



HOW LEADERSHIP SKILLS OF ARAB WOMEN IN ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS AFFECT EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE AND SERVICE QUALITY IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS IN NORTHERN ISRAEL?

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Abstract:

This study examines how leadership skills of Arab women in administrative positions influence employee performance and service quality in public institutions in Northern Israel. Despite increasing global attention to gender equality and women's leadership, Arab women remain significantly underrepresented in senior administrative positions, particularly in culturally complex minority contexts. This gap reflects a complex interplay between social norms, gender stereotypes, and traditional institutional practices that place an unspoken ceiling on women's advancement (Acker, 1990; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Using a qualitative interpretivist design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 participants (15 female leaders and 15 employees) across education, health, municipal, and social service sectors (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Thematic analysis revealed eight themes highlighting emotional intelligence, participative decision-making, relational leadership, gendered evaluation of leadership legitimacy, professional discipline, institutional barriers, employee development, and socio-cultural identity as central factors influencing organizational outcomes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2021). Findings indicate that women's leadership is a socially constructed and context-dependent practice shaped by emotional, cultural, and institutional dynamics (Arar, 2019; Saris, 2017). The study contributes to leadership theory by challenging universal models and emphasizing culturally situated leadership practices in minority contexts, providing practical insights for policymakers and institutional leaders seeking to enhance women's leadership effectiveness and organizational performance in culturally diverse settings.

Keywords: women's leadership, Arab women, public sector, employee performance, service quality, northern Israel, qualitative research, gender equality, organizational culture, leadership skills

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1. Introduction

Despite significant global progress in gender equality and women's educational attainment, leadership remains a highly gendered domain, particularly for ethnic minority women. In Israel, Arab women continue to be underrepresented in senior administrative positions, even as their participation in higher education and the labor market increases (Arar, 2019; Saris, 2017). This underrepresentation reflects the interaction of socio-cultural norms, gender stereotypes, and institutional practices that limit women's access to leadership opportunities (Acker, 1990, 2006).

Previous research has primarily focused on barriers to women's advancement, including discrimination, work-family conflict, and patriarchal organizational cultures (Pierli *et al.*, 2022; Merits, 2023). However, limited attention has been given to how Arab women's leadership practices influence employee performance and service quality, particularly within public sector institutions.

Arab women leaders in Israel experience a "*double disadvantage*" due to their gender and minority status (Arar, 2019; Saris, 2017). From the perspective of Gendered Organizations Theory (Acker, 1990), leadership is not neutral but shaped by institutional norms and power relations that reproduce inequality.

Accordingly, this study investigates how the leadership skills of Arab women in administrative positions influence employee performance and service quality in public institutions in Northern Israel. Using a qualitative approach, it examines the perspectives of both leaders and employees to provide a culturally grounded understanding of leadership and its organizational impact.

2. Literature Review

This section critically reviews the literature on women's leadership and its implications for organizational performance, with a focus on Arab women in Israel. It moves from general leadership theories to contextual and structural explanations, and ends by identifying a clear and focused research gap. The emphasis is not on description, but on evaluating assumptions and limitations in existing research.

2.1 Women's Leadership and Organizational Performance

Research consistently links women's leadership to improved organizational outcomes, particularly through participative and transformational leadership styles that enhance trust, communication, and employee engagement (Eagly *et al.*, 2003; Zenger & Folkman, 2023; Lai *et al.*, 2020).

However, this literature is largely context-bound to Western settings, limiting its applicability to minority and public sector environments.

2.2 Arab Women and Socio-Cultural Constraints

Arab women's leadership trajectories are shaped by strong socio-cultural norms that associate leadership with masculinity and caregiving roles with femininity (Barakat, 2007; Shapira *et al.*, 2010). These norms restrict access to leadership and influence perceptions of legitimacy. In Israel, these constraints are intensified by ethnic minority status, producing a "*double disadvantage*" (Arar, 2019; Saris, 2017).

