentioned: (1) Belief-based with correct beliefs, where evaluators have accurate perceptions of the different group capabilities; (2) Belief-based with incorrect, biased beliefs, influenced by stereotypes evaluators hold a bias against certain groups in their performance evaluations; and (3) Preference-based discrimination, founded on individual biases that endure regardless of actual ability shown. Bohren et al. (2019) emphasized that preference-based discrimination is a contributing element that compounds the obstacles encountered by women in their pursuit of career advancement, as persistent biases fail to accurately represent women's competencies, leading to continuous events of devaluation that diminish self-efficacy, hindering career growth.

Defining Broken Rung Phenomenon

The broken rung and glass ceiling are widely recognized theories that address barriers that women face throughout their professional careers. The glass ceiling refers to the identified yet intangible and persistent obstacles that prevent women from advancing beyond senior leadership roles despite comparable qualifications and performance (Zhong et al., 2018). While the glass ceiling represents struggles at the top, the broken rung highlights the early-career promotion gap, where women are less likely than men to be promoted from entry level to first level management, causing a limitation in their access to future leadership opportunities (Parmer, 2021; McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2023). These early barriers disrupt the leadership pipeline and contribute to long-term advancement disparities. This study acknowledges the broken rung as a key entry point to broader self-reported gender biases. Beyond broken rung, this study focuses on how biases can affect professional women's career-related perceptions.

Gender Workplace Biases

Gender workplace biases encompass a range of invisible obstacles that significantly impact decision-making in

various organizational processes, especially in promotions and performance evaluations (Correll, 2017). Gender stereotypes, which encompass both descriptive (an opinion of characteristics belonging to women and men) and prescriptive (a belief about the conduct expected of women and men), worsen by generating unfavorable performance assessments and social norms consequences for women who excel in roles traditionally associated with males (Heilman, 2012). This research explores six dimensions (in italics below) of self-reported gender bias by women within an organizational setting, adapted from validated measures by Diehl et al. (2020) and adapted scales from McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org (2023). These include unequal standards, where women are held to higher performance expectations than their male counterparts. They may encounter queen bee syndrome, experiencing limited support or increased competition from women in leadership positions. A lack of mentoring, or reduced access to meaningful mentorship and career guidance, while glass cliff assignments place women in uncertain, high-risk roles with an elevated risk of failure. In response to these challenges, self-shielding behaviors, such as altering behavior to avoid setbacks or criticism, include suppressing emotions or minimizing one's personal voice. Often, challenges to competence, with frequent questioning of one's decision-making or leadership potential, are framed as constructive feedback or guidance.

These obstacles may stem from individual, institutional, or social factors that hinder professional advancement and development. An organization structure, such as investment banking, to a large extent, a male-dominant industry, fosters a framework that may make women feel outnumbered and unsupported, which may result in women within the organization being overlooked for promotions and opportunities (Rowe & Crafford, 2003).

Relationship Awareness Dimension of Emotional Intelligence

Research completed by Mayer et al. (2004), as cited in Mayer (2004), generally described emotional intelligence (EI) as the ability to think clearly and logically about one's emotions. This qualification would involve self-regulation in one's ability to manage and control one's emotions as well as the skillfulness in reasoning or problem-solving using their administration of emotional knowledge to engage and navigate challenges by incorporating the emotional factors into decision-making processes. Essentially, recognizing and discerning a difference of emotions in oneself and others by "reading the room" or observing non-verbal cues such as studying facial expressions, vocal intonation, and physical gestures Mayer (2004).

Various scales have been developed to measure emotional intelligence (EI), including relationship awareness, which is key to productive interpersonal interactions (Libbrecht et al., 2010; Serrat, 2017). Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez (2023, p. 10) point to the Wong-Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) as the most frequently applied measure of emotional intelligence, which is comprised of 16 items (7-point Likert-

type scale) designed to measure EI relative to four sub-constructs summarized as self-emotional awareness, use of emotions, regulation of emotions, and others-emotional awareness (Law et al., 2004). This research will utilize a shortened WLEIS measure to assess the self-reported ability to discern and understand others' emotions (i.e., relationship awareness), a dimension vital for understanding relationship interactions within organizational settings (Whitman et al., 2009).

