



HOW DO SINGLE ARAB MOTHERS IN EAST JERUSALEM PERCEIVE AND EXPERIENCE THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BARRIERS THAT AFFECT THEIR EMPOWERMENT AND SUCCESS IN MANAGERIAL AND LEADERSHIP POSITIONS?

Rana Bakriⁱ

Girne American University (GAU),
Northern Cyprus

Abstract:

This study explored how social, cultural, and institutional barriers influence the empowerment and leadership success of Arab single mothers in East Jerusalem. It addresses a significant gap in the existing literature, as previous research has primarily focused on the barriers that limit women's access to leadership positions, while comparatively little attention has been given to how these barriers shape the long-term success and sustainability of Arab single mothers in leadership roles within complex socio-political contexts. A qualitative research design was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 20 Arab single mothers who currently hold or have previously held administrative or leadership positions in East Jerusalem. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach. The analysis identified six overarching themes: the transition to single motherhood as the primary breadwinner, social and cultural barriers, institutional and organizational barriers, empowerment and coping strategies, success in administrative and leadership positions, and the redefinition of success and leadership. The findings revealed that social and cultural barriers constituted the most significant challenges influencing participants' professional trajectories. Nevertheless, strategies such as continuous professional development, effective time management, strong support networks, and economic independence emerged as critical factors in enhancing participants' empowerment and sustaining their professional and leadership success. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by demonstrating that the leadership success of Arab single mothers is shaped not only by professional competence but also by the dynamic interaction between caregiving responsibilities, social and cultural barriers, and the institutional environment. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of adopting more flexible organizational policies and developing comprehensive professional and social support programs that address the unique circumstances of single

ⁱ Correspondence: email rana-b@yahoo.com

mothers, thereby promoting their empowerment and ensuring the sustainability of their leadership roles.

Keywords: Arab single mothers; women's empowerment; social and cultural barriers; institutional barriers; women's leadership; administrative leadership; East Jerusalem; glass ceiling

1. Introduction

Despite significant progress in women's education and labor force participation over recent decades, women remain underrepresented in administrative and leadership positions across most sectors. Previous research suggests that this disparity cannot be explained solely by differences in professional competence or qualifications but is largely shaped by persistent social, cultural, and organizational barriers that continue to limit women's access to leadership roles and influence their experiences after attaining them (Eagly & Karau, 2002; UN Women, 2024).

These challenges become considerably more complex when women assume primary responsibility for supporting their families. In addition to pursuing professional advancement, breadwinning mothers are required to fulfill the economic, social, and caregiving responsibilities traditionally associated with family life. Consequently, their leadership experiences are shaped not only by workplace demands but also by the continuous negotiation of gender expectations and family responsibilities (Kabeer, 1999; Walby, 2020).

The situation is particularly distinctive in East Jerusalem, where breadwinning responsibilities intersect with a complex sociopolitical environment characterized by rising living costs, labor market instability, limited public services, and mobility restrictions. These structural conditions further constrain women's opportunities for professional advancement and leadership while simultaneously increasing the demands associated with supporting their families (Nuseibeh, 2019; UNCTAD, 2013).

Although research on women's leadership and empowerment has expanded considerably, most previous studies have focused either on barriers to women's access to leadership positions or on women's labor market participation more broadly. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how social and cultural barriers influence the empowerment and leadership experiences of Arab single mothers who bear primary breadwinning responsibilities, particularly within the unique context of East Jerusalem (Arar & Oplatka, 2015; Hoyt & Simon, 2017).

Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how social, cultural, and institutional barriers shape the empowerment and leadership success of Arab single mothers occupying administrative and leadership positions in East Jerusalem. Specifically, the study examines how participants negotiate these challenges,

reconstruct their professional identities, and develop adaptive strategies that enable them to sustain their leadership roles while fulfilling their breadwinning responsibilities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Women's Empowerment and Leadership in Administrative and Leadership Positions

Women's empowerment has evolved from being viewed primarily as increasing women's labor market participation or improving their economic status to a multidimensional concept encompassing women's capacity to access resources, exercise agency, participate in decision-making, and influence organizational and social environments. Accordingly, empowerment is understood as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of economic, social, political, and psychological dimensions rather than by economic independence alone (Kabeer, 1999). Recent international reports similarly emphasize that sustainable empowerment requires dismantling structural barriers and promoting women's participation in decision-making across institutional and societal levels (UN Women, 2024; UN ESCWA, 2023).

