

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN
GOVERNMENTAL OFFICE: EVIDENCE FROM SELECTED WOREDAS OF SIDAMA
REGIONAL STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to evaluate the obstacles and opportunities for women in leadership roles within government offices in selected districts (Woredas) of the Sidama Regional State. Employing a descriptive research design, primary data was collected using stratified random sampling. Woreda offices were divided into four groups, and respondents were then randomly selected from each group. Data collected through questionnaires was analyzed using Stata software. Key findings revealed that challenges hindering female leadership include childhood background, family responsibilities, lack of family support, societal attitudes, limited education, male-dominated decision-making, financial constraints, lack of role models, and insufficient partner support. The study recommends that the Woreda Administration should implement long-term and short-term training programs and awareness campaigns to empower women with the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to pursue leadership positions in government offices.

Keywords: Female leadership, Government offices, Challenges, Opportunities

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1. INTRODUCTION

Despite representing half of the global population, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions worldwide, particularly in developing countries. This gender imbalance is rooted in cultural expectations that associate leadership with men, while women are often relegated to domestic responsibilities. These societal norms limit women's access to education, employment, and political involvement, thus hindering their ability to participate in leadership roles (Netsanet, 2015). While some developed countries have made progress in closing this gender gap, many regions, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, continue to face challenges that prevent women from ascending to leadership positions.

In Ethiopia, gender inequality remains pervasive, with women experiencing lower social status, limited access to education, and minimal involvement in decision-making processes. Many women in Ethiopia are burdened with domestic duties, restricting their ability to engage in leadership roles. Despite the government's efforts to promote gender equality through legal frameworks and policies, the representation of women in leadership remains alarmingly low (Melesse, 2014;

Endale, 2012). Institutional and socio-cultural barriers further exacerbate this issue, preventing women from accessing leadership opportunities in both public and private sectors.

The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles is not just a matter of fairness but also a barrier to democratic governance and effective policy-making. Although the Ethiopian government has taken steps to empower women through various initiatives, the proportion of women in leadership positions remains inadequate. Studies show that organizational factors, such as negative perceptions and institutional hierarchies, contribute to the slow promotion of women into leadership roles (Tigist, 2015). In Sidama Zone, for instance, women account for less than 10% of leadership positions, highlighting the ongoing gender disparity in leadership. This study aims to assess the challenges and opportunities for women in leadership roles within governmental offices in Sidama Zone, shedding light on the factors that limit their participation and providing insights for future interventions.

2. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

2.1. Concepts and Definitions of Leadership

Leadership is a dynamic process through which individuals influence others to achieve specific goals, guiding them in their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. Leaders set a direction for their followers, helping them visualize potential achievements and motivating them towards a common objective. Leadership involves inspiring others to take actions they might not have considered on their own, energizing them to pursue shared goals (Yalem, 2011). It is defined as the process of influencing others to understand and agree on what needs to be done and how to do it, facilitating collective efforts toward accomplishing objectives (Yukl, 2006). While leadership has been a topic of interest for historians and philosophers for centuries, scientific studies on the subject only began in the twentieth century. The concept remains complex, with over 350 definitions proposed by various scholars, some even suggesting that leadership is a myth based on the hope that someone will solve our problems (Warren & Bennis, 2009).

2.2. Trends of Females' Leadership in the World

Gender equality remains a significant challenge in achieving inclusive leadership across developed countries, with women continuing to face barriers to senior roles in both public service and decision-making bodies. Despite some progress, such as women holding 36% of municipal council seats, their representation in leadership positions remains limited, with only 15% in leadership roles. Women also hold 29.3% of ministerial positions in OECD countries, though this varies significantly across nations, with gender parity achieved in countries like Finland and Sweden, while countries like Hungary and Turkey show much lower representation. In public service, women occupy over 50% of central government jobs, but their representation in top management positions remains at only 29%. Challenges, such as the use of political appointments and the dominance of informal networks, continue to limit women's access to senior roles, with men often being promoted more quickly and paid more than their female counterparts (IPU, 2015; OECD, 2014; European Commission, 2014).

2.3. Female Leadership in Africa

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have witnessed significant strides in female leadership across Africa. Since the 1995 Beijing Plan of Action, African women have ascended to key political positions, with landmark achievements such as Ellen Sirleaf Johnson becoming Africa's first elected female president in Liberia in 2005. Other notable leaders include Joyce Banda, who became president of Malawi in 2012, and Ameenah Gufrif-Fakium, who took office in Mauritius in 2015. Additionally, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma's election as the first female Chairperson of the African Union Commission in 2012 marked a major milestone. This trend is reflected in increased female representation in African parliaments, with countries like Rwanda leading globally with 64% female representation, followed by Seychelles and Senegal. Several African countries have also made significant progress by introducing quotas and affirmative action measures to ensure women's political participation at both national and local levels (AU, 2012).

