EXPLORING WOMEN'S UNDERREPRESENTATION IN TRADE UNION LEADERSHIP: EVIDENCE FROM TANZANIA

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Abstract

Women's participation in leadership is essential for advancing gender equality and promoting inclusive decision-making. Despite international and national initiatives aimed at enhancing women's leadership, significant underrepresentation persists within union leadership positions. This study explores the challenges women face in accessing leadership roles within trade unions. It specifically examines the factors contributing to their underrepresentation, with evidence from Tanzania. Utilizing a qualitative case study design, the research involved a diverse group of participants, including trade union members and leaders. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 20 participants by ensuring a comprehensive range of perspectives. Data collection methods consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, which were analyzed thematically. Findings indicate that deeply entrenched patriarchal values, pervasive gender stereotypes, and societal expectations reinforce male dominance in union leadership, thus limiting women's advancement opportunities. Additionally, deficiencies in the legal framework impede women's ability to curb these barriers, therefore perpetuating their marginalization within the labour movement. The study highlights how these systemic factors create a challenging environment for aspiring female leaders and exacerbate existing gendered power imbalances. To address these challenges, the study recommends targeted initiatives, including educational programs to raise awareness on the negative impact of gender stereotypes, the establishment of supportive legal frameworks, and the promotion of women's leadership roles within unions. This study aims to deepen the understanding of the systemic barriers hindering women's leadership in trade unions and provide actionable recommendations for fostering gender equality in this context.

Keywords: *Underrepresentation, Leadership, Patriarchal Values, Systemic Barriers, Gender Equality.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the significance of women's participation in leadership has attracted substantial attention due to its implications for social justice, economic growth, and equitable development (Gaynor, 2022). This focus aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5, which prioritizes gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (UN, 2015). This goal highlights the need to eliminate discrimination, end violence, and ensure women's full and effective participation in leadership at all levels. Despite global recognition, systemic barriers persistently obstruct women's advancement to leadership roles, particularly within trade unions (Adeleke, 2021; Chikanda, 2022; Ogunyemi, 2022). The International Labour Organization (ILO) has long acknowledged the significance of gender equality in the workplace, supporting its constituents through various initiatives, including the Decent Work Agenda, defined as "productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity" (ILO, 2020).

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Within this framework, the Decent Work Agenda emphasizes gender equality as a fundamental objective across its four pillars: employment creation, social protection, rights at work, and social dialogue (ILO, 2020). However, the increase in labour force participation has not significantly narrowed gender gaps. Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions. Previous investigations, such as those by Maphunye and Kealeboga (2024) on gender dynamics in labour movements, alongside the ILO's Decent Work Agenda (2015), have illuminated the crucial role of women in promoting social dialogue and democratic engagement within the workforce. Nevertheless, these studies often overlook the entrenched patriarchal norms and insufficient legal frameworks that perpetuate male dominance in union leadership. For instance, an ILO training program aimed at strengthening women's leadership skills in Indonesian trade unions highlighted the persistence of stereotypes portraying women garment workers as docile and unassertive (ILO, 2023). This study aims to critically explore the challenges women face in leadership in trade unions in Tanzania, focusing on how these challenges impede their advancement. The central thesis posits that patriarchal norms, pervasive gendered power imbalances, and inadequate legal protections significantly diminish women's capacity to lead effectively.

The ensuing sections systematically review relevant literature, delineate the theoretical framework, outline the research methodology, present empirical findings, and discuss the implications of the identified challenges. Ultimately, this paper proposes comprehensive interventions aimed at enhancing women's leadership within trade unions while addressing limitations and suggesting avenues for further research. By illuminating these issues, the study seeks to contribute to the discourse on gender equity in labour movements and offer actionable recommendations for fostering inclusive leadership environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recognizing the critical importance of gender equality across various dimensions of leadership, numerous initiatives have been launched to promote women's participation. Notably, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995) emphasizes the need to provide women with equal status and opportunities for engagement comparable to those enjoyed by other members of society. Similarly, the Copenhagen Conference (United Nations, 1980) culminated in the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations, 1988), which serves as a vital framework for addressing gender discrimination on a global scale. The achievement of gender equality has been notably observed in the political sphere, with the proportion of women in parliamentary positions rising from 22.1% in 2015 to 27.2% in January 2025, marking a significant increase over the decade (UN Women, 2025). This trend is also evident in Africa, where women's participation in political leadership has seen remarkable growth, reflected in the increasing number of women occupying leadership positions (Meena *et al*., 2017; Vaughan & Tinker, 2022).

