



Middle East  
Centre

# BREAKING BARRIERS

A LEADERSHIP  
FRAMEWORK  
FOR WOMEN'S  
DEVELOPMENT  
IN SUDAN

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# Breaking Barriers: A Leadership Framework for Women's Development in Sudan

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## About the Authors

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## Abstract

This policy paper presents the results of a study that sought to identify the key organisational barriers impeding women’s leadership in Sudan and recommends policy reforms to overcome these challenges. The study involved 75 women leaders from various sectors who completed three rounds of Delphi study and focus group discussions. The paper provides a framework and specific policy recommendations that support women’s advancement and participation in decision-making positions in Sudan. The study identifies cross-sectoral barriers and enablers as well as maps existing organisational policies in Sudan. The policy recommendations can inform legislative reforms and promote gender-responsive policies that address the barriers and enablers to women’s advancement and meaningful participation in decision-making processes. This study highlights the urgent need to address the organisational and governmental barriers that impede women’s leadership development in Sudan and provides a roadmap for achieving gender equity in leadership and decision-making positions. The low representation of women in leadership roles in Sudan emphasises the critical role that the government must play in supporting these policy reforms. The paper’s findings and recommendations are relevant to scholars and practitioners in multiple fields, including MENA region studies, organisational behaviour, women’s career advancement and leadership development.

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## Introduction

This study aims to identify key barriers and enablers to women's leadership development and examines the organisational and governmental policies that have impacted women's leadership advancement across sectors in Sudan. Following the 2018 revolution, there has been increasing attention on women's participation and leadership in Sudanese society, and the calls for Sudanese women to occupy leadership positions have been louder than ever.

With the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region having the second largest gender gap yet to close,<sup>1</sup> it is becoming increasingly vital to understand what is limiting women's empowerment and professional progression. Within this context, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the sector-specific organisational barriers that hinder Sudanese women from reaching senior positions?
2. What are the enablers that can help overcome these organisational barriers?
3. What practices and policies can contribute to the consistent development of women's leadership in Sudan?

The urgency of this study is specifically important in Sudan, where data and research on women's leadership and career progression are extremely limited. As such, by exploring these questions, this study aims to shed light on the barriers and enablers to women's leadership advancement across sectors and provides organisational and governmental policy recommendations towards supporting women's leadership across sectors and at various government levels.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Global Gender Gap Report', *Reports - World Economic Forum*. 2022. Available at: <https://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-202/> (accessed 23 March 2023).

# Women's Empowerment and Leadership Development

## Overview

Discussions on the barriers and enablers to women's leadership development in Sudan and its relation to women empowerment have not received enough research attention to date<sup>2</sup>. Although women represent 50% of the population of Sudan,<sup>3</sup> the women's labour force participation rate is only at 28.7%.<sup>4</sup> This gap suggests that women find difficulty in entering the labour force. In addition, according to the most recent national labour force survey, only 8.2% of Sudanese businesses are owned by women. This shows that the number of women rising to senior leadership positions in firms remains low.<sup>5</sup>

Against this backdrop, the questions of how Sudanese women can be empowered and how their career paths can be promoted was at the heart of this project. Women leaders across sectors who participated in this study have identified various barriers and enablers in their leadership journeys. While many of the barriers and enablers identified are common across all the sectors, some are sector-specific.

The variation in nature of work and work-place structure plays a critical role in the types of barriers women are most subjected to, as well as the enablers that can promote their leadership development. In addition, societal backgrounds, including but not limited to, family and financial support, are also key factors that affect women's overall ability to access leadership opportunities and rise to decision-making positions. Moreover, women's leadership and career progression are largely impacted by political instability. Current political developments in Sudan have allowed more space for women to exercise leadership and advocate for a pro-women agenda. In October 2021, the country's ministers were removed, five of which were women, and some of the top leadership positions of the country. Although calls for women's inclusion are clear, sectors across Sudan remain heavily male-dominated, with men occupying most leadership and managerial positions.

Ultimately, this paper argues that breaking down barriers to women's empowerment and leadership development is crucial for achieving gender equality and improving Sudan's economic and social development. These barriers can be addressed through policy reform that promotes gender equality and women's advancement in leadership positions.

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<sup>2</sup> Souad Mohamed and Aida Abbashar, 'Investigating Women's Leadership and Development in Sudan', *LSE MEC Blogs*, 2022. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2022/08/18/investigating-the-barriers-and-enablers-for-womens-leadership-in-sudan/> (accessed 20 March 2023)

<sup>3</sup> 'Open Data – Sudan', *World Bank*, 2022. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/SD> (accessed 20 March 2023).