Despite these achievements, there is still room for improvement, particularly within political parties where women's involvement remains limited. While women hold significant positions in local governments in countries like Lesotho and Seychelles, their representation in political parties and the private sector is still low. Many African nations have implemented gender quotas at various levels of governance, with countries like Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda establishing constitutional quotas to ensure women's participation. However, women's representation in the private sector remains far behind, and continued efforts are needed to strengthen institutional mechanisms, evaluate progress, and address challenges in achieving full gender equality. The Africa Human Development Report outlines key strategies and pathways to accelerate gender equality, promoting policies and programs that integrate gender into broader human development goals (AU, 2012; IPU, 2015; UN, 2016).

2.4. Females Leadership in Ethiopia

The status of women in leadership positions in Ethiopia has evolved across three distinct political regimes: Haile Selassie, the Dergue, and the FDRE. Under Haile Selassie's rule, women were placed at the lowest levels in the social hierarchy, with traditional gender roles rooted in Orthodox Christianity, which hindered women's access to political power. The monarchy did not prioritize women's advancement, and although there were a few women's organizations, they had limited influence. Women were excluded from significant political roles, with very few holding positions in the parliament. The Dergue regime (1974-1991) promised change but largely failed to empower women. The Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association (REWA) was established, but it functioned more as a tool for consolidating the regime's power than as a means for advancing women's rights. Women's participation in development was minimal, and their roles remained subordinated within the patriarchal structures.

The FDRE regime, which came to power in 1991, marked a turning point in the political landscape for women. The new constitution guaranteed women's rights and gender equality, including participation in decision-making processes. It introduced progressive laws, such as those

prohibiting gender-based discrimination and ensuring equal rights in marriage, property ownership, and employment. However, despite these legal advancements, women's representation in leadership positions, particularly in the Ethiopian parliament, remains low compared to other African nations. While there have been incremental improvements, such as an increase in the number of women elected to parliament, their representation is still far below the levels seen in countries like Rwanda and South Africa. Despite these challenges, the FDRE government continues to adopt measures aimed at enhancing women's participation in leadership, though much work remains to be done (Yalem, 2011; Biseswar, 2014).

2.5. Challenges of Females' Leadership Participation

In societies where traditional or patriarchal values remain strong, many women find politics as unwelcoming and even hostile to participate in it and hold managerial positions. There are practical factors affecting the participation of women in managerial positions. These factors include lower level of education, financial problems, lack of necessary networks, greater family responsibilities and deprivation of their rights (IGAD, 2010).

Organizational culture also presents significant barriers. Male-dominated power structures, where men hold the majority of leadership positions, often perpetuate a system that favors men and excludes women. This can manifest in various ways, such as informal networking that excludes women, unconscious bias in recruitment and promotion processes, and a lack of support for women's career development. Additionally, religious and economic factors can further impede women's progress. Religious beliefs that reinforce traditional gender roles and economic disparities, such as limited access to financial resources and dependence on male breadwinners, can significantly hinder women's ability to pursue leadership roles (UN, 2015).

2.8. The Existing Opportunities for Females' Participation in Leadership

Gender equality has become a critical international agenda, emphasizing equal participation for women and men across all aspects of life. The UN Millennium Project defines gender equality through three domains: capabilities (education, health, nutrition), opportunities (political representation, economic access), and security (reduced vulnerability to violence). International conventions like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Beijing Platform for Action recognize women's right to participate in political life and decision-making at all levels. The African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women further emphasizes this right. Recognizing the importance of women's empowerment, the Ethiopian government has ratified international instruments and implemented national policies, such as the National Policy on Ethiopian Women, to promote gender equality and address the challenges women face in achieving leadership roles.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The type of study is descriptive survey. Descriptive survey research design aims to describe behaviors to gather respondents' perceptions, opinions, attitudes and beliefs about a current issue. The research approach employed in this study was qualitative. The quantitative research approach was selected because the objective of the study was to gather information in a systematic and standard way.

3.2. Population and Sampling

The target population of this research was all permanent employees which currently exist in Sidama National Regional State Finance and Economy Development Office. According to the data obtained from Sidama Regional State Finance and Economy Development Office (2022), there were 512 employees. Therefore, the sample size for employee is calculated by Yamane (1967) formula as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where: n = Sample size
 N = Total Population
 e = Sampling Error

$$n = \frac{512}{1 + 512(0.05)^2}$$

$$n \approx 225$$

After determining the sample size, the researcher used stratified random sampling technique. Stratified random sampling is a method of sampling that involves the division of a population into smaller sub-groups known as strata. Then each respondent from each stratum were selected using simple random sampling.

