

**WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: FACTORS AFFECTING CAREER ADVANCEMENT
OF WOMEN TO SENIOR LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN THE NGO SECTOR : A
CASE STUDY OF SELECTED NGOS IN UGANDA**

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RJ22M021/028

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF THE MASTER OF ARTS IN
ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT OF UGANDA CHRISTIAN
UNIVERSITY**

April, 2025



**UGANDA CHRISTIAN
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DECLARATION

I ANENO EMILY declare that this is my original work. The information contained in the work is the collections that were obtained from people's ideas and opinion. This work has never been produced anywhere for any academic qualification.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Emily Aneno', with a stylized flourish at the end.

EMILY ANENO

Date April 8, 2025

APPROVAL

This Research Reports has been submitted with my approval as supervisor.



Joseph Jakisa Owor, PhD

April 8, 2025

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my husband, and life partner Christopher Byaruhanga for being my greatest support in my professional and Career development and Advancement. You were the one who drove me to Uganda Christian University to get my Admission on March 2, 2022. You spent late hours to support me read. My children, Emily, Jasmine, Giselle, you gave me love, support and encouragement in my studies during difficulties and happy times. I pray and hope that you will follow my footsteps.

This piece of work is dedicated to my late mother Mary Lalum Ogik who has been a strong pillar in my life, she taught me never to give up on myself even when everyone walks away. 36 years since you departed to glory, your word never phase from my mind... “Emily, always pursue your dreams, let nothing stop you. The sky is not the limit but a stepping stone for you”. Forever in my heart mum.

I dedicate this piece of work to my grandfather, Mr. Jackson Ogik, 16 years since you ascended into glory at the age of 104 years, your guidance remains true to me... “You will always meet challenges along the way of life, but always challenge and the challenges”. You taught me to love people even when they do not deserve it.

I further dedicate this work to my late uncle Joshua Boniface Langoya who was a hero in my life, he taught me always to rise up each time I fell down, dust myself and move on with life.

Finally, I dedicate this piece of work to all the fatherless and motherless children in the world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research has been made possible by the help of very many kind and self-less individuals whose varied contribution will be invaluable.

With all my heart I would like to thank the Almighty God who has enabled me to accomplish my tasks in the academic arena by his grace and mercy.

I wish to whole heartedly send my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Joseph Jakisa Owor for his keen interest, moral support, insightful and professional comments on the study and for his tireless efforts in reading through and correcting this work. Sir, you will never know how much your support, encouragement and comments helped to shape this research. Thank you so much. Above all, the sacrifice you made to ensure I complete this study amidst all the challenges I faced which I almost gave up the course.

Dr. Sam Dobrotka, In all my hopelessness, in all my confusion and pain. I had given up on the course. I did not see a future. I was literally shattered. Nothing was making sense around me. But you didn't give up on me. You encouraged me to carry on. I may never pay you for your kindness. My prayer for you is that May the Lord almighty remember you and grant you all your heart's desires.

Dr. Festus Muindi, and Dr. Joe Macias, you gave me chances even when I was behind my assignment schedule due to illness. Your kindness can never go unnoticed.

To Dr. Victor Umaru, your counsel to me in my personal life gave me the courage to push on with this course.

ABSTRACT

This study examined the factors that affected the career advancement of women into senior leadership positions within the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) sector in Uganda. Despite global and national efforts to promote gender equality, women remained disproportionately underrepresented in top leadership roles. Employing a quantitative research design, data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire distributed via Google Forms to 112 male and female professionals working in NGOs across Uganda. The study investigated individual, organizational, and socio-cultural barriers to women's progression. The findings indicated that limited access to leadership development opportunities, low self-confidence, and challenges in balancing work and family life were significant individual-level barriers. Organizational constraints included inadequate mentorship, gender-biased recruitment and promotion practices, and male-dominated workplace cultures. Socio-cultural factors—such as entrenched patriarchal attitudes and gender stereotypes—further limited women's leadership aspirations and acceptance. Although some NGOs had adopted gender-sensitive policies, their inconsistent implementation and weak accountability mechanisms reduced their effectiveness. The study concluded that a multifaceted approach—encompassing policy reform, capacity building, and cultural transformation—is essential to foster inclusive leadership and support the advancement of women in Uganda's NGO sector.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.0.Introduction

This chapter presents the background of the study, problem statement, action question, subsidiary insight questions, and study objectives.

This research explored the factors that affected the career advancement of women into senior leadership positions in the NGO sector. Despite comprising approximately 50% of the population, women remained underrepresented in leadership roles across various organizations, including NGOs (Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2020). Even when entering the workforce with similar qualifications and experience as their male counterparts, women often experienced slower career progression, lower earnings, and fewer leadership opportunities (Poltera, 2019).

Multiple factors contributed to this disparity, including organizational biases, societal expectations, and structural barriers within NGOs.

One key factor was the phenomenon of "backlash avoidance," as described by Chyu et al. (2020), whereby women deliberately avoided promotions to circumvent the negative societal reactions associated with occupying leadership roles. Additionally, workplace policies, limited access to mentorship, and exclusion from professional networks further hindered women's progression into leadership roles within the NGO sector.

Although women's employment prospects had improved over time—reflected in increased workforce participation and longer employment tenures (Abate & Woldie, 2022)—systemic barriers persisted. While women gained access to benefits such as paid maternity leave and flexible work arrangements (Toranse & Sikoti et al., 2023), outdated institutional practices, entrenched cultural attitudes, and restrictive legislation continued to reinforce the glass ceiling and restrict advancement. According to the World Economic Forum, closing gender inequality

gaps in Asia would take between 70 and 107 years, with an even more daunting outlook projected for Africa (Zahidi, 2019).

Research consistently indicated that organizations benefitted from increased female representation in leadership. Greater participation of women in executive roles was associated with improved financial performance, a broader talent pool, and increased organizational resilience (Abate & Woldie, 2022; The Humphrey Group, 2019). Firms with more women in leadership positions demonstrated better financial health, stronger capital buffers, and lower levels of non-performing loans (Zillman, 2019). Additionally, organizations with greater gender diversity reported higher job satisfaction among both male and female employees (Lorenzo et al., 2018). Nevertheless, women continued to face substantial obstacles to reaching senior leadership positions within NGOs.

Globally, the representation of women in senior leadership remained limited, with the challenges in Africa being particularly pronounced. Although many African women progressed to mid-management levels, they frequently encountered a glass ceiling when aspiring to top-tier positions (Elias, 2018). Factors such as race, gender bias, and cultural expectations further constrained their career advancement. Despite 34.2% of African women participating in economic activity, their presence in leadership roles remained disproportionately low (Abate & Woldie, 2022). Cultural norms and societal attitudes continued to shape women's career trajectories, despite the existence of policies aimed at promoting gender equality and professional advancement (Abate & Woldie, 2021; Poltera, 2019).

Understanding the barriers to women's career advancement in the NGO sector remained crucial. Research suggested that gender bias, rather than lack of capability or merit, often prevented women from securing leadership positions (Abakah, 2018; Javadi et al., 2016). Female leaders faced numerous social and professional obstacles rooted in enduring

stereotypes that questioned their credibility and leadership capacity. Boateng (2018) argued that women historically encountered resistance, mockery, and societal sanctions—often embedded within patriarchal structures—when pursuing leadership roles. Furthermore, gender-based prejudice in organizational systems continued to obstruct the progression of women into senior leadership (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Poltera, 2019). Addressing these challenges remained essential to achieving gender equity in leadership within the NGO sector.

1.1. Background of the Study

Women face multifaceted challenges in advancing to senior leadership positions in the NGO sector due to various factors. The purpose of this research is to investigate these factors and propose possible solutions to address the challenges identified (Yemenu, 2020).

The issue of women in leadership roles has been widely analyzed, reflecting both progress and persistent barriers to gender equality. There is growing recognition of the value women bring to leadership positions, including their unique perspectives, collaborative approaches, and empathetic leadership styles (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). However, despite these attributes, women continue to face significant challenges in career advancement within NGOs.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the resilience and vulnerabilities of women in leadership. While some female leaders were praised for their effective crisis management and empathetic leadership, others faced heightened scrutiny and gender-based criticism. This underscores the importance of supporting women in leadership positions and addressing systemic barriers that hinder their advancement in the NGO sector.

Women constitute more than half of the world's population, making their equal participation and representation in leadership essential for sustainable development and democracy. Their contributions to social and economic development are substantial due to their dual roles in productive and reproductive spheres (UNDP, 2015). The presence of women in leadership

positions enhances development and promotes social justice through gender equity at decision-making levels (Panigrahi, 2013). Ensuring women's involvement in leadership across various sectors, including NGOs, is vital for fostering good governance, transparency, and accountability while improving the quality of life for women (UN Global Compact, 2011).

According to Nigist (2008), equal participation of women in leadership and decision-making plays a crucial role in their overall advancement. Without active participation and the integration of women's perspectives at all levels, the goals of equality, development, and good governance cannot be fully achieved. Therefore, understanding the factors that influence the career advancement of women in Ugandan NGOs is essential for promoting gender-inclusive leadership and enhancing opportunities for women to attain senior leadership roles.

1.2.Statement of the Problem

Leadership should have been inclusive, with both men and women participating equally. However, studies indicated that women remained underrepresented in leadership positions (Thornton, 2012). Despite comprising half of the adult population and contributing significantly to society both within and outside the household, women were often excluded from positions of power. This exclusion negatively impacted their career progression and resulted in the violation of their rights (Thornton, 2012).

The underrepresentation of women in leadership remained a global concern (Thornton, 2012). The issue was not merely about abstract principles of representation but rather the systemic barriers that prevented women from advancing to leadership roles. A common misconception was that women preferred to be led rather than lead, which contributed to their exclusion from decision-making positions. Understanding these barriers was crucial for developing effective strategies and policies that promoted gender inclusivity and created environments conducive to women's leadership growth and success (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

Given these challenges, this research aimed to examine the factors that affected the career advancement of women to senior leadership positions in the NGO sector in Uganda. By identifying key barriers and potential solutions, the study sought to contribute to efforts that enhanced gender equity in leadership within the sector.

1.3.Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study was to identify and analyze the factors that hindered the career advancement of women to senior leadership positions in the NGO sector.

1.3.1. Specific Objectives

- i. To assess the socio-cultural factors that influenced women's participation in senior leadership positions in NGOs.
- ii. To investigate the organizational barriers that hindered the career progression of women in senior leadership roles.
- iii. To examine the personal factors that impacted the professional growth of women aspiring for senior leadership positions.

1.4.Main Research Question

What are the key factors affecting the career advancement of women to senior leadership positions in the NGO sector?

1.4.1. Subsidiary/Insight Questions

1. What socio-cultural factors impact the advancement of women into senior leadership positions in NGOs?
2. What organizational barriers prevent women from attaining senior leadership roles in NGOs?

3. What personal factors influence women's career progression into senior leadership positions in NGOs?

1.5. Action Research Question

How can Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) create strategies and initiatives to support the career advancement of women into senior leadership positions?

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0. Introduction

This chapter explores literature related to the factors affecting the career advancement of women into senior leadership positions in Uganda's NGO sector.

2.1. Empirical Review

2.1.1. Women and Leadership

Traditionally, leadership has been associated with masculinity, reinforcing the belief that men are better suited for leadership roles than women. Although the number of women in leadership has increased, particularly in Africa, following the ratification of the Beijing Declaration in 1995, women's representation and participation in senior leadership remain low. Hojgaard (2002) argues that the cultural structure of leadership itself creates gendered differences, making it harder for women to break into leadership roles.

Research has demonstrated a direct link between a country's attitudes toward women and its social and economic progress (Sharma, 2008). Women's leadership is crucial to economic growth, as their participation fosters inclusive development and improved decision-making (Soni, 2008). Effective leadership in any organization requires the ability to marshal and utilize available resources—such as people, finances, talent, and time—in the most efficient way possible (Ingraham, 2005). Numerous studies indicate that leadership capacity is directly related to organizational performance, and there is no empirical evidence to suggest that women are less capable leaders than their male counterparts (Obasanjo et al., 2013). Thus, excluding women from senior leadership positions based on gender discrimination hinders organizational and national development (Wilson Center Forum, 2017).