However, women's participation in trade union leadership has not received comparable attention (Bain & Cummings, 2018; Waddington, 2020; Johnson, 2023). In industrialized countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, women's involvement in trade union leadership faces numerous barriers, including male dominance rooted in the historical development of unions from male-dominated industries, which has cultivated a male-centric culture within these organizations (Adereth, 2024). Despite the rapid increase in union membership in the United States, women remain inadequately represented in leadership positions (Albrecht, 2018; U.S.

Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2023). The situation is similar in Africa, where significant gender disparities in trade union leadership persist across various countries. These gaps are attributed to multiple factors, including the prevalence of patriarchal structures within unions and enduring societal beliefs in traditional gender roles (Okumu *et al*., 2021; McQuinn & Mihaela, 2022; Ofori & Anyigba, 2025). These entrenched norms often limit women's access to leadership positions and decision-making processes within trade unions.

In Tanzania, various initiatives have been undertaken since the 1970s to promote women's access to leadership positions. The country ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations, 1979) and adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 (United Nations, 1995). In 2000, Tanzania developed the Women and Gender Policy (Ngusa, 2024) and launched the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) to advance gender equality (Tanzania Gender Networking Programme, n.d.). Additionally, Tanzania adopted the ILO Convention No. 87 (1948) on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize (International Labour Organization, 1948), which guarantees both men and women the right to elect and be elected as leaders in trade unions. Non-governmental organizations and trade unions have actively advocated for women's participation in leadership roles. For instance, the Trade Union Congress of Tanzania (TUCTA) has emphasized the establishment of women's committees, the formulation of a gender policy, and the creation of a women's directorate within trade unions (TUCTA, 2021).

Despite notable progress in the political arena, where numerous women have been appointed to roles such as ministers and permanent secretaries (Lihiru, 2022; Mutasingwa, 2023), the advancement of women into leadership positions within trade unions remains markedly slow. Nchimbi (2018) highlights this issue, asserting that women, despite comprising a significant portion of union membership, continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles. Current estimates indicate that TUCTA affiliate unions encompass approximately 860,000 unionized members, of whom 62% are women. Given this statistic, one might anticipate a correspondingly higher percentage of women in leadership roles within these unions. Ironically, men, who represent only 38% of the union membership, occupy 64% of the leadership positions (Labour Market Profile, 2021/22). While significant research has been conducted on the factors impeding women's access to leadership roles, the majority of these studies have predominantly examined the political dimension (Killian & Hyle, 2020; Makalanga, 2023; Genda, 2024; Tarimo & Dominico, 2024). In contrast, the investigation of trade unions remains notably underexplored. Although numerous studies exist within this realm, many tend to address broader issues rather than the specific challenges that women encounter in attaining leadership positions within trade unions.

A pivotal study, "Gender Dynamics in Trade Union Leadership: Evidence from Tanzania," conducted by Okumu *et al*., (2021) examined various trade unions throughout the country. Utilizing a qualitative case study design, the researchers engaged in semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 30 women union members and leaders. This research elucidated barriers such as lack of mentorship and limited access to leadership training. It further underscored a critical deficiency in quantitative data regarding women's actual participation rates in leadership, indicating that while qualitative insights are available, comprehensive studies remain necessary.

Similarly, Mbilinyi and Msuya (2020) conducted a cross-sectional survey across urban and rural trade unions in Tanzania, involving a sample of 500 unionized members selected through stratified random sampling to evaluate women's representation in leadership roles. Despite their findings indicating that women constitute a considerable segment of union membership, the study highlighted the insufficient examination of the specific challenges that inhibit women's advancement in leadership. This underscores a conceptual gap in understanding the nuanced factors that contribute to women's underrepresentation. Moreover, Mutasingwa's (2023) evaluative research incorporated both qualitative interviews and quantitative data to assess the impact of the quota system on women's representation within trade unions. The findings revealed that, notwithstanding its potential to enhance women's representation, entrenched cultural attitudes persistently obstruct progress. This indicates a theoretical limitation in existing frameworks that inadequately account for the interplay between cultural norms and policy interventions.

Nchimbi (2018) investigated trade union performance in relation to gender equity, employing a descriptive study design. His qualitative analysis concentrated on the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, emphasizing the imperative for policies that foster an inclusive environment. Nchimbi's study identified a gap in empirical data concerning the long-term impact of such policies on women's leadership trajectories, signifying a clear lack of studies specifically addressing the challenges faced by women within trade unions. Rugeiyamu's (2018) historical study provided the context for trade unions in Tanzania by documenting significant milestones and reforms. This analysis, based on archival data and historical documents, illustrated how these developments have influenced current gender dynamics within unions. However, it lacks a focus on the specific challenges that women face, highlighting that many existing studies tend to revolve around general issues rather than particular obstacles related to women's leadership.