LMX as a Relationship Management Dimension of EI

Expressing the importance of a multidimensional construct, Liden and Maslyn (1998) asserted that different aspects of the leader-member relationship can be measured and still be linked. This concept, known as leader-member exchange (LMX), encompasses multiple dimensions. Liden and Maslyn (1998) developed four scales, which Greguras and Ford (2006) later validated as effective tools for measuring how subordinates evaluate the quality of their relationship with their leader. These four dimensions of leader-member exchange (LMX) for subordinates are: affect, loyalty, contribution, and finally professional respect, a perceived quality between a leader and subordinates that has been known to lead to better communication and trust (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This study will use a shortened measure of LMX (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Both relationship awareness and relationship management (LMX) can impact the quality of workplace interactions and potentially have a direct as well as additive effect on career outcomes, by increasing the management and awareness of one's own and others' emotions for followers (Lee et al., 2018).

Career Advancement

"Women's apparent failure in hierarchical advancement may be more due to the characteristics and organizational location of their jobs rather than their own shortcomings" (Stover, 1994, p. 400, as cited in Kelly & Marin, 1998, p. 2). Career advancement is shaped by individual factors (e.g., gender workplace biases) that are experienced across the stages of one's career (Metz & Tharenou, 2001). Prior research conducted by Litzky and Greenhaus (2007) argued that women's aspirations for career advancement are lower than those of men, highlighting the influence of gender on career advancement desires. However, this could be rejected based on the earlier mentioned material regarding women's desire for advancement being similar to men, as referenced in the Women in the Workplace 2023 report (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2023).

"At low levels of experience, men were more likely than women to run for higher positions" (Wald et al., 2024, p. 1293), this finding aligns with the challenges to competence bias discussed in this study, which highlights how women may be viewed as less competent or prepared than men (notably in earlier career stages). In the same way, Verma (2020) surveyed women employed in banking in northern India and found that organizational strategies and policies need to address the challenges women

encounter in career advancement. Jointly, these results stress the need for organizational structural interventions directed at mitigating biases that hinder the career advancement of women.

Career Satisfaction

Springer's (2011) article, which cited Spector (1994), noted relationships and interactions with leaders, colleagues, and peers as an essential variable in understanding how satisfaction impacts other factors, such as opportunities for career advancement. Individuals with a greater emotional intelligence (EI) ability to regulate and manage emotions almost always have more satisfaction with their career experiences (Ealias & George, 2012).

Spurk et al. (2011) studied the construct of measuring career satisfaction over time, finding that emotional responses to career achievements and environments may maintain a consistent level of well-being over time. According to Greenhaus et al. (1990), a 5-point scale evaluating respondents' career satisfaction revealed a noticeable awareness of the factors guiding career satisfaction among the respondents. Several theories, including the situational occurrences theory, shed light on the concept of satisfaction. Characteristics and events that occur at work play a significant role in influencing satisfaction, such as self-reported gender workplace biases. These situational characteristics and occurrences have a profound impact (Springer, 2011).

Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

The conceptual model of this study explores how emotional intelligence contributes to women's career outcomes in the context of workplace barriers, the variable flow for this model is: perceived gender workplace biases > relationship awareness + LMX > career advancement and career satisfaction. The hypotheses focus on three key areas: a) gender workplace biases are negatively related to career advancement and satisfaction, b) emotional intelligence (EI), via relationship awareness and LMX, have positive relationships with career advancement and career satisfaction (Hamid & Ishak, 2019), and c) relationship awareness and LMX will significantly explain both career outcomes beyond controlled for workplace bias and demographic variables. The hope is that these hypotheses will illustrate the connection between gender workplace bias, emotional intelligence (EI), and career outcomes. How relationship awareness and LMX may actively support women's career advancement and satisfaction, including how these two EI variables can "transcend" workplace biases to an additive degree and further explain career outcomes.