Furthermore, societal gender stereotypes significantly impact women's career advancement. In many cultures, girls may be denied access to education, limiting their future opportunities for leadership. Early marriages and expectations surrounding family responsibilities further complicate women's career progression, making it challenging for them to balance home obligations with professional aspirations (Obasanjo et al., 2013). Addressing these societal biases is essential to ensuring that women can advance to senior leadership positions in the NGO sector and beyond.

2.2. Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting Career Advancement of Women in the NGO Sector

2.2.1. Theoretical Literature on Women's Leadership

Worldwide, women's advancement in leadership has made significant strides over the last century. However, despite an increased presence of female employees in mid-management positions, executive roles remain male-dominated. Research indicates that less than 16% of corporate officers and board members of Fortune 500 companies are women (Catalyst, 2007). Women who do achieve leadership roles often face additional burdens, including family responsibilities, gender stereotyping, unequal pay, and lack of mentorship (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009).

Although women make up a significant portion of the workforce and managerial positions (Wirth, 2001), they remain underrepresented in senior leadership roles across most sectors (Davidson & Burke, 2004). One of the primary barriers to women's advancement is the unequal distribution of home responsibilities, which disproportionately falls on women. Studies by Wirth (2001) and Liff & Ward (2001) confirm that family obligations significantly hinder women's career progression. Childcare and household responsibilities continue to be primary concerns for women aspiring to senior leadership positions.

Another major challenge is gender stereotyping. Women are often perceived as less capable leaders, reinforcing the societal notion that leadership is a male-dominated domain (UN Women, 2016). These stereotypes contribute to workplace inequalities, including the gender pay gap. Studies have shown that, historically, women have been paid less than their male counterparts for the same work, further widening the disparity in career advancement opportunities (Francine et al., 2000). Additionally, lack of promotion due to gender bias threatens women's career progression (Brannon, 2016). The absence of female mentors in leadership positions further exacerbates these challenges, limiting women's access to guidance and support in their leadership journeys (UN Women, 2016).

2.2.2 Women's Leadership Challenges in Africa

In many African societies, traditional gender roles confine women to domestic and informal sector work (UN Women, 2016). While the employment rate of women in sub-Saharan Africa is among the highest globally (59.3%, ILO, 2017), much of their work remains subsistence-based, limiting their access to senior leadership roles. Educational barriers, domestic responsibilities, and gender norms continue to restrict women's professional growth (World Economic Forum, 2014).

The disproportionate allocation of domestic responsibilities also affects African women's leadership progression. For instance, the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Rural Women reports that African women spend an estimated 40 billion hours annually collecting water. This unpaid labor significantly reduces their ability to participate in leadership and economic activities (World Economic Forum, 2014). Furthermore, young girls are often denied education due to harmful cultural practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), further limiting their career prospects (UN Women, 2016).

2.2.3. Cultural Norms and Leadership Barriers

Socio-cultural norms continue to shape women's access to leadership roles in Africa. Many African societies operate under patriarchal structures, where men dominate decision-making at household, community, and national levels (Africa Barometer, 2021). Cultural beliefs discourage women from pursuing leadership positions, reinforcing gender stereotypes that portray them as unsuitable leaders (Abate & Woldie, 2022). In patriarchal societies, leadership is often constructed based on gender biases, making it difficult for women to break into senior positions (Latkin et al., 2022).

Women in leadership often face criticism regardless of their leadership style. If they display authority, they are labelled as aggressive or unfeminine; if they are expressive, they are deemed too emotional (Djan & Gordon, 2020). These biases undermine women's confidence and discourage them from pursuing leadership roles.

Additionally, proverbs and traditional sayings in many African cultures reinforce women's exclusion from leadership. For example, the Botswanan proverb, "A team of oxen is never led by females, else the cattle will fall into a ditch," and the Kenyan saying, "A woman and a sick man are the same thing," illustrate the deep-rooted cultural attitudes that limit women's leadership potential (Abate & Woldie, 2022). Such beliefs shape societal perceptions of women as weak and unfit for leadership, further restricting their career advancement opportunities.

The socio-cultural barriers limiting women's advancement to senior leadership positions in NGOs are deeply rooted in traditional gender roles, family responsibilities, gender stereotyping, and societal biases. Addressing these challenges requires targeted policies that promote gender equality, mentorship programs for aspiring female leaders, and broader cultural shifts that challenge outdated perceptions of women's leadership capabilities. NGOs must actively work to dismantle these barriers by implementing gender-inclusive leadership

development programs and advocating for workplace policies that support work-life balance for women.

2.3. Organizational Factors Affecting Career Advancement of Women in the NGO Sector

Gender discrimination in the workplace has long been a subject of debate (Bernard & Laband, 1995; Lazear & Rosen, 1990; Arrow, 1971). Gender inequalities remain one of the primary barriers to women's career advancement, particularly in leadership roles within NGOs (Ahmed & Al, 2016). Although women's leadership representation has improved over the last two decades, especially in Africa following the ratification of the Beijing Declaration in 1995, their participation in senior leadership roles remains low.

One major challenge faced by women is the "glass ceiling," a phenomenon where organizational structures and biases favor men in leadership hierarchies, leaving women sidelined (Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987). The term "glass ceiling" refers to an invisible barrier that prevents qualified women and other marginalized groups from advancing to mid- and senior-level management positions (Zachariasiewicz, 1993). This barrier is often reinforced by negative beliefs about women's management abilities and organizational cultures that unconsciously exclude them from leadership opportunities (Albrecht, Borland, & Vroman, 2003; Arulampalam, Booth, & Bryan, 2004).

While the glass ceiling has been widely studied in developed countries (Vianen et al., 2002), there is limited research on how it affects women in leadership within NGOs in developing countries. Some scholars argue that women may also self-select into occupations that offer fewer leadership opportunities, such as administrative support roles (Obasanjo et al., 2013). Additionally, African women often face cultural constraints that limit their access to higher education and professional development opportunities, further restricting their chances of securing senior leadership positions (Gberevbie et al., 2014; Emeka et al., 2011).

Family responsibilities also play a significant role in limiting women's career progression. Many women choose to prioritize family over career, which can result in fewer opportunities for promotion. In some organizations, promotion to management is based on tenure and uninterrupted work experience, which disadvantages women who take maternity leave or require flexible working conditions (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015).

Women in leadership positions within NGOs, particularly in South Africa, continue to face challenges that affect their performance and career sustainability (Nsibande, 2023). While progress has been made in increasing women's representation in decision-making roles, many who attain senior positions eventually leave due to persistent obstacles within the workplace.

Globally, women remain underrepresented in both public and private leadership roles. Despite significant educational and professional gains over the past 50 years, men still greatly outnumber women in senior positions (ILO Global Report, 2015; AAUW, 2016). From corporate boardrooms to government offices, from universities to NGOs, men continue to dominate leadership roles. Women's social and professional status has improved, yet barriers remain that hinder their advancement in senior leadership positions (UN Report, 2012; World Bank, 2012; WEF, 2017).

According to a survey conducted by the Global Network for Advanced Management, women remain underrepresented in business leadership roles worldwide, with variations across industries and countries suggesting that systemic barriers extend beyond a singular culture of patriarchy (Global Network Perspectives for Management, 2017). Addressing these challenges within NGOs requires intentional efforts, including policy reforms, mentorship programs, and workplace structures that support gender inclusivity in leadership.

2.4. Personal Factors Affecting Career Advancement of Women in the NGO Sector

Work-life balance refers to how well individuals manage their work, personal obligations, and aspirations, and it is a critical factor influencing job satisfaction (Djan & Gordon, 2020). The relationship between work-life balance and leadership is particularly significant for women, as family-related work interruptions often impact their chances for promotion and career progression. These interruptions are not limited to childcare responsibilities but also include household duties and social expectations regarding gender roles.

Compared to men, women in senior leadership positions are more likely to be childless or married without children. This trend reflects the societal perception that leadership roles demand sacrifices in personal life, particularly for women (Toranase & Sikoti et al., 2023). Gender divisions in household labor often restrict women's career mobility, preventing them from relocating for job opportunities or pursuing promotions that require additional time commitments. These constraints are especially relevant in the NGO sector, where leadership positions may involve travel, extended working hours, or relocation.

Women continue to bear a disproportionate burden of household responsibilities, including childcare and domestic management, alongside their professional obligations. Many professional women opt for less demanding roles or alternative career paths after having children, due to the pressure of balancing work and family life. In some cases, they leave their careers entirely to become stay-at-home mothers or transition to less competitive sectors. Djan and Gordon (2020) highlight that work-life balance significantly influences employees' job satisfaction and organizational commitment, as well as their overall well-being and interactions with colleagues and stakeholders.

Women who manage to balance career and family responsibilities often face high levels of stress. If not effectively managed, this stress can negatively affect both their professional

performance and personal well-being. Addressing these challenges requires organizations, including NGOs, to implement supportive workplace policies such as flexible working arrangements, parental leave, and mentorship programs aimed at promoting women's leadership development.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology used in the study. It includes the research design, population, sample size, sampling strategies, data collection instruments, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

3.1. Research Design

The research adopted an Action Research design, which focused on addressing a specific problem or issue. This design was particularly suitable as it enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that affected the career advancement of women to senior leadership positions in the NGO sector in Uganda. Additionally, Action Research facilitated the development of intervention strategies to address these challenges.

The study primarily employed a quantitative approach, with data being collected through structured, self-administered questionnaires using Google Forms. These questionnaires were distributed to carefully selected respondents, both female and male, within the identified NGOs. Self-administration ensured confidentiality and independence, promoting truthful and unbiased responses. Furthermore, this method allowed the study to reach a larger sample size within the limited timeframe while ensuring the standardization of data collection, thereby enhancing consistency and reliability.

3.2. Research Approach

This study adopted a quantitative research approach to examine the factors that influenced the career advancement of women to senior leadership positions in the NGO sector. This approach was appropriate because it facilitated the collection and analysis of numerical data, enabling the identification of patterns, relationships, and statistical significance. By focusing on

measurable variables such as socio-cultural, organizational, and personal factors, this approach ensured an objective evaluation of the research questions.

3.3. Study Population

The study population consisted of both women and men in the NGO sector. Women provided insights into the challenges they faced in advancing to senior leadership positions, while men offered perspectives on the barriers that hindered women's career progression. The total study population was estimated to be 100 individuals, encompassing both men and women across different NGOs in Uganda. A total of 112 individuals completed the questionnaire. Including both genders ensured a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting women's career advancement in the NGO sector.

3.4. Sample Size

The sample size for this study was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample determination table. According to this table, the sample size was 80 respondents.

3.5 Sampling Strategies

3.5.1 Purposive Sampling

Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, meaning they were intentionally chosen based on their key roles in their respective organizations. This selection method ensured that the study gathered relevant insights from key decision-makers, particularly human resource leaders and country leads, who played critical roles in shaping leadership policies and support systems. This targeted approach helped identify the institutional and systemic factors that affected the career progression of women into senior leadership positions in the NGO sector.

3.6. Data Collection Instruments

3.6.1 Self-Administered Questionnaire

A self-administered Google Forms questionnaire, distributed through an online link, was used to collect data from the respondents. The questionnaire was structured into different sections and included Likert scale-based questions ranging from 1 to 5. The sections covered: demographic characteristics, socio-cultural factors affecting career advancement, organizational factors affecting career advancement, and personal factors affecting career advancement.

3.7 Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis were conducted using Google Forms, which allowed for efficient organization, visualization, and interpretation of data. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the responses, while inferential statistical techniques were employed to analyze relationships between different factors influencing the career advancement of women to senior leadership positions in the NGO sector.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical research standards to ensure the rights and well-being of participants were protected. Key ethical considerations included:

- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** Participants were assured that their responses remained anonymous and confidential.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were not offered incentives.