Loisulie (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study titled "Exploring Women's Leadership in Trade Unions in Tanzania: Barriers and Opportunities," which combined quantitative surveys of 400 union members with qualitative interviews of key stakeholders to identify barriers and opportunities for women's leadership. The study uncovered significant obstacles, including discrimination and gender stereotypes. While it provided valuable insights, it also highlighted methodological gaps in the current research, particularly the need for longitudinal studies that specifically assess women's leadership trajectories over time. Similarly, Adereth (2022) conducted a comparative analysis across multiple East African countries, including Tanzania, to investigate barriers to women's leadership in trade unions. This study employed interviews and document analysis to illuminate the systemic challenges faced by women. However, it underscored a lack of comprehensive studies that focus on the specific experiences of women within diverse cultural contexts, revealing a theoretical gap in understanding how cultural variations influence women's leadership experiences.

Collectively, these studies underscore the urgent need for more focused research on the specific challenges women encounter in accessing leadership roles within trade unions. They reveal that existing research often prioritizes broader topics and has not adequately addressed the nuances of this issue. Consequently, this study aims to critically explore the challenges to women's leadership in trade unions, drawing upon evidence from Tanzania and concentrating on how these challenges inhibit their advancement. By examining these barriers, the study seeks to contribute to a more profound understanding of the systemic factors that hinder women's leadership and to propose actionable recommendations for fostering gender equality within trade unions.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study uses three theoretical frameworks: patriarchy (Walby, 1990), role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) to analyze the challenges women face in achieving leadership roles within trade unions in Tanzania. Patriarchy explains how systemic structures favour male leadership and highlights barriers rooted in cultural norms prevalent in Tanzanian society (Walby, 1990). This perspective lays the groundwork for understanding how gendered power dynamics shape organizational hierarchies. Role congruity theory further clarifies how societal perceptions contribute to prejudice against female leaders. It argues that traits associated with leadership are often seen as masculine, while those associated with femininity are viewed as unsuitable for leadership, thus limiting women's advancement (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This approach highlights significant gaps in liberal feminism, which may focus on equal opportunities but often overlooks deep-seated biases within organizations. The hegemonic masculinity theory complements these ideas by showing how dominant masculine norms shape organizational cultures, reinforcing gender inequality and undermining women's aspirations for leadership (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity reflects ideal traits like strength and control that define male leadership, perpetuating a cycle that marginalizes women.

While intersectionality provides insights into overlapping identities, it can complicate the analysis of specific institutional practices, making the combination of these three theories particularly effective. This study aims to offer a nuanced understanding of the systemic and cultural factors that hinder women's leadership by integrating patriarchy, role congruity theory, and hegemonic masculinity. This approach not only contributes to discussions about gender equity in trade unions but also informs potential policy reforms aimed at creating equal opportunities for women. Patriarchy signifies male dominance over women (Adefolaju, 2013). Although often viewed as a Western concept, especially through historical laws that granted power to men over families (Lerner, 1986), patriarchy is widespread in traditional societies, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Tanzania (Labour Market Profile, 2021/22; Lawson, 2024; Mkude, 2023; International Alert, 2024).

In patriarchal systems, leadership is often seen as inherently linked to maleness, with men assumed to possess qualities suited for leadership. In contrast, women are frequently viewed as embodying traits more suitable for domestic roles (Doost & Sibly, 2020; Mkude, 2023). This view aligns with the role congruity theory, which asserts that the mismatch between female traits and leadership expectations limits women's progress (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Lawson, 2024; Fullard, 2025). Additionally, Connell's (1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity suggests that patriarchal norms are maintained by behaviours and cultural values that keep women subordinate. Connell identifies hegemonic masculinity as the most valued form of masculinity, characterized by dominance and control, which reinforces patriarchal norms (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018). However, Connell (1987) also emphasizes the potential to transform patriarchal systems through the collective efforts of individuals, both men and women, who adopt alternative forms of masculinity. Challenging hegemonic masculinity can lead to greater gender equality, highlighting the importance of confronting existing norms and stereotypes. This perspective is crucial for this study as it underscores the opportunities for promoting equal access to leadership roles for women in trade unions.