Although scholars agree on the multidimensional nature of empowerment, they differ in explaining how it is achieved. Some emphasize economic independence as the primary pathway, whereas others argue that financial resources alone cannot translate into genuine agency without supportive institutional and social environments. Consequently, empowerment is increasingly viewed as the product of interactions among resources, opportunities, institutional support, and sociopolitical contexts (Arar, 2019; Shehadeh & Alayan, 2025).

Leadership represents one of the most visible manifestations of women's empowerment; however, access to leadership does not necessarily guarantee meaningful participation in decision-making. Women may continue to encounter social, cultural, and institutional constraints even after attaining leadership positions. Accordingly, recent scholarship has shifted from examining women's representation in leadership toward understanding how leadership is practiced and negotiated within organizational contexts (Arar & Oplatka, 2015; Abu Nasra & Arar, 2019). Research further suggests that participative and transformational leadership styles enhance organizational trust, collaboration, and employee engagement, reflecting a broader understanding of leadership as a socially constructed practice shaped through interactions between leaders and their institutional environments (Abu Nasra & Arar, 2019; Hoyt & Simon, 2017).

Despite these developments, existing research has paid limited attention to women who simultaneously occupy leadership positions and bear primary breadwinning responsibilities, particularly within politically and socially complex contexts such as East Jerusalem. Accordingly, the present study argues that understanding leadership requires examining not only women's access to leadership positions but also the processes through which they reconstruct their professional and

leadership identities while negotiating breadwinning responsibilities and structural constraints.

2.2 Gender Barriers to Leadership: From Institutional Bias to Social Structures

Gender disparities in leadership positions cannot be explained solely by differences in competence or professional qualifications. Instead, extensive research attributes women's underrepresentation in leadership to the interaction of organizational, social, and cultural barriers that shape both access to leadership positions and women's experiences after attaining them. Contemporary scholarship has shifted from examining overt discrimination, such as unequal recruitment and promotion practices, toward investigating more subtle forms of bias, including unconscious stereotypes and organizational cultures that perpetuate gender inequality (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

The concept of the **glass ceiling** remains central to understanding these inequalities, referring to invisible barriers that prevent qualified women from advancing to senior leadership positions (Cotter et al., 2001). However, recent studies argue that this concept alone is insufficient because it focuses primarily on access to leadership while overlooking the challenges women continue to encounter after promotion, including persistent scrutiny of competence, stricter performance evaluations, and limited influence in organizational decision-making (Weichselbaumer, 2020; Jones & Pal, 2022).

These barriers can be understood through **Social Role Theory**, which argues that gender stereotypes emerge from the traditional division of labor, associating women with caregiving roles and men with leadership and public authority (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Such expectations continue to influence recruitment, promotion, and performance evaluations, regardless of women's qualifications (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Complementing this perspective, **Role Congruity Theory** suggests that women experience prejudice both because they are perceived as less suitable for leadership and because they are evaluated more critically when displaying behaviors traditionally associated with effective leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Consequently, leadership remains largely evaluated according to masculine norms emphasizing authority, assertiveness, and independence (Hoyt & Simon, 2017; Jones & Pal, 2022).

Despite their substantial contributions, these theoretical perspectives have been developed primarily within relatively stable organizational contexts. Less attention has been devoted to settings where gender expectations intersect with breadwinning responsibilities and broader political and socioeconomic constraints. Accordingly, the present study argues that understanding the leadership experiences of Arab single mothers in East Jerusalem requires moving beyond organizational explanations to examine how gender roles, family responsibilities, and the local sociopolitical context collectively shape women's leadership experiences.

2.3 Motherhood, Breadwinning Responsibilities, and Professional Identity

Recent literature increasingly recognizes that the relationship between motherhood and women's professional careers is shaped by the social and organizational contexts in which women work rather than representing an inherent conflict. While earlier studies emphasized the constraints imposed by caregiving responsibilities, contemporary research suggests that the impact of motherhood depends on the interaction between family responsibilities, workplace policies, support networks, and women's access to personal and institutional resources (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Walby, 2020). Accordingly, motherhood becomes a barrier to leadership only when it is accompanied by unequal caregiving expectations and insufficient organizational support.

These challenges become more pronounced when women assume primary breadwinning responsibilities. In such circumstances, women are required to balance multiple roles simultaneously, including providing financial support, raising children, managing household responsibilities, and pursuing professional advancement. Previous studies describe these competing demands as **multiple role responsibilities**, which place considerable pressure on women's time, emotional well-being, and career development (Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Jones & Pal, 2022). Closely related to this concept is the notion of **mental load**, referring to the often-invisible cognitive and emotional effort involved in planning, organizing, and managing family life. Research indicates that this hidden workload frequently limits women's opportunities to engage in professional development, expand professional networks, and pursue leadership opportunities (UN Women, 2024; Walby, 2020).