3.3. Data Collection Methods and Tools

The data were collected directly by administrating questionnaires. Questionnaires had been contained both closed and open ended questions were used to gather data from selected sample employees. The questionnaires contain two parts. Part one is about demographic factors, part two is about challenges and opportunities of females in leadership positions in order to collect relevant and reliable data from Office governmental offices. The closed ended question was prepared in the form of likert scale type and level of agreement that was indicated on five point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (5= strongly agree, 4 agree, 3 undecided 2= disagree, and 1= strongly disagree) and open-ended questions was used to gather additional information to supplement data that are not followed by any kind of specified choice but require respondents write their views freely.

3.4. Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire designed for this research was validated. The questionnaire was taken to the researcher's advisors in Hawassa University and to experts' of different organizations in the field of women affaires. The experts' corrections, suggestions, comments and observations ensured the content validity of the instruments. The questionnaire was validated for its relevance to subject matter, appropriateness of the text content and coverage of the content area. After making all the necessary adjustments by the researcher, the advisor approved the instrument is being valid for collecting data in this study.

It is important to make sure that a scale and its items are reliable in any research. According to Adams et al. (2007) reliability is the estimate of the consistency of the measurement or the degree to which an instrument measures the same way each time it is used under the same conditions with the same subjects. Therefore, in order to determine the reliability of the questionnaire, a pre-test was conducted. According to George and Mallery (2003) a reliability of greater than 0.9 is excellent, greater than 0.8 is good, greater than 0.7 is acceptable, greater than 0.6 questionable, greater than 0.5 is poor and less than 0.5 is unacceptable. The overall reliability of the questionnaire is greater than 0.9 which is at excellent level.

3.5. Method of Data Analysis and Presentation

The collected data was coded, recoded, edited, organized, presented, and interpreted in relation to research questions. Finally, the quantitative data was entered into the computer using Stata Software version 16. The analysis techniques were performed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviation. Furthermore, inferential statistics such as one sample t-test was used to compare sample mean with expected population mean (calculated sample mean with test value) regarding current status, challenges and opportunities of female leadership. *Chi-square* test also used to identify the relationship between sex and educational level of respondents in the study area.

4. RESULT AND INTERPRETATION

The results and interpretation chapter presents the findings from the study on the challenges and opportunities faced by women in leadership positions. This chapter analyzes the various factors that influence women's participation in leadership roles, focusing on the barriers they encounter as well as the opportunities that may facilitate their advancement. The study identifies socio-cultural, family-related, socio-economic, organizational, and personal challenges that limit women's progress in leadership roles, while also highlighting the existing organizational frameworks and educational opportunities that could foster greater female leadership participation. The analysis provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics that shape women's leadership experiences and offers recommendations for overcoming challenges and leveraging opportunities to promote gender equity in leadership positions.