- Informed Consent: Respondents were required to provide consent before participating in the study.
- Right to Withdraw: Participants had the right to decline answering specific questions or withdraw from the study at any point without facing any penalty.
- Researcher Bias: The researcher remained mindful of potential biases and took necessary steps to mitigate them, ensuring an objective and balanced study.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.0. Introduction

This section presents and analyses data on the key factors influencing women's career advancement in NGO leadership. The data is categorized based on organisational, societal, and personal factors affecting women's progression to senior leadership roles.

4.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

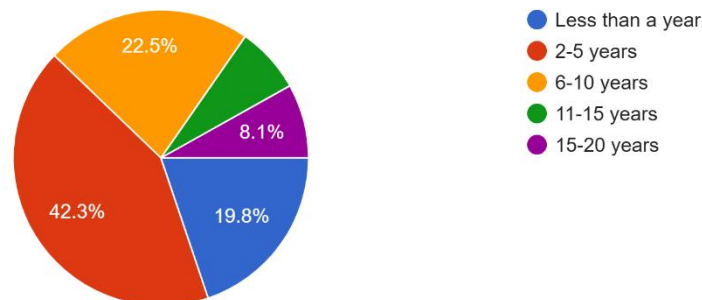
Demographics of Survey Respondents (N = 112)

4.1.1. Length of service

Among the 111 respondents, 42.3% had been with their organizations for 2–5 years. Additionally, 19.8% had served for less than a year, while 22.5% had been with their organizations for 6–10 years. A smaller percentage—7.2%—had worked for 11–15 years, and 8.1% had been with their organizations for over 15 years. These findings suggested that women often took longer to reach leadership positions.

How long have you worked with your current organization?

111 responses



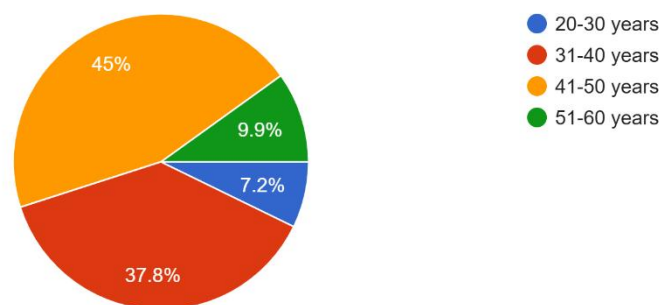
The data on length of service provided a meaningful lens through which to examine the factors affecting women's career advancement to senior leadership roles in the NGO sector. The

distribution of service years among the 111 respondents indicated that a significant number of women remained in organizations for extended periods; however, relatively few advanced to senior positions. This finding suggested that longevity within an organization did not necessarily translate into upward mobility, particularly for women. Several key factors may have contributed to this pattern:

4.1.2. Age Analysis

A total of 111 respondents provided their age in the survey. The majority (45%) were in the 41–50 age group, while 37.8% fell within the 31–40 age group. Additionally, 9.9% were aged 51–60, and 7.2% were in the 20–30 age group. These findings suggested that leadership progression in NGOs typically occurred after individuals gained extensive experience.

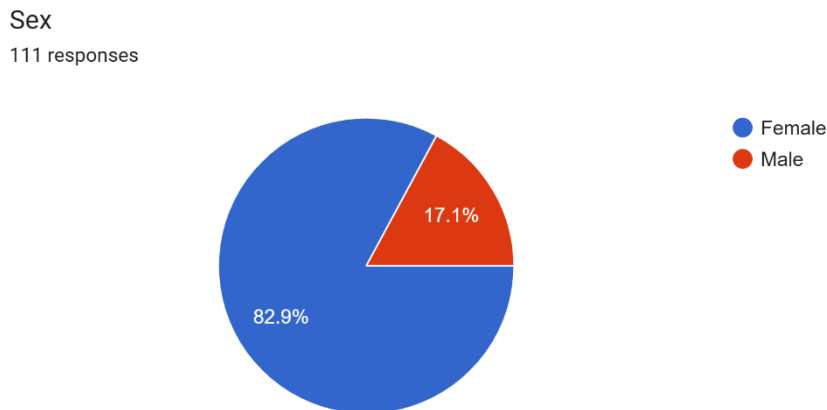
Your age group
111 responses



The age distribution among respondents offered valuable insights into the timing and trajectory of leadership advancement for women in the NGO sector. The fact that 45% of respondents were aged 41–50 and 37.8% were aged 31–40 implied that women often attained leadership positions after accumulating significant professional experience. This trend aligned with broader evidence indicating that women’s advancement into senior leadership roles was often delayed by structural, organizational, and socio-cultural factors that required them to overcome

more hurdles and invest more time than their male counterparts to reach similar levels of leadership.

4.1.3. Gender Analysis



A total of 111 respondents disclosed their gender. The majority were women (92 respondents, 82.9%), while men accounted for 19 respondents (17.1%). This gender distribution underscored the relevance and credibility of the study in capturing women’s experiences in the NGO sector, particularly with regard to career advancement and leadership pathways.

The high proportion of female respondents reflected a broader trend in the NGO sector, which was often female-dominated at the grassroots and mid-management levels. However, despite this numerical dominance, women remained underrepresented in senior leadership positions. This paradox raised critical questions about why gender representation at the highest organizational levels did not mirror the composition of the wider workforce.

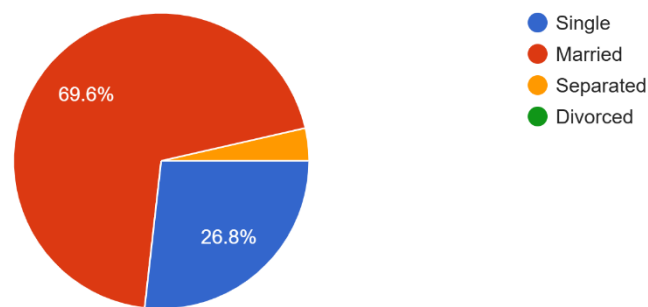
Furthermore, the fact that over 80% of the respondents were women provided a robust foundation for examining systemic barriers—such as gender bias, lack of mentorship, and unsupportive organizational cultures—that disproportionately affected women. The data,

grounded in women's lived experiences, offered authentic and nuanced insights into the obstacles faced in pursuing leadership roles.

The overwhelmingly female respondent base amplified the legitimacy and necessity of a gender-focused analysis on career advancement within the NGO sector. It reinforced the argument that women's experiences were not only relevant but central to understanding leadership dynamics and advancing equitable change across organizations.

4.1.4. Marital Status Analysis

Marital status
112 responses



A total of 112 participants responded to the question regarding marital status. The majority of respondents (69.6%) were married, 26.8% were single, and 3.6% were separated. These findings indicated that a significant proportion of women in the NGO sector were managing both professional and familial roles. This dynamic highlighted a critical aspect of women's career trajectories—the challenge of balancing family responsibilities with professional advancement.

Married women often faced dual expectations: contributing effectively in the workplace while also fulfilling traditional family and caregiving roles. These expectations frequently resulted in time constraints, reduced availability for leadership development opportunities, and limitations in mobility—particularly in roles that required travel or extended work hours. Consequently,

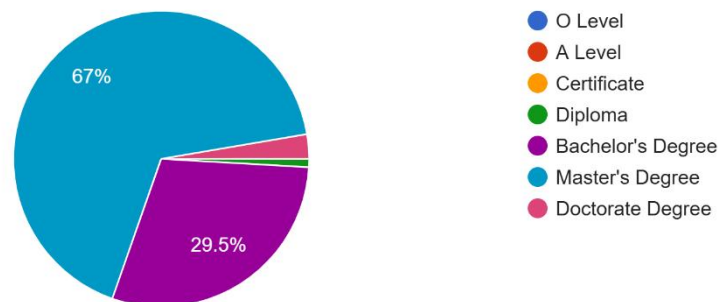
even highly capable and experienced women were sometimes perceived as less committed or suitable for leadership positions, thereby hindering their progression.

Moreover, the demands of family life tended to reduce women's participation in networking activities, mentorship programs, and strategic projects—opportunities that were essential for career advancement into senior roles. This imbalance disproportionately affected women, as men were less likely to encounter the same level of domestic responsibility or societal pressure to prioritize family over career.

These findings underscored the pressing need for NGOs to foster supportive organizational environments that recognized and addressed the realities of women’s lives. This included implementing flexible work arrangements, parental leave policies, childcare support, and family-inclusive leadership development programs. By acknowledging and accommodating family responsibilities, NGOs could more effectively retain female talent and promote equitable pathways to leadership.

4.1.5. Education level Analysis

Highest Education Level
112 responses



All 112 respondents reported having attained at least a diploma-level qualification, indicating that the sample was composed of well-educated individuals. A majority (67%) held a master’s degree, while 29.5% had a bachelor’s degree, and only 2.7% had attained a doctorate. These

findings suggested that respondents had considerable access to higher education, equipping them with the academic credentials typically required for professional roles in the NGO sector.

The high levels of educational attainment among the women surveyed indicated that a lack of qualifications was not a primary barrier to leadership advancement. In fact, many women in the sector appeared to possess the necessary academic credentials for senior positions, yet still encountered significant challenges in progressing up the career ladder. This reinforced the argument that structural, cultural, and institutional barriers—rather than educational shortcomings—were often the key impediments to women’s advancement.

Furthermore, the large proportion of respondents with postgraduate degrees reflected the commitment, capability, and ambition of women within the NGO workforce. However, despite their qualifications, many women continued to experience the effects of the "glass ceiling," where advancement beyond a certain level became disproportionately difficult due to gender bias, lack of mentorship, and limited access to leadership opportunities.

The relatively low number of women with doctoral qualifications also pointed to possible gendered disparities in access to the highest levels of education. These disparities could be attributed to broader socio-economic factors such as time constraints, caregiving responsibilities, and financial barriers—factors that disproportionately affected women.

The educational profile of the respondents indicated that women in the NGO sector were highly qualified and professionally capable. Nevertheless, they continued to face significant barriers to senior leadership, highlighting the need for NGOs to look beyond academic credentials and actively address the institutional and cultural challenges that hinder the career advancement of women.

4.2. SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS AFFECTING CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Despite high levels of education and significant years of service among women in the NGO sector, their progression into senior leadership roles remains limited. This disparity cannot be attributed solely to individual qualifications or work experience; rather, it is deeply rooted in socio-cultural factors that shape organizational dynamics, gender roles, and leadership perceptions. The following socio-cultural elements emerged as significant barriers to women's career advancement:

4.2.1 Gender Roles and Family Responsibilities

A large proportion of the respondents (69.6%) are married, highlighting the common reality of women balancing family life with professional obligations. In many societies in Uganda, women are still expected to shoulder the bulk of caregiving and domestic responsibilities, regardless of their professional commitments. These expectations often limit women's availability for roles that require long hours, travel, or high flexibility—key demands of leadership positions. As a result, women may be perceived as less committed or capable, even when they are equally or more qualified than their male counterparts.

4.2.2 Societal Expectations and Stereotypes

Deep-rooted societal norms continue to define leadership in masculine terms, associating traits like assertiveness, decisiveness, and authority with men. Women leaders, on the other hand, may face bias or be unfairly judged for displaying these same traits. Such stereotypes can influence recruitment and promotion decisions, making it more difficult for women to be recognized as suitable candidates for senior roles, especially in male-dominated leadership structures.

Respondents shared their experiences with cultural expectations, with the majority indicating that they had faced societal norms imposed upon them. Below are some of the key expectations they encountered:

- a. Gendered Expectations in Careers and Society: "Women were expected to prioritize children." "Women had no say in important matters." (*Respondent 008, single, 2025*)
- b. Barriers to Women's Education and Opportunities: "Women's education was undervalued in my region." "Girls weren't seen as capable of handling challenges." (*Respondent 078, single female, age range 20-30, 2025*)
- c. Family Influence and Challenging Norms: "I wanted to escape the struggles women faced." "My father challenged cultural barriers for me." (*Respondent 086, married female, 2025*)

These selections highlight the most critical gender-based limitations and efforts to overcome them. However, some individuals also shared how they challenged these expectations to pursue their ambitions.