<sup>4</sup> 'Sudan Open Access Data – Sudan', *ILO*, 2021. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/africa/countries-covered/sudan/lang--en/index.htm> (accessed 18 March 2023).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

## Methodology and Validated Framework

The framework was developed through an informed study on the barriers and enablers to women's leadership in Sudan. The study included an extensive three-round Delphi study, undertaken by 75 women leaders from academic, business, government, INGO/NGO sectors, and in policymaking and leadership positions, as well as from activism circles. It considered diversity of women's age groups, with participants' ages ranging from 25–72. These groups were selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers and enablers faced by women and to ensure the sample was representative of Sudanese women across sectors. The study also incorporated multiple focus groups, which were used to validate the findings of the Delphi study. In selecting the participants of this study, purposive sampling<sup>6</sup> and key informants' approach were combined as well-established methods to ensure the validity and reliability of the data collected. The key informant approach was specifically selected to attain insights from Sudanese women who have the relevant expertise and are able to provide a valuable account of the organisational barriers and enablers that have impacted their leadership journeys.<sup>7</sup>

At inception, this framework was developed through a critical literature review, which mapped out the existing analysis of women's leadership in Sudan and the MENA region. This framework proved useful, as it identified gaps and areas for further exploration. It also allowed the study team to pinpoint the organisational factors that could impact women's leadership development in the Sudanese context. This initial framework development and accompanying critical literature review also supported the study team in developing questions for the questionnaires and focus groups.

The Delphi technique was used to create a consensus between experts on the research protocol and to refine the survey instrument used to collect data from participants. This technique is predominantly used in the social sciences for understanding underexplored areas with limited theorising.<sup>8</sup> The Delphi technique is a structured and iterative process that enables consensus to be developed among participants and feedback to be used to revise, refine and validate data collection instruments. This approach was specifically chosen to allow for exploring women leadership development in Sudan, highlight the main barriers to women's advancements in their careers and identify the organisational enablers for overcoming them. Participants were informed that the study aimed to develop an understanding of the barriers and enablers they have encountered in their career journeys and were asked to complete three anonymised and open-ended questionnaires as part of the study. The purpose of this three-phase process was to validate the data and receive controlled and reliable opinion feedback.<sup>9</sup> The validity and reliability of the data

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<sup>6</sup> Lawrence A. Palinkas et al., 'Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research', *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42/5 (2015), pp. 533–44.

<sup>7</sup> Martin N. Marshall, 'Sampling for Qualitative Research', *Family Practice* 13/6 (1996), pp. 522–6.

<sup>8</sup> Puthearath Chan, 'An Empirical Study on Data Validation Methods of Delphi and General Consensus', *Data* 7/2 (2022).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*



collected from the participants were ensured by using a consistent research design and a representative sample of women leaders with specialised knowledge and experience. Data collection stopped at round three of the Delphi questionnaire, when saturation was reached. After data saturation was reached for the questionnaires, two focus group discussions were conducted to validate the overall results of the Delphi study. Content analysis was carried out in each round to identify common themes across sectors, ensuring the generalisability of the findings.

The analysis of the framework was conducted through content and thematic analysis methods. Content analysis was selected to analyse patterns found in the open-ended questions and to allow the research team to identify and compare the barriers and enablers experienced by women during the leadership journeys. Content analysis allows for the coding of raw text into selected classification schemes and has been frequently used by qualitative researchers to derive meanings from texts concerning career motivations.<sup>10</sup> NVivo was used to analyse and segment the data. The process of coding the participants data involved a hierarchical structure for analysis, which aimed to classify each respondent according to their specific attributes. The case option on Nvivo allowed the research team to classify each respondent according to their specific attributes. The attributes identified include position, years of experience, sector and organisation size. Moreover, the analytical approach framework included splitting the framework into three categories: barriers, enablers, and policy implications across sectors. Following the completion of the content analysis, the framework was empirically validated and extended to include the categories for policy implications across sectors.

Finally, this study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) with careful consideration given to the sensitive contexts to protect the dignity, rights and welfare of participants including consent, data protection and confidentiality. All participants were informed of the objectives and procedures prior to partaking in the study and were required to sign consent forms before the study began. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they had their right to withdraw at any time without consequence and that data was treated anonymously. Informed consent forms were completed by all participants and an ethical review on data management was completed and approved by LSE.

