

## Breaking Barriers: Empowering Women for NGOs' Leadership Positions towards Sustainable Development

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**Abstract.** We investigate factors that affect women's empowerment towards leadership positions at NGOs in Syria. Three factors affecting women's empowerment composed of societal, regulatory, and personal aspects were examined in this research, and their impact on women's empowerment was investigated. Also, we test whether women support each other to reach leadership positions. We collected the responses of 266 participants from INGOs, charities, professional unions, development entities, and other types of NGOs functioning in Syria from September to November 2022. We find that regulatory factors are the dominant factors that impede women's empowerment toward leadership positions. Societal factors come second in terms of their impact on women's empowerment, while personal factors are considered the least important. We also find that women tend to hold back their female colleagues from reaching leadership positions instead of supporting them. We suggest that regulations should be reformed to defend women's rights for equal access to leadership positions. We recommend that NGOs that defend women's rights extend their activities towards women's leadership empowerment through running awareness campaigns and inviting female role models. Those NGOs should offer training to female NGO staff on leadership skills, teamwork, effective communication, and motivation.

**Keywords:** women empowerment, gender equality, SDGs, NGOs, sustainable development, Syria.

## **1. Introduction**

Gender equality represents the fifth goal of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals formulated by the United Nations in 2015. It aims at promoting gender equality and ending all types of discrimination against women and girls so that they have equal rights and opportunities. It also includes empowering women and girls to accelerate sustainable development.

The NGO sector plays a crucial role in developing countries where NGOs intervene to alleviate poverty and respond to a wide variety of needs. According to the World Bank estimates, Statistics about the number of NGOs worldwide are indefinite. The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor indicates that approximately 1.5 million NGOs operate in the United States in 2021. However, this number is quite low in other countries, and there are around 17,000 NGOs in Syria. Nevertheless, their significance increased substantially, with over 15 percent of overseas development aid channeled through NGOs.

According to the Global Gender Gap Index (WEF, 2023), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have achieved the lowest parity score of 62.6 percent in comparison to 76.3 percent for Europe. This indicates that MENA countries remain the furthest away from parity. This index is calculated from four dimensions as follows: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. However, the economic participation and opportunities sub-index centers were the second worst at around 44 percent, highlighting that the gap between males and females is quite wide at 56 percent. This sub-index is captured by the following dimensions: the participation gap, the remuneration gap, and the advancement gap (Kali Pal et al., 2023).

Women represent an important part of the NGO sector at both the beneficiaries' and actors' levels. Many NGOs aim to empower women socially and economically, defend their rights of equality in pay and promotions, and protect their rights, especially in periods of war and conflict. However, while women are well-represented in different sectors at the lower hierarchy levels, they are still under-represented at the management level in both developed and developing countries (Raudeliuniene et al., 2020; Raudeliuniene et al., 2018a; Raudeliuniene et al., 2018b, Herbst and Przewłocka, 2011; WRC, 2008). Globally, the share of women in senior contributor positions is, on average, lower than that of women holding top positions of directors, vice presidents, or C-Suite positions (Kali Pal et al., 2023).

In Syria, the NGO sector has a long history of supporting orphans and those in need, which can be tracked to 1880 by establishing the Quraish Orphanage charity in Damascus (Alsabbagh, 2019). Two types of NGOs dominated the sector before the Syrian war: traditional charities linked to religious or ethnic groups and Government-organized NGOs (Alhousseiny and Atar, 2021). The former's emphasis varied significantly and focused on educational, health, and advocacy issues, while the latter was mainly linked to professional unions (Aldassouky and Hatahet, 2020). The number of Syrian NGOs reached 1582, according to the latest survey conducted in 2017.

