

Factors Affecting Omani Women's Representation in Leadership Positions

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Abstract

Introduction: The paper analyses why women remain under-represented in leadership positions in various organizations, with a particular focus on the barriers to female senior management positions in Oman.

Objectives: This study aims to explore the main obstacles that hinder women's advancement to senior management roles in Oman, despite their growing presence in the workforce.

Methods: A qualitative research method was employed. The study involved twenty women leaders as participants, providing insights into their experiences and challenges.

Results: Findings reveal that sexism at the workplace, limited examples of encouragement in their careers, and difficulties in achieving a work-life balance hinder women's progress into leadership roles. Participants identified biases during recruitment and promotion, lack of mentorship, and an added burden of balancing leadership and caregiving responsibilities.

Conclusions: The study highlights the need to address gender biases and structural barriers. Promoting gender diversity in leadership yields social equity benefits, fosters economic value, enhances organizational performance, and drives innovation.

Keywords: Gender diversity, leadership, workplace bias, mentorship, work-life balance.

1. Introduction

The representation of women in leadership positions has been a persistent issue in both developed and developing nations [1]. Despite notable strides toward gender equality in various sectors, women continue to face significant barriers when attempting to ascend to top leadership roles in business [2], politics, academia, and other fields. The lack of female representation at the highest levels of leadership not only stifles gender equality but also has profound socio-economic implications for organizations, economies, and societies [3]. This under-representation points to an enduring gender gap that is resistant to the advancements made in women's education, workforce participation [4], and overall economic involvement. Although progress has been made over the last few decades, with increasing awareness and institutional efforts to improve gender parity [5], the number of women in leadership roles remains disproportionately low in comparison to men [6].

According to the [7] women hold only 29% of senior management positions globally, and the percentage is even lower in fields like technology and finance. Similarly, a report by [8] notes that only 5% of CEOs in Fortune 500 companies are women. These figures are disheartening, especially given the significant number of women entering the workforce. The phenomenon of gender imbalance in leadership roles raises [9] fundamental questions about organizational dynamics, cultural perceptions, and structural barriers that inhibit women from reaching leadership positions despite the progress made in gender equality [10]. Gender inequality in leadership is not simply a matter of fairness; it has broader economic, organizational, and social consequences [10].

The lack of female representation in leadership positions constitutes a major challenge across the business sector together with government and education and non-profit organizations [11]. This investigation studies the life experiences of female executives through their exclusive leadership barriers

and their utilized methods to surpass such obstacles [12]. The research investigates labor market challenges women face in leadership advancement through interviews with twenty active females in executive positions [9]. By employing qualitative research approaches this study will generate new understanding about women's leadership challenges and identify what supports their professional growth in different career domains.

2. Literature Review

The Importance of Gender Diversity in Leadership

The issue of under-representation of women in leadership is critical for several reasons. Firstly, research has demonstrated that gender diversity in leadership is positively correlated with improved organizational performance [13].

Cross-sectional literature proves that diverse Board of Directors, including women, is positively associated with the generation of novel ideas and the general efficiency of decisions made [14]. [15] Mentioned that there is a 25% difference in average profitability for companies on the executive level in gender-diverse companies than that of the low gender diverse companies. It also describes how diverse leadership teams are more effective at finding new business opportunities [16] that involve high levels of risks, and at responding to changes in the global environment, which are paramount for today's highly competitive global environment.

Secondly, gender diverse leadership is associated with other organizational and economic returns [17]. According to the [18], a study done shows that the elimination of gender gap in labor force and leadership could add as much as \$12 trillion to the world economy in the year 2030 [10].

Barriers to Women in Leadership

Although there are numerous advantages of women in leadership [19], numerous factors have hampered the participation of women in leadership roles. These barriers are widespread in both the workplaces as well as in the general culture [20]. Sexism or favoritism or prejudice renders as one of the biggest challenges that women encounter along their careers [21]. This paper goes further and presents an understanding that gender stereotyping creates a bias that tends to encourage the hiring and promotion of males to leadership positions [22]. What may be adduced as

timely leadership qualities are assertiveness, confidence and competitiveness, which are endowed more on male folk [23]. These orientations are normally observed in women and the outcome is what is referred to as the double bluff where women are criticized for both being aggressive and for being passive at the same time [24].