Despite these challenges, the literature also suggests that breadwinning responsibilities may foster valuable leadership competencies, including resilience, decision-making under pressure, problem-solving, adaptability, and effective time management. However, transforming these competencies into professional opportunities largely depends on supportive organizational and social environments that recognize women's capabilities rather than reinforcing traditional gender expectations (Hoyt & Simon, 2017; Jones & Pal, 2022).

Within the context of East Jerusalem, breadwinning responsibilities intersect with occupation-related challenges, economic instability, rising living costs, limited employment opportunities, and restricted access to public services. Consequently, the experiences of Arab single mothers extend beyond the challenges commonly associated with balancing work and family life. Previous studies indicate that women in this context frequently rely on continuous learning, entrepreneurship, social support networks, and the constant reprioritization of responsibilities to sustain their professional careers despite these multiple constraints (Shehadeh & Alayan, 2025; JUZOOR for Health and Social Development, 2023).

Although a substantial body of research has examined motherhood and breadwinning from the perspectives of labor market participation and work-family balance, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how these

responsibilities reshape women's professional and leadership identities. Addressing this gap, the present study explores how Arab single mothers in East Jerusalem reconstruct their professional identities and leadership practices while negotiating the intersecting demands of breadwinning responsibilities, gender expectations, and the broader sociopolitical environment.

2.4 The Specificity of the East Jerusalem Context

The literature consistently emphasizes that women's leadership experiences cannot be fully understood without considering the broader social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are embedded. The opportunities and challenges women encounter vary considerably across different institutional and societal settings. From this perspective, **Intersectionality Theory** provides a valuable analytical framework by arguing that women's professional experiences are shaped through the interaction of multiple social identities, including gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family circumstances, and the legal and political environment. Accordingly, women do not experience discrimination or inequality in identical ways; rather, their experiences are influenced by the intersection of these identities with the broader institutional and social structures in which they operate (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins & Bilge, 2020).

This perspective is particularly relevant to East Jerusalem, where gender roles intersect with the realities of prolonged political conflict, economic instability, mobility restrictions, and institutional fragmentation. These overlapping conditions create a uniquely challenging environment that significantly influences women's professional trajectories. Previous studies indicate that Palestinian women in East Jerusalem face obstacles that extend well beyond conventional workplace barriers, including limited access to resources, rising living costs, labor market instability, and inadequate public services. Together, these structural challenges substantially affect women's opportunities for professional advancement and access to leadership positions (Diab, 2025; UN Women, 2024).

Within this context, breadwinning responsibilities represent far more than an economic obligation. They become part of an ongoing process of negotiating limited resources, adapting to structural constraints, and continuously balancing professional and family responsibilities. Existing studies demonstrate that Palestinian women employ various forms of agency and everyday resistance to sustain their professional careers despite these challenges. Nevertheless, these experiences remain underrepresented within the leadership literature, which has predominantly examined women's economic participation, empowerment, or the consequences of political conflict as separate phenomena, rather than investigating how these dimensions interact to shape women's leadership experiences (Shehadeh & Alayan, 2025; Nuseibeh, 2019).

A review of the existing literature reveals three major research gaps. First, previous studies have primarily focused on the barriers that prevent women from accessing leadership positions, while giving comparatively limited attention to how

women exercise leadership after attaining these roles or how their professional identities continue to evolve under persistent structural constraints. Second, much of the existing research has examined women in the workforce as a homogeneous group, without distinguishing between women who bear primary family breadwinning responsibilities and those who do not, despite the significant differences in their lived experiences and professional responsibilities. Third, qualitative studies exploring the leadership experiences of Arab single mothers in East Jerusalem remain scarce, despite the distinctive social, political, and economic conditions characterizing this context.

To address these gaps, the present study adopts an integrated conceptual framework that combines **Social Role Theory** (Eagly & Wood, 2012), **Role Congruity Theory** (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hoyt & Simon, 2017), and **Intersectionality Theory** (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of how gender expectations, caregiving responsibilities, and sociopolitical conditions interact to shape women's professional and leadership experiences. Rather than explaining leadership through a single theoretical lens, this integrated framework conceptualizes leadership as a socially constructed and contextually situated process emerging from the continuous interaction between individual experiences and broader institutional, cultural, and political structures.