The destructive war in Syria has overwhelming consequences on economic and social conditions, including its impact on women's lives and the activities of national and international NGOs working in Syria. First, approximately one-fifth of the Syrian population has either migrated or passed away between 2014 and 2020, with the majority of those being males. This situation meant that women were forced to play new roles and not only to be economically self-dependent but also to be income generators, especially under such deprived socio-economic contexts. Second, there was a significant decline in economic activities, with the per capita GDP deteriorating for the same period by around 67% (The Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Moreover, according to the Syrian Bureau of Statistics, inflation rates exceeded three digits in 2020 and 2021 at 120.86% and 118.84%, respectively. Furthermore, the percentage of Syrians who live below the poverty line reached 90 percent, with more than 15 million needing humanitarian assistance (ICRC, 2023). The war, as mentioned above, shifted NGOs' focus from developmental and educational aid before the war to providing livelihood, food, and shelter after 2011 (Alsherfawi Aljazaerli and Mouselli, 2022).

Despite many papers investigating women empowerment in the Syrian higher education sector at both academic and student levels (Ourfali et al., 2021; Dalati et al., 2020) and health sector (Meagher et al., 2021), there is a clear gap in exploring the situation of women leadership in the NGO sector and their advancement impediments. This research aims to fill this gap, especially with the increasing importance of this sector during the Syrian war.

## **2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development**

A growing body of international research suggests that women are still underrepresented in NGOs, particularly in positions of power and leadership (de la Rey, 2005). Syria is no different, and this trend is not only related to the NGO sector, where women are less likely to reach upper levels of administration, but also extends to other sectors, such as higher education (Afiouni et al., 2020; Makarem et al., 2019), health (Meagher et al., 2021), agriculture (Soubh, 2008) among other sectors.

Many factors could explain the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in Syria. Those factors are considered barriers to women's advancement into leadership positions. Those barriers span the areas of self-hatred, societal, personal, and regulatory aspects.

Evidence suggests women distance themselves from other women and hold each other back. This phenomenon is called the queen bee syndrome and is another barrier to women's career advancement (Kanter, 1977; Staines et al., 1974). Derks et al. (2016) argue that queen bee syndrome is a dominant dynamic that keeps the current gender hierarchy in place and perpetuates legitimate gender inequality. Also, Elias (2018) also finds evidence that women are reluctant to share success with other women and are more critical than supportive. Hence, the role of women in empowering other women can be hypothesized as follows,

*H1. Women do not empower other women towards leadership positions*

The theory of planned behavior proposed by (Ajzen, 1991), although meant to explain intentions, could be advanced to explain certain factors that impede women from taking leadership positions. First, social pressures to perform or to refrain from taking action. Social structures in Syria, both prior to and since the conflict, are largely grounded on stereotypical gender roles and are typically patriarchal, even though they vary according to disparate cultural and social specificities and value systems across the country (Women's International League for Peace & Freedom [WILPF], 2020). Hence, the relationship between social factors and women's empowerment can be hypothesized as follows,

*H2. Social factors influence women's empowerment towards leadership positions*

Job regulations and laws, while offering women many rights, such as paid maternity leaves, are seen by many employers as reasons why they should prefer men over women in all positions and in leadership positions in particular. Employers are reluctant to employ or promote women to high positions because women are more likely to be away on leave than men, especially with the issuance of Decree 35 in 2001, which extended the paid maternity leaves to be 120, 90, 75 days for first, second, and third birth respectively. We can postulate the following hypothesis,

*H3. Regulatory factors influence women's empowerment towards leadership positions*

Personal traits and characteristics could cause women to prefer not to take leadership positions. The theory of planned behavior suggests that the perceived simplicity of difficulty of doing the behavior affects the intention to take an action. Thus, women's fear of failure or lack of confidence could be a reason not to take leadership positions. Elias (2018) argues that being emotional at the workplace, lacking self-confidence, and struggling to balance work and family are possible reasons for the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Thus, the relationship between personal factors and women's empowerment can be hypothesized as follows.

