



Canadian Bureau for  
International Education

# Breaking Barriers to Women's Advancement in the Public Sector in Sub-Saharan Africa

---

Prepared by:

Gebeyehu Begashaw Abate  
University of Gondar, Ethiopia

Ayesheshim Terefe Woldie  
University of Gondar, Ethiopia

February 2022



Global Affairs  
Canada



This report was undertaken through the African Leaders of Tomorrow (ALT) Extension Program for 2021-2022. CBIE acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada and the Mastercard Foundation for the publication of this report.

---

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

<b>1 – Abstract</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>2 – Background</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>3 – Objectives</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Specific Objectives.....	8
Theoretical Framework.....	8
Methods .....	9
<b>4 – Findings and Discussions</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>5 – African Women in Decision-Making and Leadership Roles in the Public Sector</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>6 – Barriers to Women’s Advancement in the Public Sector</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Socio-Cultural Barriers.....	20
Organizational Structural/Institutional Barriers.....	22
Work-Family Balance.....	23
Individual/Personal Factors.....	23
Professional Women’s View Regarding the Barriers .....	24
<b>7 – Overcoming Barriers to the Advancement of Women Leaders: The Way Forward</b> .....	<b>30</b>
National-Level Initiatives .....	30
Organization-Level Initiatives.....	33
Other Pragmatic Initiatives .....	35
<b>8 – Conclusion</b> .....	<b>36</b>
Limitations and Implications for Future Research.....	37
Acknowledgment .....	38
Declaration of Conflict of Interest.....	38
<b>9 – Bibliography</b> .....	<b>39</b>

# LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

---

Figure 1 – Women in Management and Leadership: A Meso-Level Approach (adapted from Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009) .....	9
Figure 2 – Proportion of Women Parliamentarians in Africa .....	15
Figure 3 – Proportion of Women Cabinet Members in Africa .....	15
Figure 4 – Women’s Political Participation .....	16
Figure 5 – Percentage of Women Employed in Higher Positions in Civil Service (left fig.) and in Higher Courts (right fig.) ....	17
Figure 6 – Women Directors and Department Heads .....	18
Figure 7 – Number of Male-Female State-Owned Enterprise (SOE) Board Members .....	19
Figure 8 – Participants’ Origin from SSA.....	24
Figure 9 – Public Sector Working Experience in SSA.....	25
Figure 10 – Participants’ Experience as Leaders/Managers .....	25
Table 1 – Aggregated Responses From the Survey.....	26
Table 2 – Emerged Themes of Barriers From the Survey and Interview.....	28
Figure 11 – A Strategic Model to Overcome the Barriers to Women’s Career Advancemen .....	32

# 1

## ABSTRACT

---

Women in Africa have continued to make considerable progress in their stride to be part of the social, political, economic, and governance issues of the continent. However, despite their efforts, women are still underrepresented in the senior leadership levels of the public sector in Sub-Saharan African countries (SSA). This study attempts to examine the current status of women in decision-making roles, barriers to women's career advancement, and possible strategies to improve women's involvement in decision-making roles of the public sector in SSA. To achieve these aims, two approaches are followed: an extensive review of existing research and a survey with professional women (African Leaders of Tomorrow Fellows). More than two dozen empirical studies, global and regional reports, and books were thoroughly reviewed and analyzed. To explore the lived experiences of women leaders in Africa, surveys and interviews were also held with African professional women (ALT scholars).

The study revealed that women are slowly but increasingly participating in areas of public life in most SSA countries. However, the whole picture of this study shows that Africa needs to work hard to increase women's representation in the leadership arenas of its public sectors. This study has also identified social norms and cultural factors as the most prominent barriers to women's participation in the decision-making roles of the public sector. Work-life imbalance, discriminatory organizational structures and practices, and conflict and instability are also some of the hurdles that women have to overcome before they assume senior leadership roles. To address these gender imbalances, a combination of actions including affirmative action, quota system, mentoring and capacity-building programs, childcare centers, and attitudinal change strategies have been suggested to be implemented at organizational and national levels in SSA countries.

**Keywords:** African women leaders, African women managers, women decision-making roles, barriers to women's career progress, women leaders in the public sector

# 2

## BACKGROUND

---

In recent years, many African countries have geared their efforts towards improving women's representation in all spheres of governance in both the public and private sectors (Amina & Ibrahim, 2019 & Kiamba, 2008). Through interventions such as quota systems, capacity building, and representations set by political parties (Moodley, 2016), Sub-Saharan countries have tried to introduce more women at leadership and decision-making levels, particularly in their public sectors. In addition, governments have introduced laws and national-level regulations to avoid gender-based discrimination and related unfair practices, and to promote diversity in leadership and management roles within the public sector. Yet, women are still widely marginalized within the corridors of power and decision-making roles compared to their male counterparts (Ilesanmi, 2018 & UNESCO, 2017).

Although the number of women joining the workforce in the public sector has been continuously increasing, only a small number of them manage to advance their careers as leaders and decision-makers. Rather, they are concentrated in larger numbers at lower levels of leadership/management in the workplace (Osituyo, 2018; Coetzee & Moosa, 2020). For example, in 2015, of the 26 public higher education institutions of South Africa, only four had women as vice-chancellors (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020); most senior professional and administrative positions in Nigeria's public sector were held by men (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009); and in Mali, only 19.2% of women held management positions in the country's public sector (Doumbia & Meurs 2003).

The limited advancement of women to the top leadership level of the public sector in SSA is due to a multitude of barriers and challenges. Accordingly, a number of studies have identified certain barriers working within the society, the system, and the organizations that have led to the underrepresentation of women at the decision-making level. For example, socio-cultural beliefs (Mwale & Dodo, 2017; Ilesanmi, 2018), gendered organizational structures (Kirai & Mukulu, 2012), structural barriers and restrictive laws (UNESCO, 2017), and gender norms and stereotypes (Kiaye & Singh, 2013) are some of the barriers to women's participation in leadership and decision-making roles, despite their capabilities and qualifications.

Society in most African countries expects women to primarily play traditional gender roles such as performing domestic tasks, motherhood, and providing care for elders (Kiaye & Singh, 2013; Amina & Ibrahim, 2019). Such traditionally defined social roles have deprived African women of opportunities for progress, as they are expected to constantly fulfill the unending responsibilities of these fundamental roles (Amina & Ibrahim, 2019). For such and other reasons, the few women who even succeed in assuming better roles and positions in their respective organizations do not survive for a long period of time.

Scholars (e.g., Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Bawa & Sanyare, 2013) assert that Africa's sustainable socio-economic development aspiration requires the full participation of women in leading organizations and institutions. Through their unique perspectives, women either as individuals or as a group would greatly contribute to a nation's social and economic development, as well as the quality and dynamics of institutions and organizations (Bawa & Sanyare, 2013). Moreover, if women were going to make significant headway on economic and other fronts, they would need to have a physical presence in the public sector and other political and economic institutions. Hence, there is a dire need for substantive representation of women in decision-making positions in Africa (Ilesanmi, 2018), especially in its public sectors, to achieve gender equality in development, sustainable peace, and good governance within the continent.

There is a significant body of literature on women leaders and managers in both the private and public sectors. Moreover, most research on leadership is carried out in Western countries. Yet, the findings of those studies are not all transposable to different contexts (Blunt & Jones, 1997; Bolden & Kirk, 2009; Titi Amayah & Haque, 2017). However, there is little research on "non-Western women managers and leaders in general, and on African women in particular" (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009). As a result, we know comparatively little about the nature of the challenges that female leaders encounter in Sub-Saharan African countries.

Accordingly, the process towards increasing the visibility of women in decision-making across the continent's public sectors requires an understanding of the progress made so far, the structural and organizational challenges faced, and the way forward. This would address a gap in the literature on the experiences and challenges/barriers of emerging women leaders in a non-Western public sector context. Moreover, the research results will help African leaders, policymakers, organizations, and societies to understand the cultural, personal, and structural barriers to women's advancement in the public sector, thereby improving the situation.

# 3

## OBJECTIVES

---

The main objective of this research is to assess the structural/systemic, personal, and cultural barriers to women's advancement in the public sector in Sub-Saharan Africa.

### Specific Objectives

In line with the main objective, the research aims to:

- ▶ assess the current status of African women in their engagement in the public sector in SSA.
- ▶ examine the personal, cultural, and structural barriers to women's advancement in the public sector in SSA.
- ▶ indicate the way forward in order to overcome barriers to the advancement of women leaders in the public sector in SSA.

### Theoretical Framework

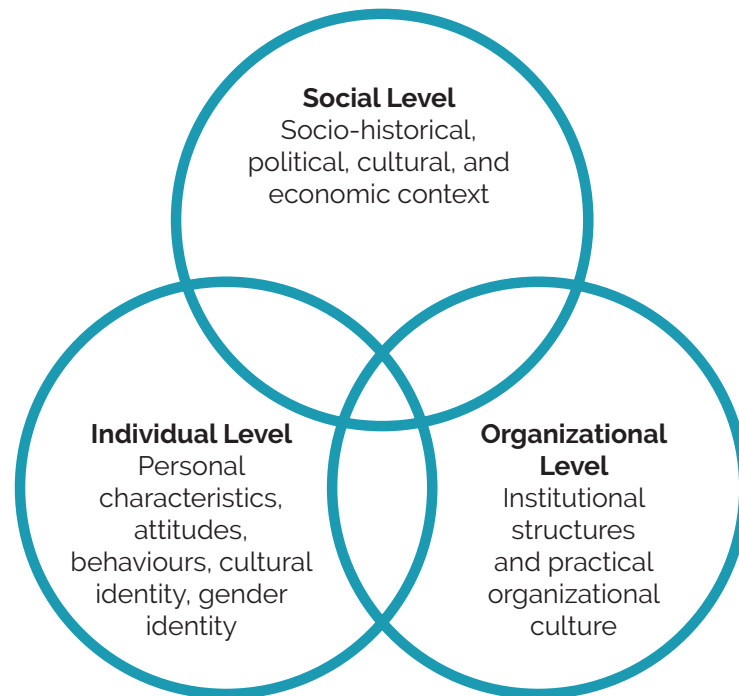
In understanding the position, experience, and progress of African women in leadership roles and advancement in the public sector, scholars (e.g., Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009) argue that there is a need to examine cultural, historical, political, and economic contexts. Depending on the theoretical frameworks and paradigms developed, the study of women in Western countries might not be appropriate enough to understand gender issues in Africa. The dominant theoretical frameworks relied on the person-centered perspective, and scholars began to question whether this approach can be applied in contexts such as Africa. Critics of such an approach argue that scholars should start seeing gender as a system, an identity, and power relations between men and women (Ely & Padavic, 2007). Accordingly, these critiques suggested that a meso-level approach connecting organizational structures and practices (macro-level) with gender identity (micro-level) is appropriate.