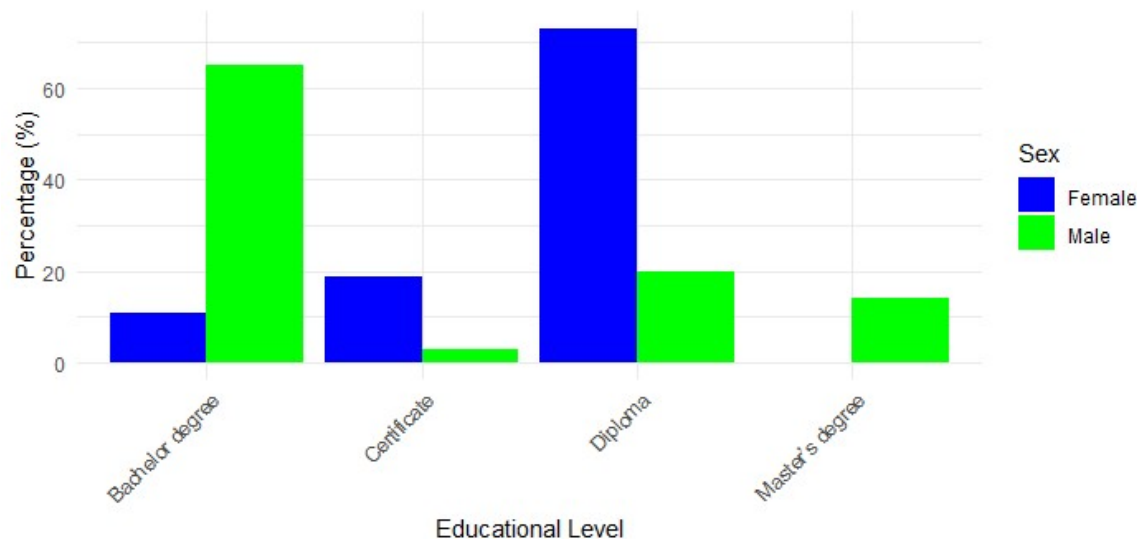


Figure 1: Sex and educational level of sampled respondents

Source: Survey Data, 2024

The data analysis shows a clear disparity in educational attainment between males and females in the study. A significant proportion of males (63.7%) hold a bachelor’s degree, while only 10.7% of females have reached the same level. In contrast, a large percentage of females (70.9%) have obtained a diploma, far exceeding the 19.6% of males with this qualification. For certificate-level education, a higher percentage of males (3%) compared to females (2.9%) are represented, though the overall numbers are low for both groups. Additionally, while a small percentage of males (13.7%) have a master’s degree, none of the females in the sample have reached this level. These findings highlight significant gender disparities in educational attainment, with females predominantly concentrated in lower-level qualifications, while males are more likely to hold higher academic credentials.

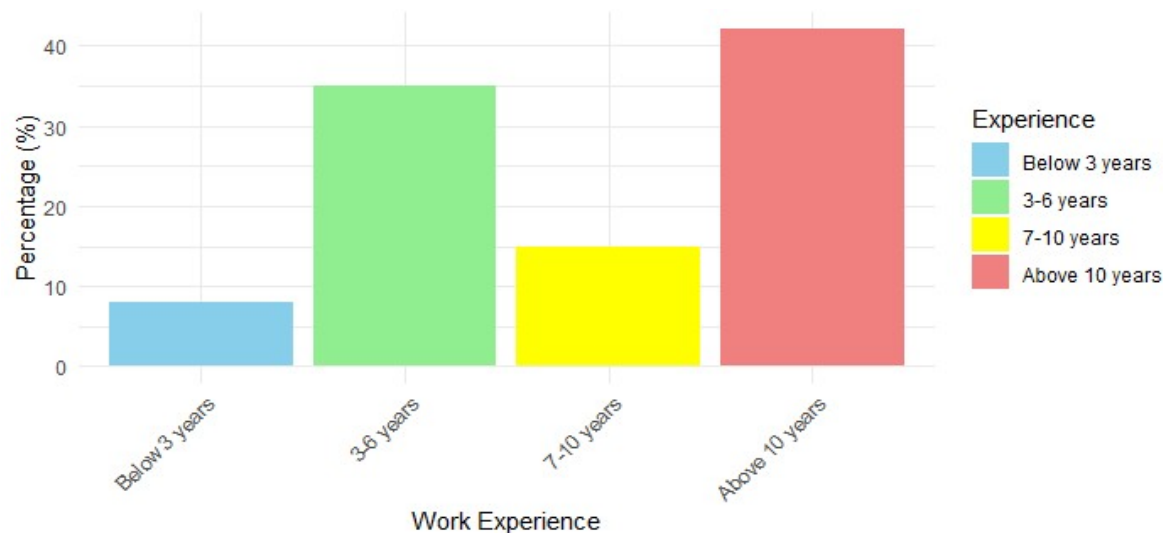
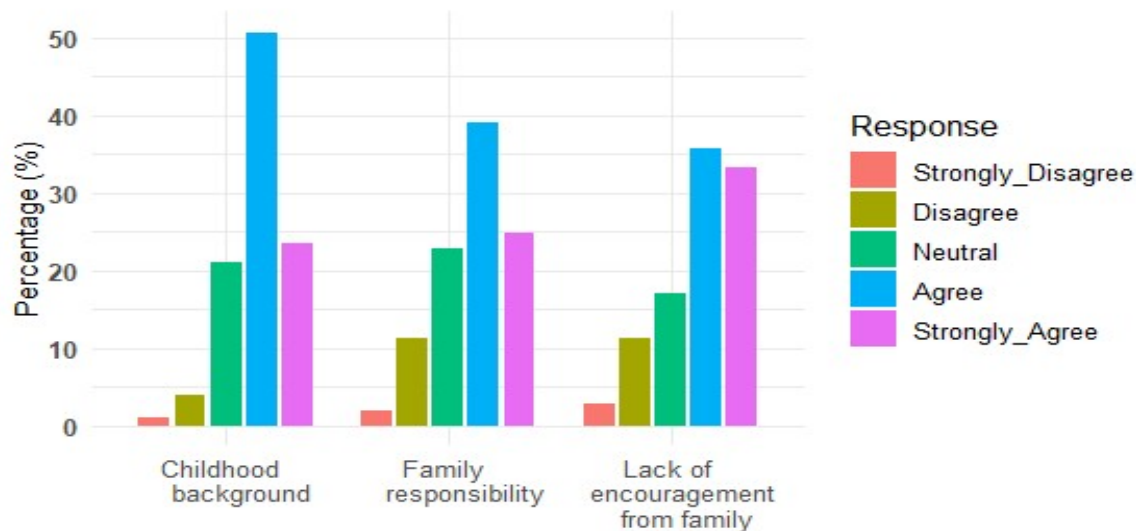