METHODOLOGY

Context of the Study

This study was conducted in 2024 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, focusing on the challenges faced by women in trade union leadership. The selection of Dar es Salaam as the study site was justified by its concentration of all trade unions in Tanzania, including both TUCTA-affiliated and non-affiliated unions. This concentration facilitates access to participants and provides a comprehensive understanding of the issues women face in leadership roles within these organizations. The urban setting of Dar es Salaam also reflects diverse socioeconomic factors that can influence women's experiences in union leadership, making it an ideal location for this research.

Study Design

The study employed a qualitative case study design, integrating qualitative research principles with a case study framework to explore the challenges women face in accessing leadership roles within trade unions in Tanzania. This approach also analyses how these challenges contribute to their underrepresentation in union leadership. Qualitative case studies are particularly effective for understanding the "how" and "why" of a phenomenon (Stake, 2020), making this methodology well-suited to the objectives of this research.

The adopted design allowed for a thorough exploration of the issues at hand and facilitated the capture of rich, in-depth narratives and perspectives from women involved, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender dynamics and the impact of patriarchy on leadership roles. As Creswell and Poth (2018) assert, qualitative case studies are particularly effective for examining complex social phenomena within their real-life context, enabling researchers to gain insights that quantitative methods may overlook. This methodological framework ultimately supports a nuanced exploration of the barriers women encounter in pursuing leadership positions within trade unions in Tanzania.

Study Participants and Sampling Procedures

The study engaged a diverse group of participants from the Trade Union Congress of Tanzania (TUCTA), including the Vice President, a representative from the Women's Committee, and the Treasurer. Representatives from TUCTA's affiliate unions: Tanzania Teachers Union (TTU), Tanzania Union of Industrial and Commercial Workers (TUICO), and Communication and Transport Workers Union of Tanzania (COTWU) were also included. To enhance the breadth of the study, two representatives from a non-affiliate union, the Tanzania Higher Learning Institutions Trade Union (THTU), were also involved along with officials from the Office of the Registrar of Trade Unions in Tanzania. This sampling strategy aimed to capture a broad range of perspectives on the challenges faced by women in trade union leadership. Participants were selected based on their roles and expertise, ensuring varied insights into the systemic barriers and opportunities within the trade union movement. A detailed list of study participants, including their respective positions, gender, and affiliated unions, is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: List of Study Participants, Positions in Trade Unions, Gender and Trade Union

Participant	Position in Trade Union	Gender	Trade Union
TUCTA staff	Vice president	Male	TUCTA
	Women committee	Female	
	Treasurer	Male	
TUCTA affiliate unions	Vice president	Female	TTU
	Deputy General	Male	
	Secretary	Male & Female	
	Ordinary members		
	General Secretary	Male	TUICO
	Women committee	Female	
	Ordinary members	Male & Female	
	National chair	Male	
	General Secretary	Male	COTWU (T)
	Ordinary members	Male & Female	
TUCTA non-affiliate union	National chair	Male	THTU
	Branch Secretary	Female	
	Ordinary members	Male & Female	
Registrar of trade unions	Registrar	Female	Registrar's office

Source: Field Research (2024)

Study Sample and Selection Technique

The study comprised a sample of 20 **potential** participants. In qualitative case studies, smaller sample sizes are often utilized to facilitate a nuanced exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives, thereby enriching the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were selected through a purposive sampling technique, predicated on their expertise in trade union leadership and their expressed willingness to engage in the study (Patton, 1990). This sampling technique is particularly effective for identifying individuals with specific knowledge pertinent to the research focus (Palinkas *et al*., 2015). As a result, the selected participants were considered highly relevant to the study's objectives, thus ensuring that the insights gathered would significantly advance the understanding of the challenges women encounter in trade union leadership.

Data Collection Instruments

Data gathering involved semi-structured interviews and document analysis. In qualitative case studies, a variety of methods are often employed, including these two approaches (Yin, 2018; Bowen, 2009). Semi-structured interviews facilitate the collection of in-depth insights, thereby allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes based on participants' responses. This approach enables researchers to delve into participants' experiences and perspectives, yielding richer data. Additionally, document analysis provides contextual support for the findings by examining existing policies, legal frameworks, practices, and relevant historical context. This method enhances the understanding of the environment in which the trade unions operate by shedding light on systemic issues affecting women's leadership. The use of multiple data sources is a hallmark of case study research, enhancing the credibility and depth of the analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2020). By integrating these methods, the study aimed to develop a holistic view of the research topic, ultimately strengthening the credibility and validity of its conclusions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved several systematic steps to ensure a thorough examination of the collected information. First, semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to accurately capture participants' responses (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). The transcripts underwent thematic coding, beginning with open coding to identify key themes and patterns related to trade union leadership (Saldaña, 2021). This initial coding process involved highlighting significant statements and categorizing them into broader themes. Following this, a thematic analysis was conducted to refine the identified themes by merging related codes, ensuring that they accurately represented participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