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<sup>10</sup> Chinnu Cheriyan et al., (2021). 'Exploring the Career Motivations, Strengths, and Challenges of Autistic and Non-autistic University Students: Insights From a Participatory Study', *Frontiers in Psychology* 12/719827 (2021); Nancy Kondracki, Nancy Wellman and Daniel R. Amundson, 'Content Analysis: Review of Methods and their Applications in Nutrition Education', *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 34 (2002), pp. 224–30.

## Organisational Policies

The National Women Empowerment Policy (NWEPE) of 2007, being the main overarching women empowerment policy framework, touches upon the need for gender-sensitive organisational policies. Its objectives include the incorporation of gender issues into policies at all levels, plan and draft policies for maternity and childcare, the creation of administrative and developmental capabilities in organisations that eliminate the restrictions women are subjected to in attending to the workplace. However, the roadmap to implementing and materialising these objectives remains unclear. The NWEPE does not highlight how these policies can be implemented, nor has the framework triggered legislative reforms that promote women's organisational leadership development across sectors. It has also been criticised for being out-dated. The existing nationwide legislation relevant to promoting gender-sensitive organisational policies is the Labour Act 1997. The latter is limited in scope of coverage of women's issues. The law discusses women's maternity leave, which is eight weeks in total, divisible depending on choice. In addition, paternity leave is legally three days. The law applies to public administration and civil servants, as well as employees in the public sector. However, the private sector, international organisations and civil society organisations often have a mix of policy frameworks between the labour law and their own policies. Thus, the scope of the NWEPE – although it is supposed to improve women's societal and economic conditions and henceforth promote their leadership development – remains unclear due to the lack of a clear roadmap to how the policy addresses women's leadership development within organisations.

The Delphi rounds highlighted stark variations between the organisational policies implemented across the different sectors. For instance, academics emphasised that their organisations' laws are reflective of the labour law act. In the case of policy makers and influencers, a wider gap in organisational policies between those working in public institutions and those working in INGOs was highlighted. Women working in international organisations and institutions often follow the mandates of their institutions, which were found to have more gender-sensitive policies in place with regards to maternity leave, equal opportunity and quota systems for women's representation. On the other hand, women activists working in gender advocacy and awareness alongside other civil society workers in the gender field have noted that their organisations also possess gender-sensitive policies that are implemented at different institutional levels. These policies range from maternity and paternity leave and health days to leadership development programs and career development support. In view of this variation, we find that gender-sensitive policies vary in degree of existence, implementation and style depending on the nature of the organisation.

## Women's Leadership Development and Higher Education Policies

Over the past two decades, educational opportunities for women in Sudan have expanded considerably.<sup>11</sup> Sudanese women have advocated for equal access to modern educational institutions and have entered these spaces at an equal footing with men.<sup>12</sup> In addition, many women have envisioned career opportunities within higher education. In Sudan, the attainment of a university education is regarded as an important stepping stone for women's career and leadership journeys in all sectors. Women are motivated to enter academia in Sudan for a variety of reasons. Positive experiences during their own academic journeys have had encouraging effects on women wanting to advance in this sector. Some of these experiences have included having access to ample networking opportunities, engagement with extracurricular activities, and interactions with role models or informal mentors. These experiences have been praised for providing women in academia with confidence, improved research and academic skills, and expanding their networks. As one university professor noted:

The collaboration with national activists and academics has enriched my experiences, communication skills and teamwork. These experiences have also improved my research and writing skills, which is essential for publishing academic papers.

Alongside these factors, individual academic merit and achieving academic success have played an important role in encouraging women to advance within their universities. Hitting milestones such as gaining admission to one of Sudan's prestigious higher education institutions or graduating at the top percentile of the class have served as reminders to women of their academic and career potential. Coupled with these personal milestones is family support. Women from families who are strong advocates for women's education are more likely to pursue higher education because they have the financial and moral support of their families to enter academic spaces in Sudan. While levels of support may vary from family to family, possessing geographical, physical and financial access to the top universities in the country – all located in the capital – has opened the sector for some women leaders. Ultimately, the opportunities available to women from rural and low-income backgrounds are far less than those available to women from urban and high-income backgrounds.