Workplace Biases and Career Satisfaction

"While companies are increasing women's representation at the top, doing so without addressing the broken rung offers only a temporary stopgap" (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2023, p. 15). Workplace biases can lead to gender stereotypes that generate negative confidence in women's performance compared to their male

colleagues, many times imposing a division between the two with results that may impact women's career advancement (Heilman, 2012). We hypothesized that perceived workplace biases are negatively related to career advancement and career satisfaction (H1).

Linking EI and LMX to Career Outcomes

"Progress remains slow for women at the manager and director levels, creating a weak middle in the pipeline and impacting the majority of women in corporate" (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2023, p. 7). Emotional intelligence encompasses understanding and influencing the quality of relationships and individual contributions (Sears & Holmval, 2010), enabling effective navigation of the workplace's complex dynamics, integrating emotions to facilitate thinking, and fostering strong connections (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005). Strengthening emotional intelligence enhances workplace relationships and overall performance (Jordan & Troth, 2011), which is important for overcoming career obstacles and achieving career advancement. This research explores the potential connection between emotional intelligence, as measured by perceived relationship awareness and relationship management (i.e., LMX), and how it can affect interactions with others that are vital for career success (Goleman, 2001). This leads to the next two hypotheses. Hypothesis 2 (H2) proposes that relationship awareness is positively associated with career advancement and career satisfaction. Hypothesis 3 (H3) tests that leader-member exchange (LMX) is positively associated with career advancement and career satisfaction.

Further Explaining Career Outcomes: The Additive Effects of Relationship Awareness and LMX

"Gender bias is the inclination to favor one gender over another. Microaggressive behavior can occur when gender bias toward women in the workplace takes place" (Parmer, 2021, p. 90). Workplace biases, such as microaggressive activities, gender bias, and stereotypes, have a detrimental effect on the advancement of women in their careers (Heilman, 2012). Workplace biases contribute a great deal to the obstacles in the professional advancement of women. Emotional intelligence, as measured by relationship awareness and LMX, can serve as a valuable tool for women, beyond such biases (Shabani et al., 2021), and leading to greater perceived career advancement and career satisfaction. This leads to the following two hypotheses. Hypothesis 4 (H4) proposes that relationship awareness will explain career advancement and career satisfaction beyond controlled-for demographic and workplace bias variables. Hypothesis 5 (H5) proposes that leader-member exchange (LMX) will explain career advancement and career satisfaction beyond controlled-for demographic and workplace bias variables.

Research Method

Sample and Data Collection

Following approval from the University's Institutional Review Board on December 17, 2024, data collection focused on the workplace experiences of professional

women. First, a pilot study was conducted to pre-test all measures before giving out the full survey, using a sample of 41 women participants. The pilot study demonstrated that all multi-item measures listed below had good internal consistency reliability, with a minimum Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability of at least 0.75. In addition, the gender bias scales were sufficiently distinct from one another, as were career satisfaction and career advancement. These encouraging pilot study findings led to the implementation of the full study.

