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(REVIEW ARTICLE)

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS IN ENHANCING WOMEN'S APPOINTMENT TO DECISION-MAKING POSITIONS: EVIDENCE FROM THE MINISTRIES OF EDUCATION IN LUSAKA DISTRICT, ZAMBIA

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the effectiveness of higher education qualifications in enhancing women's appointment to decision-making positions within the Ministry of Education in Lusaka District, Zambia. The research was guided by three objectives: to evaluate the extent to which higher education qualifications impact women's appointment to leadership positions; to analyze institutional and societal barriers hindering women's progression into decision-making roles; and to assess the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions in promoting gender representation. The study was grounded in Gendered Organizational Theory and Liberal Feminist Theory, employing a case study design with a sample of 70 female respondents selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, with thematic analysis and STATA-based quantitative methods used for data analysis. The findings revealed that while 65.7% of respondents acknowledged that higher education helped them secure leadership positions significantly, an overwhelming 88.6% indicated that higher education alone is not sufficient for women to attain leadership positions. Gender bias in recruitment and promotion (77.1%) and traditional beliefs about gender roles (80.0%) were identified as the most significant institutional and societal barriers respectively. The study further found that only 42.8% rated the National Gender Policy as effective, while 71.5% indicated that current policies are insufficient to address gender inequality. The study concludes that higher education qualifications are a necessary but insufficient condition for women's leadership advancement, with systemic barriers undermining their effectiveness. Recommendations include strengthening mentorship programs, implementing gender quotas with enforcement, providing leadership training for women, strengthening policy enforcement, and promoting cultural change through awareness campaigns.

Keywords: Higher Education Qualifications, Women's Leadership, Decision-Making Positions, Gender Representation, Institutional Barriers, Societal Barriers, Policy Effectiveness, Public Administration, Ministry of Education, Lusaka District, Zambia

1 INTRODUCTION

Education is widely regarded as a fundamental pillar of national development, playing a vital role in transferring knowledge across generations through formal instruction, research, and skill-building processes. It serves as a catalyst for socio-economic progress, influencing governance structures and shaping national policies. For women, education has historically been an essential tool for empowerment, fostering their ability to engage in social, economic, and political life. The Policy Monitoring and Research Centre [1] emphasizes that women contribute unique perspectives that enrich decision-making at individual, community, and national levels. However, despite notable improvements in women's access to education, their representation in leadership positions within government institutions remains disproportionately low. This study investigates whether higher education qualifications are a decisive factor in bridging this gap and examines structural barriers hindering women's participation in leadership.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Higher education is widely recognised as essential for women's empowerment and participation in decision-making. However, despite women comprising 50.5% of Zambia's population, they remain underrepresented in university graduation and public administration leadership. In 2020, women held only 23.2% of Permanent Secretary positions, 16.7% of Deputy Permanent Secretary roles and 31.1% of Head of Department positions [1]. This highlights the gap between educational qualifications and leadership representation. The study therefore examines how higher education influences women's appointments to decision-making positions in government ministries and identifies the systemic barriers limiting their advancement.

1.2 Objectives and Research Questions

To assess the effectiveness of higher education qualifications in facilitating women's appointment to decision-making positions within the Ministry of Education in Lusaka District, examining institutional, societal, and policy-related factors influencing gender representation.

- To evaluate the extent to which higher education qualifications impact women's appointment to leadership positions within the Ministry of Education.
- To analyze the institutional and societal barriers that hinder women's progression into decision-making roles within public administration.
- To assess the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions in promoting gender representation within leadership structures.

1.3 Research Questions

- To what extent do higher education qualifications influence women's appointment to decision-making positions in the Ministry of Education?
- What institutional and societal challenges limit women's access to leadership roles in public administration?
- How effective are current policies and interventions in enhancing gender representation in decision-making positions?

1.4 Theoretical Framework

In the context of this study, Gendered Organizational Theory provides a critical lens for examining leadership appointments within the Ministry of Education in Lusaka District. It offers insights into how gender biases are institutionally embedded, influencing recruitment practices, promotion patterns, and leadership representation. This theory will help assess whether higher education qualifications genuinely facilitate women's access to decision-making roles or if organizational structures perpetuate systemic exclusions, preventing equitable leadership opportunities for women in public administration.

1.5 Liberal Feminist Theory

In applying Liberal Feminist Theory to this study, the research seeks to evaluate whether higher education qualifications genuinely serve as a pathway to leadership for women in Zambia's public administration or whether institutional barriers continue to restrict their progression. The theory provides a policy-driven lens for assessing gender representation, advocating for workplace reforms that create equitable conditions for leadership appointments. By investigating how educational attainment influences women's appointment to decision-making roles, this study aligns with the core principles of Liberal Feminist Theory, which emphasize individual agency, institutional inclusivity, and structural policy changes to foster gender equality in leadership.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to address gender disparities in leadership within Zambia's public administration by evaluating the role of higher education qualifications in enhancing women's appointment to decision-making positions in the Ministry of Education in Lusaka District. Despite women's increased access to higher education, their representation in leadership remains disproportionately low, signaling systemic barriers beyond academic attainment. By investigating the effectiveness of education as a pathway to leadership, this research provides critical insights into institutional, societal, and policy-related factors influencing gender representation. The findings will contribute to policy recommendations aimed at improving recruitment practices, institutional inclusivity, and gender-responsive leadership frameworks, supporting efforts toward gender equity in governance. Additionally, the study offers empirical evidence to inform strategies for enhancing women's participation in decision-making, ensuring that higher education functions as a tangible enabler of leadership advancement rather than an overlooked qualification.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Exploring the impact of higher education qualifications on women's appointment to leadership positions

The underrepresentation of women in leadership has far-reaching consequences that affect not only individuals but also entire communities and national economies. A wealth of research has demonstrated that leadership teams benefit from diverse perspectives, particularly when women's voices are included in decision-making processes. Studies by Catalyst [6], Page [7], and Woolley et al. [8] emphasize that gender-inclusive leadership fosters more equitable governance, improved policy responsiveness, and enhanced organizational effectiveness. These researchers assert that the presence of women in leadership roles introduces alternative viewpoints, collaborative problem-solving approaches, and ethical considerations, which contribute to more balanced and sustainable decision-making outcomes. In addition, scholars such as Eagly [9], Kezar [10], Sandberg [11], and Madsen et al. [12] have reiterated the necessity of amplifying women's participation in leadership, arguing that their influence extends beyond institutional boundaries to shape social justice, economic reform, and equitable resource distribution.