4.2.3 Cultural Perceptions of Leadership Timing

The majority of respondents are in the 31–50 age range, indicating that leadership roles are typically attained after years of experience. However, societal expectations may cause women to delay or even forgo leadership opportunities during prime career-building years due to pressures to marry, raise children, or support extended family. These cultural norms influence how women plan their careers and whether they are able or willing to pursue senior roles when they become available.

Socio-cultural factors play a profound role in shaping women's career trajectories in the NGO sector. Even with the necessary qualifications and experience, women continue to face invisible barriers rooted in gender roles, societal norms, and organizational cultures. Addressing these

challenges requires not just individual effort, but systemic change—including gender-sensitive leadership development, inclusive workplace cultures, and proactive policy reforms that support women's advancement.

4.2.4. Family Support and Its Influence on Career Progression

The majority of respondents (85 individuals, or 80.2%) reported receiving strong encouragement from their families to pursue education and career goals, while 12.3% indicated they were moderately encouraged. This level of support is a critical socio-cultural enabler that has contributed to the respondents' high educational attainment—reflected in the fact that most hold a master's degree, many have a bachelor's degree, and a few have attained doctoral qualifications.

Family support plays a pivotal role in challenging traditional gender norms and empowering women to pursue professional aspirations, particularly in societies where women's roles have traditionally been confined to the domestic sphere. Encouragement from family not only provides emotional motivation but often includes practical support, such as assistance with childcare, financial backing for education, or simply the validation of career ambitions.

However, while family support has enabled educational achievement, it does not always translate into unhindered career advancement. Even with a strong foundation, women may still face systemic barriers within organizational structures and broader societal expectations that limit their upward mobility. This points to the complex interplay between personal support systems and institutional constraints, emphasizing that family encouragement is a necessary—but not sufficient—factor in overcoming gendered career obstacles.

4.2.5. Gender Roles and Societal Expectations

A total of 109 respondents shared their experiences regarding how societal expectations surrounding women's roles have influenced their career progression. A recurring theme

emerged: the persistent struggle to balance professional aspirations with traditional gender norms. Many respondents reported that societal expectations placed on them as women—particularly in regard to family and caregiving responsibilities—continue to shape their career paths, often limiting their availability or willingness to pursue leadership roles.

4.2.5.1. Balancing Career and Family Expectations

“I have to perform highly at work while juggling the responsibilities of being a full-time mother and wife. I can't work long hours or relocate far from home because of family obligations.” (Respondent 012, married female, aged 31-40, 2025)

This response reflects a common reality for many professional women: the dual burden of maintaining high performance at work while also being the primary caregiver at home. Such expectations often restrict women from taking on demanding roles that require extended hours, travel, or geographic mobility—factors that are frequently associated with leadership positions.

4.2.5.2. Gender Bias in Career and Leadership

“Top management does not believe in my competence until I excel in interviews and prove my capabilities through HR insights and skills.” (Respondent 051, married female, aged 51-60 years, 2025)

This quote highlights the gender bias that many women encounter in the workplace. Women often feel the need to over-perform or consistently prove their value before being considered for advancement. Unlike their male counterparts, whose competence may be assumed, women must often demonstrate their capabilities repeatedly to overcome implicit skepticism from decision-makers.

4.2.5.3. Cultural Expectations and Inner Motivation

“Despite these challenges, societal expectations have also motivated me to build my career and strive for greater achievements.” (Respondent 050, married female, aged 41-50 years, 2025)

While many respondents cited challenges, some also shared how societal expectations—though limiting—served as a source of internal motivation. For these individuals, the barriers they face become a driving force to challenge norms and pursue leadership roles, suggesting a level of resilience and agency in navigating structural inequalities.

These responses reflect the complex and often contradictory pressures women face in their career journeys. On one hand, traditional gender roles create barriers to leadership through time constraints, societal judgments, and organizational bias. On the other hand, some women use these challenges as fuel to break through societal limits and redefine their professional paths. This duality underscores the need for NGOs and other institutions to actively support gender equity not only through policy but also by shifting cultural mindsets that hinder women's full participation in leadership.

4.2.6. Pressure To Priority Family Responsibilities Over Career Growth

A total of 112 responses were received for the question regarding the pressure to prioritize family obligations over professional growth. The findings revealed that 52.7% of respondents sometimes felt compelled to prioritize family responsibilities over their careers, while 21.4% reported feeling this pressure always. Additionally, 11.6% stated that they often experienced such pressure, 9.8% rarely felt it, and only 4.5% never encountered it.

These statistics suggested that a significant majority of respondents—over 85%—faced both external and internal pressures to place family obligations at the forefront of their lives, often to the detriment of their career advancement. This finding aligned with traditional gender roles, particularly prevalent in many cultures, where women were expected to fulfill caregiving and domestic responsibilities irrespective of their professional goals.

4.2.6.1. Implications for Career Advancement

The data underscored that many women in the NGO sector were caught in a dilemma between their professional aspirations and societal expectations of their roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers. This conflict significantly limited their career mobility in several ways:

- Time constraints due to caregiving responsibilities often prevented them from taking on high-demand roles or positions requiring long hours or relocation.
- Societal judgment discouraged some women from pursuing leadership opportunities that might require them to “neglect” family duties, regardless of their competence or ambition.
- Lack of supportive workplace policies, such as flexible work arrangements and parental leave, exacerbated these challenges, forcing many women to choose between family and career, often at the expense of professional advancement.

While some women navigated these pressures by opting for flexible roles or adjusting their career ambitions to accommodate family needs, the persistence of systemic and cultural expectations continued to reinforce gender disparities in leadership.

These findings revealed the gendered nature of career advancement challenges, where family responsibilities were disproportionately placed on women. The pressure to prioritize domestic roles impeded women’s access to leadership opportunities and limited their professional progression. To foster more equitable advancement in the NGO sector, it was imperative for organizations to implement policies that supported work-life balance—such as flexible scheduling, remote work options, and inclusive parental leave. Such measures could empower women to pursue leadership roles without being forced to compromise their familial responsibilities.

4.3. ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS AFFECTING CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Organizational factors play a significant role in influencing career advancement, especially for women seeking senior leadership roles. These factors include organizational culture, leadership support, career development programs, workplace policies, and structural barriers that may either support or hinder career progression. This section explores key organizational factors based on the responses from the survey participants.

Creating an environment where women can thrive and progress to senior leadership roles requires organizational commitment to these factors, paving the way for more diverse and inclusive leadership in the future.

4.3.1. Level of Support from Senior Management for Women's Career Advancement

A total of 107 participants responded to the question regarding the level of support they received from senior management in promoting women's career advancement.

Key Findings:

- 48.6% of respondents reported that their senior management was very supportive.
- 36.4% indicated that their senior management was somewhat supportive.
- 13.1% remained neutral, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.
- 1.9% stated that their senior management was very unsupportive.

The majority of respondents (85.4%) perceived their senior management as either very or somewhat supportive in advancing women's careers. This indicated that many NGOs had made progress in fostering gender equity at the leadership level, creating environments that encouraged women's professional development.

However, the 13.1% who remained neutral suggested that while formal policies might exist, their practical implementation or visibility could be limited. This neutrality may have pointed to a disconnect between policy and practice, where supportive measures were not consistently observed or experienced by staff.

The small proportion (1.9%) who described senior management as very unsupportive reflected that some organizations still struggled to cultivate inclusive leadership cultures. These organizations may have lacked strong enforcement of gender-equity policies or demonstrated weak commitment from leadership.

While the overall sentiment toward senior management's support was positive, the findings highlighted a need for continued efforts. Organizations must not only develop gender-equity policies but also ensure they are visibly practiced and actively championed by leadership. Such efforts would reinforce institutional support and help dismantle systemic barriers to women's advancement into senior leadership roles.

4.3.2. Equal Leadership Training Opportunities for Women and Men

A total of 107 participants responded to the question regarding whether women are given equal leadership training opportunities as men in their organization.

Key Findings:

A significant number of respondents affirmed that their organizations provide equal leadership training opportunities for both women and men. A lower number of women in managerial positions, which suggests a gap between training opportunities and actual leadership outcomes for women.

Perception of Equal Opportunities: While many respondents report that their organizations provide equal training opportunities, the concerns raised suggest that

inequality persists in practice. Women, despite having access to training, often face additional challenges due to societal expectations and family-related responsibilities.

The barriers mentioned, such as limited travel opportunities and fewer women in managerial positions, point to underlying structural issues within organizations that may hinder the equitable distribution of leadership development opportunities. These challenges can disproportionately affect women's progression into senior leadership roles.

The findings suggest that while policies may aim to provide equal opportunities, there may be inconsistencies in how these opportunities are applied or made available. For instance, the prioritization of men for short-term projects and travel suggests a need for greater policy attention to ensure that women have equal access to the same leadership development opportunities.

Although many organizations report offering equal training opportunities, disparities in access and outcomes are evident, especially for women with family responsibilities.

To bridge the gap and truly provide equal opportunities, organizations should focus on addressing structural challenges and ensure that training, development, and exposure are offered equitably to all employees, regardless of gender.

4.3.3. Policies Supporting Women's Career Growth

A total of 108 participants responded to the question regarding whether their organizations have policies that support women's career growth.

Key Findings:

Majority of Respondents: The majority of respondents reported that their organizations do have policies in place to support women's career growth. This suggests that many organizations have

recognized the importance of gender equity and have implemented measures to promote women's advancement.

4.3.3.1.Types of Supportive Policies Mentioned:

- *Flexible Work Arrangements:* Some organizations have flexible working hours or remote work options, which support women, particularly those with family responsibilities, in balancing work and personal life.
- *Leadership Development Programs:* A number of organizations offer tailored leadership training programs specifically designed to develop women into leadership roles.
- *Promotion and Career Advancement Policies:* Several organizations have transparent policies for promotions and career advancement that are inclusive and aim to reduce gender bias.

Despite the existence of these policies, some respondents expressed doubts about their implementation and effectiveness. While policies may exist on paper, they may not always be fully enforced, or there may be gaps in how these policies are experienced by women in the organization. A few respondents reported that some policies are not widely communicated, leaving employees unaware of the support available to them.

Limited opportunities for senior leadership positions despite the existence of supportive policies.

Interpretation & Insights:

- *Organizational Commitment:* The fact that many organizations have policies supporting women's career growth indicates a commitment to gender equality and professional development. However, the effectiveness of these policies depends on their implementation and visibility.

- *Challenges in Execution:* Even when policies are in place, their impact can be diluted if women are unaware of them, or if the policies are not consistently applied across all levels of the organization. Policy communication and monitoring are essential to ensure their effectiveness.
- *Structural Gaps:* Despite the presence of policies, structural barriers such as glass ceilings and bias in promotions can still hinder women's advancement. This highlights the need for not only supportive policies but also a cultural shift within organizations that actively promotes women's equal access to leadership roles.

While a significant number of organizations have policies aimed at supporting women's career growth, their effectiveness hinges on clear communication, consistent application, and addressing any existing structural barriers. Organizations must continue to evolve their strategies to ensure women have equal access to leadership opportunities and that supportive policies translate into tangible career advancements.

4.3.4. Effectiveness of Gender Equality Policies for Women in Leadership

A total of 107 respondents provided feedback on the effectiveness of gender equality policies in their organizations.

Key Findings:

Responses from 107 participants revealed varying perceptions of the effectiveness of gender equality policies in promoting leadership among women:

- 30.8% of respondents believed their organization's gender equality policies were *effective* in promoting equitable leadership.

- 43.9% considered the policies *somewhat effective*, indicating that although positive aspects existed, there was still room for improvement—particularly in terms of implementation and measurable impact.
- 20.6% remained *neutral*, possibly suggesting that they had not observed significant outcomes or tangible changes resulting from the policies.
- 3.7% described the policies as *somewhat exclusive*, implying that they may not be fully inclusive or might contain implicit biases that limit their reach or impact.
- 0.9% rated the policies as *very ineffective*, potentially reflecting experiences where the policies failed to address key barriers, or where they benefited only select groups of women.