Thus, in order to study gender and leadership/management in African organizations, the expanded meso-level approach, which includes the unique socio-historical, political, economic, and cultural context of Africa is imperative. This approach incorporates the individual level, the organizational level, and the societal level depicted in the figure below.

We believe that the framework explained above offers a means to fully interrogate cultural, historical, political, and economic contexts so as to understand the status, experiences, barriers, and possibilities of African women in the public sector. This research is therefore guided by this theoretical framework.



**Figure 1 – Women in Management and Leadership: A Meso-Level Approach (adapted from Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009)**



## Methods

This study has followed two approaches: a literature review and a survey with professional African women (ALT scholars). Accordingly, a mix of data collection instruments, including surveys and interviews with ALT scholars as well as a literature review of previous studies, have been employed. Each of the approaches is described in detail below.

### Literature Review

This extensive literature review has tried to locate previous studies with the purpose of highlighting the current status of women in the public sector, possible barriers to assuming senior leadership roles, and tested interventions to increase women's career advancement in the public sector in SSA.

To identify studies in the existing literature, we conducted a literature review of all existing research on African women leaders in the public sector. This included systematic searches of online databases, targeting journal articles, books, book chapters, monographs, and reports. Accordingly, we have applied a four-stage search procedure: (1) systematic searches of online databases using a thorough set of search terms; (2) hand searches of journals by identifying the top journals based on the sample studies; (3) backward (ancestry) searches of reference lists in identified articles; and (4) forward searches of articles that have cited key studies.

Stage 1 has involved an electronic search of empirical works through Scopus, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis, SAGE publications, Business Source Premier, PsycINFO, and others. In addition to the use of academic databases, the process included searches of the following professional yet non-academic websites and databases of organizations such as World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, OECD, DFID, Africa Barometer, and Center for Global Development, AFDB, UNECA, ILO, and UNDP.

The search covers a period of approximately 21 years, from 2000 to 2021. Each publication was reviewed and classified using several categories: year of publication, sources of publication, purpose and methodology, country, and major findings. The inclusion criteria were therefore the year of publication (2000-2021), geographic focus (Sub-Saharan Africa), thematic focus (women leadership roles/engagement in the public sector and women leadership barriers), and publication type (journal article, report, book chapter, dissertation, etc.).

## Survey Participants

The targeted population that this study focuses on is all-female ALT scholars. As the number of female ALT scholars is limited, this research had employed an availability sampling technique. Accordingly, all-female ALT scholars (N=49) are included in this study.

The African Leaders of Tomorrow Scholarship Program was designed to provide young men and women from Sub-Saharan Africa to study in public policy, public administration, and public finance at Canadian universities. The program was supported by the Canadian government to commemorate the late Nelson Mandela's commitment to social justice and equity

## Survey Questionnaire

A self-administered survey questionnaire was used to collect data from ALT scholars. The questionnaire comprised several scales based on earlier scholarly studies that included management and organization-related scales (e.g., the Women As Managers Scale [WAMS], and the Career Barriers Inventory). These scales were able to draw the cultural, structural, and personal factors that limit women's career advancement in the public sector in Sub-Saharan Africa.

## Interview

About four female scholars were randomly selected for the interview. The purpose of the interview was for them to identify barriers and challenges based on their own lived experiences, draw their own beliefs and opinions towards being a woman leader in the public sector, and offer suggestions for possible interventions. This interview was also expected to highlight whether there was the norm and cultural progression related to gender equality and gender stereotypes, particularly in relation to leadership.

## Data Analysis

In analyzing the qualitative data, we employed an inductive method and thematically analyzed the findings, in response to each research question, based on the emerging themes from the interview and survey. The quantitative data obtained from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as mean and percentage. The evidence from the literature review was analyzed based on the research protocol initially set and the accompanying synthesis framework. The literature synthesis framework focused on three main areas: the current status of women, existing barriers, and possible interventions.

# 4

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

---

In order to address the main objectives of this study, we have employed two approaches of collecting evidence: a comprehensive literature review and primary data from female African Leaders of Tomorrow (ALT) scholars. The literature review was undertaken to identify published scholarly works and reports on Sub-Saharan African women's leadership and decision-making roles in the public sector.

The literature search focused on online databases, targeting journal articles, books, book chapters, monographs, working papers, and government and organizational websites. The search procedure first set keywords such as African women leadership; African women in public life; African women in cabinets; African women leaders in public sectors; African women managers/department heads, African women in parliaments; African women board members; African women in civil service leadership; African women in decision-making roles; and African women leaders in public administration.

The search has yielded over two dozen journal articles, nearly a dozen of reports from different international and regional organizations (e.g., UNDP, Africa Barometer, and ILO), and working papers and dissertations. Thousands of journal articles appeared when the search focused on African women's leadership/management in general. However, when the search key limited the scope to public sectors or public life, the number of scholarly works shrinks significantly.

Accordingly, the body of literature, particularly on women's engagement as leaders and decision-makers in the public sector in SSA, is quite small. Even the uncovered empirical studies and reports did not provide adequate and in-depth analysis of women's situation in the public sector. We found that most of the empirical works and reports have not addressed women's decision-making issues in the public sector exclusively. Rather, the issue of women's leadership in the public sector in most cases was briefly touched upon as part of other broader gender-related studies. In other words, part of the data was collected from studies in which the primary objective was not to examine women leadership in the public sector.

Besides, most of the available works in this area were solely focused on women's representation in parliament, leaving the rest of the public sector largely untouched. It was therefore essential to carefully extract every bit of information about women and the public sector from the broader gender-related literature in SSA. This study then confirmed there is indeed a significant gap in the literature in relation to women's role in the public sector in SSA. However, it is also important to recognize that some scholarly works might have not been captured in our electronic search, as there could be non-electronic journals in different countries of SSA.

The second source of data to particularly address the second and third objectives of this study were female African Leaders of Tomorrow (ALT) scholars. A questionnaire that tried to understand the barriers to women's advancement in the public sector and possible measures to overcome these barriers was sent to 49 ALT scholars. In addition, an interview was held with four scholars to share their experiences as public sector leaders. About 23 ALT scholars have returned the questionnaire. As two of the returned questionnaires had missed some important responses, they were discarded from this analysis.

# 5

## AFRICAN WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING AND LEADERSHIP ROLES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

---

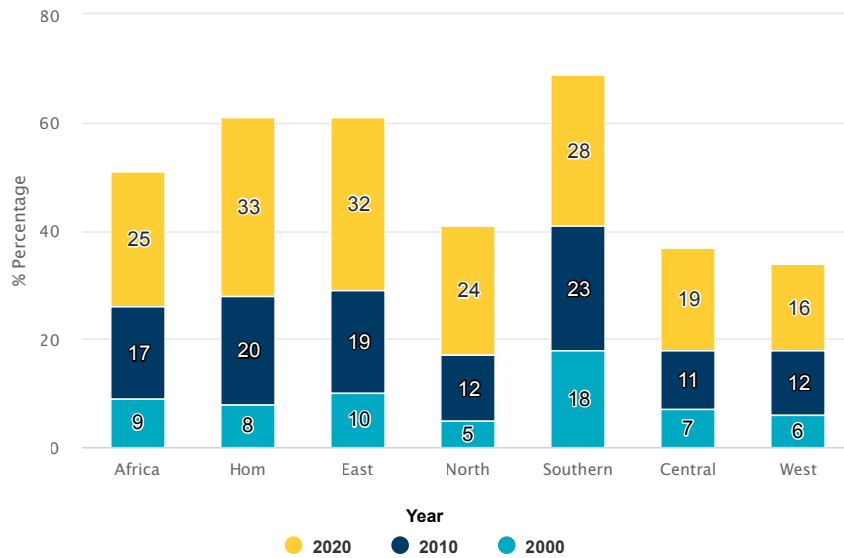
The marginalization and invisibility of women in policy-making, leadership, and governance in Africa have remained one of the fervent discourses among academics, international actors, and governments. The minimal participation of women, especially in policy-making and leading important organizations and institutions, is still a concern in the context of debates and dialogues about gender equality and equity in Africa. These concerns are likely due to "restrictive laws, cultural diversities and practices, institutional barriers, as well as disproportionate access to quality education, healthcare, and resources (Ilesanmi, 2018)." Besides, customary or traditional societal views of women (Moodley et al., 2016) in most parts of Africa have contributed to the active and deliberate exclusion of women from participating in the governance of their various countries.

However, for the past two decades, a number of actors including civil society, women's groups, and regional and international organizations (e.g., UN and African Women Leaders Network) have been working on initiatives that readdress longstanding gender inequality and inequity, power imbalances, and patriarchal norms and systems in Africa (Ilesanmi, 2018; Devlin & Elgie, 2008; Poltera, 2019). These initiatives include supporting women to play leadership roles (Poltera, 2019) and actively engaging in the political and public life of African states. Therefore, to see the current status of women and to institute change in terms of women's participation in public life, it is essential to have some baseline data on the proportion of women participating in decision-making roles in the public sector in SSA, along with the existing barriers to women's advancement in this sector.

Although it may be ambitious to claim equality has been achieved, efforts and initiatives implemented in the past few years have increased the number of women who are involved in the public life and governance of their countries (Sow, 2012; Ilesanmi, 2018; & Moodley et al., 2016). Setting quota systems, increasing women's representation in political parties, and revising constitutions and legal frameworks have played significant roles in the upsurge of women's involvement in leadership and decision-making roles across the continent (Moodley et al., 2016; Poltera, 2019; Barnes & Burchard, 2013). In fact, some even claim that the historical trend on women's representation in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially related to political representation, may be regarded as one of the fastest and largest rates of change. For example, during the 1960s, less than 1% (0.6%) of legislators were women; in 2007, 17.8% of legislators in the lower chambers of parliament were women (Tripp et al., 2009, Barnes & Burchard, 2013); and in 2021, 25% of parliamentarians were women (Africa Barometer, 2021).

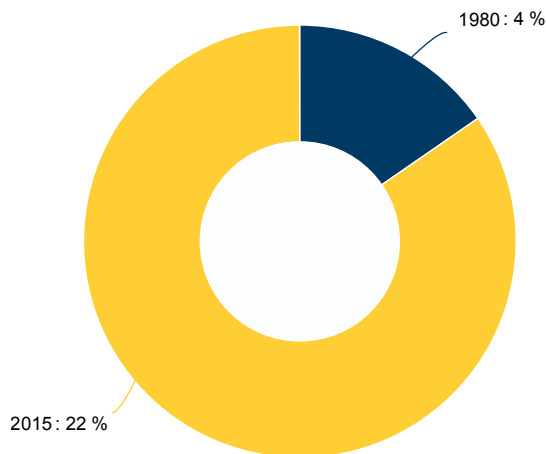
Some further reports (e.g., Moodley et al., 2016) also showed that the number of women parliamentarians has almost doubled within the 15-year span from 2000 to 2015. For example, Burundi (30%), Rwanda (48%), South Africa (32%), and Uganda (30%) are some of the countries that have recorded relative success in increasing the share of women in their political and government decision-making spheres (Sow, 2012). There are countries, however, where progress is far less advanced. These include Nigeria, where only 5.8% of parliamentarians and 10.3% of ministers were women, and Benin and Burkina Faso, where women in parliament hold only 8.4% and 6.3% of the seats, respectively (World Economic Forum, 2021). Overall, by 2015, the proportion of women parliamentarians in Africa has reached an average of 25%, while the proportion of women cabinet ministers averaged 22%. However, at this rate of change, it would still take 50 years to achieve gender equality (Africa Barometer, 2021 & Moodley et al., 2016).