*H4. Personal factors influence women's empowerment towards leadership positions*

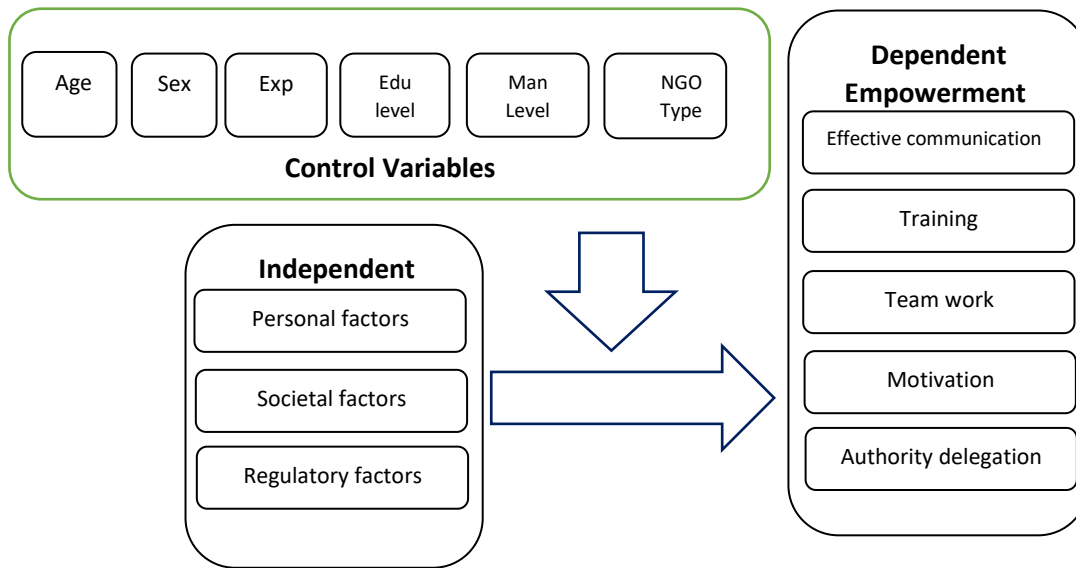


Fig. 1: Theoretical Study Framework (created by the authors)

### 3. Research Methodology

This study is based on a survey conducted in November 2022 to explore the barriers to women empowerment at NGOs in Syria. Such a survey represents a situation analysis that facilitates the analysis and synthesis of information (Ferrell and Hartline, 2008). We prepare a survey questionnaire and employ a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to measure the questionnaire items.

The survey is composed of an introduction that explains the aim of our research to participants and includes demographic and job-related questions. The first section includes questions related to the three investigated factors allocated as follows: five items to measure societal factors, six to capture regulatory factors, and three to measure personal factors. The second section includes twenty-five questions regarding women's empowerment, where each dimension is measured with five questions. The third section asks what is considered a barrier to women's leadership empowerment.

We employed a non-probability convenience sampling strategy to widen participation and increase the representation of our sample (Gómez and Mouselli, 2018). The survey was distributed online to social media and electronically sent to NGO representatives. Our sample consists of 266 employees working at NGOs in Syria from September to November of 2022. We analyze data using the 27 version of statistical package software for social sciences (SPSS).

### 4. Results

The demographic distribution of respondents illustrated that our sample is dominant, with women representing 68.4% of our sample while men were only represented by 31.6%. Regarding the age categories, 6.8% were under the age of 25, while the majority were between the ages of 25 and 34, with 63.9%, followed by those between 35 and 44 years, with 23.3%. Participants who were 45 years and above represent only 6% of our sample. The age distribution reflects the energetic nature of the NGO sector and indicates its increasing importance, where over 70% of participants are less than 35 years.

The educational attainment of participants exhibited in Table 1 shows that university bachelor holders dominate our sample with 59.8%, followed by master holders with 17.3%, 13.5% hold either diploma or technical degrees, 5.6% hold bachelorette, and 1.9% are PhD holders. The ratios indicate that NGO staff are generally of good educational attainment.

Table 1: Respondents' demographical characteristics (created by the authors)

Characteristic	Respondents number	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	266	100
Female	182	68.4
Male	84	31.6
<b>Age category</b>	266	100
Less than 25	18	6.8
25-34	170	63.9
35-44	62	23.3
45 and above	16	6.0
<b>Education level</b>	266	100
Bachelorette	15	5.6
Diploma or technical degree	36	13.5
University Bachelor	159	59.8
Master	46	17.3
PhD	5	1.9
Others	5	1.9

Table 3 shows the job characteristics of respondents. The occupational distribution regarding years of experience of NGO staff illustrates that most NGO staff have work experience of less than 10 years, with 70.9% and 12% having 10 to 14 years of experience. This indicates that interest in working in the NGO sector is relatively new and corresponds to the Syrian war that erupted in 2011.