The glass ceiling is reinforced by organizational cultures [25] that are male-dominated and resistant to change. In many organizations, leadership pathways are designed in ways that are more conducive to male career trajectories [26], often excluding women who may need to balance work with family responsibilities [27]. Women are also more likely to encounter maternal bias, where they are judged unfavorably in the workplace after becoming mothers. According to the [28] women with children are 79% less likely to be hired for leadership roles compared to women without children, even when they possess similar qualifications and experience.

Additionally, the lack of female role models and mentors in leadership positions compounds the problem. Women often lack access to the same professional networks as men, which are crucial for career advancement [29]. Mentorship and sponsorship are essential components of leadership development, yet women are frequently under-mentored [30] and under-sponsored [31]. This lack of mentorship limits their exposure to opportunities and prevents them from gaining the confidence and support needed to advance into leadership positions. As [32] points out in her book *Lean In*, women need advocates in leadership positions who can help break down barriers and encourage them to aspire to leadership roles.

Organizational and Cultural Change

For this to happen there is need for the cultural and organisational change to be made; including; the elimination of gender bias when formulating policies and also the use of equity in the recruitment, promotions and detainment of women in the workplace [33]. Moreover, it may be crucial not to reduce gender equality to a matter of women's concern and emphasize the need for men's actions and attitudes, especially of male subordinates for women's senior management promotion. Promoting mentorship, training of first-line supervisors, and working arrangements are tangible measures that can be implemented to assist women in their career

progression [34]. It aims at determining the motivational thesis for women not to attain leadership positions and to establish the socio cultural, organizational and personal factors that hinder women from arising to leadership positions [34]. Also, the study seeks to establish effects of the under-representation on organization's performance, economic growth and welfare. To ensure that the study offers possible solutions and necessary recommendations in regard to the challenges and possibilities [35], it aims at presenting concrete measures to advance gender diversity in leadership and bring about change in the leadership state.

This paper acknowledges that, despite the fundamental improvements towards women's representation in leadership roles, there is still much work that needs to be done in this area [36]. Breaking the barriers facing women in the leadership positions is not only advantageous to the female gender, but also beneficial in the formulation of healthier and productive organizations and a better society. This paper posits that it is crucial to advance in the area of gender diversity in leadership to enhance innovation, performance and economy.

3. Methods

Research Design

The study uses qualitative investigation to analyze women's deficient presence in executive roles across multiple professional domains.

Participants

A total of twenty female leaders at mid-to-senior levels participated through semi-structured interviews within business, government, education and nonprofit sectors.

Interview Process

The study has conducted interviews investigated how female leaders experienced their leadership path together with leadership hurdles and the methods they utilized to conquering these obstacles. The conferencing interviews took place at 45 minutes each although some interviews were conducted in person as well as through video conferencing.

Data Analysis

Study has applied thematic analysis as their method to extract major patterns and patterns from interview transcripts. The analysis involved six steps:

4. Results

Table 1: Key Themes Identified in Qualitative Interviews with Female Leaders

Theme	Description	Frequency (%)
Workplace Bias	Experiences of gender bias in recruitment, promotion, and daily work interactions	80%
Lack of Mentorship	Difficulty finding mentors or sponsors within the organization	65%
Work-Life Balance	Challenges in balancing leadership responsibilities with family or caregiving roles	70%
Double Standards	Being held to higher standards than male counterparts or criticized for assertiveness	50%
Organizational Support	Perception of inadequate support from organizations in terms of flexible work arrangements	60%
Career Development Barriers	Limited access to professional development and leadership programs	55%

As mentioned in table 1 the analysis of interview data revealed several recurring themes that reflect the barriers faced by Omani women in their pursuit of leadership roles.

Workplace Bias and Gender Stereotypes

The main obstacle in leadership comprehension arises from the stereotypes linking leadership theory to male perspectives. Individuals who demonstrate assertiveness together with their ability to make decisions and their competitive nature receive high societal respect. Women receive negative assessments when they exhibit the same leadership characteristics that men do with no criticism.

The main challenge in leadership comprehension exists because people frequently perceive leadership characteristics as belonging primarily to men. Society celebrates assertiveness together with the ability to make decisions and being competitive in men since these traits earn male respect. Women who demonstrate identical leadership characteristics end up receiving negative evaluations from society. Leadership barriers faced by women in their professional roles emerge because society treats them differently than men when displaying leadership traits thus requiring them to face more scrutiny for acceptance. It is the high time that society changed its outlook regarding gender and leadership because the model is clearly skewed against women's traditional leadership qualities.