**Figure 2 – Proportion of Women Parliamentarians in Africa**



Source: Africa Barometer 2021.

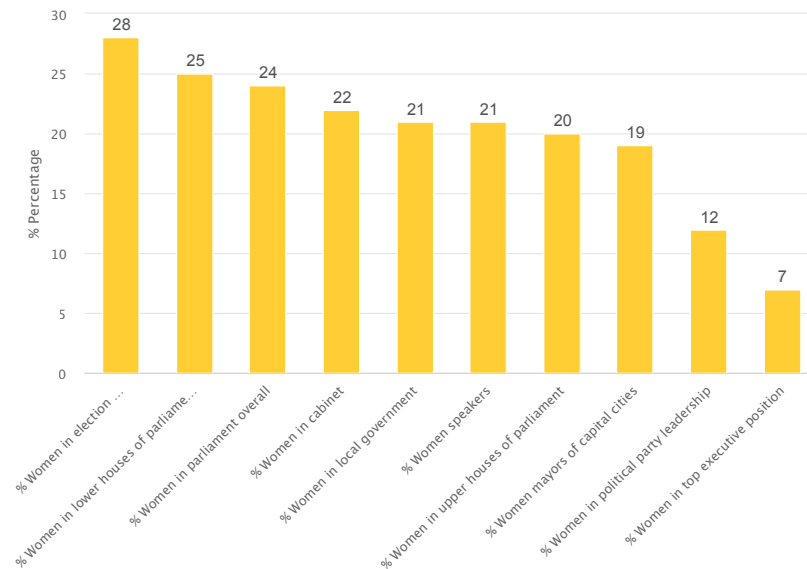
**Figure 3 – Proportion of Women Cabinet Members in Africa**



Source: Moodley et al, 2016 & world Economic forum (2015)

From 2015 onwards, there have not been many quantitative changes in terms of the number of women who are participating in governance and leadership roles. In its 2021 report, Africa Barometer (2021) found that women constituted 24% of the parliamentarians in Africa—25% in the lower houses, and 20% in the upper houses of parliament, which is on par with the evidence reported from studies conducted three to five years earlier than 2021. This may be related to delays in elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Figure 4 – Women's Political Participation**



Source: Women's Political Participation ~ Africa Barometer 2021

In fact, the overall continental average of women in decision-making masks important regional and country differences (Moodley et al., 2016; UNDP, 2021). Variations in the degree of women's visibility in high-level decision-making roles (e.g., parliament and cabinet ministers) across the continent range from 33% in the Horn of Africa to 16% in West Africa (Africa Barometer, 2021). For example, women's participation in public life in the Democratic Republic of Congo is only 7% (Moodley et al., 2016). In Ghana, out of a total of 16 cabinet ministers in 2006, there was only one female minister, and only one out of 16 vice-chancellors of the universities were women; there were no female chancellors out of a total of eight; and two female registrars out of a total of 17 (Bawa & Sanyare, 2013). Similarly, in Nigeria, between 1999 and 2003, women accounted for only 1.62% of the nationwide electable positions; out of the 360 members of the House of Representatives, there were only 12 women. Similarly, out of the 109 members of the Senate, there were only three women (Ebeku, 2005).

Apart from the legislature and parliamentary representation, women's participation as leaders and decision-makers in other areas of the public sector is a key step towards women's empowerment in public life. Women's inclusion in decision-making positions across government sectors and positions (e.g., education, finance, health, energy, defense, foreign affairs, etc.) would help women's career progress in particular, as well as gender parity in the public sector in general (UNDP, 2021). However, women in Sub-Saharan countries continued to be underrepresented in the highest rungs of such public sectors and are rarely found in senior-level decision-making roles (Osituyo, 2018). For example, World

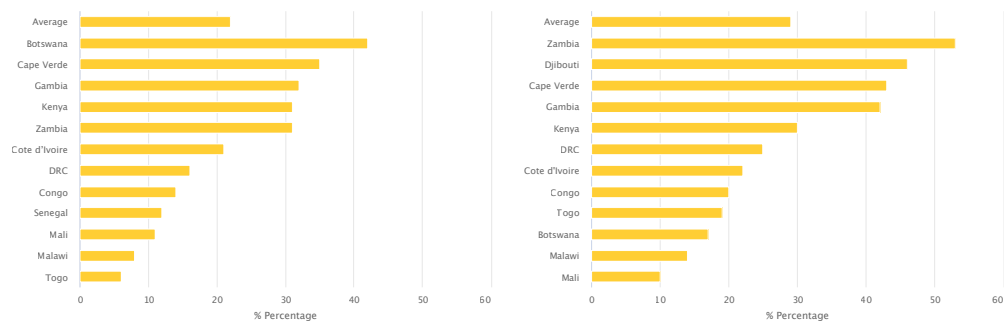


Economic Forum (2021) estimated that the median level of women in senior roles in SSA was 33%. In this regard, the Economic Forum reported that four countries (Burkina Faso, Botswana, Cote d'Ivoire, and Togo) had almost as many women as men in senior positions, whereas there were three other countries (Malawi, Gambia, and Mali) where women held only 15.6% to 17.5% of the senior positions.

Some scholarly works have endeavored to measure women's participation rate in leadership and decision-making roles in the public sectors of some SSA countries. For example, in South Africa, women constitute 14.7% of all executive managers and only 7.1% of all the directors in the country (Chiloane-Tsoka, 2010). The most recent evidence from South Africa by Osituyo (2018) reported even lower figures, where women occupy only 3.6%, 5.5%, and 21.4% of chief executive, chairperson, and executive managerial positions, respectively. In Mali, a 2003 report highlighted that women accounted for 19.2% of management, 16.4% of senior executives, and 23.5% of junior executives of managerial positions in the public sector (Doumbia, & Meurs, 2003). In Kenya, 84% of men take the lion's share of senior positions compared to the 16% of women in the civil service sectors (Kirai & Mukulu, 2012).

Moreover, Togo (6%), Malawi (8%), Senegal (12%), and Congo (14%) were some of the countries that have shown the lower number of women in senior and managerial positions in their respective civil service organizations, as reported by the United Nations Economic Commissions for Africa (2017). In addition, a similar report from UNECA indicated that Zambia, Djibouti, Cape Verde, and the Gambia have crossed the 30% mark in judiciary appointments, while many other countries including Mali, Malawi, Botswana, and Togo have recorded the lowest number of women in the judiciary. In Mali's civil service sectors, women appeared to be underrepresented in senior executive positions (i.e., 10%) but overrepresented at the junior executive and skilled worker levels, which is 39 and 36% of the staff, respectively (Doumbia & Meurs, 2003).

**Figure 5 – Percentage of Women Employed in Higher Positions in Civil Service (left fig.) and in Higher Courts (right fig.)**



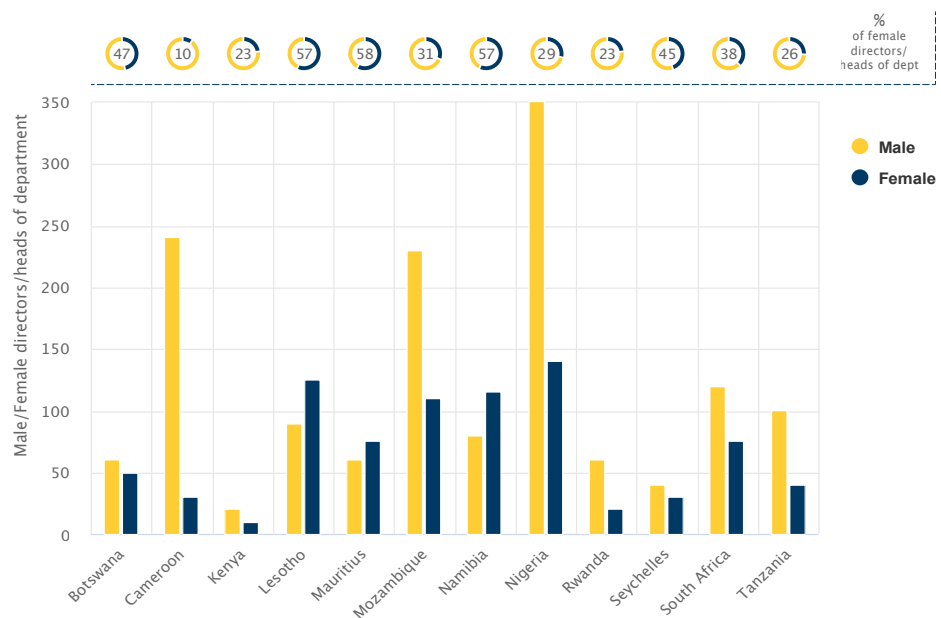
Source: UNECA, 2017 computed from AGDI reports of 2012

Evidence from Zimbabwe also showed that women's participation in leadership positions in the public sector is very low. For example, a study in Zimbabwe identified that among the 246 secondary school headship positions, only 14 (5.6%) were female heads and eight (3.25%) were female deputy heads (Chabaya et al., 2009). A survey data in South Africa higher education also showed a limited number of women in senior leadership roles despite the fact that gender representation of the staff was almost equitable (46% women versus 54%

male), but only 24% of women were in senior leadership roles (Kiamba, 2009). Furthermore, in the public sector in Kenya, 0.5% of women employees were in top management positions compared to the 2% of men employees (ILO, 2015).

A 2015 report on the number of male and female directors/department heads of civil service organizations of 12 Sub-Saharan countries (part of Commonwealth countries) highlighted that a few countries reached the 50% mark while most of them have below 30% women directors and department heads. For example, Cameroon scored the lowest proportion of women (10%) as heads and directors of its civil service sectors. On the other hand, Lesotho has recorded that about 57% of directors and department heads in its civil service were women (The Commonwealth, 2015).