2.3 Leadership Skills and Employee Performance

Evidence shows that leadership skills significantly influence employee performance, motivation, and organizational effectiveness (Wang *et al.*, 2019; Nasir *et al.*, 2022). Transformational and participative leadership are particularly effective in collectivist environments due to their emphasis on trust and relational coordination (Helalat *et al.*, 2025; Harasis *et al.*, 2024). However, most studies treat leadership as gender-neutral and overlook gendered expectations and institutional constraints. This suggests that leadership effectiveness depends not only on skills but also on the context in which they are applied.

2.4 Challenges Facing Arab Women Leaders

Despite progress in gender equality, women continue to face structural barriers such as the glass ceiling, gender stereotypes, biased promotion systems, and unequal work-family expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Morrison, 1992). For Arab women, these barriers are intensified by cultural norms that define leadership as a male domain, creating a continuous legitimacy burden.

2.5 Israeli Public Sector Context and Research Gap

The Israeli public sector provides a critical context for studying leadership in intersectional environments. Despite high educational attainment, Arab women remain severely underrepresented in senior leadership positions (Sabah-Karkabi, 2025; Knesset Report, 2024). Public institutions in Northern Israel operate within overlapping systems of ethnic inequality, centralized governance, and traditional gender norms (Arar, 2019; Saris, 2017). Therefore, the key gap is not whether Arab women can lead, but how their leadership practice's function and shape organizational outcomes within constrained public sector environments.

3. Material and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative interpretivist design to investigate how the leadership skills of Arab women in administrative positions influence employee performance and service quality in public institutions in Northern Israel. A qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to capture participants' lived experiences, meanings, and interpretations within their natural organizational contexts (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which

assumes that reality is socially constructed and shaped by cultural and institutional settings (Erciyes, 2020).

3.1 Data Collection

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews, which allow both guided discussion and flexibility to explore emerging themes (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). Interview guides were developed based on literature on leadership, organizational behavior, and minority contexts.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic to ensure clarity and authenticity of responses. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in participants' workplaces or preferred locations. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

3.2 Study Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of Arab women leaders and employees working under their supervision in public institutions in Northern Israel, across education, health, municipal, and social service sectors.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants with relevant experience (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Leaders had at least three years of managerial experience, while employees had at least one year of experience under the same leadership. The final sample consisted of 30 participants (15 leaders and 15 employees). Sampling continued until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring depth and richness of data

3.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022), following phases of familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining final themes. Coding followed an inductive approach, allowing patterns to emerge from the data.

NVivo 14 software was used to support data organization and coding (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Richards, 2021).

3.4 Trustworthiness and Ethics

To ensure rigor, the study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through member checking and peer debriefing, while transferability was supported through thick description. Dependability and confirmability were ensured through audit trails and reflexive documentation.

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines. All participants provided informed consent and were assured confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage.

4. Results

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of how Arab women's leadership is experienced and interpreted within public institutions in Northern Israel. Based on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 30 participants (15 female leaders and 15 employees), eight interrelated themes were identified. Together, these themes illustrate that leadership in this context is not only a set of managerial practices, but a socially embedded process shaped by emotional, relational, institutional, and cultural dynamics.

Overall, the data indicate that women's leadership is constructed through a dual logic: on the one hand, it is grounded in relational trust, emotional intelligence, and employee empowerment; on the other hand, it is constrained by institutional barriers and gendered perceptions of legitimacy that continuously shape how leadership is recognized and evaluated.

Theme 1: Emotional Intelligence as a Core Leadership Resource

A dominant pattern across interviews was the centrality of emotional intelligence in shaping effective leadership practices. Rather than being framed as an abstract skill, emotional awareness emerged as a daily relational practice that structures communication, trust, and responsiveness in the workplace.

Several participants emphasized that leaders' ability to recognize and respond to employees' emotional states directly influences workplace stability and motivation. One leader noted:

"I try to understand what my employees feel before I respond to what they say."

An employee similarly explained:

"She notices when we are under pressure and deals with it with understanding, not punishment."

These accounts suggest that emotional intelligence functions as a form of relational capital that enables leaders to maintain cohesion and reduce workplace tension. In this context, emotional sensitivity is not peripheral, but central to leadership effectiveness in collectivist organizational settings.

Theme 2: Participative Decision-Making and Employee Engagement

Another prominent theme was the consistent use of participative decision-making practices. Participants described leadership approaches that actively include employees in discussions related to work processes and decisions.