Figure 2: Work experience of sampled respondents**Source:** Survey Data, 2024

The bar graph illustrates the distribution of work experience among a sample of respondents. The data is categorized into four ranges: "Below 3 years," "3-6 years," "7-10 years," and "Above 10 years." A substantial proportion of respondents (42%) have "Above 10 years" of work experience. In contrast, only 8% of respondents have "Below 3 years" of work experience. The intermediate categories, "3-6 years" and "7-10 years," represent 35% and 15% of the respondents, respectively. This distribution suggests that the sample population has a relatively high proportion of individuals with significant work experience.

4.3. Challenges of Female Leadership in Government Offices

This section deals with the presentation on analysis of data gathered on challenges of female leadership in government offices of the study area. It assesses the perception of respondents about personal challenges, family related challenges, socio-cultural challenges and socio-economic challenges as follows:

**Figure 3:** Family related challenges of female leadership in government offices**Source:** Survey Data, 2024

Family-related challenges faced by female leadership in government offices, based on survey responses. The data indicates that 74.1% of respondents agree (50.7%) or strongly agree (23.4%) that childhood background plays a significant role in shaping female leadership, while only 4.9% disagree or strongly disagree. Regarding family responsibilities, 63.9% of respondents agree (39.0%) or strongly agree (24.9%) that family obligations pose challenges to female leadership, while 13.2% disagree or strongly disagree. Additionally, 68.8% of respondents either agree

(35.6%) or strongly agree (33.2%) that a lack of encouragement from the family is a barrier to female leadership, while 14.1% disagree or strongly disagree. These findings highlight the significant family-related challenges women face in pursuing leadership roles, including the influence of their childhood background, family responsibilities, and lack of family support and encouragement.