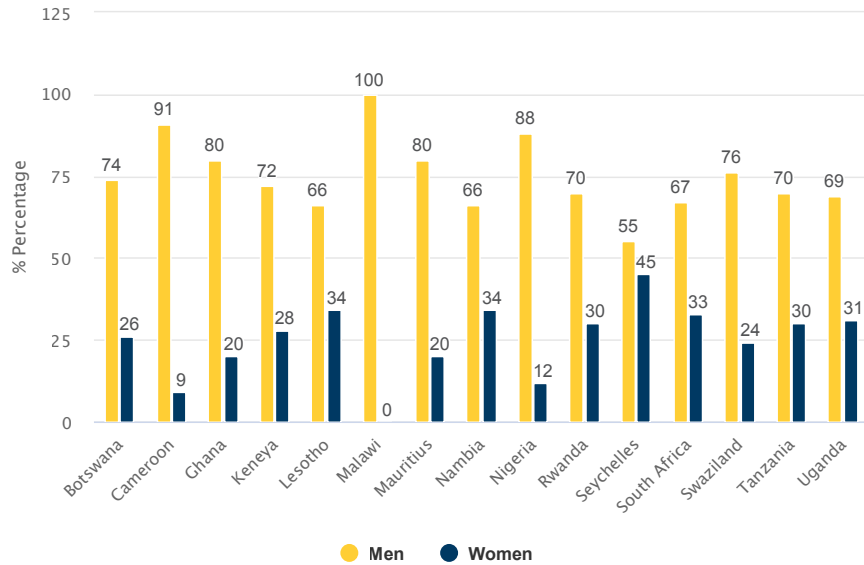
**Figure 6 – Women Directors and Department Heads**



Source: The Commonwealth report for 2015

A similar report on the number/percentage of women on boards of directors of government-owned enterprises of 15 African countries (The Commonwealth, 2015) showed that only a handful of countries have reached 30% or more in involving women on boards of directors. This ranges from 0% representation in Malawi to 12% in Nigeria and 45% in Seychelles.

**Figure 7 – Number of Male-Female State-Owned Enterprise (SOE) Board Members**



Source: The Commonwealth 2015 report

Scholarly works (e.g., Moodley et al., 2016; UNDP, 2021; Paxton, Hughes, & Barnes, 2020) suggest that a great proportion of women in leadership and decision-making roles should not be the only goal. As Moodley et al. (2016) described, the type of roles women undertake is also important if they are to have as much influence as men. However, women may find themselves overrepresented in some policy areas that are considered to have less influence and power but underrepresented in some other areas often considered more prestigious. For example, women most often lead social affairs, education, and women’s affairs ministries, while they are much less likely to lead areas such as defense, finance, and foreign affairs ministers (UNDP, 2021). In relation to this, a report by Moodley et al. (2016) showed that only 30% of African women ministers lead the ministers for treasury, infrastructure, defense, and foreign affairs ministries, while the majority are in charge of youth and women affairs, arts and culture, and tourism, which have less political influence and power.

# 6

## BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

---

Despite increased efforts by governments, pressure groups, and international organizations, women are still underrepresented in leadership positions and decision-making roles in the public sector in SSA (e.g., Kiamba, 2009; Yoon, 2004; Ilesanmi, 2018; UNDP, 2021). Understanding and documenting the barriers and challenges that women face in the public sector in SSA is therefore imperative in order to address the problems and develop strategies and policies that will increase women's greater participation in public life. Accordingly, this paper has identified the most prominent barriers including patriarchal/socio-cultural barriers, organizational policies and practices, and individual factors that prevent women from advancing within the public sector.

### Socio-Cultural Barriers

Socio-cultural perceptions and societal values have continued to oppress women's attitudes and discourage women from taking decision-making roles and leadership positions (Chiloane-Tsoka, 2010). In Sub-Saharan Africa, fundamental to the constraints that women face is an entrenched patriarchal culture (Ilesanmi, 2018; Dodo, 2013; Africa Barometer, 2021) in which family control and decision-making powers are in the hands of men. For example, in many countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, leadership and decision-making are considered as men's domain while the worth of a woman is measured based on the roles she plays as a wife and mother (e.g., Africa Barometer, 2021; Yoon, 2004; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Chiloane-Tsoka, 2010). As Yoon (2004) described it, culture shapes social attitudes and stereotypes towards women's roles, which in turn, influence women's decisions to aspire for leadership roles. This patriarchal culture then relegates women to subordinate roles, which leads women to step back from aspiring and assuming decision-making and leadership roles.

Customary law and patriarchal culture often guide the "gendered division" of labor where men are expected to lead and occupy the decision-making roles whether in the home, in the community, or in national life, while women play a subordinate role (Africa Barometer, 2021; Osituyo, 2018; Poltera, 2019). Such social norms of power allocation make it more difficult for women to leave their traditional domestic roles for public life, and they hinder their career progress even once they join the public sector. Moreover, scholars (e.g., Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Mwale & Dodo, 2017) noted that early socialization practices for girls, rooted in cultural and social traditions in Africa, prepare young women to be good wives and mothers. According to Yoon (2004), even the formal education for girls in Africa teaches them the stereotypical roles they could play instead of training them to assume the same leadership roles as men. On the other hand, Emmet (2001) noted that the rituals and rites of passage pertaining to the boychild nurture them for leadership positions.

The proverbs and traditional sayings about women's place in a society in different countries of SSA are also manifestations of how traditional-cultural views reinforce the exclusion of women in terms of playing decision-making and leadership roles. For example, in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan, there are proverbs that downplay the value of women in their society and that explicitly assume women are poor decision-makers (Hussein, 2009). Good examples are the Ethiopian proverbs: "Let women go to their kitchen/pantry, but men to the court"; "Women are good, but are not great"; "No matter what a woman knows, it is by a man a thing is finished"; and, "A man is the head of a woman", among others. Similarly, the Kenyan proverb, "Woman and an invalid man are the same thing"; the Botswanan proverb, "A team of oxen is never led by females, otherwise the oxen will fall into a ditch"; and the Sudanese proverb, "A woman is like a hair that follows the neck" are some of the deeply ingrained views that cast doubt on women's ability and limit their destiny and sphere of influence in their society.

The negative cultural views and stereotypes towards women's participation in decision-making and leadership roles are not only limited to those who aspire to become leaders but also to those who are already in the decision-making spheres. For example, in Zambia, a woman member of parliament once requested for the harmonization of statutory laws (Ebeku, 2005) that banned customary practices like bride price and sexual cleansing, which she recalls lead to the marginalization of many women. In response, a male member of parliament said that "gender equality would depend on how women behaved". Another male parliamentarian also shared his view by saying "The so-called discrimination was God-made and would be very difficult to get rid of." This single case tells everything about the impact of cultural and traditional beliefs even on those people who are at the helm of governance.

Several empirical studies (e.g., Chiloane-Tsoka, 2010; Mwale & Dodo, 2017) came up with evidence in support of the negative impact of socio-cultural views and practices on women's presence in the leadership arena. In South Africa, for example, a survey on culture as a barrier indicated that 27% of male respondents strongly believed that women's place is at home, and 50% responded that women should not be in a position of authority over men (Chiloane-Tsoka, 2010). In Zimbabwe, a study found that the majority of the participants believed men were the only people with a capacity to govern and make decisions (Dodo, 2013). Such beliefs and attitudes are among the major obstacles to women's career progress (Mwashita, Zungu & Abrahams, 2020).

In Zimbabwe, 16 male participants in a case study on women leadership (Mwale & Dodo, 2017) viewed themselves as superior to women. One of these participants argued that "women, even long ago, they did not occupy positions of influence in the Bible." Yoon (2004), in his study on women's legislative representation in Africa, also identified that patriarchal culture is significantly and positively correlated with the lower levels of women's entry to the national legislature. Furthermore, a survey conducted in South Africa about gender equality revealed that more than 30% of the respondents believed that women are too emotional to handle high-level leadership positions (Gouws, 2008).

## Organizational Structural/Institutional Barriers

Structural or organization-related barriers that have led to the underrepresentation of women at the leadership or management level have also received a good level of attention in the literature. Researchers argue that women's entry into the leadership arena could be impaired by gendered organizational systems, norms, and structures (Mwashita et al., 2020 & Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009). Such gendered structures including limited access to networking processes, lack of mentoring, limited training and development opportunities, recruitment and job evaluation issues, and stereotyping (Kirai & Mukulu, 2012) are contributors to women's lack of advancement in leadership and decision-making roles.

An empirical study in Kenya's civil service sector (Kirai & Mukulu, 2012) highlighted that discriminatory practices in recruitment, selection, and promotion towards women have contributed to the limited number of women moving to managerial positions. Respondents of this study indicated that promotion is based on who knows who and based on the informal networking that one has with higher-level leaders in a given organization. Another survey from South Africa revealed that about 32% of women believed the promotion system in organizations is an impeding factor for the advancement of women in leadership positions (Chiloane-Tsoka, 2010). In support of these studies, McKinsey's 2016 Women Matter Africa report revealed that women leaders have identified performance evaluation bias as a major obstacle to their career advancement. They described that "men tend to be evaluated on their future potential while women are evaluated on what they have achieved to date (Moodley, et al., 2016)."

In addition, Mwashita et al. (2020) from South Africa reported that about 33.8% of women recognized a lack of adequate general management experience as the biggest obstacle for their leadership advancement. In a similar study, 49.7% of the respondents agreed women have to work twice as hard as men in order to be promoted to senior management level. Kenyan women working in the public sector were asked to rate the three challenges that they face at their workplace. Accordingly, they rated discriminating due to their gender (25%), work-life balance (30%), and lack of support from their bosses (24%). These survey results showed that discriminatory organizational structures and practices are major hindrances to women's career advancement in the public sector.

Inhospitable organizational culture (Uwamahoro, 2011), lack of female mentors and role models (Lumby et al., 2010), and social exclusions from male networks (Doubell & Struwig, 2014) are also reported barriers to women's career progress in organizations of SSA. Women have also frequently identified insufficient capacity building and on-the-job professional development as barriers to their advancement as leaders in organizations (UNDP, 2014).

## Work-Family Balance

Family attachment/work-family imbalance is also another major impeding factor for career advancement that researchers have identified. Women may prefer to give their time to their families over an opportunity for career advancement. For example, a survey in Zimbabwe schools revealed that family attachment was the major reason why women teachers do not apply to school headships (Chabaya, Rembe, & Wadesango, 2009).

Scholars (e.g., Watts, et al., 2015) argue that, as women rise to senior leadership, the more hours they work per week, with senior managers working the longest hours. Hence, hours spent at work are hours that could have been spent at home, and many women tend to prefer the latter. In addition, Shrestha (2016) argues that the conflict between work and family is one of the most common causes of the glass ceiling for women. Even if women have the skills and opportunities to advance their careers, reconciling the dual realities of a career and a family, combined with the traditional gender roles, has become a major challenge to them.

## Individual/Personal Factors

Another set of barriers that empirical works have documented is the personal and/or individual factors. Researchers argue that (e.g., Posholi, 2012), since women are torn between work and family demands, their leadership/career advancement is often at a substantial cost of their personal lives. For example, a survey by Posholi (2012) in Lesotho indicated that the majority of women rated conflict with family responsibilities as a barrier to their career advancement.