While there are several factors that have enabled women's career advancement in the academic sector, several barriers continue to disrupt their ambitions and journeys. Firstly, the economic and political conditions of Sudan have shaped who has been able to access and advance within academia. High inflation, economic turbulence and lack of sustainable and effective economic restructuring have forced female academics into low-paid positions within their academic institutions and has resulted in low financial and resource allocation to universities in the country. These factors along with the long hours and high

<sup>11</sup> Monira Hamid, Christopher Thron, and Sallam Fageeri, 'Status and Trends in University Admissions for Women in Sudan: A Graphical Data Analysis', *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 2/1 (2020).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

demands of academic positions have resulted in women searching for other opportunities to supplement their incomes or abandoning the sector. Sudan's turbulent political situation has also created barriers for women's leadership journeys within academia. Female academics believe that political establishments have given their career advancement little attention, and this can be exemplified by the lack of investment in universities in the country. Moreover, it was noted that women's leadership advancement in public institutions can be easily succumbed to biases and nepotism based on political affiliation. Some women found that their peers with specific political ties received promotions and positions with ease. In addition, Sudan's current political situation has also brought about a security crisis throughout the country, because of instability, police violence, regional conflict and protests.<sup>13</sup> These factors disproportionately impact women, who are more likely to face limitations to their movement and gender-based violence. This has hindered the ability for academics to conduct fieldwork, an essential component for advancing to high-ranking academic careers.

Finally, women in academia have indicated that the difficulties they have encountered in maintaining a work-life balance have had an impact on their career and leadership journeys. In particular, public universities in the country abide by the employment laws of the Labour Act of 1997, which dictates that women can be granted maternity leave for only two months. In addition, many reported that returning to work after giving birth was not an easy transition due to the lack of work flexibility and absence of child-care facilities available in the sector. In turn, female academics have struggled to fulfil their child-care obligations and career aspirations simultaneously and find that they often must sacrifice demanding, high-ranking positions to support their children.

## Recommendations

There are organisational policies and practices that can be instilled in Sudan's higher education institutes (HEIs) that can support women's leadership development. Organisational policy reform in this sector, particularly in the case of public universities, is intrinsically tied to government support for female academics. This study revealed that the government has an important role to play in setting the pace for public institutions to follow. For instance, the development of national and regional level policies that support women's safety and mobility, such as anti-harassment and anti-abuse laws, would support female academics in conducting their field research. Having this type of government support would allow women in academia to tap into national policies to support their careers. In turn, it sets an example for HEIs that it is important to create positive and safe conditions for the advancement of female-led research. Furthermore, the government has a role to play in addressing political biases. As part of Sudan's current period of political transformation, there is room to uproot institutional political biases perpetuated by the previous government. Creating anti-bias policies that address this at both governmental and university levels will even the playing field for female academics striving to reach high ranking academic positions.

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<sup>13</sup> 'Sudan: Between Violence, Humanitarian Crisis and Protests', *Forbes*, 2022. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2022/12/30/sudan-between-violence-humanitarian-crisis-and-protests> (accessed 14 March 2023).

Through university and national government partnerships, financial resources can be channelled to HEIs to improve access to child-care services. Directing more financial resources to the HEIs can support institutions in developing child-care policies and facilities. Having on-campus child-care facilities can support working mothers in balancing their familial and work-obligations. In doing so, this would allow for female academics to commit more time to their leadership journeys.

## Contrasting Experiences of Women Leaders from INGOs and NGOs

Sudan is a hub for numerous international governmental organisations (INGOs) and national governmental organisations (NGOs) working on a variety of issues related to the social, economic and political advancement of the country. For Sudanese women, working in this sector is not taboo, with many entering it for its growth opportunities and international and national exposure. Those who work in NGOs and INGOs are fundamentally motivated by their passion for domestic and international issues, and the visions that their respective organisations uphold. Familial and community support have also been cited as enabling factors for women in this sector. Women leaders believe that a major reason why their aspirations have been realised is because they have come from supportive environments that encouraged them to work on the issues they are passionate about.

Nevertheless, in their leadership journeys, women in this sector are confronted with a variety of challenges which are partially dependent on what type of organisation they work for. Across INGOs and NGOs, young age was cited as a barrier to leadership development. This, coupled with gender, creates an intersectional challenge for some women, who may not be taken as seriously as their older male counterparts. This can result in workplace exclusion. Exclusion and isolation within an organisation can lead to women not having access to important opportunities for career growth. It can also have an impact on an individual's confidence in their abilities. Tied to this barrier is unsupportive senior leadership. Women leaders largely cited that not having access to supportive senior leadership has impacted their promotional prospects, skills development, and ultimately, leadership advancement. In this case, unsupportive senior leadership refers to senior management not making gender-sensitive policies an organisational priority. For instance, women working in INGOs have cited that although mentorship programmes exist in their organisations, they are often focused on general skills development without a gendered lens and with minimal focus on gender empowerment.