Institutional culture plays a significant role in shaping women's experiences within leadership spaces. A grounded theory study involving 16 participants working in faith-based institutions examined the effects of organizational culture on women's leadership aspirations [13]. Findings revealed that women's leadership trajectories were often influenced by organizational fit, gendered workplace norms, and institutional policies that either supported or restricted their progression. The study identified four distinct categories of women leaders, ranging from those who felt empowered within their institutions to those who explicitly critiqued the gendered dynamics present within their leadership environments. This reinforces the idea that women's leadership success is not solely dependent on academic credentials but rather on the institutional structures, support mechanisms, and cultural attitudes that shape leadership access and progression.

Further research on women's leadership advancement in governance structures underscores both barriers and enabling factors that shape leadership opportunities. A phenomenological study focused on five women who served as board chairs in private institutions revealed that certain leadership skills such as strategic thinking, organizational management, and peer recognition were essential for women's ability to secure top leadership roles [14].

Higher education has long been regarded as a powerful instrument for fostering women's participation in decision-making across multiple sectors. Research conducted in Pakistan, India, and Turkey highlights how women's academic qualifications enhance their leadership capabilities, equipping them with knowledge, negotiation skills, and critical thinking abilities that enable them to navigate governance and institutional frameworks [15, 16, 17]. A study in India examined the relationship between education and leadership effectiveness, concluding that educated women exhibit stronger decision-making abilities compared to their uneducated counterparts [18]. Additional findings from the International Labour Organization [19] emphasize that higher education directly correlates with increased participation in governance, affirming that women's academic achievements significantly influence their leadership trajectory and social status.

2.2 Identifying institutional and societal barriers that hinder gender equity in leadership

The underrepresentation of women in top-level leadership positions has been the subject of extensive research by scholars, policymakers, organizations, and international institutions. Despite global initiatives aimed at achieving gender equity, women continue to face systemic barriers in securing leadership roles across multiple sectors, including business, academia, and public administration [20, 21, 22]. The push for equitable leadership is based not only on the principle of fairness but also on the recognition that gender-diverse leadership structures produce more balanced and effective decision-making processes [23, 24].

2.3 The Relationship Between Gender Equality and Education in Zambia

One of the most important catalysts for establishing gender education and development as a new scholarly arena is the increased involvement of international organizations in gender education policy-making. This tendency began in the 1990s and was considerably enhanced by the publication of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000. These goals focused on the need to ensure development across the globe through a concerted reduction in poverty. They also established the legitimacy of talking about gender equality in relation to education [25]. In conjunction with the Dakar Declaration [27], which pledged to achieve Education for All (EFA), the MDGs provided a skeleton framework and devised a set of yardsticks to establish the current status of gender educational equality in each nation and assess their progress. Such global gender targets were particularly welcomed in some quarters, especially since they identified the scale of the problem and began to demonstrate to national governments the range of factors, variables, forces, and constraints associated with gender inequality. However, these universal gender targets also carry with them imperial and colonial legacies of international interference in nation-building and national educational systems. Gender equality, although portrayed as a human right, is now also associated with the new demands of neoliberal economic globalization, encouraging national regimes and indigenous cultures to move toward Western versions of modernization [26].

2.4 Establishing Research Gap

The researcher examined how gender inequality affects leadership representation, educational accessibility, and workplace dynamics in Zambia, highlighting the gaps in existing studies. While the reviewed literature provides important insights into institutional barriers, policy frameworks, and socio-cultural influences, several areas require further exploration to strengthen gender equity interventions. One of the key gaps identified in the literature is the limited analysis of how higher education qualifications influence women's leadership advancement in Zambia's public administration. While studies acknowledge low female representation in governance, they do not adequately explain how academic qualifications translate into leadership roles or whether higher education alone is sufficient to overcome systemic barriers [28]. Existing research primarily focuses on statistical comparisons between men and women in leadership but lacks qualitative insights into the experiences, challenges, and strategies employed by female leaders to navigate institutional biases [29]. The researcher explored this gap by assessing whether formal education significantly impacts women's career progression and if complementary factors such as mentorship, policy enforcement, and institutional reforms play a larger role in shaping leadership trajectories. Furthermore, the literature on gender disparities in Zambia's workplace predominantly discusses pay gaps, occupational segregation, and employment discrimination, yet little attention is given to workplace culture and organizational behavior [30]. Studies acknowledge persistent challenges such as sexual harassment and exclusion from decision-making processes, but fail to analyze how workplace dynamics influence women's confidence, performance, and long-term career mobility [31]. Additionally, research rarely examines employer accountability mechanisms, leaving unanswered questions about how companies enforce anti-discrimination policies and whether existing labor protections sufficiently safeguard women from workplace biases [32]. The researcher addressed this gap by analyzing employer practices, corporate culture, and employee experiences, offering recommendations for workplace inclusivity beyond legal protections.

Finally, while several studies explore theoretical frameworks on gender equality, few examine the effectiveness of feminist movements and advocacy groups in Zambia. Feminist critiques often highlight institutionalized discrimination, yet they fail to provide case studies on successful gender activism or how grassroots movements influence policy reforms [33]. The researcher examined the role of advocacy organizations in shaping public discourse, challenging discriminatory policies, and fostering gender-inclusive reforms, aiming to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Zambia's gender equity landscape.

By addressing these research gaps, the researcher contributes to evidence-based policy development, offering insights into education reforms, workplace inclusivity, and leadership representation in Zambia. The findings aim to inform policymakers, educational institutions, and corporate entities on practical strategies to bridge gender disparities and promote structural changes that support women's professional and academic advancement..

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study will use a case study design to examine factors influencing women's participation in decision-making roles in Zambia's public administration, focusing on barriers and opportunities affecting their leadership progression[15].

3.2 Target population

The target population for this study will comprise women in public administration, education stakeholders, and workplace professionals in Zambia. The focus will be on individuals who have actively participated in leadership roles

or have been impacted by gender disparities in governance and employment structures. The selected population will include both male and female respondents to ensure a comprehensive understanding of systemic barriers and institutional challenges affecting gender representation in leadership.