A few studies (e.g., Reddy, 2006; Kiaye & Singh, 2013) have also documented internal/psychological barriers such as lack of self-confidence and women's self-limiting behavior (e.g., self-imposed or self-constrained due to the fear of success or failure) as barriers to women's career advancement as leaders and decision-makers. Although scholars make this argument, some studies (e.g., Kiaye & Singh, 2013) reported that 80% of women respondents have considered themselves as confident, competitive, and ready for senior leadership roles. On the other hand, some scholars (e.g., Lumby et al., 2010) strongly argue that the chief barrier is not structural or social attitudes, but women's low self-esteem and lack of confidence.

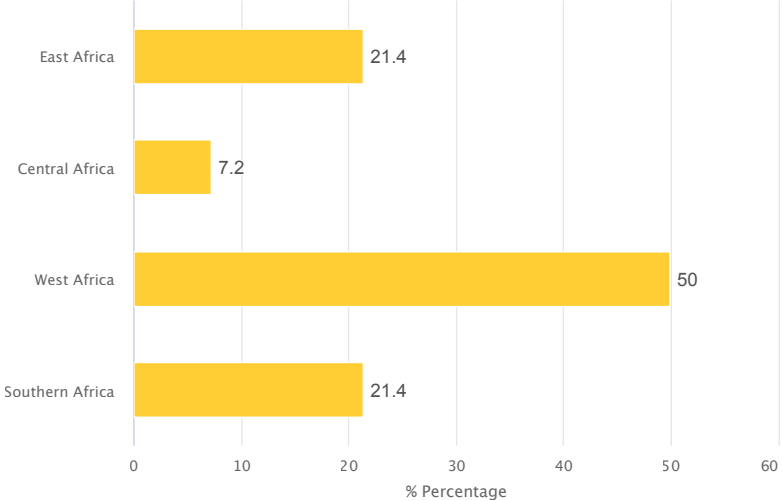
However, the main problem is not what women think of themselves, but how others think about their dispositions and traits. For example, Mathur-Helm (2004) found that one in three managers in South Africa attributed women's lack in career advancement mainly to women's own internal disposition, completely discounting the external/situational limiting factors. In this same survey, the majority of the respondents hold the belief that women are less objective, less aggressive, and less confident than their male counterparts (Mathur-Helm (2004). This common belief is an extension of the longstanding cultural history of male dominance, stereotyping roles, socialization (Doubell & Miemie, 2014), and a tendency to associate a profile of a good leader with typical male characteristics. In fact, scholars (e.g., Uwamahoro, 2011 & Lumby et al., 2010) argue if women lack confidence or self-esteem, it may be a consequence of the imposition of male dominance culture or the socialization of both men and women into believing that male leadership styles are the norm.

# Professional Women's View Regarding the Barriers

However, the main problem is not what women think of themselves, but how others think about their dispositions and traits. A descriptive survey was carried out in an attempt to explore the barriers to women's career advancement in the public sectors of SSA countries. A questionnaire was then sent out to the female ALT scholars. In addition, an interview was conducted with these selected female scholars. The survey and interview made with ALT female scholars have revealed a number of barriers that women face in taking leadership and decision-making roles in the public sector. It is noted that, with a few exceptions, the results from these surveys and interviews mostly aligned with the results of the literature reviewed and analyzed in the previous section.

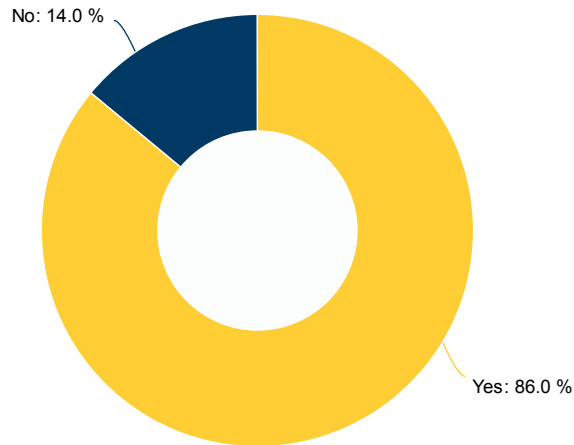
Respondents in this survey came from all regions in Sub-Saharan Africa, and about 86% of them have work experience in one or more of the public sectors in Sub-Saharan Africa.

**Figure 8 – Participants' Origin from SSA**





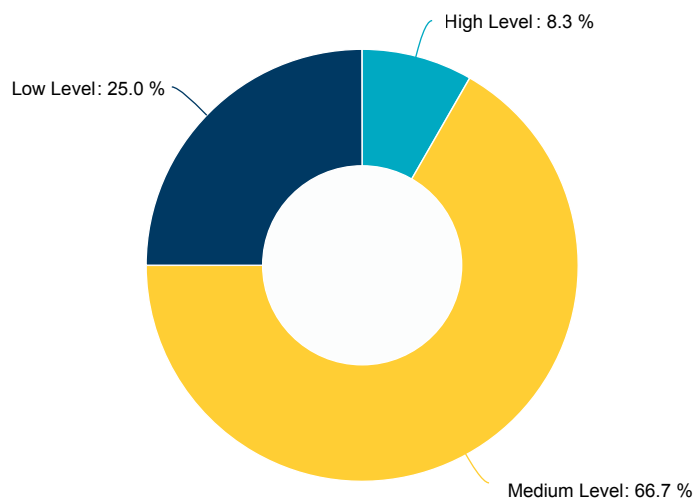
**Figure 9 – Public Sector Working Experience in SSA**



The survey asked participants about their leadership role experiences in their respective organizations. Accordingly, most of the respondents reported that they have worked in mid-level (67%) and lower-level (25%) leadership/managerial positions. Only 8% of them indicated that they have had high-level leadership experience. From the literature review, we observed a trend that if women are in leadership positions, they mostly assume the lower rungs of the leadership ladder. A similar trend is also observed in the results obtained from this survey. In relation to this, one of the key informants of this study had to say the following:

"I have been working as a mid-level manager in the power and utility company owned by the government. I have other female colleagues who are capable and have the skill and courage to become one of the top leaders in this organization. There are engineers, economists, policy experts, and accountants. However, most of them are just working as expert employees. A few of them and myself are participating in the decision-making roles, but still, we do not have a female leader at the top management level of this important and huge government organization."

**Figure 10 – Participants' Experience as Leaders/Managers**



The findings from this survey revealed that organizational practices including unequal career advancement opportunities between men and women, lack of policies to support women, and lack of respect for women managers are still challenges in women's career advancement. This result is in line with previous studies (e.g., Kiaye, & Singh, 2013) where they reported that the nature of the work environment faced by women is found to be the major determinant of their career advancement. In addition, most of the respondents perceived that stereotypic culture is also another impediment to women's career advancement. The following table depicts the mean score for the aggregated responses of each domain.

**Table 1 – Aggregated Responses From the Survey**

Domain	Mean
Women's career advancement (3 items)	1.68
Cultural stereotypes (4 items)	3.78
Work-life balance (6 items)	3.56
Organizational structure (4 items)	3.72
Internal/individual factors	1.49

From the above aggregated mean score, one can observe that most of the respondents do not agree with the idea that women receive sufficient support from their respective organizations for their career advancement. The mean score of the dependent variable, women's career advancement, is 1.68. On the other hand, most of the ALT scholars agreed that cultural stereotypes (M=3.78) and organizational structures (M=3.72) are barriers to women's career advancement in organizations. On the other hand, the mean score of internal individual factors as barriers is 1.49, which indicates that most of the respondents disagree that women's personal characteristics are barriers to women's career advancement.

Although the above aggregated mean score gave us some pictures of how the participants perceive the role of different domains of barriers, the aggregate result, however, masks some important specific information. It is therefore imperative to also look into the disaggregated data. For example, nearly 55% of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that most in their countries would be comfortable working for a woman supervisor than a man supervisor. This is another indication of how a patriarchal culture may affect women's career advancement in the workplace. One of the interview participants said the following:

"There are men employees who think that working under a woman manager or supervisor is a sign of weakness and losing one's pride. This attitude is especially pervasive when the woman is a lower-level manager who may not have much power to reprimand those under her supervision. Men struggle to accept working under a woman's supervision. This ultimately affects the performance of that given department, paving the way for demotion and/or removal of the woman supervisor."

On the contrary, nearly half of the respondents (47%) agreed that most in the public sectors of their respective countries would feel more comfortable supervising women employees than men employees. While many would not want to work under a female supervisor as noted in the above response, most are comfortable supervising women employees. This could be due to people's thought that women may not compete for their positions, and supervising women employees may give them safety and security for their position. In line with this result, Posholi (2012) reported that most women would feel comfortable when supervising female employees compared to male employees. From the women's side, this choice could be due to the assumption that women may face less opposition when they supervise women employees.

In general, compared to the respondents who are uncertain or who disagree, more women tend to agree on the following factors as barriers to advancing their careers: lack of organizational support, gender stereotypes, a challenge to balance family and work life, lack of role models, and lack of equal career advancement opportunities. These findings are supported by Posholi's (2013) study where a survey on 100 Lesotho women in senior management roles gave nearly a similar view regarding the above-mentioned barriers. One of the professional women interviewed said that "it is not our character or personality that limits our career advancement; it is indeed the organizational and societal culture that act as key barriers. In my society, being a woman manager is against the social norm of men's higher status."

The ALT female scholars were also asked in an open-ended question to specifically describe the barriers to women's career advancement in their respective countries. The responses were tallied, and they yielded common themes that somehow fit the literature review.