One leader explained:

"When employees are part of decisions, they feel responsible for outcomes, not just tasks."

Employees confirmed this perception:

"We are asked for our opinions before decisions are made. This makes us feel included and respected."

These findings indicate that participation is not merely procedural but functions as a mechanism for strengthening ownership, engagement, and organizational attachment. The data also suggest that participative practices are particularly effective in environments where collective values and interpersonal relationships are culturally emphasized.

Theme 3: Gendered Evaluation of Leadership Legitimacy

A clear and consistent finding was the presence of gendered standards in evaluating leadership performance. Participants described a recurring pattern in which women leaders are required to continuously demonstrate competence, while male leaders are more readily assumed to be legitimate.

One employee stated:

"Men are trusted until they fail; women must succeed before they are trusted."

A leader added:

"Every decision feel like a test of my competence, not just a managerial task."

These narratives reflect how leadership legitimacy is not neutral but socially constructed through gendered expectations. The data highlight an ongoing asymmetry in how authority is granted and sustained in organizational settings.

Theme 4: Relational Leadership Style

Participants frequently characterized women's leadership as relational in nature, emphasizing interpersonal connection, accessibility, and trust-building as core features of managerial practice.

One employee described:

"She treats us as people first, not just workers. She knows our lives and respects them."

This relational orientation appears to strengthen communication channels and create a supportive work climate. Importantly, relational leadership in this context is not separate from task achievement, but integrated into how work is coordinated and maintained.

Theme 5: Professional Discipline and Accountability

Alongside relational practices, participants consistently highlighted a strong emphasis on discipline, structure, and accountability in women's leadership.

One employee noted:

"She is supportive, but she is very serious about performance and deadlines."

These findings indicate that women's leadership in this context is not characterized by softness alone, but by a balanced integration of care and performance orientation. This combination contributes to both relational stability and organizational efficiency.

Theme 6: Institutional Barriers and Structural Constraints

Participants identified significant institutional and structural barriers that shape leadership experiences and limit advancement opportunities. These include limited career pathways, organizational resistance, and unequal access to decision-making structures.

One leader explained:

"The system is still not fully supportive of women in leadership positions."

Another added:

"We often need to prove ourselves more than others just to be seen as equal."

These accounts indicate that leadership outcomes cannot be understood independently of institutional design, which continues to reproduce unequal conditions despite formal equality frameworks.

Theme 7: Employee Development and Psychological Empowerment

A strong emphasis was placed on leadership practices that support employee development and empowerment. Participants described leaders who invest in skill-building, confidence development, and professional growth.

One employee stated:

"She gives us opportunities to grow and believes in our abilities."

These practices contribute not only to performance improvement but also to psychological empowerment, enhancing employees' sense of competence and value within the organization.

Theme 8: Socio-Cultural Identity and Leadership Experience

The final theme highlights the role of socio-cultural identity in shaping leadership experiences. Participants described leadership as an identity-laden position, particularly for Arab women who perceive themselves as representatives of both professional institutions and broader social groups.

One leader explained:

"I feel that I represent Arab women in leadership positions."

These findings indicate that leadership is experienced as both an organizational role and a socially symbolic position. This dual identity adds an additional layer of responsibility and visibility that shapes leadership behavior and perception.

4.1 Final Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Arab women's leadership in public institutions is characterized by a complex integration of emotional intelligence, participative engagement, relational leadership, and accountability. At the same time, leadership practices are continuously shaped by institutional constraints and gendered perceptions of legitimacy.

This dual structure—supportive relational leadership within constrained institutional environments—highlights the importance of understanding leadership not as an individual trait, but as a socially embedded and context-dependent process.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that women's leadership in the Arab public sector in Northern Israel is shaped by the interaction between relational leadership practices and structural constraints. Leadership effectiveness cannot be understood solely through individual competencies but must be interpreted within broader cultural, institutional, and gendered contexts. Overall, women's leadership contributed positively to employee engagement, trust, and organizational performance while remaining constrained by persistent inequalities and gendered expectations.