In the process of decision making, I feel that my assertiveness may look like aggression to the other people. Therefore, while for men assertiveness represents positive character traits, the same in women is defined as negative behavior despite what may seem like scenarios that are harmless.

This makes many participants who attend decision-making meetings develop aggression due to my assertiveness. The example also shows a serious issue that in this case, assertiveness in women is considered a phenomenon that is equivalent to aggressiveness, while assertiveness in men is described as a desirable characteristic. My attempts of being confident in my contributions are covered up by people's choice of depicting me in the wrong light, as aggressive rather than assertive. The discrimination of my input creates prejudice, making women to be the opposite of what they are so as to be accepted. There continues being a need for clarification of what is meant by implicit prejudices which would allow all people to openly share ideas in the workplace as equals.

Societal Expectations and Cultural Norms

Other issues focusing on the pressuring cultural/societal roles that come with having a family emerged as another theme in the course of the study. Thus, in Omani context, many women have to prioritize family responsibilities and that hinders their career advancements.

Several of the participants said they experienced traditional family pressure, one of the education sector participant had this to say, "My family always expects me to put career second." On this, of course, my male counterparts do not have to endure. This is a cultural

belief that women ought to be subordinate to men and consequently, they should not be given leadership opportunities.

Lack of Mentorship and Professional Networks

Another issue that was brought out by the participants was that of mentorship and professional contacts or relationship. Some of them stated that senior role models who could help mentees in defining their career trajectories were scarce for women. One of the healthcare professionals said this: "There are still many roles available for women to role model to assume senior positions and even the male managers and supervisors do not recommend women to be trained due to cultural expectations." The absence of proper mentorship means that young female professional cannot be guided on how they can advance to leadership positions and this makes a gap in support structures for women in leadership.

Work-Life Balance and Double Burden

The majority of participants faced considerable difficulties while handling their work commitments alongside family obligations. Articles and management duties proved challenging for participants since they had to navigate between demanding professional and household responsibilities which sometimes resulted in job-related sacrifices particularly for women leaders. Public servants highlighted the necessity for adaptable work regulations to oversee their combined careers and family life in first-person statements, "The expectations are high at work, and the same is true at home. It often feels like a choice between my family and my career."

It has been established that WLB is an essential factor that enhances employee's psychological health, but gender differences exist, and WLB affects it. [37] Indicate that many factors contributed to the attainment of WLB by women, but the males preferred full time contract. According to [38], the writing suggests that poor WLB results in psychological exhaustion and poor job performance but only if self-efficacy is not present. Further, work to family and work to life interference is positively associated with stress and depressive symptoms [39]. [40] Investigate in the contexts of healthcare that WLB plays a moderating role in the relationship between EI and JS among CCN. Further, [41] note that QWL impacts job satisfaction and WLB with the help of the moderating role of the committed employee. University teacher's burnout and

teleworking willingness during COVID-19 lockdown and its influence to the performance and willingness to go back to work [42]. In order to eliminate those differences of WLB between different genders, there is a need to ensure that policies developed support employees' wellbeing and organizations provide a psychological support system.

5. Discussion

The study of interview data demonstrates that Omani women encounter various challenges when seeking leadership positions because of workplace prejudices and traditional social standards and minimal mentorship availability [43]. Many women face issues with assertiveness because positive self-expression is commonly misunderstood as hostility yet these stereotypes [44] do not apply to men. The misconception that women lack assertiveness causes decision-making bodies to silence their voices while maintaining false beliefs [45] that assertiveness is only observed in men [46]. Some cultures elevate family duties to have a central priority so women must choose to care for their home instead of pursuing their professional goals [47] and this hinders their career development. Female mentor availability remains low due to which women often cannot get support for their career advancement from professional networks [48]. Women experience intense conflict because they must manage the tension between their professional objectives and cultural duty to fulfill family roles [49]. This conflict frustrates women because they persistently fight between work dedication and conventional domestic commitments [50]. The development of inclusive workplaces requires immediate attention to unconscious biases [51] as well as the provision of mentorship services and work flexibility to accommodate female professionals who serve dual roles in life [51].

This paper also reveals the various cultural factors as well as organizational factors that hinder Omani women from attaining top management positions in their career. Global culture also presents barriers in leadership positions within the business world as women are dissuaded from aspiring to such positions as the stereotype of leadership involves characteristics that are closely linked with masculinity [52], especially if they depict women in assertive-authoritative style of leadership [53].