For the full study, a new sample was used, and an online survey was conducted using Qualtrics between March 2025 and mid-April 2025. The survey began with a CAPTCHA verification to ensure that only human respondents could proceed. All respondents were required to review an informed consent statement outlining the voluntary nature of participation, guaranteed anonymity, and detailed eligibility requirements. To proceed with the survey, respondents were required to confirm that they (a) were 18 years of age or older, (b) identified as a woman, and (c) were employed full-time (35 or more hours per week). Any respondents who did not meet these eligibility criteria were disqualified from completing the survey. To ensure attentiveness, one attention check item was embedded within the survey. At the end of the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to provide contact information through a separate, unlinked survey to maintain the anonymity of all survey responses. This allowed respondents to participate in a follow-up interview, focus group, or enter a drawing to win one of ten \$50 Amazon gift cards. Recruitment was conducted through the first author's professional and interest-based networks, focusing on women in various industries and at different career stages, as noted by Pousa et al. (2017), as cited in Vilela and Casado (2023). Snowball sampling was encouraged to increase industry diversity. Repeated outreach efforts by the first author included the PayTech Women (PTW) professional network members, the Park Slope Parents (PSP) online community members, and LinkedIn, engaging with professional connections and relevant interest groups. A total of 219 responses were collected. Of these, only $n = 165$ (76%) met the eligibility criteria, completed the survey, and were included in testing the study hypotheses. Ninety-two percent (151/165) of these respondents correctly identified the attention check item.

Measures

All multi-item scales below used a 7-point Likert response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Reliability, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was assessed for each scale using sample data collected, and a sample item is reported.

Career Satisfaction. Adapted from Greenhaus et al. (1990), career satisfaction was evaluated using a 5-item scale that assessed respondents' satisfaction with career success, goals, income, advancement, and skills development. A sample item includes, "I am satisfied with my progress toward meeting my overall career goals." Reliability was .86.

Career advancement. To evaluate perceived opportunities for career advancement, a 4-item scale adapted from Metz and Tharenou (2001) was used, which reflects respondents' access to high-performance assessments, leadership opportunities, support from leaders, and access to professional networks. A sample item states, "Consistently receiving high-performance assessments contributed to my career advancement." Reliability was .76.

Gender workplace bias. A 21-item blended scale adapted from Diehl et al. (2020) and McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org (2023) assessed six gender workplace biases. A 4-item scale was used to determine self-shielding behaviors in response to psychological safety at work. One scale item is, "I feel like I have to tone down what I say to avoid being unlikable." Reliability was .77. Experiences with women in leadership positions who block or hinder other women's opportunities, queen bee syndrome, were evaluated using a 3-item scale, which produced a reliability of .87. A representative item is, "I have had opportunities blocked by other women at work." Perceptions of unequal standards were measured using a 4-item scale to gather respondents' insight on higher scrutiny and differential workplace expectations based on gender. An example from the unequal standards scale is, "I work harder than my male colleagues for the same credibility." Reliability was .89. A 3-item scale assessed the lack of mentoring opportunities, and the deficiency of mentorship prospects yielded a reliability of .79. An included scale item is "I had to learn how to lead on my own." Focused on the experiences of challenges to competence, a 4-item scale assessing respondents' perceptions of diminished credibility returned a reliability of .84. One scale item is, "My judgment is questioned." A 3-item scale assessed perceptions of being given high-risk leadership roles or being unfairly blamed, referred to as the glass cliff. For example, "Women in my organization seem to be given leadership roles with a high risk of failure." Reliability was .78.

Relationship Awareness. The 4-item Others' Emotional Appraisal subscale in the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS; Wong & Law, 2002) was used to explore respondents' ability to recognize and understand others' emotions. Reliability was .85. The respondents' shared experiences of workplace conflict resolution. A sample item is "I have a good understanding of the emotions of people around me."

Leader-member exchange (LMX). Assessed with a 4-item scale developed from the LMX-7 scale by Liden and Maslyn (1998), which measured the reflected relationship quality, loyalty, and respect perceived by an employee for their direct supervisor. A sample item is, "My supervisor would come to my defense if I were 'attacked' by others." Reliability was .88.

Demographic variables. Eight variables were collected: employment status, age, years of professional experience, years with the current organization, race, highest level of education, job role, and current industry in which the indi-

vidual worked. Measurement for the full sample of $N = 219$ is reported in the results section.