**Table 2 – Emerged Themes of Barriers From the Survey and Interview**

Themes of barriers drawn from responses	Specific descriptions/responses
<b>Stereotypical/patriarchal culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ cultural norms and stereotypes</li> <li>▶ stigmatization when women seek leadership roles</li> <li>▶ expected to take care of children at home</li> <li>▶ women's careers are not prioritized</li> <li>▶ a perception that men make better managers than women</li> <li>▶ men prefer to work with male colleagues</li> <li>▶ roles assigned by society to men and women</li> <li>▶ masculine organizational culture</li> </ul>
<b>Gender discriminatory organizational structure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ promotion based on informal networking and nepotism</li> <li>▶ lack of access to development opportunities</li> <li>▶ male-dominated organizational system</li> <li>▶ lack of supportive climate</li> <li>▶ marginalization and discrimination in the workplace</li> <li>▶ the corrupt system of organizations</li> <li>▶ discriminatory managerial recruitment and selection</li> <li>▶ lack of leadership training for women</li> </ul>
<b>Economic barriers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ the burden of domestic labor</li> <li>▶ lower income within the family</li> <li>▶ lack the means to enhance their skill and knowledge</li> </ul>
<b>Work-family balance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ social familial obligations</li> <li>▶ less supportive husbands</li> <li>▶ time-demanding (leadership takes long hours)</li> <li>▶ lack of flexible roles</li> </ul>
<b>Internal barriers (personal)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ lack of confidence due to the way females are socialized</li> <li>▶ negative self-assessment</li> <li>▶ undermining one's skill and ability</li> </ul>
<b>Conflict and unstable political system</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Gender-based violence and intimidation during instability</li> <li>▶ ethnic backgrounds and social class</li> <li>▶ mostly losing one's position after political instability or conflict</li> </ul>

From the responses given by the ALT scholars, the above themes of barriers to women's advancement emerged. These emerged themes are more or less in line with what has been frequently reported in the literature review. For example, most of the respondents indicated gendered cultural and social values as the major obstacles to women's involvement in senior leadership in the public sector. Indeed, most empirical works (e.g., Poltera, 2019; Kiaye, & Singh, 2013) have noted that patriarchal culture in most African countries has continued to pose the most

significant barrier to those outside the structures of decision-making and power, as well as to those who are already in power. One of the interviewees said the following:

"Our conservative culture is mostly responsible for hindering women's career advancement in organizations". Imagine, after work if I go to pubs and people see me sipping beer or coffee as my male colleagues would do. The next morning, the whole organization would turn upside-down. People would say this organization is being led by a bar lady. I would not have the capability to handle the defamation. If anything goes wrong in the organization, the whole reference of failure would be that moment I was seen at the bar. Unfortunately, the same thing would not have happened if a male manager were to do it. How can I create networks and friends, which is important for my career development if my culture set me where to go and how to behave?"

From these emerged themes, economic barriers and conflict and instability have not been addressed much in the existing literature. However, instability and conflict are prevalent in a number of African countries. Such conflicts and instability may result in a challenge of balancing many conflict-related priorities with social and gender-related dimensions. In such circumstances, women face particular challenges in advancing their careers in the public sector (UNDP, 2014). They may even end up losing their current positions, as men may use the conflict and instability situation to their own advantage by toppling women from their position. One of the ALT interview participants stated that:

"My country just emerged out of political instability quite recently. What I have seen is, in the post-conflict environment, most women lost their previous positions. Before the conflict, there were at least some women who were ministers and cabinet members. However, post-conflict reshuffling of the leaders in most public offices has led to the reduced number of women."

As can be seen from the above response, conflict and instability may disproportionately affect women. With conflict, the government may not have the capacity to enforce national laws and policies related to gender equality or other instruments such as the quota system. Political instability and violence then present particular barriers to women's engagement in the leadership arena. For example, a survey conducted in Guinea illustrated that about 64% of women leaders were very concerned about political intimidation, and they feel a sense of vulnerability (Africa Barometer, 2021).

Furthermore, the economic situation of the continent is another factor creating difficulty for women to participate in decision-making roles. Many African women usually lack the economic power and resource to invest in themselves and prepare for leadership positions. Women need financial support for further education and training, networking, and campaigning. However, the economic deprivation and the daily struggle for survival that most women face would not allow them to fully participate in leadership decision-making. In Ghana, for example, having an advanced degree (a master's degree in public administration) is required for promotion to a senior leadership position. Nevertheless, pursuing a master's degree in Ghana is costly and beyond the salaries of the public sector employees, which mostly affects women employees (Kwaku Ohemeng & Adusah-Karikari, 2015).

# 7

## OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN LEADERS: THE WAY FORWARD

---

Scholars (e.g., Ilesanmi, 2018; Bawa & Sanyare, 2013) agree that Africa needs substantive representation of women in its key decision-making and policy formulation processes. The participation of women in decision-making will advance not only gender equality but also accelerate the overall socio-economic development of the continent. Consequently, the complex barriers to women's advancement in decision-making roles in the public sector in SSA demand comprehensive, multi-stakeholder, and long and strategic approaches (UNDP, 2014).

Both the literature and survey participants have recommended a number of interventions to reduce the obstacles women face in advancing their careers in the public sector. From the literature, we have identified several initiatives at the organizational level, policy and regulatory changes at the national level, and social change programs at the community/society level that are in place in a number of SSA countries. However, it has to be noted that limited evaluative data available on whether these initiatives have had a real impact on the advancement of women's careers in the public sector. Moreover, it must be noted that there will not be one 'silver bullet' that can be introduced to bring change in the underrepresentation of women leaders in the public sector. This section will highlight possible and effective measures that may help overcome barriers to women's career advancement in the public sector in SSA.

### National-Level Initiatives

At a national level, constitutional, legal, and policy frameworks should guarantee gender equality not only in the case of women's political representation but also in the case of public service organizations. A variety of legislation and policy introductions in post-apartheid South Africa, for example, have improved gender relations within its society (Mwashita et al., 2020). These different pieces of legislation and national policy frameworks have at least put South Africa among the better performers in women's participation in leadership and decision-making roles in the public sector. The introduction of specific instruments such as gender quota in national legislative and constitutions is imperative in enhancing women's career advancement. Unfortunately, in most countries in Africa, such initiatives mostly concentrate on bringing women into politics (Kwaku Ohemeng & Adusah-Karikari, 2015) while less attention is given to other sectors of public life.

There seems to be enough evidence to suggest that the legal quota system can increase women's participation in decision-making roles. For example, an empirical study in SSA (Yoon, 2004) showed that women's parliamentary representation is 15.56% higher in countries with a substantial quota and 12.76% higher in countries with a minor quota than in countries with no quota. Similarly, the 2017 United Nations report on gender development and equality highlighted that female representation among legislators stands at 22% among countries

with any type of gender quotas, versus 13% in countries without any form of quota (UNECA, 2017). This UN report also revealed that all the African countries that reach the Beijing Platform for Action's recommended 30% minimum representation of women in decision-making roles appears to have some form of quota system.

Ghana has also been applying this quota or affirmative action system to increase women's representation at local assemblies and public organizational life. The directive is set to ensure that 30 to 50% of government appointees are women. However, as noted in the previous section, Ghana is not one of the good performers in terms of women's participation in decision-making roles. As Bawa & Sanyare (2013) explained, there is a disconnect between this concrete national policy and the effective creation of avenues for women's participation. Setting a quota system alone may not bring about a miracle unless supported with a good environment and platform to enable women to effectively use this opportunity. Bawa & Sanyare (2013) also noted that adherence to the quota directives varied from place to place in Ghana. But, all in all, without this quota system in Ghana, women would have been in a worse situation than they have already been. In fact, Finkel, Hughes & Hill (2021) have suggested that, if quotas are to be used, there should be an effective enforcement system that includes monitoring and evaluation bodies.

Moreover, the 30% legal quota system introduced in Lesotho in 2005 is found to be effective in increasing women's participation. For example, as a result of this decision, Lesotho has achieved 58% of women's representation on local councils (ILO, 2015). Similarly, Namibia's 2004 legislative measure to redress past discrimination against women by implementing affirmative action has ranked the country at the time the fourth in Africa and seventh in the world by setting a record 29% women parliamentarians (Bauer, 2004).

Bauer & Burnet (2013) argued that increasing the participation of women in public life through the quota system has a symbolic representation effect. They argued that even a small number of women in a leadership or decision-making role would inspire other women to become more engaged in decision-making roles. For example, Bauer & Burnet (2013) in their study found that gender quotas in Botswana and Rwanda have had a significant symbolic effect. Participants of this study from both countries have identified women in parliaments and ministries inspired them to seek more decision-making roles in their working place. In addition, women from Rwanda reported that, due to more women in the cabinets, parliaments, mayoral offices, and chief executives, the respect they were given by their community was equal to that given to men.

Given such modest results, implementing macro-level policies such as quota and affirmative action for women's representations in all public sectors including the parliament, judiciary, public boards, councils, ministerial offices, and other public bureaucratic offices would be an effective strategy for women's representation in decision-making roles in the public sector.

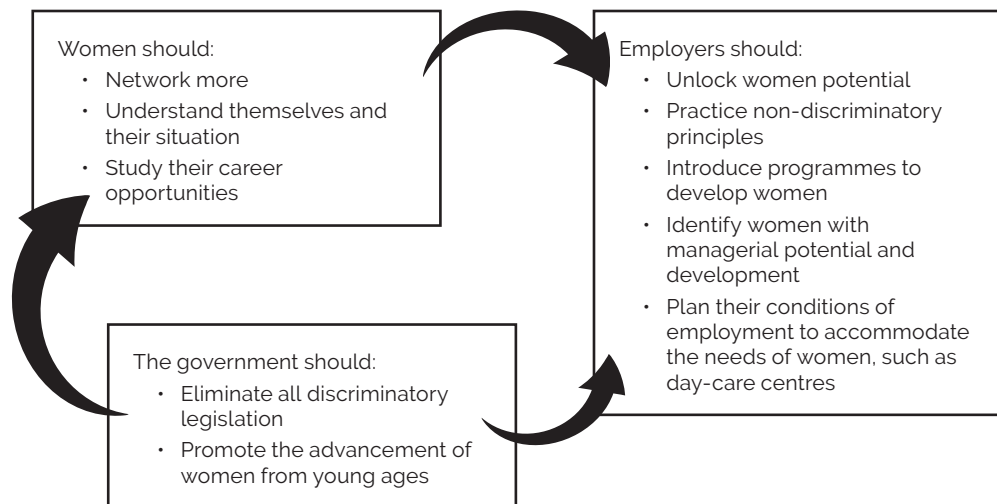
Besides, affirmative action and positive discrimination strategies, Kiamba (2008) suggested that rhetorical strategies from politicians and key members of the society may help women's representations in various structures of the public sector. Kiamba (2008) argued that, although this strategy is more symbolic, it may set a foundation for more substantive reforms. For example, a presidential decree of 30% representation of women in public service positions during an

election campaign in Kenya has resulted in many more women being nominated to parliament and other public sectors.

However, the UN's 2017 report on gender equality noted that most African governments in general struggle to achieve gender equality due to weak policy implementation and poor institutional capacity, which have negatively affected the possible gains that may have been achieved via the quota system and related forms of policy instruments. African governments should therefore build their capacity to adequately implement, monitor, and evaluate progress made in implementing policies, laws, and programs to advance women's career progress in all sectors (UNESCO, 2017).

In addition, at the macro level, states may need to introduce initiatives intended to reduce and/or eliminate prejudices, customs, and all other practices that are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes. Kirai & Kobia (2012), for example, suggested that strategies such as advocacy through religious leaders, traditional leaders, as well as male champions of gender equality are essential to reconstruct views about women and gender roles. As Mathipa & Tsoka (2001) argued, without a positive change of attitudes and mindsets within society, the position of women would not be improved as needed. Even in the context of strong laws and policies that promote women into decision-making roles, social norms and stereotypes can still hinder their implementation and impact (Finkel, et al.,2021). The change in attitude at the societal level will boost the self-image and self-esteem of women.