Interpretation and Insights

The findings indicate a spectrum of perceptions regarding gender equality initiatives. While it is encouraging that a notable portion of respondents found the policies effective, the largest group (43.9%) characterized them as only somewhat effective. This points to a critical implementation gap: while policies may exist on paper, their integration into daily organizational practices and leadership culture may be inconsistent or insufficient.

The neutral responses (20.6%) further suggest a lack of visibility or awareness of the policies' impact, which could reflect limited communication, monitoring, or outcomes-based evaluation. These results imply that organizations must move beyond symbolic compliance and focus on making gender policies actionable, measurable, and widely understood across all staff levels.

Moreover, the fact that a small percentage of respondents found the policies somewhat exclusive or very ineffective highlights potential inclusivity issues. Certain subgroups of women—such as those from marginalized backgrounds, with caregiving responsibilities, or in

lower-tier roles—may not fully benefit from existing frameworks. This suggests a need to reassess and refine gender equality policies to ensure they address intersectional barriers and are genuinely equitable in both design and impact.

Overall, while many organizations in the NGO sector have gender equality policies in place, the perceived effectiveness remains moderate. To enhance women's career advancement into leadership, NGOs must prioritize not only the existence of such policies but also their implementation, inclusivity, and accountability. Regular policy reviews informed by staff feedback, disaggregated data analysis, and leadership commitment will be vital to fostering a genuinely supportive environment for women's advancement.

4.3.5. Gender Bias in Promotions & Leadership Appointments

A total of 108 respondents provided feedback regarding their experiences with gender biases in promotions and leadership selections within their organizations.

Key Findings:

a. Gender Bias

- *Experienced Gender Bias:* A significant percentage of respondents reported experiencing gender biases in the promotion and leadership selection process. Many expressed concerns that women are less likely to be promoted or selected for leadership roles compared to their male counterparts, even if they have the same or superior qualifications and performance.
- *Common Biases Identified: Preference for Male Candidates:* Some respondents noted that leadership roles tend to be filled by men, with gender bias often influencing decision-making.
- *Bias Against Women in Leadership:* There were also mentions of a perception that women are less suited for leadership roles due to stereotypes or traditional gender roles.

- *Underrepresentation in Leadership:* Several respondents highlighted the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, despite having the qualifications and experience necessary to take on such roles.

b. Barriers Faced by Women:

- *Limited Access to Leadership Opportunities:* Women often faced limited access to leadership roles, with biases influencing decisions on who gets promoted or appointed to senior leadership positions.
- *Family-Related Bias:* Some respondents felt that family obligations, often associated with women, were used as a reason to deny them leadership opportunities or promotions, even though they had the required capabilities.

c. Qualitative Insights from Respondents:

- *"I feel that even though I have the necessary skills and experience, men are often chosen for senior roles, or I am overlooked for leadership training."*
- *"In my organization, women are often seen as 'too emotional' or not 'tough enough' to take on leadership roles, even though we are equally capable." (Respondent 074, married female, aged 41-50, 2025)*
- *"I've been told that I was passed over for a leadership role because I am a mother, and they didn't believe I could handle the responsibilities of the position." (Respondent 094, single female, 2025)*
- *"I have often seen male colleagues, with less experience, getting promoted ahead of women in my team." (Respondent, Married Male, 2025)*

d. Perceived Gender Bias:

The findings suggest that gender bias in promotions and leadership appointments is still a significant issue for many women, despite qualifications, experience, and performance. This

may be attributed to gender stereotypes and traditional beliefs about leadership and the roles women should play within organizations.

e. Limited Access to Leadership Opportunities:

Women continue to face systemic barriers to leadership opportunities, despite being equally qualified as men. This may be due to implicit biases, such as the perception that women are less assertive or less capable of making tough decisions, as well as structural barriers such as limited access to key leadership development programs.

f. Family-Related Discrimination:

Gender bias related to family responsibilities is a notable challenge for many women. The assumption that women with families may not be able to handle the demands of leadership roles can lead to discriminatory practices that hinder their advancement. This is especially relevant in contexts where traditional gender roles still persist, which may lead to involuntary career sacrifices for women.

In summary, gender bias in promotions and leadership appointments remains a significant challenge for many women. Organizations must actively address systemic barriers, provide equal opportunities for leadership development, and work to mitigate the impact of implicit biases. Implementing these measures will not only promote gender equality but also enhance organizational performance by ensuring the best talent is selected for leadership roles, regardless of gender.

4.3.6. Factors Influencing Promotion Decisions in Organizations

A total of 108 respondents provided feedback regarding their experiences with gender biases in promotions and leadership selections within their organizations. Their responses reveal that

while many view promotions as being primarily based on performance and qualifications, informal and implicit factors—including gender dynamics—continue to influence career progression.

Key Findings:

- 67.6% – Performance and Qualifications: A majority of respondents believe promotions are largely merit-based, with emphasis on skills, expertise, and demonstrated achievements.
- 13% – Seniority and Experience: Some respondents noted that length of service and accumulated experience play a role in promotion decisions.
- 15.7% – Workplace Relationships and Networking: Internal relationships, visibility, and rapport with leadership were identified as important, albeit informal, determinants of promotion.
- 1.9% – Gender Considerations: A small minority indicated that gender was an explicit factor in promotional decisions.
- 1.9% – Other Factors: A few respondents mentioned other unspecified influences.

Although only a small percentage of respondents cited gender as a formal factor, this figure likely understates the influence of gender-related dynamics. Other parts of the study revealed that issues such as family obligations, limited access to mentorship, and cultural expectations continue to inform women's career advancement experiences. These factors suggest the presence of implicit bias and structural limitations that may not be formally acknowledged but still affect women's upward mobility.

The prominence of workplace relationships and internal networking as factors highlights the importance of visibility and access to influential circles—elements that may not be equally

accessible to all employees, particularly women who may face exclusion from informal networks or leadership circles. Meanwhile, seniority was recognized as relevant, but clearly less influential than performance or visibility.

Implications for Practice:

The findings underscore the need for NGOs to foster more transparent, inclusive, and equitable promotion practices. To support the career advancement of women, organizations should:

- Establish clear and objective promotion criteria;
- Provide equal access to mentorship, leadership training, and high-visibility assignments;
- Actively identify and address implicit biases within leadership and HR practices;
- Monitor and evaluate promotion processes to ensure fairness and gender inclusivity.

By addressing both the formal and informal factors that shape career advancement, NGOs can build a more equitable environment where leadership potential is recognized and nurtured across gender lines.

4.4. PERSONAL FACTORS AFFECTING CAREER ADVANCEMENT

While organizational and socio-cultural factors significantly shape women's career trajectories, personal factors also play a crucial role in determining how women navigate their professional paths. These factors, which include individual personality traits, self-confidence, career aspirations, and personal values, often intersect with external challenges to either support or hinder career advancement. The following personal factors emerged as particularly influential in the career progression of women in the NGO sector:

4.4.1. Self-Confidence and Leadership Aspirations

A key personal factor that influenced career advancement was self-confidence. A total of 111 participants responded to the question regarding their confidence in advancing to senior leadership positions. The results revealed a strong sense of self-assurance among the respondents:

- 75.7% expressed being very confident in their ability to advance to senior leadership roles.
- 18.9% reported being somewhat confident about their career prospects.
- The remaining 5.4% were neutral, neither expressing strong confidence nor doubt.

These findings suggested that the majority of women in the sample possessed a high degree of confidence in their leadership potential. This level of self-belief was critical, as confidence significantly influenced individuals' willingness to take initiative, seek out leadership opportunities, advocate for themselves in professional settings, and persist in the face of challenges. Women who exhibited higher self-confidence were more likely to pursue promotions and leadership roles, even in male-dominated environments.

However, the 18.9% who were only somewhat confident indicated that self-doubt or uncertainty continued to affect a portion of women in the NGO sector. This group may have experienced imposter syndrome—the internalized belief that they were not as capable or deserving as their male counterparts. Women with lower self-confidence might have been less likely to negotiate for promotions, assert themselves in strategic discussions, or pursue visibility-enhancing roles, potentially leading to missed opportunities for advancement.

While the high levels of confidence reported by most respondents were promising, the presence of moderate confidence levels among a notable portion of the sample highlighted the need for targeted interventions. Organizational support, mentorship, and leadership development

programs could play a pivotal role in further enhancing women's self-confidence and equipping them to overcome psychological and systemic barriers to career progression.

4.4.2. Aspiration to Attain a Senior Leadership Position in the Organization

A total of 111 participants shared their aspirations regarding the attainment of senior leadership positions within their organizations. The responses were varied, reflecting a range of personal ambitions, organizational constraints, and external factors. The findings can be categorized into the following themes:

- a. **Aspire to Senior Leadership:** A significant number of respondents expressed a clear aspiration to reach senior leadership positions:
 - *"Yes, growth is a natural aspiration."(Respondent 043, male, 2025)*
 - *"Yes, if any opportunity is available."(Respondent 110, female, 2025)*
 - *"Yes, although I do feel inadequate."(Respondent, 045, married female, 2025)*

These responses indicate a strong desire among respondents to advance professionally. Many view growth as a natural progression in their careers, driven by their skills and competencies. However, there is also an acknowledgment of self-doubt, with some respondents expressing feelings of inadequacy despite their qualifications. This suggests that while there is a general aspiration for senior leadership, confidence gaps or imposter syndrome may still pose barriers to fully realizing these ambitions.

- b. **Already in a Senior Leadership Position:** A smaller, but significant portion of respondents, indicated that they have already achieved their aspiration and are currently in senior leadership roles:

- *"I am in a senior leadership position." (Respondent 074, married female, aged 41-50 years, 2025)*
- *"I am already in one."(respondent 037, married female, aged, 41-50 years, 2025)*
- *"I am a member of the senior leadership team."(respondent 082, married female, aged 31-40 years, 2025)*

These responses highlight that some women have successfully reached leadership positions, demonstrating that career progression is possible despite the challenges outlined in previous sections. Their success serves as a powerful reminder of the potential for women to break through leadership barriers, given the right opportunities and support structures.

c. **Organizational Constraints:** Some respondents expressed frustration with organizational limitations that hinder their career progression:

- *"No, there is no room for career advancement or growth." (Respondent 005, single female, 2025)*
- *"No, most leadership roles are given to expatriates."(Respondent 068, married female, aged 31-40, 2025)*

These responses reflect a frustrating reality for women in organizations where structural barriers—such as a lack of growth opportunities, rigid organizational hierarchies, or the prevalence of expatriate leaders—restrict their advancement. Such constraints limit the potential for women to aspire to or attain senior leadership roles, even if they have the qualifications and ambition to do so.

d. **Personal Reasons:** A portion of respondents expressed a lack of interest in pursuing senior leadership roles for personal reasons:

- *"No, I just want another working environment, nothing in particular." (Respondent 046, married Female, aged 41-50 years, 2025)*
- *"No, I want to stay at the same level in this particular organization."(respondent 034, married female, aged 41-50 years, 2025)*

These responses suggest that personal factors, such as a desire for a different work environment, retirement plans, or ongoing studies, also play a role in shaping career aspirations. For some women, work-life balance, personal contentment, or timing considerations may outweigh the pursuit of higher positions.

The responses highlight the diverse motivations and barriers women face in their aspirations toward senior leadership roles. While many express a strong desire to advance, organizational constraints, such as limited opportunities or structural barriers, are significant obstacles. Additionally, personal factors, including self-doubt or life-stage considerations, also influence whether women actively pursue leadership roles.