3.3 Sampling design

The study will use purposive and stratified sampling to select participants across different sectors, leadership levels and educational backgrounds, ensuring diverse perspectives on gender representation (Kumar, 2019; Sekatle, 2021; Robson, 2018; Leskinen, 2020).

3.4 Data collection methods

This study will employ semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis to gather qualitative insights into gender representation in Zambia's public administration, education, and employment sectors. Semi-structured interviews will allow participants to share personal experiences and institutional challenges, while focus group discussions will foster collective analysis of gender equity barriers and policy effectiveness [34]. Document analysis, including policy reports and academic literature, will help identify trends, contradictions, and gaps in existing frameworks [35]. By integrating multiple data sources, this approach ensures triangulated findings that provide a comprehensive evaluation of gender disparities and inform policy recommendations [29].

3.5 Data analysis

This study will employ thematic analysis and STATA-based quantitative methods to ensure a robust evaluation of gender representation in Zambia's public administration, education, and employment sectors. Thematic analysis will be used to identify patterns, themes, and narratives from qualitative data, coding responses to highlight institutional challenges, leadership experiences, and policy barriers [36]. Additionally, STATA will be used to conduct descriptive statistics, regression analysis, and comparative tests, quantifying gender disparities in leadership roles, wage differentials, and academic attainment [37]. Chi-square tests will assess statistical differences in gender representation across various administrative levels, while regression models will examine relationships between higher education qualifications and career advancement [38]. By integrating qualitative thematic insights with quantitative STATA-based evaluations, this approach ensures a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of gender equity trends in Zambia's governance structures.

3.6 Triangulation

Additionally, data triangulation will be used by gathering information from a diverse range of participants, including policymakers, educators, workplace professionals, and advocacy groups, allowing for cross-sectoral comparisons that highlight the institutional and societal barriers affecting women's leadership advancement [34]. This approach ensures that findings do not rely solely on one group's perspectives, thereby reducing bias and improving the credibility of conclusions. Furthermore, theoretical triangulation will involve analyzing results using multiple frameworks, such as human capital theory, gender equity models, and institutional governance perspectives, enabling a multifaceted understanding of systemic gender barriers [29].

By integrating these triangulation techniques, the study will strengthen the rigor and depth of its findings, ensuring that gender disparities in leadership are examined through various lenses. This methodological approach will help validate findings, minimize research biases, and improve the applicability of policy recommendations aimed at fostering inclusive and equitable leadership structures in Zambia. Ultimately, triangulation will ensure that the study contributes to a well-rounded discussion on gender equity in governance and workplace settings.

3.7 Limitations of the study

The following are therefore the limitations that are likely to be seen in this particular research.

Limited Generalizability. Due to the nature of the case study design and the focus on Lusaka, the findings may not be easily generalized to other geographical areas or contexts with different socio-economic and governance structures. The gender dynamics in public administration outside Lusaka may vary, affecting the applicability of conclusions.

3.8 Ethical considerations

Permission will be sought from Information and Communication University (ICU), the Ministry of Education, the Zambia Research and Ethics Committee, Zambia Research and Development Center (ZRDC**)** and other relevant institutional bodies to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines in conducting this research. Since this study involves human participants, careful attention will be required to address ethical considerations. The following are some of the many ethical principles this research will observe:

4 RESULTS

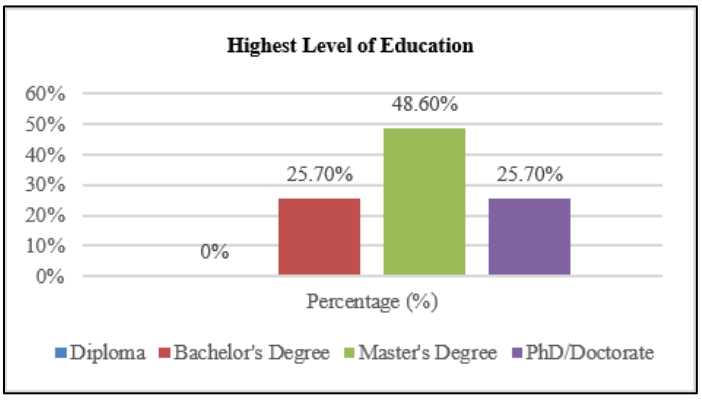


Figure 1: Age distribution of respondents.

Primary Data Source: 2026

4.1 Presentation of Results Based on Thematic Area Developed from Objective One

Objective One: To evaluate the extent to which higher education qualifications impact women's appointment to leadership positions within the Ministry of Education.

4.1.1 Perception of Higher Education's Role in Securing Leadership Positions

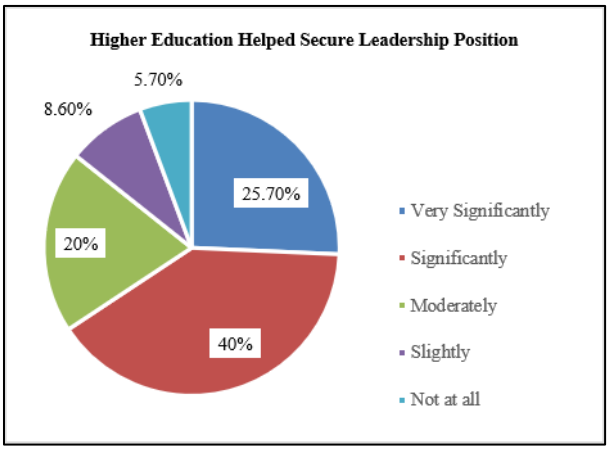


Figure 2: Extent to which higher education helped secure leadership positions.

Primary Data Source: 2026

According to the results, the majority of respondents (65.7%) acknowledged that higher education helped them secure leadership positions either "Very Significantly" (25.7%) or "Significantly" (40.0%). Only 5.7% felt that higher education had no impact on their leadership attainment. This finding strongly supports the theoretical framework of Liberal Feminist Theory, which posits that education serves as a tool for women's empowerment and access to leadership roles. The data suggests that academic qualifications are indeed a key determinant of women's career progression, though not the only factor.

4.1.2 Belief That Education Is Considered During Appointments

According to the results, 65.7% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that higher education qualifications are considered during leadership appointments. However, 17.1% remained neutral, and 17.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This indicates that while most women believe education matters, a significant minority perceives that other factors may override qualifications in appointment decisions. This aligns with Gendered Organizational Theory, which argues that although institutions claim to be merit-based, gender biases often influence selection processes.