**Figure 11 – A Strategic Model to Overcome the Barriers to Women's Career Advancemen**



Source: Adapted from Lewis 1990:217



## Organization-Level Initiatives

The literature and participants of this study also frequently cited the need to improve organizational policies and practices in order to involve more women in decision-making roles. In most public sectors of Africa, the organizational culture is male-dominated, leaving women either to adapt themselves to this male-dominated culture or give up aspiring for leadership positions. For example, women might sometimes be required to stay at the office after work hours, which is challenging for those with children and other domestic responsibilities. This may again be part of the performance evaluation process that could affect women's possibility of promotion. One interview participant said the following:

"My inability to work late hours and to travel to other places for the organizational purpose had cost me promotion and salary increase. My commitment to the organization was also questioned."

Accordingly, organizational policies such as flexible work hours, paid leaves of absence, promotional standards, and fair recruitment policies are essential to women's participation in higher-level positions in their respective organizations. For example, a study in South African public sectors (Osituyo, 2018) revealed that gender equity policy has significantly helped women to advance their careers as senior leaders and decision-makers. Besides, some organizational and national-level recruitment policies in Uganda have also improved the representation of women in the public sector. In Uganda, organizations are required to encourage both men and women to apply in their vacancy advertisements, and recruitment teams are supposed to have both men and women members and be given gender sensitization training (UNDP, 2014).

The work-family balance issue, particularly where women are expected to handle the bulk of household tasks and childcare, is another gender norm that affects women's career advancement. Due to this norm, women have fewer hours and less flexible schedules to work as senior leaders in organizations. In a survey in Uganda, among owner-managers, about 38% of women and 0% of men had their children with them at work (Delecourt & Fitzpatrick, 2019). To overcome this challenge, organizations may take several interventions so that women have time to fully participate in the workplace. For example, one of the many policies being suggested in the literature and by professional women is an alternative to mothers' care of children (e.g., daycare center). An experimental study in Kenya showed that women who used center-based childcare have increased their working hours/employment by over 17% more than women who were not using the daycare services (Clark, Laszlo, Kabiru, & Muthuri, 2017). An interviewee had this to say:

"I have a beautiful baby. My mom used to help me [care for] my baby until I [came] back from my workplace. Quite recently, my mom got a new job, and that has become very challenging for me. Let alone aspire for a leadership position, I was praying not to lose my full-time job. With God's grace, my organization has opened a daycare center just in a basement of a building where I am working in. That gave me a sigh of relief. I wish all organizations had this kind of initiative and others like me get the benefit."

This interview clearly demonstrates how challenging it is for women to take up leadership roles if they are not given the necessary support by their organizations.

The above response suggests that women may prefer to stay with their families instead of taking a career advancement opportunity.

Furthermore, organizations may also design leadership succession plans. Organizations need to identify and nurture women's talent so as to prepare them to take leadership and decision-making roles in the future. Women themselves agree that organizational support of their career development is imperative if they are to become future leaders in their respective workplaces. For example, in a survey (Lumby et al., 2010) with South African women school leaders, the majority agreed that an organization-level career development plan for women is a key foundation for women to become leaders. Moodley et al., (2016) also suggested African organizations could attain gender diversity in their senior leadership positions by setting key gender performance indicators for women's representation in leadership. McKinsey's Women Matter Africa survey revealed that about 47% of Organizations with clear targets and gender diversity plans have an above-average share of women in senior leadership positions (Moodley et al., 2016).

A number of interviewees of this study and a substantial number of scholarly works have also suggested that organizational support, particularly mentorship programs, could help women advance their careers in the workplace. Quite a few interview participants pointed out that a lack of organizational support is a reason for the low number of women in the decision-making arena. In relation to this, Posholi (2012) identified that women in Lesotho's public sector who have not been mentored faced more challenges as compared to those who have been mentored. They also reported that those whose organizations do not offer mentorship programs experienced challenges such as lack of equity in training, promotion, and pay, as compared to those who have been mentored (Posholi, 2012). Furthermore, Shresta (2016) reported that special support from organizations through networks, coaching, and mentoring was found to be effective in bringing women to the decision-making fronts.

Another interview participant of this study indicated that special support including mentoring programs is important for the advancement of women in the workplace. She stated that:

"I see many women in my organization, including myself, struggling to find time to make networking and meeting others, which are valued if we wish to progress to the upper ranks of supervisory and managerial positions. I believe special organizational support such as helping women get some coaching and mentoring opportunity would encourage us to be more visible."

Formal mentoring programs in the public sector would be invaluable to the advancement of women's careers through career guidance, psychological support, and confidence-building. For example, a study in South Africa (Lumby et al., 2010) involving women school leaders reported that most of them have received some sort of mentorship from former principals/leaders. They reported that this mentorship opportunity gave them the idea of leadership and the skills necessary to become successful as leaders. One of the ALT women interviewed stated that:

"Without the support of my husband and the previous supervisor of my department, I would not have imagined myself being a supervisor of such a busy department. However, the former supervisor involved me in his day-to-

day decisions and gave me glimpses of leadership. My husband is also a great mentor, as he himself is a manager in one of the region's government offices."

## Other Pragmatic Initiatives

Several other specific initiatives and measures to increase women's presence as senior leaders in the public sector in Sub-Saharan countries are also identified in the literature.

Initiatives such as training and professional development, sexual harassment policies, and educational opportunities for women are some of the recommendations in the literature. For example, UNDP initiates and supports women public servants in Eritrea and South Sudan to enhance their capacities in leadership through providing leadership capacity and professional development training (Finkel, et al., 2021).

Strengthening and investing in non-governmental organizations and women's movements would also pressure both governments and society to act on the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions in the public sector. In most countries, including South Africa, Kenya, and Mozambique, women groups and organizations have succeeded in challenging their government to adopt policies such as a quota system to bring more women into power. These women groups and organizations may also create networking opportunities and provide other women experience and guidance on leadership. Women's organizations can also campaign for flexible working arrangements, childcare, and ending violence against women, which can transform workplace culture and women's chances of reaching the top (Hinds, 2015). In Namibia, for example, women's organizations were credited with helping to increase women in national legislatures through advocacy, sensitization, and by working to change electoral systems (Bauer, 2004).

Interviewed women have also raised the need for opportunities related to educational/academic progress. One of the interview participants described that further academic training is always going to men employees, hampering women's future ability to compete with men who have further academic training. Organizations may therefore need to set a platform that provides equal opportunity for women to continue further academic training. One of the ALT participants stated that:

"Right now, in my organization, there is a leadership position open for us to compete. However, I will not apply for this position since my academic qualification is not sufficient for the position. I do not think other women employees would also have the required qualification. simply, this opportunity will goes to men whom several of them have the academic qualification required for this position."

UNDP (2014) suggests that, as training and other forms of capacity building have strategic importance to increase women's presence as senior leaders of organizations, governments need to restructure recruitment and development programs to ensure that all women have equal access to managerial, entrepreneurial, technical, and leadership training. In support of this view, a study in Lesotho's public sector (Posholi, 2012) illustrated that the majority of women interviewed were enthusiastic to study further and advance their careers.

# 8

## CONCLUSION

---

This study was intended to shed light on the status, experiences, and challenges/barriers of women leaders in the public sector in Sub-Saharan countries. It examined the cultural, structural, and social barriers to women's advancement and representation in senior leadership and decision-making levels in the public sector.

Although obtaining comprehensive baseline data on the status and experience of women in the public sector in SSA countries is very challenging, it appears that nearly in every country where empirical works are available and reviewed, women remain underrepresented in senior-level leadership and decision-making roles. In most cases, women within the public sector have occupied lower-level positions characterized by less prestige, pay, and sphere of influence.

However, it can be noted that all is not gloomy. While the fact remains that African women are hugely excluded from the public life of SSA, most recent studies showed that there is indeed some hope and possibility to see more women in senior leadership roles in the public sector. There are situations and countries where African women have recorded some gains as leaders and decision-makers in the public sector. Women have especially made progress in participating at the legislature level and in some high political offices, indicating that their position in politics is improving much faster than in other public sectors. For example, more women are now in the parliaments of Rwanda, Tanzania, and South Africa.

This study has identified several complex and pervasive barriers to women's progress in senior leadership and decision-making roles in the public sector in SSA. Women face social and cultural barriers, structural and organizational hurdles, and systemic and institutional depriving factors. For example, in most parts of Africa, social norms and patriarchy have created discriminatory practices and beliefs that men are expected to lead in any circumstance while women are expected to follow, contributing to the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles. These social biases and stereotypes also exist in the organizational environment and are working against women in terms of promotion, recruitment, and support, undermining the equal representation of women in decision-making roles.

To address the gender imbalance, most countries in SSA have employed macro-level strategies including changing their constitutions, introducing new gender-related legislation, and designing specific policy instruments such as affirmative action and quota systems. Although these initiatives are not systematically evaluated, some numbers showed that countries with quotas and other forms of affirmative action policies have performed better at increasing women in senior leadership roles than countries without quota systems. Thus, until overall societal changes have occurred and gender equality has normalized, SSA needs to stick with implementing a quota system in all parts of public life.

At the micro-level, organizations have an invaluable role in promoting women to leadership roles. The findings of this study indicated that organizations' role is multifaceted, from improving the recruitment process, to making evaluation

and promotion free of gender bias, to ensuring women have access to the same training and development opportunities as men. Organizations with concrete policies and guidelines that facilitate the career advancement of women have shown improvements in balancing gender in the leadership arena.

The results of this study also suggest that other pragmatic initiatives, including childcare support, networking and mentorship opportunities for women, bringing women organizations to the front, and economic empowerment are some of the strategies that would help improve women's involvement in decision-making roles.

In conclusion, identifying a single cause or mix of causes with certainty for the current underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles in the public sector in SSA is very difficult. Scholarly works and experts suggested complex and interwoven barriers working against women's advancement, including socio-cultural (e.g., views and perceptions on gender roles), interpersonal factors (e.g., confidence and self-belief), institutional (e.g., biased recruitment and promotional systems), structural (e.g., economic situations and policies), and political (e.g., instability and type of governance). This suggests that governments of individual countries and public sector organizations in such countries must consider a combination of multiple policies, initiatives, and actions involving women themselves and other stakeholders.

## Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Although the findings of this study provide some insight into the current status of women in decision-making, experiences, and barriers to women's advancement in the public sector in SSA, the interpretation of these findings and subsequent conclusions should be with great caution. This is because the data were collected from different countries with different types of governance, policy, public sector structures, culture, and legal and constitutional foundations, which makes direct comparison or generalization very difficult. In addition, most of the empirical works reviewed were from countries with better social, political, and economic conditions. For example, most empirical works are from South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria. This implies a need for further research focusing on the social, economic, cultural, and political contexts of each region, if possible, and each country. There is also a need to disaggregate the data on women's leadership, sector by sector, as the current literature missed a number of public sectors in its investigations.