The nature of societal expectations of women specifically in regard to their roles in the family also affects them in career-selection [54]. Even as Oman has made certain progressive reform, cultural norms and expectations in career especially for women remain that women are caregiver and should still be primarily employed for the family than for occupational careers [55]. This is in line with Hofstede's cultural dimensions' model [56] that implies that collectivist societies are inclined toward giving priority to the family as well as the broader community more than the individual accomplishments of the women thus affecting the career.

The study shows that gender diversity in the leadership is important in the fight against ESG misconduct especially in the country that has put in place policies on gender diversity. Research shows that although equal opportunities in enrollment of higher education, women are still underrepresented in the academic management and there are differences from region to region [57]. Gender equality reporting in companies is not very systematic in its methodology, which requires the use of broad strategies [58]. Having women on the board is beneficial to the risk management function as it helps for conservative debt management [59]. Female scholars and professionals in soil science as well as oncology still experience the glass ceiling effect [60, 61]. The presence of women in audit committees cuts down on tax evasion since female-headed mechanisms improve corporate oversight [62]. Sex equality has an impact on organizational processes [63].

Progress made toward gender equity exists however the social expectations obstruct women from pursuing leadership positions in their careers. Society imposes pressure on women who face expectations of fulfilling parental responsibilities [64] so they experience restricted career growth prospects [65]. Men and women share societal biases which create an environment at the workplace that undervalues female work compared to masculine work.

The cultural dimensions' theory developed by Hofstede establishes a beneficial system to analyze this situation [66]. People in Oman's collectivist culture value family and community more than individual achievements primarily for women [67]. The collective culture leads organizations to follow male leadership patterns and uphold traditional masculine [68] and feminine roles. The leadership ambitions of women must often pass through a challenging environment because skepticism

together with active obstacles block their path [69]. Leader development efforts should challenge current social conventions because they need to establish an environment which appreciates women's leadership capabilities in professional settings [70]. Furthermore, the lack of mentorship and professional support networks limits women's access to guidance, career advancement, [71] and confidence-building opportunities.

Bridging the leadership gap is another factor that poses a challenge to women leadership; this is due to lack of role models who can offer guidance [72].

Other than that, due to family related issues, work life balance makes it even more difficult for women in Oman to promote themselves in their respective careers. This suggests that without such policies in place, women again are in a position that they have to make some painful choices [73] outside the work sphere, and this relates to career and family. This "double burden" limits fully the ability of female candidates to occupy leadership positions, thus the need to implement such policies as flexible working time and parent's leave as espoused by [74]. While considering the career progress, the female employees in Oman also faces significant challenges in work-life balance issues because they have to deal with multiple competing demands [67]. The findings thus demonstrate why it is possible to describe the workplace policies for support as crucial because they assist women to cope with their competing demands at work and at home. The two roles interfere with women's chances of pursuing leadership roles [75] and have a detrimental effect on their level of job satisfaction as well as their mental health.

Women experience internal conflict by battling workplace demands with their roles as caregiver even though they feel guilty about both responsibilities [76]. Women who face dual responsibilities often choose to work part-time or give up promotion opportunities since these decisions affect their professional development [77]. There is an immediate necessity to create family-friendly policies because people require better work-life balance [78]. The implementation of adaptive working schedules and mobile work strategies together with extended parental care provisions gives women the ability to maintain employment success [79] in addition to parental obligations.

A workspace must develop an understanding of feminine barriers yet provide full comprehension to all team coworkers and highest leaders [80]. Organizations that emphasize work-life balance create satisfied employees combined with reduced turnover while harnessing the complete potential of female executives [75] who boost diversity within leadership positions across Oman.

6. Conclusion

Multiple cultural organizational and individual barriers exist to explain women's scarcity in leadership roles throughout Oman's society. The progress made in gender equality remains insufficient because traditional gender roles combine with workplace discrimination and scarce mentorship programs which block women from executive positions. The advancement of women leaders in Oman needs complete policies that will target structural and cultural obstacles.

For improved gender equality at work Omani institutions must create programs which match female mentoring needs while allowing flexible work options and providing unconscious bias training for all staff members. Oman can attain Vision 2040 economic and social development targets while boosting gender equality through building a leadership community which fully recognizes women's accomplishments.

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