4.4.3. Education and Skills Development - Additional Education or Training to Enhance Career Prospects

A total of 110 participants responded to the question regarding whether they have pursued or are currently pursuing additional education or training to enhance their career prospects. The responses reveal a strong commitment among women to further their education and develop their skills in order to advance professionally. The findings can be categorized into the following areas:

4.4.3.1.Pursued or Are Pursuing Further Education:

A significant number of respondents have either completed or are in the process of pursuing advanced degrees to boost their career prospects:

- *"Yes, I have acquired my Master of Business Administration." (respondent 058, married female, 2025)*
- *"Yes, I recently completed a Master's program." (Respondent 002, married female, aged 31-40 years, 2025)*
- *"Yes, doing my master's, and I have also enrolled in online courses on leadership, business, and impact, plus attending masterclasses in the same."(Respondent 083, married female, aged 31-40 years, 2025)*

4.4.3.2.Taken Professional Courses or Certifications:

In addition to formal degrees, many respondents have also undertaken professional certifications and training programs to enhance their qualifications:

- *"Yes, certifications in trending areas in HR to keep me up to date."(Respondent 025, separated, aged 41-50 years, 2025)*
- *"Yes, Global HR certifications." (Respondent 085, married female, aged 41-50 years, 2025)*

These responses highlight a strong emphasis on continuous professional development through certifications in various specialized areas, such as HR, project management, and leadership. Professional certifications are a key way for women to stay relevant and competitive in their fields, especially in rapidly evolving sectors. This proactive approach to career growth demonstrates the commitment of many respondents to improving their skills and advancing in their careers.

4.4.3.3.Attended Leadership and Development Programs:

Many respondents have also participated in leadership development programs to improve their skills in management, leadership, and decision-making:

- *"Yes, leadership development training."(respondent 103, married female, aged 41-50 years old, 2025)*
- *"Yes, I have pursued additional training in leadership, management, conflict management, decision-making, and cross-cultural communication." (respondent 050, married female, aged 51-60 years, 2025)*
- *"Yes, Women in Management program."(Respondent 021, married female, aged 51-50 years, 2025)*

These responses demonstrate that leadership training is a priority for many women, with respondents actively seeking out opportunities to strengthen their leadership competencies. The inclusion of mentorship programs and gender-specific leadership programs, such as the Women in Management program, further underscores the importance of support networks and tailored learning experiences to help women navigate the challenges of leadership.

4.4.3.4.Due to Constraints or Other Reasons:

Some respondents indicated they had not pursued further education or training due to personal or external factors:

- *"No, lack of funds, but I would wish to." (Respondent 040, married female, 2025)*
- *"Not yet, but I am planning to." (respondent 079, married female, 2025)*
- *"No, I have not pursued additional education recently, but I engage in online quizzes, articles, and short courses to stay updated." (Respondent 082, married female, 2025)*

While fewer in number, these responses point to financial constraints and the lack of time as significant barriers to pursuing further education. However, many of these individuals continue to engage in self-directed learning through online resources, articles, and short courses, demonstrating a commitment to professional development despite the challenges.

The findings reveal that a majority of respondents are committed to enhancing their skills and qualifications through further education, professional certifications, and leadership training. This commitment to ongoing learning highlights the importance of continuous development in career advancement, particularly for women aiming for senior leadership roles. However, financial constraints and other barriers, such as time and organizational limitations, remain challenges for some individuals.

To support women in overcoming these barriers, organizations should consider offering scholarships, training programs, or partnerships with academic institutions that can help alleviate financial barriers to education and skill development. Additionally, providing access to leadership development opportunities and mentorship programs would be crucial to help women build the skills and confidence necessary for leadership roles.

4.4.4. Professional Development Opportunities in Organizations

A total of 111 respondents participated in the question regarding professional development opportunities within their organizations. The responses revealed varied perceptions about the availability and quality of these opportunities:

- 46.7% of respondents indicated that their organization provided good professional development opportunities.
- 13.5% rated these opportunities as excellent.
- 28.8% remained neutral, expressing neither a positive nor negative opinion.
- 8.1% rated the opportunities as poor.

- 2.7% rated them as very poor.

These findings suggested that the majority of respondents perceived professional development opportunities in their organizations as adequate or better. Specifically, a combined 60.2% rated them as either good or excellent, indicating that many women believed they had access to valuable learning and growth opportunities that could support their career advancement.

However, the relatively high proportion of neutral responses (28.8%) may have reflected uncertainty regarding the availability, accessibility, or effectiveness of such programs. This neutrality might also have indicated that while development opportunities were technically present, they were not actively promoted, tailored, or equitably accessible to all employees—especially women seeking advancement.

In addition, 10.8% of respondents rated the opportunities as either poor or very poor. These perceptions pointed to gaps in organizational support for professional growth. Respondents in this group may have encountered challenges such as limited training resources, lack of mentorship, unclear career development pathways, or inadequate encouragement from leadership—factors that could hinder career progression into senior leadership roles.

4.4.5. Challenges in Balancing Work and Personal Commitments

A total of 111 participants responded to the question regarding the challenges they faced in balancing work and personal commitments. The responses were distributed as follows:

- 48.6% indicated that it was somewhat challenging.
- 22.5% stated that it was very challenging.
- 12.6% remained neutral on the issue.
- 13.5% reported that it was not very challenging.

- 2.7% indicated that it was not challenging at all.

The findings suggested that a majority of respondents experienced some degree of difficulty in balancing professional responsibilities with personal obligations. Specifically, nearly 71.1% indicated that balancing work and personal life was either somewhat challenging or very challenging. This highlighted the widespread nature of work-life balance struggles among women in the NGO sector, many of whom faced dual pressures from both their careers and family responsibilities.

In contrast, 12.6% of respondents remained neutral, which may have reflected individual differences in workload, family dynamics, or access to support systems that mitigated the perceived difficulty. Meanwhile, 16.2% reported that balancing work and personal commitments was either not very challenging or not challenging at all, suggesting that a minority of women might have benefited from flexible work environments, supportive family structures, or personal coping strategies that facilitated better balance.

Overall, the data indicated that work-life balance remained a significant challenge for many women in the NGO sector, particularly those managing multiple roles such as professionals, caregivers, and community members. These findings underscored the need for organizational policies that support flexible working arrangements and promote employee well-being to enable women to thrive both personally and professionally.

4.4.6. Impact of Family Responsibilities on Leadership Aspirations

A total of 108 respondents shared their experiences regarding how family responsibilities have influenced their ability to take on leadership roles. The findings highlight that while many women face challenges balancing their family commitments with career aspirations, some also find ways to leverage their experiences to enhance their leadership skills.

Key Findings: 7 respondents indicated that family responsibilities have not impacted their leadership aspirations. The majority acknowledged varying degrees of impact, ranging from missing key trainings, meetings, or promotions to making career sacrifices due to family commitments.

4.4.6.1. Common Challenges Highlighted:

The following challenges were commonly reported by respondents:

- *Missed Opportunities:* Some respondents had to forgo important professional opportunities, such as trainings, meetings, or career advancements, due to maternity leave, childcare, or family emergencies.
- *Limited Mobility:* Several respondents reported restrictions on travel due to childcare duties or the work commitments of their spouses. This limitation on mobility can hinder participation in leadership development programs or international assignments.
- *Career Sacrifices:* Some respondents had to resign from jobs or decline leadership roles due to family pressure or responsibilities, particularly when career demands conflicted with family needs.
- *Time Constraints:* Balancing work and family was often cited as particularly challenging, with leadership roles requiring significant time commitments. This sometimes conflicted with family obligations, leading to difficulty in fulfilling both sets of responsibilities.
- *Financial Limitations:* Financial responsibilities within the family, such as the need for additional household income or caregiving expenses, prevented some respondents from pursuing further education or career advancement opportunities.

4.4.6.2. Positive Impact:

Despite the challenges, a few respondents highlighted how family responsibilities helped enhance their leadership skills in areas

4.4.7. Career Advancement Motivators

A total of 110 respondents shared their insights on the factors that primarily motivated them in their career advancement. The findings revealed diverse sources of motivation, with a strong emphasis on personal growth and achievement.

Key Findings:

- 66.4% of respondents reported being driven by personal growth and achievement, indicating a strong intrinsic motivation for self-improvement, skill development, and the pursuit of personal success.
- 15.5% stated that their motivation stemmed from making an impact within their organizations, reflecting a desire to contribute meaningfully to organizational goals and missions.
- 8.2% were motivated by recognition and influence, suggesting that visibility, acknowledgment, and the ability to inspire others played a significant role in their career progression.
- 7.3% cited financial incentives as their primary motivator, highlighting the importance of competitive compensation and rewards in encouraging professional advancement.
- 2.7% identified other motivating factors, which may have included work-life balance, passion for their field, or job stability.

These results indicated that the majority of respondents were primarily motivated by internal drivers, such as personal development and a desire for meaningful impact, rather than external factors like financial gain or recognition. This suggested that fostering opportunities

for growth, learning, and influence could be key strategies for NGOs aiming to support and retain women in their leadership pipelines.

4.4.8. Facing Self-Doubt or Fear of Failure in Leadership Pursuits

A total of 110 respondents shared their experiences with self-doubt and fear of failure while pursuing leadership roles. These emotions were commonly encountered, with varying degrees of impact on their confidence and willingness to step into leadership positions.

Key Findings:

Self-doubt emerged as a common challenge among respondents, influencing their confidence levels when considering leadership roles. While many expressed concerns, they also reported strategies to manage these feelings and continue pursuing leadership opportunities. Respondents shared various methods they used to combat self-doubt and fear of failure:

- **Seeking Mentorship and Role Models:** Many respondents emphasized the importance of mentorship and role models. By engaging with experienced leaders for guidance, they were able to receive advice and reassurance that helped them navigate leadership challenges.
- **Personal Development and Education:** Continuous learning and personal growth were frequently cited as essential in overcoming self-doubt. Respondents pursued leadership courses, reading, and other forms of education to build their competence and confidence.
- **Self-Affirmation and Encouragement:** Practices like prayer, self-reflection, and focusing on past successes were highlighted as ways to reaffirm personal worth and capabilities. Positive self-talk and focusing on previous accomplishments helped boost confidence.

- **Building Confidence Through Experience:** Taking on smaller leadership tasks before progressing to larger roles allowed many respondents to gradually build their confidence and prove their abilities, ultimately reducing self-doubt.

Reframing Failure as a Learning Opportunity: Respondents shared how they reframed failure not as a personal shortcoming but as a learning opportunity. This shift in perspective allowed them to view setbacks as part of the growth process rather than barriers to success.

Some respondents provided personal examples of how they managed their self-doubt and fear of failure:

- *"I doubted I could lead a department at first, but I reassured myself that I had the skills and knowledge to make things work." (Respondent 025, aged 41-50, 2025)*
- *"I faced challenges leading people older than me, but I overcame them by developing myself and learning from feedback." (Respondent 078, aged 20-30 years old, 2025)*
- *"I have hesitated to compete for international roles because of my fear of failure." (Respondent 003, aged 31-40 years, 2025)*

These examples reflect the personal struggles that many women face, along with the practical ways they manage their doubts and build the confidence needed to pursue leadership roles.

Self-doubt and fear of failure are significant challenges faced by women in leadership pursuits, but the strategies for overcoming these obstacles highlight the resilience and self-awareness of many respondents. By leveraging mentorship, committing to personal development, and reframing failure, women are able to gain the confidence necessary to step into leadership positions.

4.4.9. Access to Mentors in Leadership Development

A total of 104 respondents shared their experiences regarding mentorship and its impact on their leadership journey. The majority of respondents reported having mentors who played a positive role in their career and leadership development.

Key Findings:

Over 80% of respondents indicated that they had mentors who significantly contributed to their professional growth and leadership development.

The benefits of mentorship were widely recognized by respondents and included:

- *Career Guidance:* Mentors helped shape career choices, assisted in selecting the right courses, and provided direction for long-term career growth.
- *Confidence Building:* Mentors played a key role in boosting confidence, encouraging mentees to believe in their abilities and take bold decisions in their leadership journey.
- *Skill Development:* Respondents highlighted how mentorship helped enhance leadership styles, managerial skills, and the ability to effectively manage people and teams.
- *Encouragement and Motivation:* Mentors inspired mentees to embrace new challenges and push beyond self-imposed limitations, empowering them to step into leadership roles they might have otherwise hesitated to pursue.
- *Strategic Decision-Making:* Mentors provided guidance on navigating career challenges, transitions, and decisions, helping mentees make more informed, strategic choices.

A small minority of respondents mentioned that they had not yet secured a mentor but were actively seeking guidance and support to advance their careers.