Cultural factors appear to be an impediment for women leaders in the NGO space in Sudan. Given that many women in this sector work on Sudan-focused issues, they are also vulnerable to harassment for public involvement. Women from this sector noted that they are confronted with stereotypes about women leading organisations and are harassed online and in-person for being vocal about their causes. In addition, they have noted that their leadership development has been impacted by stereotypes relating to the roles of women. The belief that women should prioritise family obligations over their careers has hindered their ability to conduct field work, travel abroad for conferences, attend important meetings, amongst other instances.

As a director from an NGO noted:

As a woman and an activist, who is working to establish a public feminist institution in polarised and patriarchal setups, my leadership is resented among both women and men who are part of public spaces.

Ultimately, it can be debilitating to be a woman leader in an environment that perpetuates stereotypes about women. This can create hindrances to an individual's development and advancement in their respective sectors and requires urgent policy interventions. While the barriers and enablers to women's leadership across NGOs and INGOs are similar, there are differences in policies and organisational structures. INGOs typically abide by their own international organisation's laws and policies when it comes to factors such as promotions, maternity leave, flexible working, and anti-harassment policies. Women leaders in INGOs in Sudan recognise that they are given certain advantages with these policies that women working in Sudan-based organisations may be deprived of. As one INGO manager noted:

Since I work for a British government body, my work terms and conditions are more aligned to UK laws rather than Sudan laws. I am therefore entitled for 6.5 months of maternity leave which is much better than Sudan labour law maternity leave of 1.5 months. Being able to stay for 6.5 months with my new-born is essential to be able to adapt my life to the family addition and reorganise my priorities when it comes to personal life, career, and my contribution to the community as a female leader.

Indeed, women working in NGOs in Sudan are less likely to have access to the gender-sensitive policies available in the international space, and this creates various barriers to their leadership journeys.

## Recommendations

There are several policies and practices that can be implemented to support women's leadership development within INGOs and NGOs. First, it is important for INGOs and NGOs to foster and promote synergies between one another when it comes to women's leadership development. Specifically, INGOs with the capacities and experience of providing mentorship and professional development programmes can work closely with NGOs to support their capacity development. In addition, NGOs can support INGOs through knowledge exchange on Sudan's context and women's issues, due to their strong on the ground experience. Instilling anti-discrimination policies at organisational level will make it clear that discrimination is not tolerated within organisations, while also outlining standards and behaviour for all staff. In the case of women leaders in this sector, these policies should also ensure that there are no biases in recruitment or promotional practices. To complement these policies, organisations should review their grievance and whistle-blower mechanisms, ensuring that these are up to date and accessible for women. While there are differences between the policy and programmatic structures in INGOs and NGOs, the whole sector would benefit from reviewing and emphasising the importance of including and supporting women leaders in the sector.

## Policy Reform in Sudan's Male-dominated Business Sector

Women in Sudan's business sector have made important headways. Several women have become CEOs, heads of departments and directors in this male-dominated field. Although there is a prevalence of women leaders working in the business sector, Sudan's turbulent economic environment has limited business opportunities and growth. As one female CEO noted, 'there is almost a complete lack of opportunity in Sudan for women in the field of business.' This lack of opportunity can be tied to the fact that women working in this sector experience discrimination, disenfranchisement and biases throughout their leadership journeys. However, despite these challenges, they are motivated and enabled to enter the business sector for a variety of reasons.

Having access to higher education institutions has been cited as an important enabling factor for women in this sector. Specifically, studying economics, business administration or finance at university-level has supported women in developing business-related skills and knowledge. In addition, family providing moral support has also played a role in enabling women to join the business sector. This type of support is particularly important given the intimidation and doubts that may arise when women join male-dominated fields. Finally, supportive senior leadership was the most frequently cited enabler for women in this business sector. Specifically, having a non-discriminatory manager, who invests in the capacity-building and training of women in the field, has supported women in achieving their leadership ambitions. In addition, some senior managers in this sector have supported women's leadership development through applying gender-sensitive policies.

As a C-level women leader at a private sector company noted:

(I felt supported by) maternity leave and a flexible time approach which my line manager granted me when my child was very young, and I had just been widowed. Although he granted me this prior to setting it as a company policy, we later on institutionalised it to benefit all relevant staff.

Therefore, policy responses have an important role to play in supporting women's leadership development in the sector. However, women face several challenges in reaching leadership positions in this sector. Male-dominance in this field has made it more difficult for women to climb the career ladder. Sectors that are more male-dominated and regard women's participation as taboo, may breed a male-dominated work culture. In turn, this can lead to environments where women's leadership is not valued and where their contributions and aspirations are limited and overshadowed by male colleagues.<sup>14</sup> Women leaders in business have argued that this male-dominated work culture manifests in men not respecting women's opinion and participation, as well as a lack of support for women's career progression and promotion.