Data Analysis

As noted, the final sample of $n = 165$ was used for testing the study hypotheses (H). Pearson correlations were used to test the relationships forecasted in H1 through H3. A three-step hierarchical linear regression was used to test H4 and H5. In both H4 and H5, for Step 1, three control variables (years of professional experience, race, and level of education) were used. For Step 2, the six gender workplace bias scales were entered, and for Step 3, either relationship awareness (H4) or leader-member exchange (H5) was assessed. Race was collapsed into two categories, White versus Non-white, to create a more even distribution based on the sample. Given the study's focus, years of professional experience were more relevant than age or years in the current organization. To test the hypotheses, the evaluation of changes in R-squared, overall R-squared, beta coefficients, and significance levels were conducted, and tests were two-tailed at p levels of .10, .05, or .01. SPSS (2021) was used for all data analyses.

Results

Sample Description

The full initial research sample is comprised of 95% full-time professional women. Table 1 reports that more than 75% of participants earned a Bachelor's degree (36%) or higher (31% a master's degree, 9% Doctoral or Professional Degree) and many are currently in a leadership job role (36% in mid-level management, 22% in senior management or executive leadership). There is also a wide distribution across industries. Overall, this heterogeneous sample represents professional women who were able to provide a point of view on experienced gender workplace bias and career outcome dynamics. The full initial sample was reduced to $n = 165$ based on the previously noted eligibility criteria for testing the study hypotheses.

Hypotheses Tests

Table 2 reports descriptive statistics and a correlation matrix for the 12 continuous variables, based on the final analytic sample of $n = 165$. Respondents reported an average of 17 years of professional experience (Mean = 17.13, $SD = 9.37$) and were well educated (Mean = 4.39 on a 5-point scale, $SD = 1.12$). Relationship awareness had a notably high mean (Mean = 6.04, $SD = 0.99$), indicating that this dimension of self-reported emotional intelligence was very strong among respondents. In addition, the correlations among the six gender workplace bias scales revealed that although they were positively related to each other, they were sufficiently distinct to be used separately in further analyses (Stevens, 1996). The correlation of $r = .51$ between career satisfaction and career advancement indicates 26% overlap (.512), also allowing for each to be used as a separate dependent variable.

Pearson correlation analysis was used to test the first three hypotheses and explore the degree and nature of the

Table 1*Sample Demographics of Survey Respondents (n = 219)*

Demographics	Frequency	Percent (of 219)
Identify as a woman		
Yes	210	95.9%
No	2	0.9%
Missing	7	3.2%
Employment Status		
Employed full-time	208	95.0%
Employed part-time	4	1.8%
Missing	7	3.2%
Age (years)	Mean = 39.6 SD = 11.46	
Years of Professional Experience	Mean = 16.9 SD = 9.1	
Years with Current Organization	Mean = 8.2 SD = 7.5	
Race (Collapsed)		
White	114	52.1%
Asian	14	6.4%
Black or African American	43	19.6%
Hispanic or Latino	15	6.8%
Native American or Alaska Native	3	1.4%
Two or more races	11	5.0%
Other	4	1.8%
Missing	15	6.8%
Highest Education Level		
High School or Less	1	0.5%
Some College / Associate's Degree	25	11.3%
Bachelor's Degree	79	36.1%
Master's Degree	68	31.0%
Doctoral / Professional Degree	20	9.2%
Missing	26	11.9%
Job Role		
Entry-Level / Non-managerial	9	4.1%
Associate / Non-managerial	56	25.6%
Mid-level Management	78	35.6%
Senior Management	30	13.7%
Executive Leadership	19	8.7%
Other	1	0.5%
Missing	26	11.9%
Industry (Currently Working In)		
Education	21	9.6%
Energy & Utilities	14	6.4%
Entertainment, Sports & Wellness	9	4.1%
Financial Services	56	25.6%
Government	6	2.7%
Healthcare & Life Sciences	20	9.1%
Professional & Business Services	32	14.6%
Technology, Information & Media	29	13.2%
Other	14	6.4%
Missing	18	8.2%

relationships among variables. Overall, as Table 2 shows, there were consistently significant negative correlations between all six self-reported gender workplace biases (self-shielding, queen bee syndrome, unequal standards, lack of mentoring, challenges to competence, and glass cliff) and career satisfaction, as well as a weaker pattern

of negative correlations with career advancement. This provides partial support for the first hypothesis (H1).