Accordingly, this study seeks to explore how Arab single mothers occupying administrative and leadership positions in East Jerusalem reconstruct their professional and leadership identities while navigating the intersection of breadwinning responsibilities and social, cultural, institutional, and political barriers. By doing so, the study moves beyond merely identifying the obstacles that hinder women's leadership and instead examines the complex social processes through which leadership identities are constructed, negotiated, and sustained within one of the region's most challenging sociopolitical contexts.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopted a **qualitative research design** to explore the influence of social and cultural barriers on the empowerment and leadership success of Arab single mothers who are the primary breadwinners in East Jerusalem. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to their professional journeys within complex social and cultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was grounded in the **interpretivist paradigm**, which assumes that social reality is socially constructed through individuals' experiences and interactions with their surrounding environment (Crotty, 1998).

A **purposive sampling** strategy was employed to recruit participants capable of providing rich and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). The sample consisted of 20 Arab single mothers who assumed primary

responsibility for supporting their families due to divorce, widowhood, separation, or the prolonged absence of their husbands because of illness, imprisonment, or migration. All participants either currently held or had previously held administrative or leadership positions in governmental, private, or non-governmental organizations, or managed their own businesses in East Jerusalem.

Participant recruitment continued until **thematic saturation** was achieved, at which point no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews, and additional data served only to confirm and enrich the patterns identified in earlier interviews (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018).

Data were collected through **semi-structured interviews**, which provided sufficient flexibility to explore participants' personal experiences while maintaining a consistent interview framework across all interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interview guide was developed following an extensive review of the literature on social and cultural barriers, women's empowerment, women's leadership, breadwinning responsibilities, and the distinctive sociopolitical context of East Jerusalem.

Due to the security situation, including the ongoing war and restrictions on mobility, all interviews were conducted remotely using video communication platforms, primarily **Zoom** and **WhatsApp**, as some participants were unfamiliar with or unable to use Zoom.

The interviews explored participants' professional backgrounds, their experiences of balancing breadwinning responsibilities with professional work, the social, cultural, and institutional barriers they encountered, the strategies they employed to cope with these challenges and enhance their empowerment, their experiences in administrative and leadership positions, and their perceptions of leadership and professional success. All interviews were conducted individually after obtaining participants' informed consent. The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim in Arabic to facilitate thematic analysis.

4. Results

The thematic analysis identified five overarching themes that describe the leadership journeys of Arab single mothers in East Jerusalem. Rather than representing isolated experiences, the themes reflect a dynamic process through which participants reconstructed their professional identities following family transformation, negotiated social, cultural, and institutional barriers, developed resilience and empowerment strategies, and sustained leadership roles within a complex sociopolitical environment. The themes are presented below in the sequence in which they emerged from the analysis.

Theme 1: Family Transformation as the Starting Point for Professional Reconstruction

Participants consistently described family transformation as the pivotal event that reshaped both their personal and professional lives. Although the circumstances leading to breadwinning responsibilities varied, participants viewed this transition as the beginning of a new trajectory characterized by greater independence, the redistribution of responsibilities, and the reconstruction of their professional identities.

One participant described this experience by stating: *"My divorce marked the turning point in my life. From that moment on, I became much more self-reliant."*

Participants further explained that becoming the primary breadwinner fundamentally transformed the relationship between work and family. Employment was no longer perceived merely as a source of income but became an essential means of ensuring family stability and security. Consequently, professional success was redefined in terms of sustaining the family and maintaining household stability rather than simply.

Theme 2: Negotiating Social, Cultural, and Institutional Barriers

Participants' leadership experiences were characterized not by the absence of barriers but by their continuous efforts to negotiate and adapt to them. Social stigma emerged as the most prominent challenge, particularly among women who became the primary breadwinners following divorce or widowhood.

One participant explained: *"Some people look down on divorced women. They assume they are broken and incapable of moving forward, but reality proves otherwise."*

Participants described how professional success became a means of challenging these stereotypes and redefining their social position.

Institutional barriers also played a significant role. Participants referred to restrictions associated with public-sector employment, difficulties in expanding private businesses, rising operational costs, and shortages of qualified personnel. These constraints frequently interacted with broader social expectations, creating multiple obstacles that limited professional development.

Participants further emphasized that these barriers were closely connected to the unique context of East Jerusalem. Rising living costs, economic instability, mobility restrictions, and the broader political environment continuously influenced their professional decisions and opportunities. As a result, participants negotiated not only gender-related expectations but also a complex combination of social, political, and economic constraints throughout their leadership journeys.