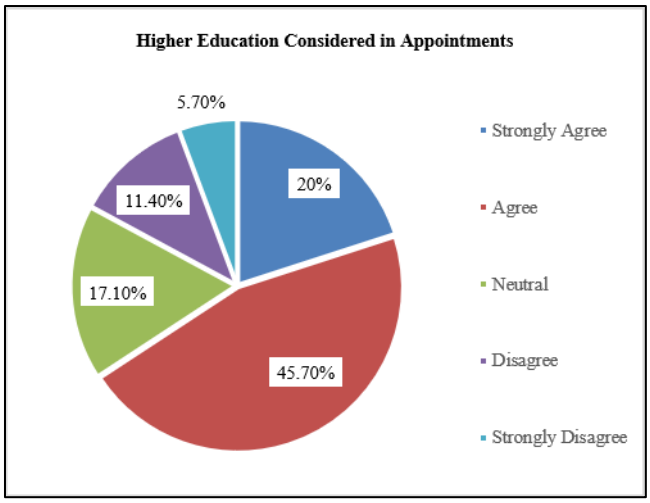


Figure 3: Consideration of higher education during appointments.

Primary Data Source: 2026

4.1.3 Influence of Higher Education on Women's Appointment

According to the results, more than half of the respondents (57.2%) believed that higher education has a "Large Extent" or "Very Large Extent" influence on women's appointment to leadership positions. Only 17.1% felt the influence was small or very small. This suggests a strong consensus that higher education qualifications play a substantial role in facilitating women's access to decision-making roles, though respondents acknowledged that it is not the sole determining factor.

4.1.4 Higher Education Accessible to Women

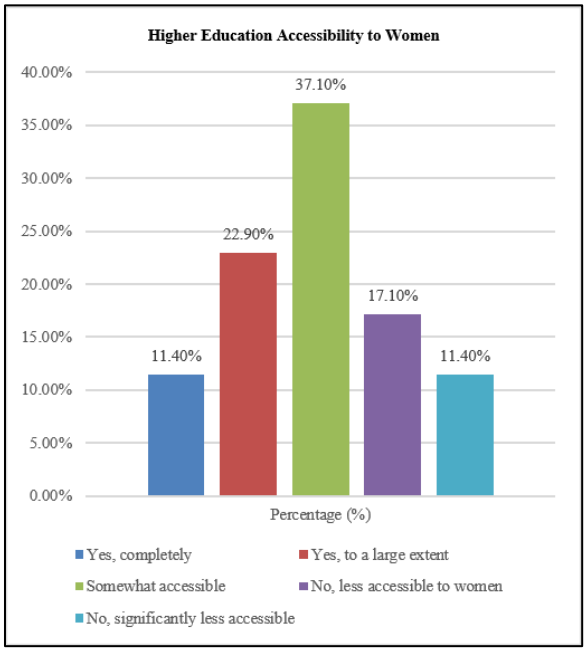


Figure 4: Accessibility of higher education to women

Primary Data Source: 2026

According to the results, 37.1% of respondents indicated that higher education is only "somewhat accessible" to women, while 28.5% believed it is either less accessible or significantly less accessible to women. Only 34.3% felt that higher education is completely or largely accessible to women. This finding reveals a critical issue: despite constitutional guarantees and policy commitments, access to higher education remains unequal, which has implications for women's leadership pipeline development.

4.1.5 Whether Higher Education Alone Is Sufficient

According to the results, an overwhelming majority (88.6%) of respondents indicated that higher education alone is not sufficient for women to attain leadership positions. This is a critical finding that aligns with the researcher's earlier critique of the literature that academic credentials, while necessary, are not sufficient to overcome systemic barriers. Respondents emphasized that additional factors such as mentorship, networking, policy support, and organizational reforms are equally important. This finding validates the study's theoretical grounding in both Liberal Feminist Theory and Gendered Organizational Theory.

4.1.6 Additional Factors Necessary for Leadership Attainment

According to the results, mentorship (88.6%) and networking (80.0%) were identified as the most critical additional factors necessary for women to attain leadership positions. Policy support (71.4%) and organizational reforms (62.9%) were also considered important. This finding highlights the multi-faceted nature of leadership advancement education provides the credentials, but mentorship, networks, and supportive policies enable women to convert those qualifications into leadership opportunities. The high emphasis on mentorship is particularly noteworthy and suggests that women in leadership recognize the importance of guidance, sponsorship, and advocacy in navigating institutional barriers.

4.2 Presentation of Results Based on Thematic Area Developed from Objective Two

Objective Two: To analyze the institutional and societal barriers that hinder women's progression into decision-making roles within public administration.

4.2.1 Institutional Barriers Affecting Women's Leadership

According to the results, gender bias in recruitment and promotion was identified as the most significant institutional barrier, with 77.1% rating it as "Very High" or "High." This was followed by lack of mentorship programs (74.3%) and limited access to professional development (65.7%). These findings strongly support Gendered Organizational Theory [39], which argues that organizations are not gender-neutral but rather embedded with biases that systematically disadvantage women. The low rating for sexual harassment (20.0%) as a barrier may reflect underreporting or a genuine perception that other barriers are more prevalent.

4.2.2 Effectiveness of Equal Opportunity Policies

According to the results, while 55.1% of respondents rated the policies as "Very Effective" or "Effective," a significant proportion (24.1%) rated them as only "Somewhat Effective," and 20.7% rated them as "Ineffective" or "Very Ineffective." This reveals a gap between policy existence and policy implementation a finding that echoes the literature review's critique that Zambia has made policy commitments but struggles with enforcement. The disconnect between policy and practice remains a major barrier to gender equity.

4.2.3 Societal Barriers Affecting Women's Leadership

According to the results, traditional beliefs about gender roles (80.0%) were identified as the most significant societal barrier, followed by societal expectations of women as caregivers (74.3%) and family responsibilities (74.3%). These findings strongly align with the literature review's discussion on patriarchal structures in Zambian society. The Ministry of Gender [40] observation that Zambian culture is deeply rooted in patriarchal values is empirically validated by these findings. The notion that women should prioritize domestic responsibilities over professional ambitions remains a formidable barrier to leadership progression.