The distribution of respondents on managerial levels highlights that a good number of participants are volunteers, with 30.5%. This relatively high ratio represents the youth's interest in exploring this sector because it is financially and personally rewarding, where volunteers have good wages and feel good about themselves serving their communities. Figures also show discrepancies between juniors and seniors, with 19.5% and 41.4% respectively. They indicate a high turnover ratio between the NGO sector and other sectors, with few volunteers willing to continue taking over junior positions. Managers are reasonably represented in our sample with 8.6%.

The NGO sector in Syria contains many NGOs ranging from charities, professional unions, development entities, INGOs, and others. Figures indicate that respondents working at INGOs dominate our sample with 74.4%. Respondents working for charities and development entities represent 11.3% and 1.5%, respectively. Usually, INGOs, such as UN agencies, Caritas, Gopa, Danish Refugee Council, and Norwegian Refugee Council, among others, offer higher salaries and remunerations than national and local NGOs, attracting more employees. Many UN agencies also offer their senior employees the possibility of international placements.

Table 2: Respondents' job characteristics (created by the authors)

Characteristic	Respondents number	Percentage (%)
<b>Years of Experience</b>	266	100
Less than 5	105	39.5
5-9	110	41.4
10-14	32	12.0
15 and above	19	7.1
<b>Managerial level</b>	266	100
Volunteer	81	30.5
Junior	52	19.5
Senior	110	41.4

Manager	23	8.6
<b>NGO Type</b>	<b>266</b>	<b>100</b>
INGO	198	74.4
Charity	30	11.3
Professional Union	1	0.4
Developmental entity	4	1.5
Others	33	12.4

Table 3 summarizes respondents' views regarding societal factors that affect women's empowerment toward leadership positions in NGOs in Syria. It can be seen that the view of women as less capable of handling work pressure compared to men is still in place, with an average of 3.39. Respondents also feel that women have a lower degree of freedom to carry out all their job duties. This could be due to the risky tasks usually required from NGO staff, such as food and clothes distribution in turbulent areas or providing shelters in situations similar to the devastating earthquake that hit Syria in February 2023, which may require working in difficult conditions and spending days away from home. Third in this dimension is the view of society that women are not welcomed as leaders, with an average of 3.12.

Table 3: Respondents' view regarding societal factors (created by the authors)

Statement	Average	Standard Deviation	Rank
People believe that the right place for women is the house	2.94	1.358	5
Society does not accept women as leaders	3.12	1.135	3
Society views women as less capable of handling work pressures than men	3.39	1.128	1
Family puts pressure on working women to prevent them from working with men	3.11	1.124	4
The degree of freedom granted to women by society does not help them carry out all of their job duties	3.33	1.022	2
Overall- weighted	3.18	0.0867	
Alpha's Cronbach			0.804

The main regulatory factor that impedes women's leadership roles is the nomination process, which prefers men over women, with an average of 3.47. Respondents believe that men and women possess the same competencies and qualifications, and then men will be chosen for higher positions with an average of 3.06. This could be due to the privileges granted to women by law that offer them extended leaves. However, respondents do not believe that women are less capable or of commitment to perform tasks than women.

Table 4: Respondents' view regarding to regulatory factors (created by the authors)

Statement	Average	Standard Deviation	Rank
Nomination for leadership positions is not based on objective foundations	3.47	1.006	1
If men and women are equal in competencies and qualifications, men will be chosen for higher positions	3.06	1.227	2
Decision maker excludes women when nominating for senior positions	2.69	1.029	6
Senior managers believe that women are less capable of performing work than men	2.76	1.121	4
Senior managers believe that women are less committed to performing tasks than men	2.69	1.205	5
Women have legally granted privileges (Such as maternity leave) that reduce their chances of obtaining a leadership position	2.94	1.081	3
Overall-weigh	2.93	0.818	
Alpha's Cronbach			0.829

Regarding personal factors, respondents believe managers do not have enough confidence in women and think that women do not have enough leadership skills, with an average of 3.23. However, respondents think that women could balance family and work responsibilities (average of 2.87) and are self-confident in their skills (average of 2.82).