Theme 3: Reconstructing Professional and Leadership Identity

Participants perceived leadership not as a formal position or organizational authority but as a continuous process of reconstructing their professional identities following family transformation and the assumption of breadwinning responsibilities. Leadership was consistently associated with decision-making, responsibility, resilience, and the ability to maintain stability within both the family and the workplace.

Participants also challenged traditional definitions of leadership by emphasizing collaboration, trust, shared responsibility, and teamwork rather than authority or control. One participant explained: *“Leadership is the ability to guide a team and work with them in a spirit of cooperation.”*

Another participant stated: *“A leader is involved throughout the entire process—not someone who simply gives orders.”*

Participants further described a continuous need to demonstrate their professional competence. Many explained that they repeatedly had to prove their abilities to colleagues, clients, and the wider community because of persistent gender stereotypes and assumptions related to their family circumstances. Leadership legitimacy was therefore earned through consistent performance, effective decision-making, and the development of trusting professional relationships rather than through formal authority alone.

Professional independence also emerged as a defining characteristic of participants' reconstructed identities. Beyond financial autonomy, independence represented the freedom to make professional decisions, determine career pathways, organize time effectively, and balance family and professional responsibilities. Consequently, participants redefined professional success in terms of autonomy, responsibility, and sustainability rather than occupational status or financial reward alone.

Theme 4: Resilience and Empowerment as Everyday Practices

The findings revealed that resilience was not perceived as an inherent personal characteristic but as a dynamic process developed through everyday practices that enabled participants to balance their professional and family responsibilities. Similarly, empowerment was viewed not as a final outcome achieved through leadership positions or financial independence but as an ongoing process shaped by continuous learning, effective time management, self-investment, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Rather than waiting for external conditions to improve, participants actively developed strategies that enabled them to negotiate the social and institutional challenges they encountered.

Continuous learning emerged as one of the most significant sources of empowerment. Participants regarded professional development, training, and lifelong learning as essential for maintaining professional competence and adapting to changing workplace demands.

One participant stated: *“The most important thing is to keep up with new developments, continue learning, attend training courses, and exchange experiences with others.”*

Participants also highlighted time management as a key resilience strategy. Successfully balancing work, childcare, and household responsibilities required the continuous reorganization of priorities rather than the pursuit of an ideal work–life balance.

Economic independence was valued not merely for its financial benefits but also for the autonomy it provided in making professional and personal decisions. Consequently, participants redefined professional success in terms of sustaining their careers, maintaining family stability, and preserving personal independence rather than focusing solely on occupational status or income.

Theme 5: Support Networks Within the Complex Context of East Jerusalem

The findings demonstrated that participants' leadership journeys were shaped not only by individual efforts but also by the support they received from family, professional, and institutional networks. These support systems played a crucial role in reducing the pressures associated with breadwinning responsibilities and sustaining participants' professional careers.

Family support emerged as the most influential form of assistance. Participants described their families as the primary source of practical and emotional support, particularly through childcare, encouragement, and financial assistance.

One participant explained: *"My family supported me in every possible way –by taking care of my children and providing both emotional and financial support."*