4.3.5 Cultural Practices Support or Hinder Leadership

According to the results, a striking 80.0% of respondents indicated that cultural practices either "Hinder" or "Strongly Hinder" women's leadership aspirations. Only 8.6% felt that cultural practices support or strongly support women's leadership. This finding demonstrates the pervasive nature of cultural barriers, which are deeply embedded in Zambian society and resistant to change. It also supports Chiroro [41] observation that "women are often not treated as full-fledged citizens" despite constitutional guarantees.

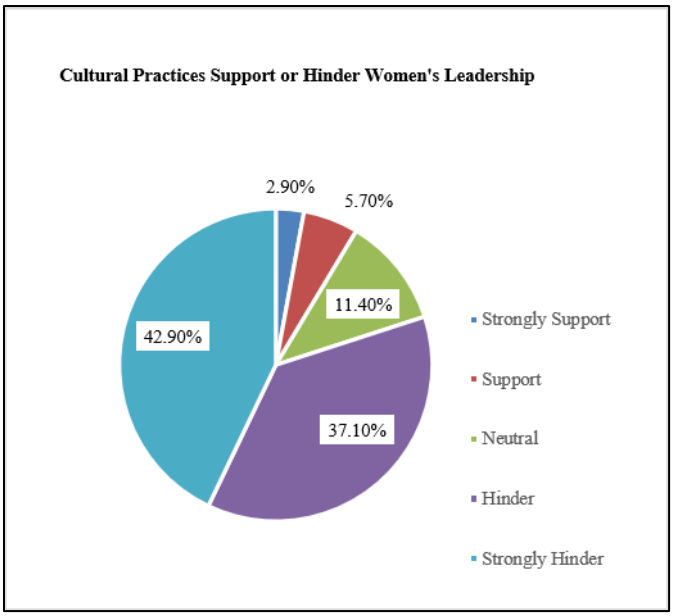


Figure 5: Perceptions of cultural practices and women's leadership.

Primary Data Source: 2026

4.2.4 Personal Experience of Societal Barriers

According to the results, 71.4% of respondents reported having personally experienced societal barriers either "frequently" (31.4%) or "occasionally" (40.0%). This high percentage reflects the lived reality of gendered discrimination, confirming that societal barriers are not abstract constructs but concrete obstacles that women face in their careers. The 11.4% who reported never experiencing such barriers may represent women who have been fortunate or those who have normalized discrimination to the point of not recognizing it.

4.2.5 Women in Senior Leadership Positions

According to the results, 45.7% of respondents indicated that there are "very few" women in senior leadership positions, while 20.0% reported that there are "none at all." Only 2.9% believed that there are "many" women in senior roles. This finding confirms the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership, which was highlighted in the problem statement where women held only 23.2% of Permanent Secretary positions in 2020. The perception that women are still a minority in leadership aligns with the statistical data reviewed in the literature.

4.2.6 Current Women Leadership Percentage

According to the results, the majority of respondents (45.7%) estimated that women hold less than 20% of senior leadership positions. Only 11.5% estimated that women hold 40% or more of leadership positions. This finding is consistent with the PMRC [1] report, which documented that women held 23.2% of Permanent Secretary positions and 31.1% of Head of Department positions. The perception that women remain underrepresented in leadership is empirically validated by these responses.

4.3 Women Representation Increased Over Time

4.3.1 Main Reasons for Underrepresentation

According to the results, gender discrimination (80.0%) was identified as the primary reason for women's underrepresentation, followed by patriarchal cultural norms (74.3%) and institutional barriers (68.6%). Importantly, only 11.4% cited "lack of qualifications" as a reason, which underscores the central argument of this study that women's underrepresentation is not primarily due to a lack of education but rather systemic barriers that prevent qualified women from accessing leadership opportunities. This finding challenges the assumption that women simply need more education and instead calls for structural reforms.

4.4 Presentation of Results Based on Thematic Area Developed from Objective Three

Objective Three: To assess the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions in promoting gender representation within leadership structures.

4.4.1 Awareness of Gender Policies

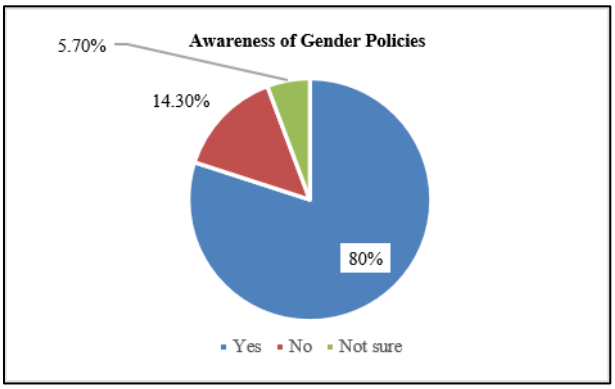


Figure 6: Perceived effectiveness of the National Gender Policy.

Primary Data Source: 2026

According to the results, 80.0% of respondents are aware of gender policies and interventions aimed at promoting women's representation in leadership. This high level of awareness suggests that gender equity is a recognized issue within public administration, even if implementation lags behind policy commitments. The 14.3% who were unaware of such policies may represent a gap in communication and dissemination of policy information.

4.4.2 Effectiveness of National Gender Policy (NGP)

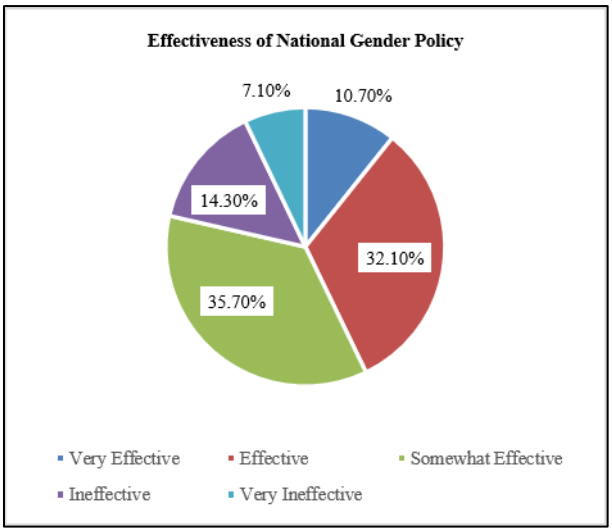


Figure 7: Perceived effectiveness of the Employment Equity Act.

Primary Data Source: 2026

According to the results, 42.8% of respondents rated the National Gender Policy as "Very Effective" or "Effective," while 35.7% considered it "Somewhat Effective," and 21.4% rated it "Ineffective" or "Very Ineffective." This mixed assessment reflects the gap between policy intent and implementation that was identified in the literature review. While the policy framework exists, its practical impact on women's leadership is perceived as limited by a significant minority.