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<sup>14</sup> Tahani Alqahtani, 'Women's Leadership in Higher Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia', *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Organization Management* 10/1 (2021).

Having unsupportive senior management can heighten feelings of exclusion and discrimination women feel in the business sector. When managers do not support gender-sensitive programming and policies, they feed into organisational cultures that make women feel isolated while supporting the male-normed nature already rooted in this sector. In fact, women leaders in the private sector have said that they face implicit bias from their managers in terms of support for their growth. They highlighted that the business sector upholds gender biases, and that the lack of support they receive allows their male counterparts to override them at work. They specifically noted that lack of flexible working hours has created challenges for women with child-care responsibilities. The long-hours required for working in the private sector often do not coincide with the familial duties and societal expectations for a woman's work-life balance.

## Recommendations

Within this context, several policies and practices can be adopted by the business sector in Sudan to support women's leadership development. First, flexible working policies and longer maternity leave can support mothers in fulfilling both their career and familial obligations. As one business manager noted, 'recruitment of married women and mothers is difficult. It is assumed they cannot fulfil their jobs and commit to responsibilities.' To address these challenges, policies supporting flexible or remote work, such as work from home set ups and childcare, as well as longer maternity leave, can be instilled within the private sector. To complement these policies, gender-sensitive anti-discrimination policies should be mandated and accessible to all staff. Ensuring that these policies are effective is also dependent on developing anti-bias training for all staff in private sector companies. Trainings that focus on women's empowerment and the barriers women experience in this sector can help lead to a more inclusive environment within businesses.

Although barriers to women's leadership in the business sector persist, several private sector companies in Sudan have launched corporate social responsibility initiatives (CSR) to support women's participation and leadership within the business sector. For instance, Haggar Group has championed professional development programmes for women within their organisation, while also providing for scholarships for young Sudanese women to study abroad, developing the business and leadership capacities of Sudanese women living in rural areas, amongst other programmes. In addition, El Barbary Group has a generous maternity leave policy of one year. The private sector also enjoys a large degree of autonomy over policies and bylaws of entities, meaning that their organisational factors vary, as well as policy implications that can improve the status quo for women. It is therefore the responsibility of individual organisations to reform policy and practices.



## Organisational Policies, Women Leaders, and the Public Domain

Women founders of national government organisations – focusing on women’s issues, women in governmental and policy-making positions, and female activists and politicians – have all attempted to make influential marks in the public domain. They are motivated by their passion for women’s advancement in Sudan’s social, political and economic development, and their own political aspirations. Sudan’s long history of women’s public involvement in protests, activism, and politics is what respondents of this study believe makes their leadership experiences distinctive. As stated by a women leader in the NGO sector:

‘Women’s leadership in Sudan goes way back. It was always there throughout Sudanese history. This is quite different from other MENA countries. I think this has allowed more women to want to be leaders since Sudan’s independence.’

Tied to this have been feelings of solidarity felt amongst women leaders in Sudan attempting to make a mark in the public sphere. Women have been able to reach leadership positions because of inter-organisational solidarity that is bred from common networks. Often, women working in NGOs, government, and policy know each other and support each other’s issues on social media. This has allowed women to feel a sense of support, network with and mentor one another, driving more leadership development.

Although the importance of women’s leadership in the public sphere has been highlighted in recent times, there are still organisational barriers that women face. For instance, women working in government, politics and activism have noted that lack of legislative support for women’s safety has impacted their ability to move around the country to attend meetings or conduct fieldwork. While the Public Order Law was repealed in 2019, the security apparatus that implements the law still exists. As a result, women find themselves confronting the legacies that the law has had on their movement and involvement in the public sphere to this day. These feelings of insecurity are heightened by Sudan’s current political situation. While the revolution has been cited as a motivating factor for women’s involvement in the public sphere, the government change of 2021 has led to a lack of security throughout the country. In addition, government priorities have shifted focus on the current political and economic situation. As a result, participants have argued that their contribution to Sudan’s political transformation period has become more symbolic than anything. As one social policy specialist lamented:

A weak security environment limits women’s movement and participation in different types of jobs and activities. The lack of security, especially during the recent period, could increase women’s restrictions on moving around freely to pursue work, education and other aspirations.