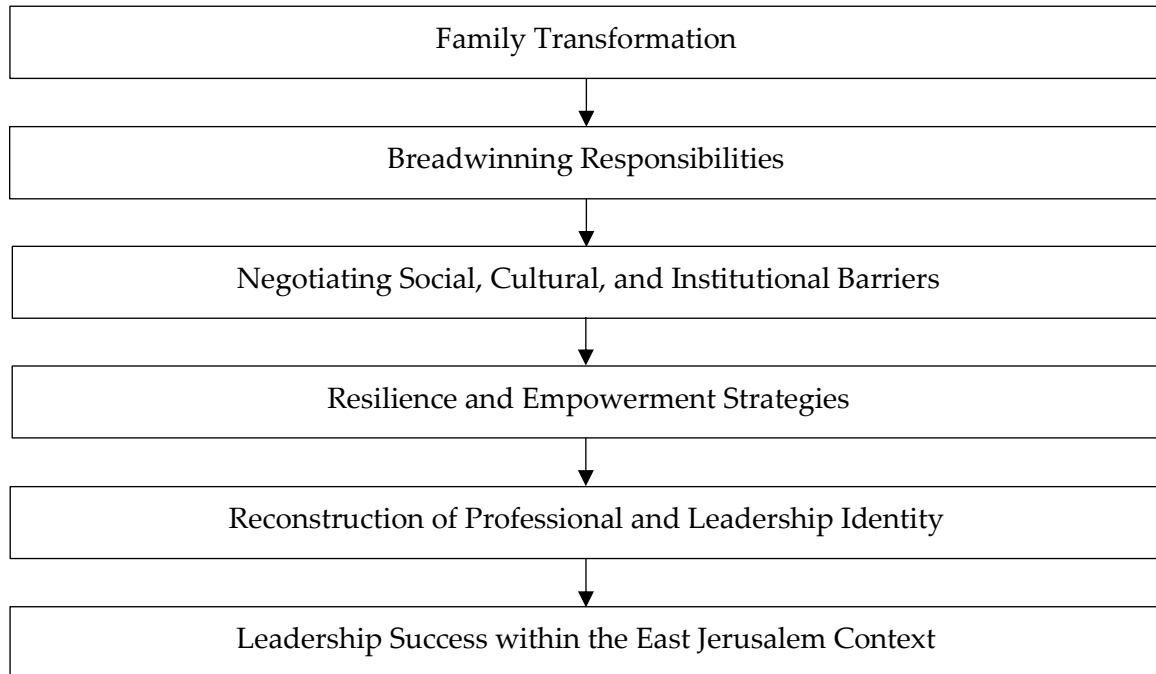
Another participant stated: *"Whenever I had a training course or workshop, my mother or sister would look after my children. I realized that I could not carry every responsibility on my own."*

Participants also highlighted the importance of professional and institutional support, including mentoring, professional training, networking opportunities, and the exchange of experiences. These resources strengthened their professional confidence and expanded their leadership capacities. However, participants emphasized the need for more sustainable institutional initiatives, including financial assistance, mentoring programs, and psychological support specifically designed for women with primary breadwinning responsibilities.

Finally, participants consistently linked their professional experiences to the unique sociopolitical realities of East Jerusalem. Rising living costs, economic instability, mobility restrictions, and the broader political context continuously influenced their professional opportunities and leadership experiences.

To provide an integrated representation of the findings, Figure 1 presents the conceptual process through which Arab single mothers reconstructed their professional and leadership identities. Rather than depicting isolated experiences, the model illustrates the dynamic relationships among family transformation, breadwinning responsibilities, the negotiation of social, cultural, and institutional barriers, the development of resilience and empowerment strategies, and the reconstruction of leadership within the sociopolitical context of East Jerusalem.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Leadership Development
Process Among Arab Single Mothers in East Jerusalem



5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that social and cultural barriers constitute the primary factors shaping the empowerment and leadership success of Arab single mothers in East Jerusalem. Rather than operating independently, these barriers interacted continuously with breadwinning responsibilities and institutional constraints, influencing participants' professional experiences throughout their leadership trajectories.

These findings support Role Congruity Theory and Social Role Theory, which explain how persistent gender-role expectations continue to shape perceptions of women's leadership and professional competence (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Consistent with previous research (Walby, 1990; Koenig & Eagly, 2014; Weichselbaumer, 2020; Arar & Oplatka, 2015), participants reported experiencing persistent stereotypes associated with both their gender and family circumstances. However, the present study demonstrates that breadwinning responsibilities do not merely intensify existing gender barriers but fundamentally reshape them. Participants simultaneously negotiated expectations associated with leadership, motherhood, and sole family responsibility, indicating that empowering Arab single mothers requires addressing social and cultural expectations alongside organizational policies.

Empowerment emerged not simply through occupying leadership positions but through a continuous process of professional development, effective time management, social support, and economic independence. This interpretation aligns with Kabeer's (1999) conceptualization of empowerment as the interaction between resources, agency,

and achievements, as well as recent international evidence emphasizing the importance of strengthening women's capabilities and institutional support (UN Women, 2024).

The findings also corroborate previous studies highlighting the role of education, supportive organizational environments, and social support in strengthening women's leadership capacities (Arar, 2019; Abu Nasra & Heilbrunn, 2016; Hoyt & Simon, 2017). Nevertheless, this study shows that these strategies were primarily developed in response to breadwinning responsibilities rather than career aspirations alone. Continuous learning, effective time management, and support networks functioned simultaneously as mechanisms for professional advancement and family stability, illustrating that empowerment in this context is both a professional and a social process. These findings emphasize the importance of institutional policies promoting flexible working arrangements, professional development, and organizational support for women with breadwinning responsibilities.