4.4.3 Effectiveness of Employment Equity Act (EEA)

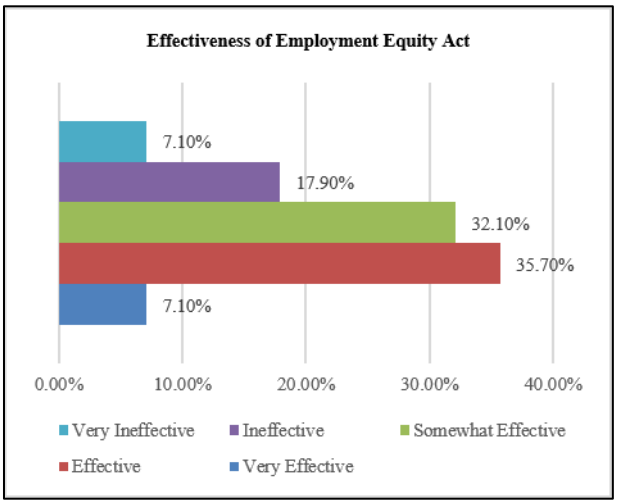


Figure 8: Perceived effectiveness of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development.

Primary Data Source: 2026

According to the results, only 42.8% rated the Employment Equity Act as "Effective" or "Very Effective," while 32.1% considered it "Somewhat Effective," and 25.0% rated it "Ineffective" or "Very Ineffective." The relatively low perceived effectiveness of the EEA is concerning, given that it is a cornerstone of gender equity legislation in Zambia. This finding suggests that legislation alone is insufficient to drive change; enforcement mechanisms and institutional accountability are essential.

4.4.4 Effectiveness of SADC Protocol on Gender and Development

According to the results, only 28.6% of respondents rated the SADC Protocol as "Effective" or "Very Effective," while 39.3% considered it "Somewhat Effective," and 32.1% rated it "Ineffective" or "Very Ineffective." This relatively low effectiveness rating suggests that international commitments have not translated into significant domestic change. The finding aligns with the literature critique that international frameworks often lack enforcement power at the national level.

4.4.5 Effectiveness of Affirmative Action Policies

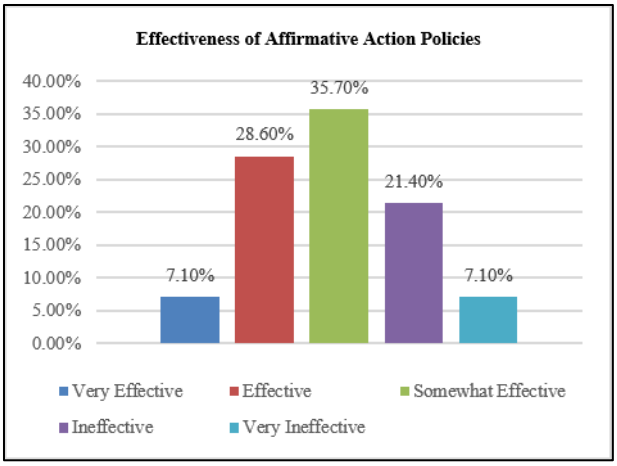


Figure 9: Perceived effectiveness of affirmative-action policies.

Primary Data Source: 2026

According to the results, 35.7% rated Affirmative Action Policies as "Effective" or "Very Effective," while 35.7% considered them "Somewhat Effective," and 28.5% rated them "Ineffective" or "Very Ineffective." This near-equal distribution suggests a lack of consensus on the effectiveness of affirmative action, with many respondents perceiving that these policies have not delivered the intended results. The finding supports the view that affirmative action quotas, while symbolically important, have not fundamentally transformed leadership structures.

4.4.6 Effectiveness of Mentorship Programs

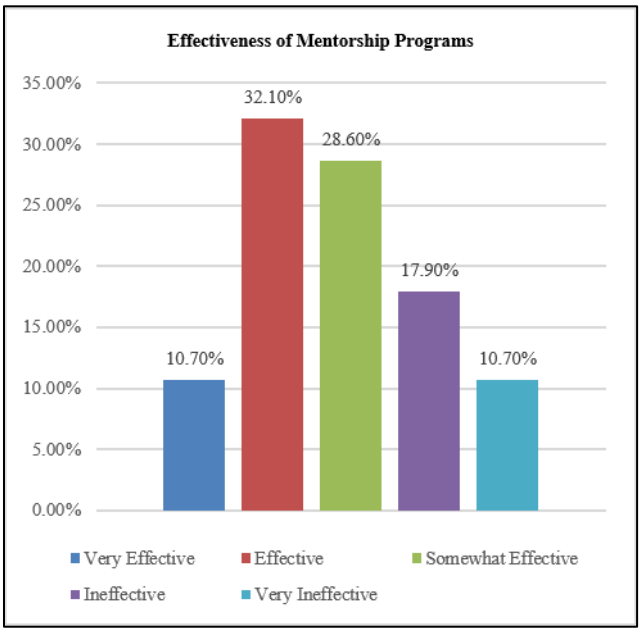


Figure 10: Perceived effectiveness of mentorship programmes.

Primary Data Source: 2026

According to the results, 42.8% of respondents rated mentorship programs as "Effective" or "Very Effective," while 28.6% considered them "Somewhat Effective," and 28.6% rated them "Ineffective" or "Very Ineffective." The relatively high proportion (28.6%) rating mentorship programs as ineffective is concerning, especially given that mentorship was identified as the most critical additional factor for leadership attainment (88.6% in Table 4.11). This suggests that while mentorship is recognized as important, existing programs may not be adequately structured or accessible.