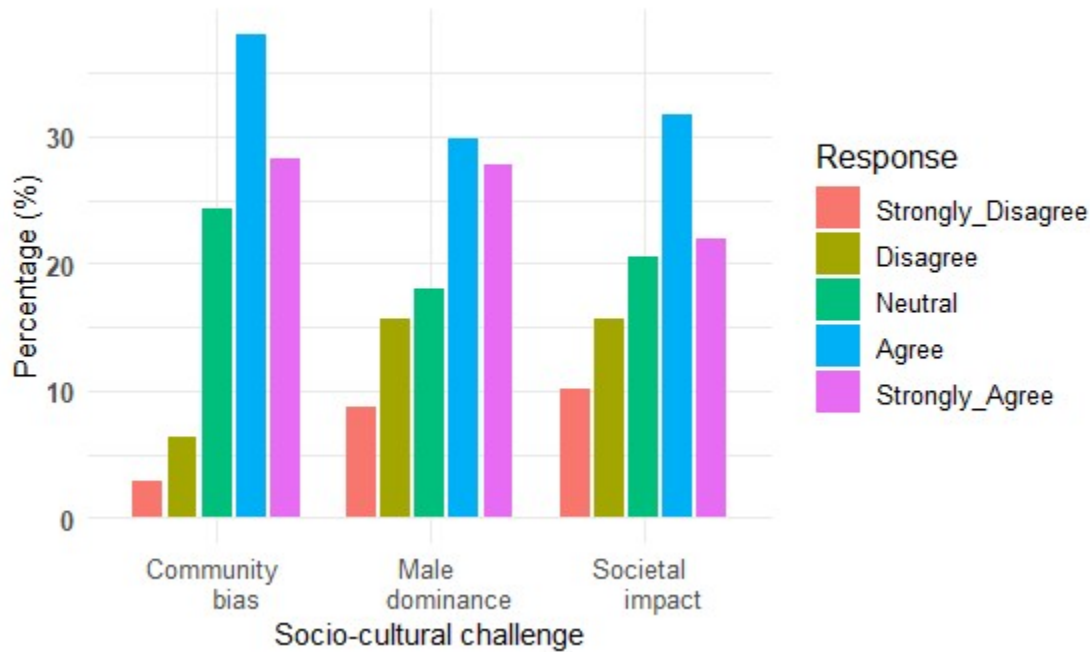


Figure 4: Socio-cultural challenges of female leadership in government offices

Source: Survey Data, 2024

The socio-cultural challenges faced by female leadership in government offices, based on survey responses. The data reveals that a significant portion of respondents (66.3%) agree or strongly agree that the community perceives females as lacking the ability and skill to be leaders, with only 9.2% disagreeing. Additionally, 53.7% of respondents either agree (31.7%) or strongly agree (22.0%) that societal attitudes negatively influence female leadership, while 25.8% disagree or strongly disagree. Furthermore, 57.6% of respondents agree (29.8%) or strongly agree (27.8%) that decision-making power is still predominantly attributed to males, with only 24.4% disagreeing. These findings suggest that societal norms and perceptions, including stereotypes about female leadership potential and the continued dominance of males in decision-making, pose significant barriers to female leadership in government offices.

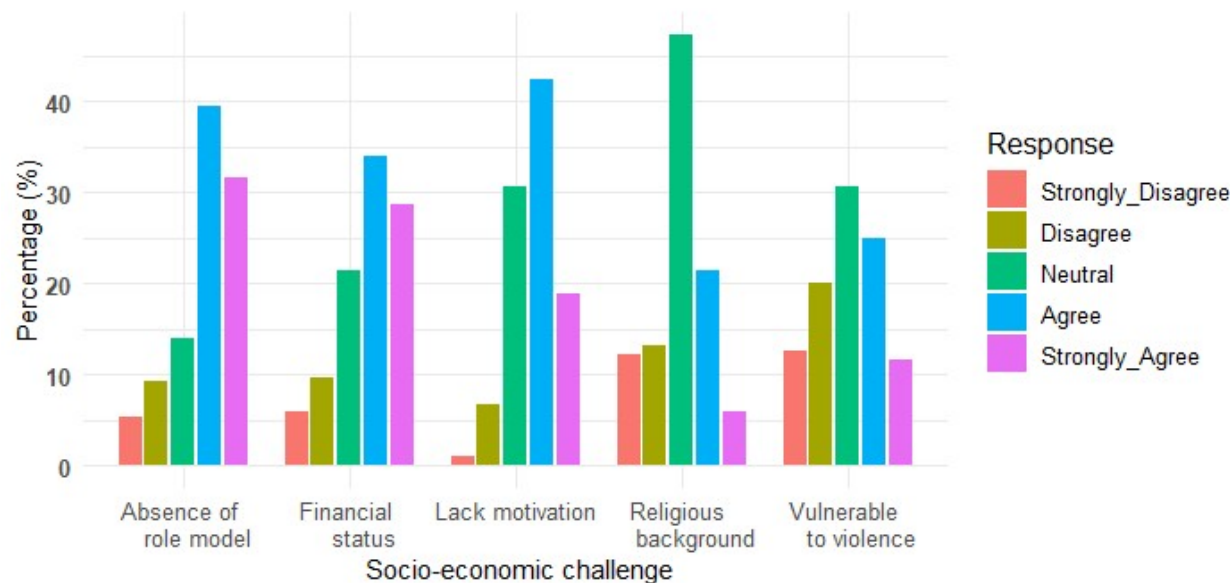


Table 5: socio-economic challenges of female leadership in government offices
Source: Survey data, 2024

Socio-economic challenges faced by female leadership in government offices, based on survey responses. The data shows that 27.4% of respondents either agree (21.5%) or strongly agree (5.9%) that religious background affects female leadership, while 25.4% disagree or strongly disagree, and a large portion (47.3%) remain neutral. Regarding financial status, 62.9% of respondents agree (34.1%) or strongly agree (28.8%) that financial constraints limit female leadership, with only 15.7% disagreeing. The absence of role models is another significant challenge, with 71.2% agreeing (39.5%) or strongly agreeing (31.7%) that this affects female leadership, while 14.7% disagree. Additionally, 36.6% of respondents agree (24.9%) or strongly agree (11.7%) that women are vulnerable to violence and conflict in their leadership roles, while 32.7% disagree or strongly disagree. Finally, 61.4% of respondents believe that a lack of motivation from partners is a challenge for female leaders, with 42.4% agreeing and 19.0% strongly agreeing, while 7.8% disagree. These findings reveal several socio-economic factors such as financial limitations, the lack of role models, and vulnerability to violence, and insufficient support from partners that significantly hinder female leadership in government offices.