Looking at additional hypotheses testing, relationship awareness was significantly and positively correlated with career advancement ($r = .21$) and career satisfaction ($r = .16$), which supports H2. Leader-member exchange (LMX) showed a significant positive correlation with both career advancement ($r = .43$) and career satisfaction ($r = .36$), supporting H3.

Three-step hierarchical regression analyses were used to test H4 (shown in Table 3) and H5 (shown in Table 4). Common to both sets of analyses, in Step 1, demographic controls were implemented for race (recoded into non-white and white for ease of analysis), years of professional experience, and the highest level of education obtained. Years of professional experience was a significant positive correlate to both career outcomes. Next, in step 2, the six workplace bias variables were incorporated. Queen bee and lack of a mentor were significantly negatively related to career advancement, while unequal standards and lack of a mentor were negatively associated with career satisfaction.

Finally, Step 3 introduced either relationship awareness (Table 3) or LMX (Table 4). Relationship awareness significantly explained career advancement beyond the Step 1 and Step 2 variables for career advancement ($b = .23$), but not for career satisfaction. This provides partial support for H4. LMX significantly explained both career advancement ($b = .35$) and career satisfaction ($b = .21$) beyond the controlled variables, supporting H5. Overall, using relationship awareness in the full model, 18% of the variance in career advancement and 32% of the variance in career satisfaction was explained (Table 3). Using LMX in the full model, 29% of the variance in career advancement and 36% of the variance in career satisfaction was explained (Table 4).

Discussion

The data illustrate that perceived gender workplace biases can negatively affect women's career outcomes. Biases, i.e., queen bee and lack of a mentor for career advancement, and unequal standards and a lack of a mentor for career satisfaction, were associated with lower career outcomes. However, relationship awareness (emotional intelligence) and leader-member exchange (relationship management) positively correlated with both career outcomes. In more sophisticated regression analyses, relationship awareness significantly explained additional career advancement, while LMX significantly explained both career advancement and career satisfaction. As a check, no moderating effects, multiplicatively combining relationship awareness and LMX were found to significantly affect either career advancement or career satisfaction. Thus, emotional intelligence via relationship awareness and LMX can enhance upward perceived career attitude and advancement beyond self-reported workplace biases. These findings support the overall research question. In regression analyses, a lack of mentoring

Table 2*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Variables*

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Years of Professional Experience ^a	17.13	9.37	(NA) ^d											
2. Highest Education Level ^b	4.39	1.12	.04	(NA)										
3. Self-Shielding Bias ^c	4.10	1.31	.07	.07	(.77)									
4. Unequal Standards Bias ^c	4.48	1.66	.13	.09	.46**	(.89)								
5. Queen Bee Bias ^c	4.20	1.81	.18*	.18*	.38**	.51**	(.87)							
6. No Mentorship Bias ^c	4.11	1.64	.26**	-.01	.20*	.33**	.32**	(.79)						
7. Challenges to Competence Bias ^c	3.14	1.31	.06	-.05	.38**	.57**	.49**	.38**	(.84)					
8. Glass Cliff Bias ^c	3.67	1.62	.06	-.05	.33**	.64**	.47**	.38**	.64**	(.84)				
9. Relationship Awareness ^c	6.04	0.99	.12	.14	-.01	-.01	.04	-.05	-.28**	-.13	(.85)			
10. Leader-Member Exchange ^c	5.32	1.48	.12	.10	-.19*	-.13	-.20*	-.09	-.36**	-.26**	.35**	(.88)		
11. Career Satisfaction ^c	5.00	1.31	.11	.09	-.24**	-.44**	-.30**	-.28**	-.42**	-.44**	.16*	.36**	(.86)	
12. Career Advancement ^c	5.21	1.26	.14	.10	-.02	-.05	-.23**	-.19*	-.14	-.12	.21**	.43**	.51**	(.76)

Note. N = 165. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed). ^a Years of professional experience is a continuous variable (0 – 40 years); ^b Highest education level from 1 (High school or less) to 5 (Doctoral / Professional Degree); ^c All other measures used a 7-point response scale, where 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

^d Reliability estimates in parentheses in the diagonal, NA = not applicable.