Leadership success was similarly reconstructed through participants' ability to sustain professional performance, establish trust, maintain organizational relationships, and balance leadership with breadwinning obligations rather than through occupying formal administrative positions alone. This finding is consistent with previous research demonstrating that women leaders establish professional legitimacy through performance, collaboration, and trust rather than formal authority (Arar & Oplatka, 2015; Abu Nasra & Heilbrunn, 2016; Hoyt & Simon, 2017).

Finally, the present study extends the literature by demonstrating that leadership success is continuously negotiated through the interaction between breadwinning responsibilities, gender expectations, institutional structures, and the distinctive sociopolitical realities of East Jerusalem. The findings support an intersectional understanding of leadership in which professional identities are constructed within complex structural environments (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Participants consistently associated rising living costs, labor market instability, political restrictions, and limited institutional resources with their leadership experiences, suggesting that leadership development cannot be understood independently of the broader structural conditions shaping everyday life. From a practical perspective, increasing women's representation in leadership requires more than promotion opportunities or leadership training; it also requires comprehensive institutional policies that provide flexible working arrangements, mentoring opportunities, professional development, and sustained organizational support for women with primary breadwinning responsibilities.

Table 1 summarizes the main themes identified in this study, together with their supporting theoretical perspectives, key literature, and practical implications. It provides an integrated overview of the study's principal findings and their contribution to the existing literature.

Table 1: Integration of the Main Findings with Theoretical Perspectives, Supporting Literature, and Practical Implications

Theme	Supporting Theory	Supporting Literature	Implications
Family transformation and professional reconstruction	Agency Theory (Kabeer); Social Role Theory	Kabeer (1999); Hoyt & Simon (2017)	Major family transitions can become a catalyst for reconstructing professional identity and leadership development.
Negotiating social, cultural, and institutional barriers	Role Congruity Theory; Social Role Theory	Eagly & Karau (2002); Eagly & Wood (2012); Walby (1990); Koenig & Eagly (2014); Weichselbaumer (2020); Arar & Oplatka (2015)	Leadership policies should address social stereotypes together with organizational barriers.
Empowerment through everyday practices	Empowerment Theory	Kabeer (1999); UN Women (2024); Arar (2019); Abu Nasra & Heilbrunn (2016); Hoyt & Simon (2017)	Continuous learning, social support, and economic independence enhance sustainable empowerment.
Leadership success and professional identity	Social Role Theory; Intersectionality	Arar & Oplatka (2015); Abu Nasra & Heilbrunn (2016); Hoyt & Simon (2017); Crenshaw (1989); Collins & Bilge (2020)	Leadership success is reconstructed through the interaction of gender roles, breadwinning responsibilities, and structural conditions.
East Jerusalem context	Intersectionality Theory	Nuseibeh (2019); UNCTAD (2013); Diab (2025)	Leadership development should be interpreted within the broader political, economic, and institutional context of East Jerusalem.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the leadership success of Arab single mothers in administrative and leadership positions cannot be explained solely by professional competence. Rather, it emerges through the continuous interaction between breadwinning responsibilities, social and cultural barriers, and the institutional environment within the unique sociopolitical context of East Jerusalem.

The findings indicate that social and cultural barriers extend beyond limiting women's access to leadership positions and continue to shape how leadership is practiced and sustained. At the same time, participants developed a range of adaptive strategies—including continuous learning, effective time management, support networks, and economic independence—that enabled them to negotiate these challenges while maintaining both their professional and family responsibilities.

The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that the leadership experiences of Arab single mothers are shaped through the dynamic interaction between

breadwinning responsibilities, gender expectations, institutional structures, and the broader sociopolitical environment. In doing so, it extends existing scholarship on women's empowerment and leadership by providing a contextually grounded understanding of leadership within one of the region's most complex settings.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that promoting women's leadership requires more than increasing access to leadership positions. Organizations should adopt flexible working arrangements, strengthen professional development opportunities, expand mentoring initiatives, and establish institutional support systems that recognize the realities of women with primary breadwinning responsibilities.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relied on a qualitative sample of Arab single mothers in East Jerusalem and therefore provides an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences rather than aiming for statistical generalization. Future research could employ comparative qualitative or mixed-methods designs to examine similar experiences across different Palestinian and Arab contexts, thereby expanding current understanding of the relationship between breadwinning responsibilities, women's empowerment, and leadership development.