Moreover, in most of the existing empirical works, women are taken as a monolithic group. However, according to UNDP (2014), within this group of the population, there are sub-groups that need to be addressed separately and adequately. Further intersectional studies that address all groups of women such as ethnicity, rural/urban divide, class, disability, gender identity, professional identity, among others, are imperative to ensure women in their full diversity are equally represented in the public sector in SSA.

Governments and organizations across all regions of SSA have introduced certain policies and programs to enhance women's representation in the public sector. However, there is a lack of impact evaluation on the effectiveness of these policies. Thus, future research may need to measure, evaluate, and compare the effectiveness of introduced policies and initiatives. Doing so would help

governments and organizations design initiatives aimed at enhancing women's engagement in leadership roles in the public sector.

Government policies have a major impact on women's career advancement in the public sector. While this study has tried to highlight some of the policies related to gender equality in the public sector in SSA, carrying out a deep policy analysis was beyond its scope. Future research, particularly when analyzing the public policies of governments, may provide better knowledge and insight when it comes to understanding the facilitators and inhibitors of women's upward mobility in leadership in the public sector.

## Acknowledgment

This work was carried out through the African Leaders of Tomorrow (ALT) Extension Program and funded by the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada and the Mastercard Foundation.

## Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

1. Adusah-Karikari, Augustina, and Frank Louis Kwaku Omehang. (2014). "Representative Bureaucracy in the Public Service? A Critical Analysis of the Challenges Confronting Women in the Civil Service of Ghana." *International Journal of Public Administration* 37(9):568–80.
2. Africa Barometer (2021). Women's political participation: International Institute for democracy and electoral assistance, Stockholm: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2021.21>
3. Amina, B. Z. J., & Ibrahim, S. G. (2019). Role of African Women Leaders in inspiring women participation in leadership: AN analysis. *African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*, 2(3), 12-27.
4. Barnes, T. D., & Burchard, S. M. (2013). "Engendering" politics: The impact of descriptive representation on women's political engagement in sub-Saharan Africa. *Comparative Political Studies*, 46(7), 767-790.
5. Bauer, G. (2004). 'The Hand That Stirs the Pot Can Also Run the Country': Electing Women to Parliament in Namibia. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 42(4), 479-509.
6. Bauer, G., & Burnet, J. E. (2013, November). Gender quotas, democracy, and women's representation in Africa: Some insights from democratic Botswana and autocratic Rwanda. In *Women's Studies International Forum* (Vol. 41, pp. 103-112). Pergamon.
7. Bawa, S., & Sanyare, F. (2013). Women's participation and representation in politics: Perspectives from Ghana. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 36(4), 282-291.
8. Bolden, R., & Kirk, P. (2009). African leadership surfacing new understandings through leadership development. *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management*, 9(1), 69–86. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1470595808101156>
9. Booysen, L. A., & Nkomo, S. M. (2010). Gender role stereotypes and requisite management characteristics: The case of South Africa. *Gender in Management: An international journal*, Vol. 25 No. 4, pp. 285-300
10. Blunt, P., & Jones, M. L. (1997). Exploring the limits of Western leadership theory in East Asia and Africa. *Personnel Review*, 26(1/2), 6–23. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/00483489710157760>
11. Chabaya, O., Rembe, S., & Wadesango, N. (2009). The persistence of gender inequality in Zimbabwe: Factors that impede the advancement of women into leadership positions in primary schools. *South African Journal of Education*, 29(2), 235-251.
12. Chiloane-Tsoka, G. E. (2010). Perceptions of barriers to the advancement of women in management and leadership positions in South Africa. *Gender and behaviour*, 8(2), 2976-2995.
13. Clark, S., Kabiru, C. W., Laszlo, S., & Muthuri, S. (2019). The impact of childcare on poor urban women's economic empowerment in Africa. *Demography*, 56(4), 1247-1272.

14. Coetzee, M., & Moosa, M. (2020). Leadership contingencies in the retention of women in higher education. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 18, 11.
15. Commonwealth Secretariat (2015). Baseline data report on the Status of Women in Leadership Across the Commonwealth: United Kingdom, London
16. Delecourt, S., & Fitzpatrick, A. (2019). *The baby profit gap: how childcare duties impact entrepreneurial performance*. Working paper. Stanford University.
17. Devlin, C., & Elgie, R. (2008). The effect of increased women's representation in parliament: The case of Rwanda. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61(2), 237-254.
18. Dodo, O. (2013). Traditional leadership systems and gender recognition: Zimbabwe.
19. Doubell, M., & Struwig, M. (2014). Perceptions of factors influencing career success of professional and business women in South Africa. *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, 17(5), 531-543.
20. Doumbia, S., & Meurs, D. (2003). Gender equality at work in sub-Saharan Africa: A case study of Mali's modern sector. *Int'l Lab. Rev.*, 142, 295.
21. Ebeku, K. S. (2005). African women and participation in public life and governance: relevant laws and overview of recent experience. *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee/Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, 56-77.
22. Ely, R. and I.Padavic. (2007). A feminist analysis of organizational research on sex differences: *Academy of Management Review* 3 (4) 11 1-1143
23. Finkel, M., Hughes, M. M., & Hill, J. (2021). Gender equality in public administration. *UNDP and University of Pittsburgh*.
24. Gouws, A. (2008). Obstacles for women in leadership positions: The case of South Africa. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 34(1), 21-27.
25. Hinds, B. (2015). Strategies for increased participation of women in leadership across the commonwealth. *The Commonwealth Secretariat*.
26. Hussein, J. W. (2009). A discursive representation of women in sample proverbs from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya. *Research in African Literatures*, 96-108.
27. Ilesanmi, O. O. (2018). Women's visibility in decision making processes in Africa—progress, challenges, and way forward. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 38,
28. International Labor Office. (2015). *Women in business and management: Gaining momentum*. International Labour Office.
29. Kahn, S. B., & Louw, V. (2011). Women's representativeness in the South African public service. *Journal of Public Administration*, 46(1), 669-682.
30. Kiamba, J. M. (2009). Women and leadership positions: Social and cultural barriers to success. *Wagadu Volume 6 Journal of International Women's Studies Volume 10: 1*, 89.
31. Kiaye, R. E., & Singh, A. M. (2013). The glass ceiling: a perspective of women working in Durban. *Gender in Management: An international journal*, Vol. 28 No. 1,
32. Kirai, M. N., & Kobia, M. (2018). Effects of Social Cultural Beliefs on Women Career Progression in Kenya's Civil Service. *International Journal of Advances in Agriculture Sciences*.
33. Kwaku Ohemeng, F. L., & Adusah-Karikari, A. (2015). Breaking through the glass ceiling: Strategies to enhance the advancement of women in Ghana's public service. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 50(3), 359-379.



34. Lumby, J., Azaola, M., de Wet, A. M., Skervin, H., Walsh, A., & Williamson, A. (2010). Women school principals in South Africa: Leading the way.
35. Kirai, M., & Mukulu, E. (2012). Perceived organisational barriers to women career progression in Kenya's civil service. *International Journal of Advances in Management and Economics*, 1(6), 203-213.
36. Mathipa, E. R., & Tsoka, E. M. (2001). Possible barriers to the advancement of women to leadership positions in the education profession. *South African Journal of Education*, 21(4), 324-330.
37. MathurHelm, B. (2005). Equal opportunity and affirmative action for South African women: a benefit or barrier?. *Women in Management Review*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 56-71
38. Moodley, V., Holt, T., Leke, A., & Desvaux, G., (2016). Women Matter Africa: making gender diversity a reality. *McKinsey & Company*,
39. Mwale, C., & Dodo, O. (2017). Sociocultural beliefs and women leadership in Sanyati District. *Journal of Social Change*, 9(1), 10.
40. Mwashita, T., Zungu, N., & Abrahams, D. (2020). The Glass Ceiling: Career Progression Barriers for Female Employees in the South African Hospitality Industry, Vol 9, No 5, pp. 1077-1093 nder
41. Nkomo, S. M., & Ngambi, H. (2009). African women in leadership: Current knowledge and a framework for future studies. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies*, 4(1), 49-68.
42. Oplatka, I. (2006). Women in educational administration within developing countries: Towards a new international research agenda. *Journal of educational administration*: Vol. 44 No. 6,
43. Osituyo, D. (2018). Underrepresentation and career advancement of women in the South African public-sector setting. *International Journal of Women's Studies*, 19(3), 171-186.
44. Paxton, P. M., Hughes, M. M., & Barnes, T. (2020). *Women, politics, and power: A global perspective*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
45. Emmet, M. (2001). Women at the heart of a renewed vision for humanity. *Agenda*, 49, 66- 70.
46. Poltera, J. (2019). Exploring examples of women's leadership in African contexts. *Agenda*, 33(1), 3-8.
47. Posholi, M. R. (2012). *An examination of factors affecting career advancement of women into senior positions in selected parastatals in Lesotho* (Doctoral dissertation, Cape Peninsula University Of Technology).
48. Reddy, P. (2006). *An investigation of the barriers that impede the career advancement of women in management* (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Western Cape).
49. Schreiber, U. (2013). Worldwide index of women as public sector leaders. Opening doors for women working in government.
50. Shrestha, P. (2016). Barriers for women in career advancement in the hospitality industry: a review of literature. *MBA Student Scholarship*, 52, 1-13.port
51. Sow, N. (2012). *Women's political participation and economic empowerment in post-conflict countries: Lessons from the Great Lakes region in Africa*. EASSI.

52. Strachan, A.L. (2015). *Women in politics and the public sector in Tanzania* (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1286). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.
53. Titi Amayah, A., & Haque, M. D. (2017). Experiences and challenges of women leaders in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Africa Journal of Management*, 3(1), 99-127.
54. Tripp, A. M., Casimiro, I., Kwesiga, J., & Mungwa, A. (2009). *African women's movements*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
55. UNDP (2014). *Global report on Gender equality in Public administration*: New York,
56. UNDP (2021). *Gender equality in Public administration*: United Nations Development Programme, New York
57. UNECA (2017). *African Gender and Development Index Regional Synthesis Report: Measuring Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Africa*. Addis-Ababa, United Nations, Economic Commission for Africa.
58. UNESCO (2017). *Gender Equality in Sub-Saharan Africa*. place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France
59. Uwamahoro, J. (2011). *Barriers to women in accessing principalship in secondary schools in Rwanda: A case study of two secondary schools in the Gicumbi District* (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Faculty of Humanities, School of Education).
60. Watts, L. L., Frame, M. C., Moffett, R. G., Van Hein, J. L., & Hein, M. (2015). The relationship between gender, perceived career barriers, and occupational aspirations. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 45(1), 10-22.
61. World Economic Forum (2021). *Global Gender gap report 2021*. Geneva: ISBN-13: 978-2-940631-07-0Gl
62. Yoon, M. Y. (2004). Explaining Women's Legislative Representation in SubSaharan Africa. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 29(3), 447-468



Canadian Bureau for  
International Education