Table 3*Hierarchical Regression Models Testing Relationship Awareness Impact on Career Outcomes Beyond Controlled-for Variables*

Outcomes	Career Advancement					Career Satisfaction				
	b	SE	R ²	Change R ²	F	b	SE	R ²	Change R ²	F
Step 1: Demographic Variables			.03		1.51			.03		1.58
Race ^a	-.04	.19				-.20	.18			
Years of Professional Experience	.03**	.01				.03**	.01			
Highest Education Level	.14	.09				.12	.08			
Step 2: Workplace Bias Variables			.15**	.12**	2.96**			.31**	.28**	7.66**
Self-Shield	.07	.08				-.02	.08			
Unequal Standards	.06	.08				-.20*	.08			
Queen Bee	-.24**	.07				-.06	.06			
Lack of Mentor	-.14*	.06				-.11+	.06			
Challenges to Competence	.05	.11				-.09	.10			
Glass Cliff	.02	.08				-.10	.08			
Step 3:										
Relationship Awareness	.23*	.10				.11	.10			
			.18*	.03*	3.28**			.32**	.01	7.04**

Note. N = 165. b = unstandardized beta. SE = standard error. + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (all two-tailed).

^aRace = 1 (Non-White), 2 = (White)

emerged as a commonly reported workplace bias in affecting both career outcomes. This result is consistent with prior research with Diehl et al. (2020). Years of professional experience was positively related to career advancement, which is consistent with Metz and Tharenou (2001).

Additional open-item responses substantiated the LMX variable, illustrating the impact of relationships on career advancement. One respondent noted, “I gained some insights about my job and how to improve my work ethic from my supervisor.” Several recounted experiences of male allyship in leaders who were “very supportive” and offered guidance that shaped their careers. At the same time, another shared that limited access to board meetings under an unsupportive leader negatively impacted their promotion potential.

To date, the authors are not aware of any other empiri-

cal research testing these variable relationships. As such, this research is expected to contribute to both academic literature and business practice by enriching organizational theory and practice, shedding light on addressing the broken rung issue, further encouraging the development of two emotional intelligence (EI) dimensions, relationship awareness and relationship management, and bolstering career advancement and satisfaction variables that are inclusive of women. This research seeks to build on existing ideas about the broken rung phenomenon by exploring the additive impact of two emotional intelligence (EI) dimensions on women’s career dynamics. Moreover, it explores how EI may shape work experiences within an organization’s ecosystem, including the ability to navigate workplace barriers and outcomes related to career advancement. Increased mentoring is an important organizational variable. However, the positive correlation found between queen bee bias and lack of mentoring ($r = .32$)

Table 4*Hierarchical Regression Models Testing LMX Impact on Career Outcomes Beyond Controlled-for Variables*

Outcomes	Career Advancement					Career Satisfaction				
	b	SE	R ²	Change R ²	F	b	SE	R ²	Change R ²	F
Step 1: Demographic Variables			.03		1.51			.03		1.58
Race ^a	-.10	.18				-.23	.18			
Years of Professional Experience	.02*	.01				.03*	.01			
Highest Education Level	.12	.08				.11	.08			
Step 2: Workplace Bias Variables			.15**	.12**	2.96**			.31**	.28**	7.66
Self-Shield	.11	.08				.01	.08			
Unequal Standards	.03	.08				-.22**	.08			
Queen Bee	-.20**	.06				-.04	.06			
Lack of Mentor	-.15*	.06				-.11+	.06			
Challenges to Competence	.11	.10				-.04	.10			
Glass Cliff	.04	.08				-.08	.08			
Step 3:										
Leader-member Exchange (LMX)	.35**	.06				.21**	.06			
			.29**	.14**	6.11**			.36**	.05**	8.46**

Note. $N = 165$. b = unstandardized beta. SE = standard error. $+ p < .10$, $* p < .05$, $** p < .01$ (all two-tailed).