Emotional intelligence emerged as a central leadership resource. Empathy, listening, and emotional support were viewed as essential mechanisms for building trust and maintaining positive workplace relationships. Consistent with previous research (Zenger & Folkman, 2023; Eagly *et al.*, 2003), emotional intelligence appears to function as relational capital in collectivist settings where social cohesion and interpersonal relationships are highly valued.

Participative decision-making was also identified as an important feature of women's leadership. Employees reported stronger engagement and commitment when involved in decisions affecting their work, supporting previous studies linking participation to organizational effectiveness and employee commitment (Setiawan *et al.*,

2025; Dembele & Ünsal, 2025). In this context, participation strengthens ownership and reinforces collaborative work environments.

The findings further revealed that women leaders continue to face gendered evaluations of legitimacy. Participants described a persistent need to prove competence in ways rarely expected of male leaders, supporting role congruity theory and the “Think Manager–Think Male” phenomenon (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Balgiu, 2013). At the same time, women leaders were characterized by a relational style based on trust, communication, and collaboration, combined with strong professional discipline and accountability. These findings challenge stereotypes portraying women leaders as less performance-oriented and suggest that effective leadership integrates both relational and task dimensions.

Institutional barriers remained a significant challenge. Participants described organizational resistance, limited advancement opportunities, and insufficient institutional support, reflecting the persistence of gendered organizational structures (Acker, 1990, 2006). Women leaders nevertheless emphasized employee development and psychological empowerment by encouraging initiative, supporting growth, and fostering confidence, consistent with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Finally, socio-cultural identity emerged as an important dimension of leadership experience. Arab women leaders described their positions as carrying both professional and social responsibilities, supporting intersectionality perspectives that view leadership experiences as shaped simultaneously by gender and ethnic identities (Arar, 2019; Saris, 2017).

Taken together, the findings reveal a dual reality of women's leadership in the Arab public sector. Women leaders employ relational, participative, and empowering practices that enhance organizational effectiveness, yet they operate within institutional and cultural environments that continue to impose structural constraints and unequal expectations. These findings highlight the need to understand leadership as a socially embedded and context-dependent process that requires both individual capability and institutional change.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Arab women's leadership plays a significant role in shaping employee performance and service quality in public institutions in Northern Israel. The results indicate that Arab women leaders employ a combination of emotional intelligence, participative decision-making, relational leadership, professional discipline, and employee empowerment practices that positively influence employee engagement, trust, commitment, and organizational effectiveness. These findings suggest that leadership effectiveness is not determined solely by managerial authority or technical competence, but also by the ability to build supportive relationships and create inclusive work environments.

At the same time, the study reveals that women's leadership continues to be shaped by institutional and cultural constraints. Participants described persistent gendered expectations, unequal evaluations of competence, limited opportunities for advancement, and structural barriers that restrict women's leadership experiences. The findings therefore suggest that women's leadership in the Arab public sector is characterized by a dual logic: women leaders contribute positively to organizational outcomes while simultaneously operating within environments that continue to reproduce inequalities and impose additional legitimacy burdens.

The study contributes to the literature on women's leadership by demonstrating that leadership practices are socially and culturally embedded and cannot be fully understood through universal leadership models alone. The findings further extend research on gendered organizations and Arab women's leadership by providing empirical evidence of how relational and participative leadership practices influence employee experiences and organizational outcomes within a minority and public-sector context. The study also offers practical implications for policymakers and organizational leaders by highlighting the need for institutional reforms, inclusive organizational cultures, leadership development programs, and policies that support women's advancement and reduce structural barriers.

Several opportunities for future research also emerge from this study. Future studies may examine the long-term impact of women's leadership on organizational performance and public service quality, explore generational differences in leadership experiences, and investigate the perspectives of male colleagues and senior administrators. Comparative studies across sectors and cultural contexts may also provide further insights into the factors that shape women's leadership experiences and effectiveness.

Overall, this study demonstrates that effective women's leadership in the Arab public sector is both relational and transformational, yet deeply influenced by cultural and institutional realities. Supporting women's leadership therefore requires both the development of individual leadership capabilities and the transformation of institutional environments that recognize, value, and sustain women's contributions to organizational effectiveness and public service delivery.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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