Creative Commons License Statement

This research work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>. To view the complete legal code, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode.en>. Under the terms of this license, members of the community may copy, distribute, and transmit the article, provided that proper, prominent, and unambiguous attribution is given to the authors, and the material is not used for commercial purposes or modified in any way. Reuse is only allowed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- Abu Nasra, M., & Heilbrunn, S. (2016). Transformational leadership and organizational citizenship behavior in the Arab educational system in Israel: The impact of trust and job satisfaction. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 44(3), 380–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214549975>
- Al-Asfour, A., Tlaiss, H. A., Khan, S. A., & Rajasekar, J. (2017). Saudi women's work challenges and barriers to career advancement. *Career Development International*, 22(2), 184–199. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-11-2016-0200>

- Arar, K. (2019). How novice principals face the challenges of principalship in the Arab education system in Israel. *Journal of Career Development*, 45(6), 580–596. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845317726392>
- Arar, K., & Abu Nasra, M. (2019). Leadership style, occupational perception and organizational citizenship behavior in the Arab education system in Israel. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 57(1), 101–116. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-08-2017-0094>
- Arar, K., & Oplatka, I. (2015). Current research on Arab female educational leaders' career and leadership: A review of key themes. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 53(2), 255–271. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-10-2013-0117>
- Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2020). *Intersectionality* (2nd ed.). Polity Press. Retrieved from <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/shop/general-sociology/intersectionality-2nd-edition-p-9781509539673>
- Cotter, D. A., Hermesen, J. M., Ovadia, S., & Vanneman, R. (2001). The glass ceiling effect. *Social Forces*, 80(2), 655–681. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2001.0091>
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167. Retrieved from <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Qualitative_Inquiry_and_Research_Design.html?id=gX1ZDwAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003115700>
- Diab, A.-K. (2025). From intersectional marginalization to empowerment: Palestinian women transforming through higher education. *Education Sciences*, 15(9), Article 1144. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15091144>
- Eagly, A. H. (1987). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social-role interpretation*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1987-97607-000>
- Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573–598. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.109.3.573>
- Eagly, A. H., & Wood, W. (2012). *Social role theory*. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 458–476). Sage. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.4135/9781446249222.n49>
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>

- Hoyt, C. L., & Simon, S. (2017). Psychosocial approaches to women and leadership theory. In S. R. Madsen (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Gender and Leadership* (pp. 85–99). Edward Elgar Publishing. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Handbook_of_Research_on_Gender_and_Leadership.html?id=HeLw0AEACAAJ&redir_esc=y
- Jones, S. J., & Pal, P. R. (2022). The effects of social role and role congruity on the perceived value of women's leadership in Southwestern research universities. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*.
- JUZOOR for Health and Social Development. (2023). *Empowering women in marginalized East Jerusalem communities*. JUZOOR for Health and Social Development. Retrieved from https://www.juzoor.org/cached_uploads/download/2022/10/01/final-research-report-empowering-women-in-marginalized-east-jerusalem-communities-1664616297.pdf
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>
- Koenig, A. M., & Eagly, A. H. (2014). Evidence for the social role theory of stereotype content: Observations of groups' roles shape stereotypes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 107(3), 371–392. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037215>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2015). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). Sage. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/InterViews.html?id=bZGvwsP1BRwC&redir_esc=y
- Nuseibeh, R. A. (2019). Palestinian women teachers in East Jerusalem: Layers of discrimination in the labor market. *Middle East Journal*, 73(2), 207–223. <https://doi.org/10.3751/73.2.12>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Qualitative_Research_Evaluation_Methods.html?id=FjBw2oi8El4C&redir_esc=y
- Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H., & Jinks, C. (2018). Saturation in qualitative research: Exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & Quantity*, 52(4), 1893–1907. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8>
- Shehadeh, R., & Alayan, S. (2025). *Between colonialism and patriarchy: The role of agency among Palestinian women in the West Bank and East Jerusalem*. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 110, Article 103080. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2025.103080>
- UN ESCWA. (2023). *Arab women and the Sustainable Development Goals: Regional progress report 2023*. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.

- UN Women. (2024). *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2024*. UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/09/progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2024>
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2013). *The Palestinian economy in East Jerusalem: Enduring annexation, isolation and disintegration*. United Nations. Retrieved from https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/gdsapp2012d1_en.pdf
- Walby, S. (1990). *Theorizing patriarchy*. Basil Blackwell. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Theorizing_Patriarchy.html?id=-UDiAQAAACAAJ&redir_esc=y
- Walby, S. (2020). Varieties of gender regimes. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 27(3), 414–431. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa018>
- Weichselbaumer, D. (2020). Multiple discrimination against female immigrants wearing headscarves. *Industrial Relations*, 59(2), 287–308. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irel.12255>