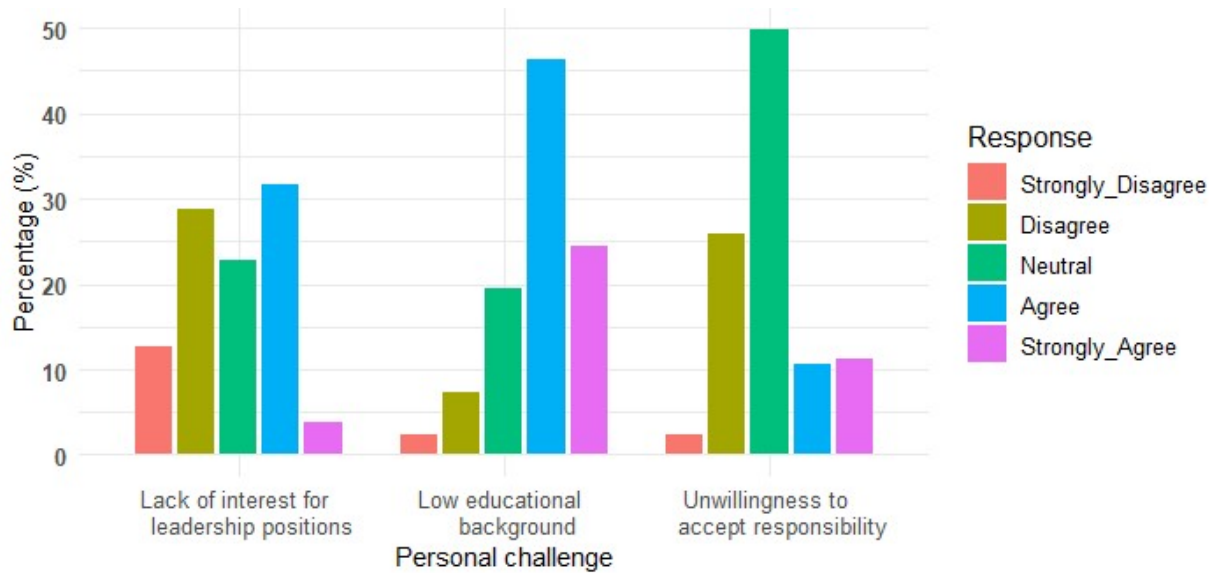


Table 6: Personal challenges of female leadership in government offices

Source: Survey Data, 2024

Personal challenges faced by female leadership in government offices, based on survey responses. The data shows that 21.9% of respondents agree (10.7%) or strongly agree (11.2%) that unwillingness to accept responsibility is a challenge for female leaders, while 28.3% disagree or strongly disagree, and a large portion (49.8%) remain neutral. Regarding educational background, 70.7% of respondents agree (46.3%) or strongly agree (24.4%) that a low educational background poses a challenge to female leadership, with only 9.7% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Finally, the data reveals that 35.6% of respondents agree (31.7%) or strongly agree (3.9%) that a lack of interest in leadership positions is a challenge, while 41.5% disagree or strongly disagree. These findings indicate that personal factors, such as unwillingness to take responsibility, low educational background, and lack of interest in leadership, present significant challenges for women aspiring to leadership roles in government offices.

4.4. Opportunities of Females Leadership

The number and proportion of female leaders have been enhanced in the last decade than before. Thus, along the challenges that female leaders have been facing, there are also opportunities that posed by it. The opportunities of female leadership in this study included existing organizational set up opportunities and educational opportunities. This can be explained as follows.