^aRace = 1 (Non-white), 2 = (White)

seems troubling as it suggests that self-reported competition among women for leadership could reduce their desire to mentor other women. As such, this could make the process of women navigating the initial broken rung phenomenon more difficult for achieving their professional goals.

Study Strengths and Limitations

As noted earlier, the authors are not aware of prior research that has tested this specific combination of variables. As such, although a strength, the results should be regarded as exploratory and in need of further validation. A prior pilot study was conducted before the full study, and in both studies, all multi-item scales used, despite any adaptations, showed good reliabilities. The research study has several limitations that should be noted, including the use of a self-reported survey and a sample of voluntary respondents from professional networks, which restricts the generalizability. Although all data were self-report, the one-factor test indicated that 26% of the variance was explained by the first factor, so that method variance is not an overriding limitation to the findings (SPSS, 2021). The data were collected at a moment in time, and therefore, the research is unable to causally state if an increased gender workplace bias decreases women's career advancement or career satisfaction, only that a negative relationship exists. Additionally, a high mean and restricted variability in the relationship awareness variable may have contributed to weaker relationships compared to leader-member exchange in terms of explaining career satisfaction and career advancement. The voluntary sample was predominantly White, and approximately one quarter of the sample were in non-managerial roles. The Women in the Workplace 2023 report also noted that the promotion rate of 87 women for every 100 men decreased further to 73 women of color who were promoted to manager. Unfortunately, less than 20% of the current sample

were Black or African American women. Thus, greater Non-white racial representation is needed.

Practical Implications

This study found that all six perceived gender workplace bias measures were each significantly negatively related to women's career satisfaction. Although the pattern was not as strong, they were still negatively associated with self-reported career advancement. As such, an organization needs to monitor such self-reported biases, for example, through employee surveys and focus groups, and look for potential impact on outcomes such as decreased performance and voluntary turnover (Hayashi, 2023). An anonymous hotline for reporting specific discriminatory behaviors may also be useful. If such biases are built on preference-based discrimination (Bohren et al., 2019), i.e., enduring biases regardless of actual ability shown, then the organization needs to take steps to reduce this, for example by proactively conducting workshops to reduce such biases, as well as EI-related training, with follow-up to measure their impact (Hayashi, 2023).

Future Research and Conclusion

Findings showed a more consistent negative relationship between self-reported gender workplace biases and career satisfaction versus career advancement. Relationship awareness and LMX each had significant positive relationships to both career variables. However, only LMX had a significant positive additive impact for explaining both career advancement and career satisfaction, beyond controlling for demographics and gender workplace biases. Relationship awareness had a significant positive additive impact for only career advancement.

Since this study could not isolate early career stage, first-level managers, additional research should focus on the longitudinal impact of gender workplace biases and emotional intelligence variables for women within their

early career stage. Such a study could help explain prior research conducted by McKinsey & Company and Lean-In.Org (2023), which explored why women choose not to pursue advancement opportunities and the role that persistent experiences of gender workplace bias play in early career aspirations and the career advancement journey. Exploring career satisfaction utilizing the Power and Fast Track Job (PFTJ) scale, which centers attention on challenges and opportunities faced by professional women in the workforce, designed by Kelly and Dabul Marin (1998), would be useful to further delve into the impact challenges women face in career advancement and evaluate career advancement potential. Finally, removing perceived competition for leadership (queen bee bias) as an impediment to mentoring seems important in future research for women to advance and feel satisfied with their careers.

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