Finally, women working in political parties, government, activist circles, and in national organisations concerned with women's issues have cited those societal taboos about their participation that have created challenges in their leadership development. Women founders and activists have expressed that they have not received great support from their close networks, when they decided to pursue careers addressing issues related to women's experiences. The policies that impede women's adequate and effective political participation are not direct. In fact, women in Sudan have been voted into parliament, and gained access to the public sphere early on, albeit in limited capacities. Nonetheless, the policies that limit women's participation are policies and laws that limit women's ability to voice their opinions such as the Public Order Law and the Personal Status Act, which have implications on women's safety and mobility amongst other factors. Moreover, the lack of policies that are gender sensitive is in and of itself a discriminatory stance against women's political participation.

## Recommendations

Promoting diversity, inclusion, and gender-mainstreaming in government and policy-making circles, political parties, unions, activist circles, and national organisations can play a key role in supporting women's leadership development. Setting gender and geographical quotas for women's participation in these sectors can help ensure that more women are involved in influential positions. As cited in this study, most women who are in leadership positions in this sector come from Khartoum and there is a lack of discussion on issues that impact women throughout the country. These efforts can be part of a wider mainstreaming of gender policies at the top levels of every organisation of this sector. This will require raising awareness on political processes and incorporating the views of women across the whole country. It is also important to note that these policies are needed at both federal and local levels. As a woman leader noted:

I think we need sub-national level policies. We did research on the damages of FGM and people were talking about criminalising it, we found several states in their legislative councils already set laws as the time the national had not set their laws. This is an example of the fact that we need to incorporate a variety of different voices.

Part and parcel of mainstreaming gender policies is anti-bias training within government, political parties and unions. Anti-bias training can play a key role in shedding light on issues of female exclusion in the male-dominated political sphere. It is also important for women to feel solidarity within their organisations and that the barriers they experience are understood by their peers, as this will lead to more meaningful platforms and discussions on women's issues in Sudan. Tied to gender mainstreaming is the importance of developing a national gender plan for Sudan, to serve as a blueprint for the government's women's empowerment efforts. Women in politics have pointed to the fact that the government has an important role to play in setting the precedent for other sectors. Through the development of a national gender plan, the government can assert that women's empowerment is a priority of Sudan's current period of political transformation.

Lastly, women's leadership development can be enabled by security sector reform. A policy expert noted, 'the reform of the security sector is a major issue and no one is talking about how it affects women. Women are victims of abuse, and this impacts their movement. The male-dominated nature of the security sector has ignored women's participation in the public space.' Reforming this sector could promote women's safety and security and allow them to participate more. Although the Public Order Law has been repealed, the security sector still limits access to leadership positions through policing women's movement. Women leaders have expressed feelings of insecurity, and that the security apparatus continues to perpetuate discrimination and abuse against women. Security sector reform should be conducted through a gender-sensitive lens that aims to end the scrutinization of women's public movement and activism.

## Governmental and Organisational Synergies

The lack of policy coordination between the national level policies and legislations, and organisational policy enforcement has yielded fragmented and unbalanced gender-sensitive organisational policies. This is partially attributable to the fact that, in Sudan, the government agency responsible for women related issues, being a directorate under a ministry, is considered a 'low-level machinery,' which automatically limits the entity's ability to impose and enforce drastic policy and legislative changes.

The key policy reform required is the establishment of a new national women agenda, that necessitates the implementation of a unified gender-sensitive organisational code as a core element of women empowerment across sectors. Moreover, the absence of sectoral women unions has resulted in fragmented policies within the sector, which disproportionately enable women's leadership development. This study signifies the importance of the development of a common agenda between the different sectors that addresses women's leadership development barriers in organisations, and mandates enabling tools to support women's leadership development. Furthermore, to develop a unified women's agenda, it is crucial to emphasise successful examples of gender mainstreaming in both public and private organisations. This approach not only encourages organisations to comply with the national women's policy but also supports the development of gender-sensitive regulations within these organisations.

In Sudan, due to the relative organisational autonomy in implementing gender sensitive policies, the study highlighted non-uniform circumstances for women in organisations. However, some positive policies surfaced in the participants' responses. For example, a private sector specialist said that the company she works for allows one year paid maternity leave for women and has slow return policies for women back to work. Another positive policy that women in the civil service have highlighted, is that despite the short maternity leave for women, during medical complications after labour, the employer is not allowed to terminate the woman's contract until her safe return to work.