4.4.7 Effectiveness of Gender Quota Systems

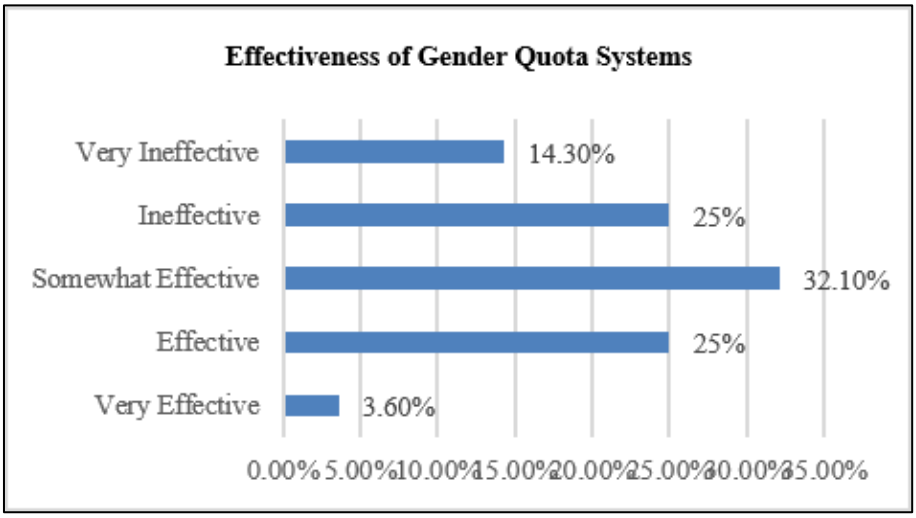


Figure 11: Perceived effectiveness of gender quota systems

Primary Data Source: 2026

According to the results, gender quota systems were rated as the least effective policy intervention, with only 28.6% rating them as "Effective" or "Very Effective," while 32.1% considered them "Somewhat Effective," and 39.3% rated them "Ineffective" or "Very Ineffective." This finding suggests that while quotas have been adopted in some contexts, they are perceived as having limited impact on actual leadership representation. This may reflect the reality that quotas can be tokenistic if not accompanied by structural changes and institutional commitment.

4.4.8 Perception of Whether Current Policies Are Sufficient

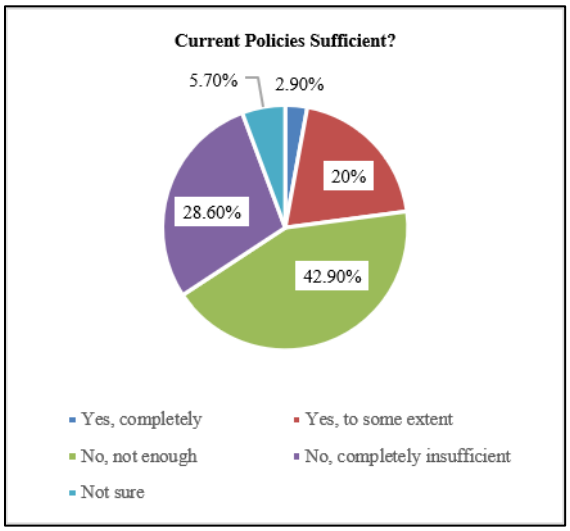


Figure 12: Perceptions of whether current policies are sufficient.

Primary Data Source: 2026

According to the results, an overwhelming 71.5% of respondents indicated that current policies are "not enough" (42.9%) or "completely insufficient" (28.6%) to address gender inequality in leadership. Only 22.9% believed that policies are sufficient to some extent or completely. This finding represents a strong indictment of existing policy frameworks and reinforces the need for more robust interventions. The perception that policies are insufficient aligns with the problem statement, which noted that Zambia has struggled to meet gender parity targets despite policy commitments.

4.4.9 Organization Has Gender Programs

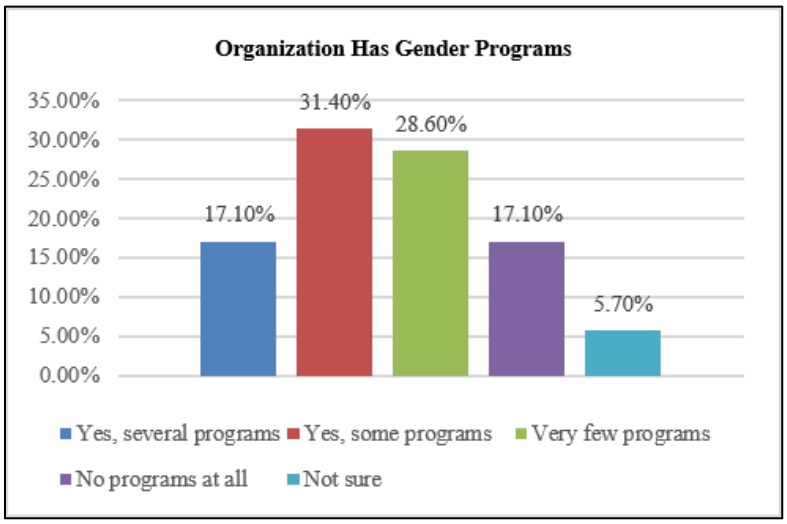


Figure 13: Whether organizations have gender programmes

Primary Data Source: 2026

According to the results, 48.5% of respondents reported that their organizations have "several" or "some" gender programs, while 28.6% reported "very few" programs, and 17.1% reported "no programs at all." This finding indicates that while many organizations have some form of gender programming, these initiatives are not yet pervasive or consistently implemented across the public sector. The 17.1% reporting no programs at all suggests that gender equity is still not prioritized in some institutions.

4.4.10 Specific Gender Programs Implemented

Table 1: Specific Gender Programs Implemented (Qualitative Responses)

Type of Program	Frequency (from 34 respondents)	Percentage
Mentorship programs	18	52.9
Leadership training	14	41.2
Gender awareness workshops	12	35.3
Affirmative action recruitment	10	29.4
Flexible work arrangements	6	17.6
Women's networking forums	4	11.8

According to the results, among organizations that have gender programs, mentorship and coaching programs (52.9%) were the most common, followed by leadership development training (41.2%) and gender awareness/sensitization workshops (35.3%). The prevalence of mentorship programs is encouraging, given that mentorship was identified as the most critical factor for women's leadership advancement. However, the lower prevalence of flexible work arrangements (17.6%) and women's networking forums (11.8%) suggests that some important support mechanisms remain underdeveloped.

4.4.11 Challenges in Implementing Gender Programs

Based on qualitative responses, the following challenges were identified:

Table 2: Challenges in Implementing Gender Programs

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Inadequate funding	24	34.30%
Lack of political will	20	28.60%
Cultural resistance	18	25.70%
Weak enforcement mechanisms	16	22.90%
Limited institutional capacity	14	20%
Lack of leadership commitment	12	17.10%
Tokenism/superficial implementation	10	14.30%
Absence of monitoring and evaluation	8	11.40%

According to the results, the top challenges identified were inadequate funding (34.3%), lack of political will (28.6%), cultural resistance (25.7%), and weak enforcement mechanisms (22.9%). These challenges reflect the systemic nature of gender inequality and the need for comprehensive, multi-pronged interventions. The fact that cultural resistance and weak enforcement were identified as significant barriers reinforces the importance of both policy reform and cultural transformation.