Table 5: Respondents' view regarding personal factors (created by the authors)

Statement	Average	Standard Deviation	Rank
Managers' lack of confidence in women and their ability to possess leadership	3.23	0.992	1
Women prefer to take care of family matters rather than taking care of increasing work responsibilities	2.87	1.020	2
The fear of failure in leadership positions prompts women not to hold those positions	2.82	1.062	3
Overall-weighted	2.97	0.752	
Alpha's Cronbach			0.572

We investigated five forms of women empowerment towards leadership positions: delegation of authority, motivation, teamwork, training, and effective communication. Table 6 indicates that respondents feel that enough authority is delegated to women, with managers having confidence in women's ability to do tasks, and they do not follow up on them more than women. They also feel that women are decision-takers in the tasks assigned to them. Managers also offer women enough flexibility when delegating tasks to them.

Regarding motivation, respondents indicate that managers' appreciation is an important incentive for women for further achievements. Also, women are motivated to achieve NGO goals and receive appreciation from their managers for their work. However, respondents are close to neutral about whether salaries are adequate to the women's task. This could be due to the high inflation rates in Syria, which significantly reduces the purchasing power of their salaries. However, the overall weighted average of this dimension is quite high at 3.81.

For the third dimension, teamwork, respondents believe that Women's work requires them to cooperate with colleagues, that they are involved in various committees and councils, and that trust exists between women and their supervisors. Moreover, Managers give women the freedom to express their opinions. However, it seems that trust between women and their female colleagues is somehow problematic, with only an average score of 3.32.

The fourth dimension of women's leadership empowerment is training. Participants' responses to survey questions regarding this dimension are very close, ranging from 3.74 to 3.96. The highest average corresponds to the fact that managers provide women with opportunities to exchange work experiences, while the lowest score is related to the fact that managers are interested in constantly developing women's performance. The overall weighted average is quite high, with 3.84.

Effective communication is the last dimension of women's leadership empowerment. Respondents feel that instructions at work are clear, with an average of 3.78, and that an effective communication system is in place in NGOs. This is especially expected since INGOs represent 74.4% of the total sample, as shown in Table 2. Very close to it is the idea that Women can easily access information when needed and can easily approach decision-makers with averages of 3.70 and 3.69, respectively.

Table 6: Respondents' view regarding empowerment (created by the authors)

Statement	Average	Standard Deviation	Rank
<b>Delegation of authorities</b>			
Women are granted sufficient authority to accomplish their job tasks	3.50	0.891	4
Managers have confidence in women's ability to carry out the tasks delegated to them	3.82	0.795	1

Managers provide sufficient flexibility for women to carry out the tasks delegated to them	3.73	0.829	3
Women are the decision-makers in the tasks assigned to them	3.82	0.862	2
Bosses at work follow up on women in the tasks assigned to them more than they follow up on the tasks assigned to men	2.88	1.064	5
Overall- weighted	3.55	0.505	
<b>Motivation</b>			
Women have the motivation to contribute towards achieving NGOs' goals	4.22	0.695	2
Managers at work appreciate the efforts made by women	3.80	0.824	3
Managers' appreciation for women's efforts at work is a real incentive for further achievement	4.30	0.721	1
Managers motivate women to assume additional responsibilities and tasks	3.60	0.903	4
The salary a woman receives is adequate for the work assigned to her	3.12	0.998	5
Overall- weighted	3.81	0.503	
<b>Teamwork</b>			
Women's work requires them to cooperate with colleagues	4.18	0.686	1
Trust prevails between women and their supervisors at work	3.77	0.784	3
The level of trust between a woman and her colleagues at work differs from that of a man and his colleagues	3.32	1.013	5
Managers give women the freedom to express their opinions	3.76	0.778	4
Women are involved in working in various committees and councils	3.91	0.749	2
Overall- weighted	3.79	0.431	
<b>Training</b>			
Managers provide sufficient opportunities for women for self-development	3.79	0.814	4
Managers provide training courses for women to develop their work skills	3.90	0.834	2
Managers provide women with opportunities to exchange work experiences	3.96	0.754	1
There are plans to train women at workplace	3.82	0.826	3
Managers are interested in constantly developing women's performance	3.74	0.896	5
Overall- weighted	3.84	0.710	
<b>Effective Communication</b>			
The instructions at work are clear	3.78	0.894	1
Women can easily approach decision-makers	3.69	0.900	5
The organization has an effective communication system	3.76	0.844	3
Women can easily access information when they need it	3.70	0.810	4
The organization has an effective information system	3.77	0.843	2
Overall- weighted	3.74	0.665	