Respondents shared specific ways in which their mentors had positively influenced their leadership journeys:

- *"Mentorship has improved my leadership style and boosted my confidence. I've also been pushed to pursue roles I wouldn't have otherwise." (Respondent 008, aged 31-40 years old, single, 2025)*
- *"I have wonderful mentors across HR, finance, and academia, which helps me have a holistic understanding of leadership." (Respondent 082, aged 31-40, 2025)*
- *"Having a mentor has offered reassurance during critical career transitions and leadership decisions." (Respondent 050, married female, 2025)*
- *"I learned leadership from my first supervisor, who encouraged me to take on tasks outside my job description, boosting my skills and confidence." (Respondent 020, single female, 2025)*

These insights highlight the transformative role mentors play in fostering both personal and professional development by offering guidance, confidence, and skills that shape leadership potential.

Mentorship plays a crucial role in the leadership development of women in the NGO sector, with the majority of respondents benefiting from mentorship relationships that provide invaluable career guidance, confidence, and skills. While some women are still seeking mentorship, the positive influence of mentors on leadership outcomes cannot be overstated.

4.4.10. Personal Strategies to Overcome Career Advancement Challenges

A total of 105 respondents shared their personal strategies for overcoming challenges in their career progression. These strategies reflect a combination of self-improvement, resilience, and intentional planning to overcome obstacles and achieve career growth.

Key Strategies Identified:

1. *Self-Development & Continuous Learning*: Pursuing further education, certifications, and training to stay competitive; Engaging in self-study, reading widely, and staying updated with industry trends; Actively attending leadership development programs to enhance skills.
2. *Resilience & Growth Mindset*: Viewing challenges as opportunities for growth rather than setbacks; Bouncing back from failures, learning from mistakes, and using them as stepping stones; Developing self-awareness and capitalizing on strengths to build resilience.
3. *Mentorship & Networking*: Actively seeking guidance from mentors and professional sponsors who can support career progression; Participating in networking activities, attending conferences, and engaging in industry events to build relationships; Cultivating strong professional relationships to create a supportive career network.
4. *Work-Life Balance & Well-being*: Setting clear boundaries between work and personal life to maintain well-being; Taking regular breaks for reflection, study, and self-improvement to recharge; Ensuring proper utilization of leave days to prevent burnout and maintain health.

Some respondents shared specific ways they applied these strategies to overcome career challenges:

- *“Every time I was denied an opportunity; I encouraged myself because I knew I was not the problem—it was just not my time yet. I continued working harder and smarter, taking on challenges and excelling.”(Respondent 042, married female, aged 41-50, 2025)*

- *“Never forgetting that I am a woman. Not leaving fellow women behind. Learning to unlearn. Accepting feedback and exploring the new age of AI.” (Respondent 082, aged 31-40, married female, 2025)*
- *“I pray and then I go and do it afraid.” (Respondent 026, married female, aged 41-50, 2025)*

These personal strategies highlight a combination of determination, self-awareness, and continuous improvement that empower individuals to overcome barriers and continue progressing in their careers, even when faced with challenges.

The strategies shared by the respondents reflect a proactive and multifaceted approach to overcoming obstacles in career advancement. Key elements of self-development, resilience, and networking emerge as fundamental to overcoming the challenges that women face in their leadership journey.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. SUMMARY

This study aimed to examine the factors affecting the career advancement of women to senior leadership positions within the NGO sector in Uganda. Through a combination of individual-level, organizational-level, and socio-cultural factors, the study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers women face in their pursuit of leadership roles. In addition, it explored potential strategies for overcoming these barriers to enable women's advancement in leadership positions.

The key findings from the study are summarized below:

5.1.1. Socio-Cultural and Structural Barriers:

- **Patriarchal Norms and Societal Expectations:** Traditional cultural norms and deeply ingrained gender roles continue to define leadership as a predominantly male domain.
- **Stereotyping and Discrimination:** Women leaders often face discrimination and are scrutinized more intensely for their leadership styles compared to their male counterparts.
- **Weak Policy Enforcement:** Although many NGOs have gender equity policies in place, their enforcement remains weak, which limits the policies' effectiveness in promoting women's career advancement.

5.1.2. Organizational-Level Factors:

- **Mentorship and Sponsorship Deficiencies:** A lack of structured mentorship and sponsorship programs has been identified as a significant barrier for women seeking to advance into senior leadership roles.

- **Gender Bias in Recruitment and Promotion:** Women often encounter both implicit and explicit biases in recruitment and promotion processes, with male candidates frequently preferred for leadership positions.
- **Male-Dominated Leadership Cultures:** Many NGOs still maintain leadership structures that are predominantly male, which can discourage women from aspiring to leadership roles.

5.1.3. Individual-Level Factors:

- **Limited Access to Leadership Development:** Many women in the NGO sector face challenges in accessing leadership development opportunities such as training, coaching, and mentorship.
- **Confidence and Self-Efficacy:** A number of women reported low levels of confidence, which is often linked to a lack of female role models in leadership and limited opportunities for career growth.
- **Work and Family Responsibilities:** The disproportionate burden of domestic duties and caregiving responsibilities continues to hinder women's ability to dedicate time and energy to leadership development.

The study reveals that women's career advancement in the NGO sector is hindered by a combination of individual, organizational, and socio-cultural barriers. Despite some progress, significant gaps remain in addressing these challenges comprehensively.

5.2 CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the factors that affect the career advancement of women to senior leadership positions within the NGO sector in Uganda. Grounded in a qualitative methodology, the study used semi-structured interviews to explore participants' experiences

and perspectives, generating rich, thematic insights into the complex barriers women face.

These findings were analyzed in relation to existing literature, highlighting both convergence and divergence between local realities and broader theoretical frameworks.

At the individual level, women face considerable challenges, including limited access to leadership development opportunities, low self-confidence, and the pressure of balancing work and domestic responsibilities. These findings resonate with earlier studies that identified the dual burden of work and home as a major hindrance to career advancement (Djan & Gordon, 2020; Toranse & Sikoti et al., 2023). Moreover, societal expectations that associate women with caregiving roles limit their flexibility and availability for leadership opportunities—an issue emphasized in the works of Obasanjo et al. (2013) and Kamau (2019).

Within the organizational context, this study found that a lack of mentorship and sponsorship, gender-biased promotion practices, and male-dominated leadership cultures significantly hinder women's upward mobility. These findings affirm the literature, which points to the persistence of the "glass ceiling" effect, where women are systematically excluded from top-level roles due to both implicit and explicit organizational biases (Morrison et al., 1987; Albrecht et al., 2003). As Wirth (2001) and Davidson & Burke (2004) also note, organizational structures rarely accommodate the career pathways of women, especially those balancing family duties.

Socio-cultural factors emerged as another critical barrier, with entrenched patriarchal norms shaping perceptions of leadership and reinforcing stereotypes that delegitimize women's authority (Abate & Woldie, 2022; Latkin et al., 2022). Participants in the study reported experiencing scrutiny and resistance when they adopted leadership roles, mirroring the findings of UN Women (2016), who observed that women in Africa are often judged more harshly than men for the same leadership behaviors. Traditional sayings and proverbs in African cultures

further perpetuate the belief that leadership is a male domain, as highlighted by Abate & Woldie (2022) and the Africa Barometer (2021).

While some NGOs have adopted gender-sensitive policies, this study found that their implementation is often inconsistent and poorly monitored. This gap between policy and practice is well documented in global literature, particularly in African contexts where structural inequalities remain deeply entrenched (UN Women, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2014). Weak enforcement mechanisms and limited accountability further dilute the impact of such initiatives.

Ultimately, the findings underscore the interconnectedness of individual, organizational, and cultural dimensions in shaping women's leadership trajectories. The qualitative methodology used in this research enabled a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, offering both contextual depth and personal insight that complements existing empirical data (Barreto, Ryan & Schmitt, 2009; Ahmed & Al, 2016).

The conclusion drawn from this study is that addressing the barriers to women's career advancement requires multi-level, sustained interventions. At the individual level, NGOs must invest in leadership training, confidence-building, and mentorship programs. At the organizational level, structures and cultures must be reformed to ensure inclusivity, transparency, and support for work-life balance. Societally, long-term change requires challenging patriarchal norms and promoting equitable narratives of leadership.

In alignment with global research (e.g., World Bank, 2012; ILO, 2017), the study emphasizes that women's leadership is not merely a gender equity issue—it is a strategic imperative. Elevating women into senior leadership enhances organizational effectiveness, diversifies decision-making, and contributes to national development goals. For NGOs in Uganda,

promoting women into senior leadership is thus both a matter of social justice and a catalyst for greater sectoral impact.

5.3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to key stakeholders to facilitate the career advancement of women into senior leadership roles within the NGO sector in Uganda:

5.3.1. Recommendation to NGO Leaders

a. Implement Gender-Equitable Leadership Development Programs

NGO leaders should prioritize leadership development initiatives that specifically target women. This can include structured training programs, leadership coaching, and mentorship opportunities aimed at equipping women with the necessary skills, confidence, and visibility to advance into senior leadership roles.

b. Establish Mentorship and Sponsorship Network

NGOs should create formal mentorship and sponsorship frameworks that connect senior leaders (both male and female) with high-potential women in the organization. These programs should provide women with career guidance, advocacy, and the resources necessary to advance within the organization.

c. Strengthen Gender-Sensitive Recruitment and Promotion Policies

NGO leaders must ensure that recruitment, promotion, and performance evaluation processes are fair, transparent, and free from gender bias. They should introduce gender audits to identify and address disparities and encourage practices that ensure equal representation of women in leadership roles.

d. Promote Work-Life Balance through Family-Friendly Policies

NGOs should adopt family-friendly policies such as flexible working hours, parental leave, and remote work options to help employees, especially women, balance work and caregiving responsibilities. This would enhance women's ability to participate in leadership roles without compromising their family obligations.

e. Create Inclusive Organizational Cultures

NGO leaders should foster organizational cultures that value diversity in leadership styles and actively promote gender inclusivity. This can include unconscious bias training and a more open dialogue on gender equality to eliminate implicit biases that hinder women's career progression.

5.3.2. Recommendation to Women in NGOs

a. Engage in Professional Development Opportunities

Women should actively seek professional development opportunities such as leadership training, workshops, and networking events. These opportunities will help women build the necessary skills and confidence to take on leadership roles within the NGO sector.

b. Seek Mentorship and Sponsorship

Women should leverage formal mentorship and sponsorship programs within their organizations. They should also consider seeking out mentors from outside their organizations to gain broader perspectives and access to new networks that can support their career advancement.

c. Build Networks and Increase Visibility

Women should strategically position themselves within the organization by participating in high-visibility projects, networking events, and leadership development opportunities. Building

strong internal and external networks will increase their chances of being considered for leadership roles.

d. Advocate for Family-Friendly Policies

Women should advocate for the implementation of policies that support work-life balance, such as flexible working hours and childcare support. This advocacy can help create a more inclusive environment for women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities.

5.3.3. Recommendation to Government of Uganda

a. Strengthen Gender Equality Laws and Policies

The government should ensure that gender equality laws are effectively enforced, and that policies promoting women's leadership are implemented at all levels of governance and organizational structures, including in the NGO sector.

b. Create National Programs to Support Women's Leadership Development

The government should establish programs that provide funding, training, and leadership development opportunities for women, particularly in sectors like NGOs where gender inequality is prevalent. These programs could include scholarships, leadership fellowships, and training initiatives targeted at women seeking leadership roles.

c. Support Gender Equality in NGOs through Tax Incentives or Funding

The government should incentivize NGOs that demonstrate a commitment to gender equality by providing tax breaks or funding for initiatives that promote women's leadership. This can motivate NGOs to prioritize gender equity in their organizational structures.

d. Public Awareness Campaigns to Challenge Societal Norms

The government can lead national campaigns to challenge patriarchal societal norms and promote positive representations of women in leadership roles. These campaigns can help change public perceptions of women in positions of power and encourage more women to aspire to leadership roles.