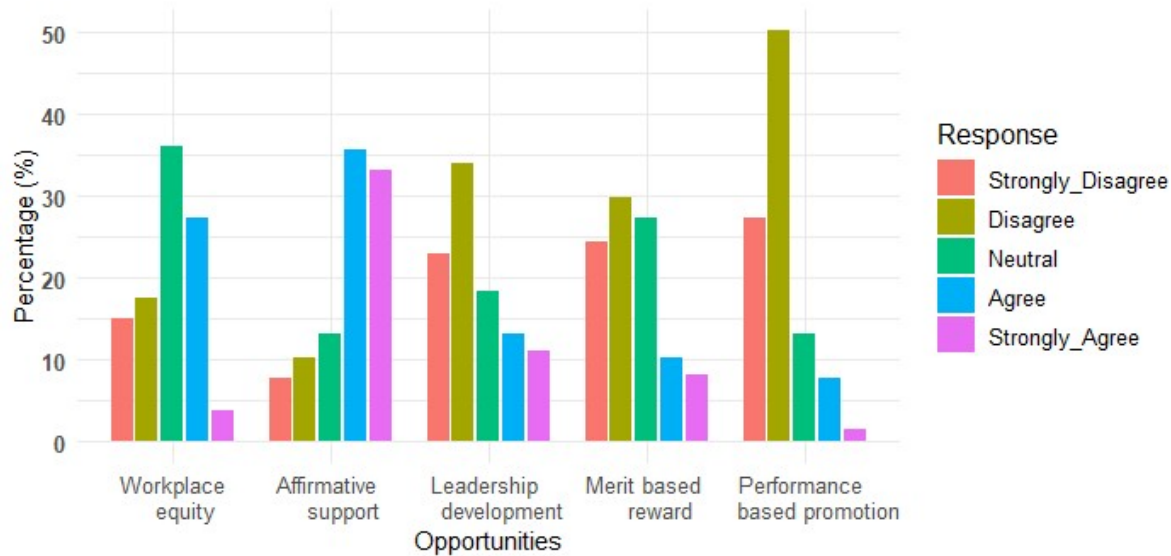


Table 7: Existing organizational setup opportunities

Source: Survey Data, 2024

Regarding the existing organizational setup opportunities for female leadership in government offices, the findings reveal that only 31.2% of respondents agree (27.3%) or strongly agree (3.9%) that there is equal opportunity in the workplace, while 32.7% disagree (17.6%) or strongly disagree (15.1%), and 36.1% remain neutral. Regarding Affirmative Action, 68.8% of respondents agree (35.6%) or strongly agree (33.2%) that they benefit from such initiatives, with only 18.0% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. However, when it comes to rewards based on achievement, only 18.5% of respondents agree (10.2%) or strongly agree (8.3%), while 54.2% disagree (29.8%) or strongly disagree (24.4%), and 27.3% remain neutral. Similarly, 78.7% of respondents disagree (50.2%) or strongly disagree (27.3%) that promotions are given based on good practice, with only 9.3% agreeing (7.8%) or strongly agreeing (1.5%). Regarding leadership training, 57.0% of respondents disagree (34.1%) or strongly disagree (22.9%) that female leaders are provided with leadership training, while only 24.4% agree (13.2%) or strongly agree (11.2%). These findings suggest that while there are some organizational opportunities such as Affirmative Action, there is room for improvement in areas like equal opportunities, rewards for achievements, promotions based on good practice, and providing training for leadership development.



Table 8: Educational opportunities of female leaders in the study area

Source: Survey Data, 2024

Concerning the educational opportunities available to female leaders in the study area, the data shows that 71.3% of respondents agree (41.5%) or strongly agree (29.8%) that they have the chance to upgrade their educational improvement, while only 10.3% disagree (5.9%) or strongly disagree (4.4%), and 18.5% remain neutral. In contrast, regarding the availability of mentors to participate in leadership, 35.6% of respondents agree (16.1%) or strongly agree (19.5%) that mentors are available, while 34.2% disagree (21.5%) or strongly disagree (12.7%), and 30.2% remain neutral. These findings suggest that while there are educational opportunities for improvement, such as the chance for further education, the availability of mentorship for leadership development is more limited, indicating a potential area for growth in supporting female leaders through mentorship programs.

5. CONCLUSION

The main challenges that hinder women in leadership positions are multifaceted, involving family-related, socio-cultural, organizational, and personal factors. Family responsibilities, such as the greater burden women carry for home and family issues compared to their male counterparts, are significant barriers to their participation in leadership roles. Additionally, a lack of encouragement from families and childhood development challenges further hinder their leadership ambitions. Socio-cultural attitudes also play a key role, as many people believe that women lack the necessary skills and abilities for leadership and that decision-making power should remain with men. Low educational backgrounds and societal influence further limit women's interest in leadership roles. Organizational challenges, such as male-dominated cultures and a lack of practical support or frameworks to encourage female leadership, also affect their ability to ascend to leadership positions. Financial limitations and insufficient motivation from families also contribute to this challenge. On a personal level, while reluctance to accept responsibility is not a significant issue, societal acceptance and a lack of forcefulness to defend their leadership aspirations remain

obstacles. However, women possess the potential to be strong leaders, committed to their organizations and careers, and with the right support and encouragement, they can overcome these barriers and thrive in leadership roles.

Several opportunities and strategies have been identified to encourage greater female participation in leadership roles. These include providing equal opportunities for women to advance their education at all levels and ensuring equal chances at the workplace by offering both short-term and long-term training programs. These measures, rather than prioritization, are seen as essential to boosting female participation in leadership. Additionally, affirmative action programs that support women's entry into leadership positions serve as an important opportunity for enhancing their involvement. However, despite these opportunities, women in government offices face challenges such as not being promoted for their performance, lacking access to leadership training, and not receiving rewards based on their achievements.

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