To promote gender-sensitive policies and ensure their enforcement across organisations, it is important to work on the advocacy and public awareness aspect of gender-sensitive organisational policies. Policy change can only be enforced if organisations and the societies around them are made more aware of the importance of platforming gender-sensitive legislations and organisational policies.

## Conclusion

Overall, this policy paper highlights the significant impact of the lack of gender-focused policies and programmes on women's leadership development in Sudan. The mapping, analysis and recommendations provided in this paper can serve as a useful guide for policymakers, organisational leaders and advocates to address these issues and create a more gender-inclusive workplace culture. By adopting these recommendations, organisations in Sudan can take the necessary steps to ensure that women's empowerment, economic and political development remains a priority. Furthermore, the current period of political transformation in Sudan presents a unique opportunity to set a precedent for future generations by incorporating these reforms sooner rather than later.

The first-hand accounts of women leaders participating in this study demonstrate that despite the barriers they face, women leaders in Sudan believe that organisational policy reform, coupled with strong governmental support, can create opportunities for women's career growth in the country. In conclusion, the success of gender-sensitive policies and practices requires strong governmental involvement and collaboration between different sectors and stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society, and the private sector. It is essential to create a comprehensive national agenda that addresses women's leadership development barriers in organisations and mandates the necessary tools to support women's advancement. Ultimately, ensuring gender equality and diversity in leadership positions will benefit both individuals and organisations in Sudan, leading to a more inclusive and prosperous society for all.

**Table 1: Reforming Governmental and Organisational Policies for Women's Empowerment and Leadership Development in Sudan**

Sector	Challenges	Workplace policy and programme implications	Governmental policy implications
<b>Academia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic and political turmoil leading to underfunding of HEIs and low wages for academics.</li> <li>• Limited access to professional development programmes targeting female academics.</li> <li>• Lack of government investment in women's academic career development.</li> <li>• Safety concerns while conducting fieldwork.</li> <li>• Short maternity leave and limited access to child-care facilities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The development of a workplace child-care policy and child-care facilities.</li> <li>• The development of gender-sensitive field-work policies that focus on women's safety and mobility.</li> <li>• Mentorship and personal development programmes targeted at supporting the skills development of women in academia.</li> <li>• Creating anti-discrimination policies to ensure that there are no biases in recruitment or promotional practices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of national and regional level anti-harassment policies that ensure women's safety and mobility.</li> <li>• Anti-bias policies that address institutional biases perpetuated by previous regime.</li> <li>• Promoting university and government partnerships to increase access to financial resources for HEI.</li> <li>• Increasing the national maternity leave allowance.</li> </ul>
<b>INGOs and NGOs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiencing biases, exclusion and discrimination due to young age.</li> <li>• Lack of senior leadership support in accessing professional development opportunities targeting women.</li> <li>• Safety concerns while conducting fieldwork.</li> <li>• Short maternity leave and lack of flexible working in the NGO sector.</li> <li>• Challenges achieving a work-life balance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoting synergies between INGOs and NGOs to exchange knowledge on women's leadership advancement and develop programmatic opportunities for skills development.</li> <li>• The development of gender-sensitive field-work policies that focus on women's safety and mobility.</li> <li>• Creating anti-discrimination policies to ensure that there are no biases in recruitment or promotional practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing the national maternity leave allowance to support women in national organisations.</li> <li>• Development of national and regional level anti-harassment policies that ensure women's safety and mobility while conducting fieldwork.</li> </ul>
<b>Business</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiencing biases, exclusion and discrimination as a result of working in a male-dominated field.</li> <li>• Lack of managerial support for gender-sensitive programming and policies.</li> <li>• Lack of flexible working and long working hours.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing flexible work and child-care policies and facilities to support women's familial obligations.</li> <li>• Creating anti-discrimination policies to ensure that there are no gender biases in recruitment or promotional practices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoting synergies between the government and private sector companies to devise solutions that promote business opportunities and growth in the country.</li> </ul>
<b>Government, policymakers, activists, unions, and women-led organisations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of legislative support for women's safety and movement which has triggered feelings of insecurity when participating in politics.</li> <li>• Societal taboos about women's involvement in the public sphere.</li> <li>• Male-dominated political spaces.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting gender and geographical quotas for women's participation.</li> <li>• Raising awareness within political spaces about the importance of women's participation through anti-bias training with political organisations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting governmental quotas for the involvement of women in politics at federal and local levels.</li> <li>• The development of a national gender plan to serve as a blueprint for the government's women's empowerment efforts.</li> <li>• Supporting security sector reform to tackle the abuse and harassment women face when being involved in public movements and activism.</li> </ul>

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