5.3.4. Recommendation to Universities

a. Incorporate Gender Equality into Leadership Curricula

Universities should integrate gender equality and leadership studies into their curricula. Offering courses and workshops specifically focused on leadership challenges faced by women will equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate these challenges in the workplace.

b. Encourage Female Students to Pursue Leadership Roles

Universities should create platforms for female students to take on leadership roles in academic, extracurricular, and community activities. These experiences can help women build the leadership skills and confidence necessary for success in the NGO sector.

c. Collaborate with NGOs to Provide Internship and Mentorship Opportunities

Universities should partner with NGOs to offer internships, field placements, and mentorship programs that expose female students to real-world leadership experiences. These partnerships will provide women with the necessary skills and networks to successfully transition into leadership roles in the NGO sector.

d. Conduct Research on Women's Leadership in NGOs

Universities should promote and fund research on the barriers and enablers of women's leadership in the NGO sector. Research findings can inform policy, advocacy efforts, and organizational practices aimed at reducing gender inequality in leadership positions.

By taking a multi-faceted approach and involving all relevant stakeholders—NGO leaders, women themselves, the government, and universities—this study advocates for a more inclusive and supportive environment for women to rise to senior leadership positions within the NGO sector. These changes will not only promote gender equity but also enhance the effectiveness and impact of NGOs by fostering diverse and inclusive leadership.

Implementing these recommendations can help break down the barriers women face and ensure equal opportunities for career advancement in leadership roles.

5.4. SUGGESTED FURTHER STUDIES

Given the findings and limitations of this study, several areas warrant further investigation to deepen the understanding of the factors affecting women's career advancement in the NGO sector, particularly in Uganda. Below are some suggested avenues for future research:

5.4.1. Impact of Gender-Sensitive Policies on Career Advancement

Further studies could explore the long-term impact of gender-sensitive policies (e.g., recruitment, promotion, and mentorship programs) on the career advancement of women within NGOs. Research could investigate how different policies are perceived by women at different career stages and how effectively these policies translate into tangible leadership opportunities.

5.4.2. Intersectionality and Leadership Challenges

Future research could adopt an intersectional approach to investigate how factors such as age, education, socio-economic status, and ethnicity intersect with gender to affect women's career advancement in the NGO sector. This would provide a more nuanced understanding of the diverse challenges faced by women in leadership, particularly in Uganda, where cultural and social norms play a critical role in shaping perceptions of leadership.

5.4.3. The Role of Men as Allies in Promoting Women's Leadership

Another interesting area for future research could focus on the role of men as allies in promoting women's career advancement. This study could examine the attitudes of male leaders in NGOs and their involvement in mentoring, advocating for, and supporting women in leadership roles. Understanding how male allies can be leveraged to reduce gender disparities in leadership would be valuable for advancing gender equity initiatives.

5.4.4. Comparative Studies of Gender Equality in Leadership Across Different Sectors

While this study focuses on the NGO sector in Uganda, further research could compare the barriers to women's leadership in the NGO sector with those in the corporate or public sectors. This comparative approach would help identify sector-specific challenges and highlight best practices that could be applied across industries to improve women's representation in senior leadership roles.

5.4.5. Exploring the Role of Family-Related Policies in Women's Leadership Development

Given that balancing family and work responsibilities was a key challenge identified in this study, future research could examine the effectiveness of family-friendly policies (e.g., paid parental leave, flexible working hours, and childcare support) in facilitating women's career progression. Studies could explore how the lack of such policies or their insufficient implementation impacts women's opportunities for leadership positions within NGOs.

5.4.6. The Effectiveness of Gender Equality Training Programs

Further research could investigate the effectiveness of gender equality and unconscious bias training programs within NGOs. This study could assess whether these training programs lead to tangible improvements in women's career advancement and whether they contribute to cultural and organizational changes in attitudes toward gender equality in leadership.

5.4.7. Longitudinal Studies on Women's Career Progression in NGOs

A longitudinal study could track the career progression of women in NGOs over time to understand how they move through different career stages, identify the critical turning points in their careers, and analyze the factors that either facilitate or hinder their advancement. This type of research could provide valuable insights into the long-term career trajectories of women in the NGO sector and the barriers they continue to face.

5.4.8. Women's Leadership and Organizational Performance

Future studies could also explore the relationship between women in leadership positions and organizational performance in the NGO sector. This research could investigate how gender-diverse leadership teams influence decision-making, innovation, and overall organizational effectiveness, providing empirical evidence to support the business case for gender equality in leadership.

5.4.9. Social and Cultural Perceptions of Women in Leadership

Additional studies could delve deeper into the societal and cultural perceptions of women in leadership roles, particularly in African contexts like Uganda. Research could explore how traditional gender roles and cultural beliefs shape both women's aspirations for leadership and their societal reception when they take on leadership positions.

5.4.10. The Role of Digital Platforms in Women's Leadership Development

In today's digital age, platforms like online training programs, webinars, and networking groups can play a significant role in career development. Future studies could examine the role of digital tools and platforms in enhancing women's leadership development, particularly in the NGO sector, and how they can provide alternative avenues for skill-building and networking for women who may face geographical or social barriers.

These suggested further studies would contribute to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence women's career advancement in the NGO sector and other sectors, offering valuable insights for policymakers, NGO leaders, and scholars working toward greater gender equality in leadership positions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

You have been selected to participate in the study **Women in Leadership: Factors Affecting Career Advancement of Women To Senior Leadership Positions In The NGO Sector. A Case Study of Selected NGOS In Uganda**, and your response shall be instrumental.

All individual responses shall be strictly confidential, and this information will be used strictly for academic purposes.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Part A: General Information

Please select the appropriate response.

1. Position held:
2. How long have you worked with your current organization?
 - a. Less than a year
 - b. 2-5 years
 - c. 6-10 years
 - d. 11-15 years
 - e. 15-20 years
3. Your age group
 - a. 20-30 years
 - b. 31-40 years
 - c. 41-50 years
 - d. 51-60 years

4. Sex:
 - a. Female
 - b. Male

5. Marital status:
 - a. Single
 - b. Married
 - c. Separated
 - d. Divorced

6. Highest Education Level:
 - a. O Level
 - b. A Level
 - c. Certificate
 - d. Diploma
 - e. Bachelor's Degree
 - f. Master's Degree
 - g. Doctorate Degree

7. Category of Deployment:
 - a. Department (if Country office).....
 - b. Project/Program (If field staff).....

Part B: Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting Career Advancement

1. Family and Upbringing

- To what extent did your family encourage your education and career ambitions?
 - a. Strongly encouraged
 - b. Moderately encouraged

- c. Neutral
- d. Slightly discouraged
- e. Strongly discouraged

- Were there any cultural expectations that influenced your career choices? (Yes/No) If yes, please explain:

2. Gender Roles and Expectations

- Have societal expectations regarding women's roles affected your career progression? (Yes/No) If yes, how?
- Do you feel pressure to prioritize family responsibilities over career growth?
 - a. Always
 - b. Often
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Rarely
 - e. Never

3. Workplace Culture and Support

- How would you describe the organizational culture towards women in leadership?
 - a. Very supportive
 - b. Somewhat supportive
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat unsupportive
 - e. Very unsupportive
- Have you faced any gender-based discrimination or bias in your career journey? (Yes/No) If yes, please describe:

- What support systems (e.g., mentorship, leadership training) exist for women in leadership in your organization?

4. Networking and Professional Growth

- How accessible are networking and leadership development opportunities for women in your organization?
 - a. Very accessible
 - b. Somewhat accessible
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat inaccessible
 - e. Very inaccessible
- Are there any socio-cultural barriers that limit women's participation in professional growth activities? (Yes/No) If yes, please explain:
.....

5. Perceptions and Stereotypes

- Have you encountered stereotypes about women in leadership within your organization? (Yes/No) If yes, what were they?
- How have such stereotypes impacted your career advancement?
.....

6. Balancing Career and Personal Life

- How have societal expectations regarding work-life balance affected your career growth?
- What strategies have you employed to balance professional responsibilities with personal life?

7. Recommendations for Improvement

- What specific policies or interventions could help overcome socio-cultural barriers to women's career advancement in NGOs?
- What role can male colleagues and leaders play in supporting women's career advancement?
- What recommendations would you give to young women aspiring to senior leadership roles in the NGO sector?

PART C: PERSONAL FACTORS AFFECTING CAREER ADVANCEMENT

1. Self-Confidence and Leadership Aspirations

- How confident are you in your ability to advance to a senior leadership position?
 - a. Very confident
 - b. Somewhat confident
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat unconfident
 - e. Not confident at all
- Do you aspire to attain a senior leadership position in your organization? (Yes/No) If no, why not?

2. Education and Skills Development

- Have you pursued any additional education or training to enhance your career prospects? (Yes/No) If yes, what type?
- How would you rate the availability of professional development opportunities in your organization?

- a. Excellent
- b. Good
- c. Neutral
- d. Poor
- e. Very poor

3. Work-Life Balance and Personal Commitments

- How challenging has balancing work and personal life been in your career progression?
 - a. Very challenging
 - b. Somewhat challenging
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Not very challenging
 - e. Not challenging at all
- Have family responsibilities impacted your ability to take on leadership roles? (Yes/No)

If yes, please explain:

4. Motivation and Career Drive

- What motivates you the most in your career advancement?
 - a. Personal growth and achievement
 - b. Financial incentives
 - c. Recognition and influence
 - d. Organizational impact
 - e. Other (please specify):
- Have you faced self-doubt or fear of failure in pursuing leadership roles? (Yes/No) If yes, how have you managed it?

5. Mentorship and Support Networks

- Have you had access to mentors who have guided your leadership journey? (Yes/No) If yes, how has mentorship influenced your career?
- How would you describe the level of support from colleagues and supervisors in your career growth?
 - a. Very supportive
 - b. Somewhat supportive
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat unsupportive
 - e. Not supportive at all

6. Recommendations for Improvement

- What personal strategies have helped you overcome challenges in career advancement?
- What initiatives could organizations implement to support women in overcoming personal barriers to leadership?
- What advice would you give to young women aspiring to senior leadership roles in the NGO sector?

PART D: ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS AFFECTING CAREER ADVANCEMENT

1. Leadership and Management Support

- How would you describe the level of support from senior management in promoting women's career advancement?
 - a. Very supportive
 - b. Somewhat supportive
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat unsupportive
 - e. Very unsupportive
- Are women given equal leadership training opportunities as men in your organization?
(Yes/No) If no, please explain:

2. Workplace Policies and Practices

- Does your organization have policies that specifically support women's career growth?
(Yes/No) If yes, which ones?
- How effective are the existing policies in ensuring gender equality in leadership?
 - a. Very effective
 - b. Somewhat effective
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat ineffective
 - e. Very ineffective
- Do you believe workplace policies on maternity leave, childcare support, and flexible work arrangements influence women's career progression? (Yes/No) If yes, how?
.....

3. Organizational Culture and Gender Inclusivity

- How would you describe the organizational culture in terms of gender inclusivity?
 - a. Highly inclusive
 - b. Somewhat inclusive
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat exclusive
 - e. Highly exclusive

- Have you observed any gender biases or discrimination in promotions and leadership appointments? (Yes/No) If yes, please describe:
.....

4. Mentorship and Networking Opportunities

- Does your organization provide mentorship programs specifically for women? (Yes/No)
If yes, how effective have they been?

- How accessible are networking opportunities for women seeking leadership positions?
 - a. Very accessible
 - b. Somewhat accessible
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat inaccessible
 - e. Very inaccessible

5. Career Development and Promotions

- Have you experienced or witnessed barriers to promotion based on gender? (Yes/No) If yes, please elaborate:
- What factors do you think influence promotion decisions in your organization?
 - a. Performance and qualifications
 - b. Seniority and experience
 - c. Workplace relationships and networking
 - d. Gender considerations
 - e. Other (please specify):

6. Recommendations for Improvement

- What specific policies or interventions could help overcome organizational barriers to women's career advancement in NGOs?
- What role can male colleagues and leaders play in supporting women's career advancement?
- What recommendations would you give to young women aspiring to senior leadership roles in the NGO sector?