4.4.12 Recommended Interventions

Based on qualitative responses, the following interventions were recommended to improve women's representation in leadership:

According to the results, the most recommended interventions were strengthening mentorship programs (88.6%), implementing gender quotas with enforcement (71.4%), providing leadership training for women (68.6%), and strengthening policy enforcement (62.9%). These recommendations align with the study's conceptual framework, which emphasizes the need for both individual-level interventions (mentorship, training) and systemic interventions (policy enforcement, quotas, cultural change).

5 DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Higher Education and Women's Leadership

This critical finding supports the study's argument that while education is necessary, it is not sufficient—systemic barriers prevent qualified women from converting their academic credentials into leadership opportunities. As highlighted in the literature review, women in Zambia face institutional and societal barriers that undermine their career progression despite their qualifications [1, 3]. The emphasis on mentorship (88.6%) and networking (80.0%) as additional factors necessary for leadership attainment reflects the reality that career advancement is not purely merit-based but requires sponsorship, guidance, and advocacy—support systems that women often lack.

5.2 Institutional and Societal Barriers

According to the results, gender bias in recruitment and promotion (77.1%) and traditional beliefs about gender roles (80.0%) were identified as the most significant institutional and societal barriers, respectively. These findings validate the literature review's emphasis on patriarchal structures and cultural norms as major impediments to women's leadership. The Ministry of Gender [40] had noted that Zambia's culture is "deeply rooted in patriarchal values," and this study empirically confirms that these values continue to affect women's career progression.

5.3 Policy Effectiveness

According to the results, while 80.0% of respondents were aware of gender policies, only 42.8% rated the National Gender Policy as "Effective" or "Very Effective," and only 28.6% rated the SADC Protocol as effective. This finding reveals a significant implementation gap—policies exist but are not achieving their intended outcomes. This aligns with the literature critique that Zambia has "been slow in implementing policies and mechanisms that enable women to convert their academic credentials into tangible leadership roles" [42].

The findings of this study have several important implications. First, higher education must be complemented by mentorship, networking, and leadership development programs. Simply increasing women's access to education will not automatically translate into leadership representation. Second, institutional and societal barriers must be addressed through comprehensive reforms that target gender bias in recruitment, cultural norms, and workplace environments. Third, policies must be strengthened with enforcement mechanisms and accountability measures to ensure they are not merely symbolic. Fourth, cultural change which requires shifting patriarchal norms and engaging men in gender equality is essential for sustainable progress.

6 CONCLUSION

This study set out to assess the effectiveness of higher education qualifications in facilitating women's appointment to decision-making positions within the Ministry of Education in Lusaka District. The research was guided by three specific objectives: (1) to evaluate the extent to which higher education qualifications impact women's appointment to leadership positions; (2) to analyze the institutional and societal barriers that hinder women's progression into decision-making roles; and (3) to assess the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions in promoting gender representation within leadership structures.

6.1 Conclusion on Objective One: Higher Education and Women's Leadership

The study concludes that higher education qualifications significantly impact women's appointment to leadership positions, but they are not sufficient on their own.

6.2 Conclusion on Objective Two: Institutional and Societal Barriers

The study concludes that both institutional and societal barriers significantly hinder women's progression into decision-making roles, with gender bias and traditional cultural norms being the most formidable obstacles.

6.3 Conclusion on Objective Three: Policy Effectiveness

The study concludes that existing policies and interventions are largely ineffective in promoting gender representation within leadership structures, primarily due to weak enforcement, inadequate funding, and cultural resistance.

6.4 Overall Conclusion

The study concludes that higher education qualifications are a necessary but insufficient condition for women's appointment to decision-making positions in Zambia's public administration. The effectiveness of higher education in

facilitating women's leadership is significantly undermined by institutional and societal barriers, including gender bias, patriarchal cultural norms, and weak policy implementation.

The findings of this study make several important contributions. First, they provide empirical evidence that education alone cannot bridge the gender gap in leadership systemic barriers must be addressed. Second, they validate the theoretical frameworks of Gendered Organizational Theory and Liberal Feminist Theory, demonstrating the relevance of these perspectives for understanding gender inequality in Zambia. Third, they offer practical recommendations for policymakers, educators, and women professionals to enhance gender representation in leadership.

Ultimately, achieving gender equity in leadership requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach that addresses individual-level factors (education, skills, confidence), institutional factors (recruitment practices, workplace culture, mentorship), societal factors (cultural norms, gender roles), and policy factors (enforcement, accountability, funding). The study's findings suggest that while progress has been made, much work remains to be done to create truly inclusive and equitable leadership structures in Zambia's public administration.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Recommendations for Policymakers

The study found that while policies exist, they are not effectively implemented. Policymakers should establish robust enforcement mechanisms, including:

- Implement Gender Quotas with Enforcement

The study found that gender quota systems were rated as the least effective policy intervention. This is not necessarily because quotas are ineffective but because they lack enforcement mechanisms. Policymakers should:

- Mentorship was identified as the most critical factor for women's leadership advancement (88.6%). The Ministry of Education should:
- Leadership training was identified as a key intervention (68.6%). The Ministry of Education should:
- Gender bias in recruitment and promotion was identified as the top institutional barrier (77.1%). The Ministry of Education should:
- Networking was identified as a critical factor for leadership advancement (80.0%). The Ministry of Education should:
- Given that mentorship (88.6%) and networking (80.0%) were identified as critical factors for leadership advancement, women professionals should:
- While higher education is not sufficient, it remains a prerequisite for leadership. Women professionals should:

The study recommends that future research use mixed methods approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative studies can provide statistical evidence of gender disparities, while qualitative studies can offer rich, contextual insights into women's lived experiences. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions should be used to explore the nuanced challenges women face and the strategies they employ to overcome them.

This study focused on Lusaka District and the Ministry of Education. Future research should:

- This study focused on women's experiences. Future research should:

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Author declares no conflict of interest in regarding this manuscript.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participate included in the study.

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