To address the first hypothesis, we ask participants for their views on the main barriers that impede their progress toward NGO leadership positions. Surprisingly, 20.7% of respondents see that females are enemies of themselves. This agrees with queen bee syndrome since 68.8% of our sample are females. Males are considered barriers by only 14.7% of respondents, while other factors are blamed for the rest. Hence, we accept the first hypothesis that women do not empower other women in leadership positions.

Table 7: Distribution of women empowerment barriers (created by the authors)

Device	Respondents number	Percentage (%)
Males	39	14.7
Other females	55	20.7
Other factors	172	64.6



To test the other three hypotheses, we estimate the following model:

$$\text{Women empowerment} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Social factors} + \beta_2 \text{Regulatory factors} + \beta_3 \text{Personal factors} + \varepsilon$$

The results from estimating the model mentioned above are reported in Table 8. The three independent factors load positively and significantly on women's empowerment. The most significant factors are regulatory factors, with a beta estimate of 0.130, which is significant at a 1% level. Societal factors are also significant at a 1% level with a positive and significant coefficient of 0.108. Although personal factors are only significant at the 5% level, personal factors' coefficient is positive with a value of 0.103. Results illustrated in Table 8 suggest that all three groups of factors, i.e., regulatory, societal, and personal, are important determinants of women's empowerment towards leadership positions in NGOs.

Table 8: Direct effects' coefficients from multiple regression on Women empowerment (created by the authors)

The relationship	Estimate	P-value	Result
H2: Women empowerment <--- Societal factors	0.108	0.005	Supported
H3: Women empowerment <--- Regulatory factors	0.130	0.001	Supported
H4: Women empowerment <--- Personal factors	0.103	0.014	Supported

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

We investigate factors that affect women's empowerment towards leadership positions at NGOs in Syria. Three factors affecting women's empowerment composed of societal, regulatory, and personal aspects were examined in this research, and their impact on women's empowerment was investigated. Also, we test whether women support each other to reach leadership positions.

We collected the responses of 266 participants from INGOs, charities, professional unions, development entities, and other types of NGOs functioning in Syria from September to November 2022. We find that regulatory factors are the dominant factors that impede women's empowerment toward leadership positions. Societal factors come second in terms of their impact on women's empowerment, while personal factors are considered the least important. We also find that women tend to hold back their female colleagues from reaching leadership positions instead of supporting them.

It is unbelievable that women have difficulties in reaching leadership positions in NGOs, which are considered oases of freedom and elevators of human rights. However, the situation on the ground indicates a hill to climb to restore gender equality. First, we suggest that regulations should be reformed to defend women's rights for equal access to leadership positions. This could be achieved by establishing a gender equality committee on the ministerial level to monitor and ensure equal opportunities for all genders. Second, we recommend that NGOs that defend women's rights extend their activities towards women empowerment for leadership positions by running awareness campaigns and inviting role models. Third, those NGOs should train women, especially those working in the NGO sector, on leadership skills, teamwork, effective communication, and motivation.

However, this study has some limitations. First, we highlight a skewness of respondents towards INGOs working in Syria. We understand that INGOs are self-regulated towards higher levels of governance and support of women's empowerment. Second, we believe that regulations reflect societal attitudes and beliefs; thus, an overlap could exist between regulatory and societal factors. Hence, future research should consider these limitations by ensuring enough representation of local and national NGOs and investigating the possibility of overlapping between regulatory and societal factors.

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