To complement the interview data, relevant documents were also analyzed, seeking key information that aligned with the emerging themes. Triangulation was employed to enhance the credibility of the findings by comparing insights from both interviews and document analysis (Carter *et al.*, 2014), thereby validating results through multiple sources of evidence. This comprehensive analytical approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of the data, thus allowing meaningful conclusions regarding the challenges and opportunities in trade union leadership to be drawn. By integrating various data sources and employing systematic coding techniques, the study ensured that the analysis was both rigorous and reflective of the participants' lived experiences.

FINDINGS

The findings indicate that women encounter a multitude of challenges in accessing leadership roles within trade unions in Tanzania. These impediments are rooted in deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and male dominance, where societal constructs perpetuate the perception that leadership is inherently male, thereby undermining women's capabilities and opportunities for advancement. Furthermore, traditional gender roles and stereotypes constrain women to domestic responsibilities, reinforcing societal beliefs that diminish their aspirations for leadership positions. The lack of motivation among women is exacerbated by insufficient support and mentorship, which erode their confidence and willingness to seek leadership roles. Additionally, shortcomings in the legal and policy framework manifest as inadequate policies that fail to promote gender equality and effectively address the barriers women confront. This section examines these challenges in detail under the heading "Impediments to Trade Union Leadership," illuminating the complexities and interconnections that contribute to the systemic barriers women face in their pursuit of leadership roles within trade unions in Tanzania.

Impediments to Trade Union Leadership

Patriarchal Norms

The analysis reveals that patriarchal norms and beliefs favouring male dominance constitute significant barriers to women's access to leadership roles in trade unions. Participants' narratives indicate that women remain underrepresented in these positions due to discriminatory norms rooted in male dominance, commonly referred to as 'mfumo-dume' (Swahili). As one participant noted:

> "*Even when women are qualified, the expectation is that they will take on supportive roles. Because of 'mfumo-dume'* (patriarchal system), *it feels like there's an invisible wall preventing us from stepping into leadership*" (Interview Informant 8, April 2024).

Another participant emphasized:

> "*Patriarchy* (mfumo-dume, Swahili) *runs deep in our organizations. When a woman speaks up, she is often met with resistance. It's as if her voice doesn't carry the same weight as a man's*" (Interview Informant 12, May 2024).

These pervasive patriarchal values are perceived as incongruent with women's roles, entrenching the notion that leadership is predominantly a male domain. This systemic bias severely limits women's aspirations and opportunities for leadership within trade unions, thereby highlighting the urgent need for transformative change.

Male Dominance

The findings indicate that prevailing norms and beliefs that favour male leadership have resulted in a predominantly male composition within union leadership. Historically, men, constituting the majority of union members, have tended to vote for their fellow men, thus perpetuating this trend. As one participant noted:

> "*If you could compare us with men, in the union's membership in the past, we were very few; men also used their numerical advantage to recommend their fellow men to the union bodies, and then voted for men during elections*" (Interview Informant 3, June 2024).

Furthermore, an analysis of trade union documents reveals that membership in the selected unions was male-dominated, particularly between 2001 and 2004, as illustrated in Table 2. This significant male representation among unionized members correlates with their dominance in leadership roles, thereby reinforcing the cycle of male supremacy in union governance. These findings highlight the urgent need for strategies to address gender imbalances within trade unions and promote equitable leadership opportunities for women.

Table 2: Selected Unions' Membership Profile by Gender, 2001-2004

Trade union	Women	Men
TUICO	8,991 (12.6%)	28,203 (26.8%)
TTU (CWT)	59,241 (83.3%)	70,331 (66.8%)
RAAWU	2,938 (42.0%)	6,674 (6.35%)
TOTAL	71,170 (100%)	105,208 (100%)

Source: Trade Unions' Membership Profile (2004)

There has been a significant increase in women's membership in the selected trade unions from 2005 to 2020. Given this rise, one might anticipate a corresponding increase in the number of women leaders within these unions, particularly since women constitute the majority of voters. However, despite this demographic shift, a critical question arises: why do women's positions in union leadership remain disproportionately low, even though they represent the majority of union membership, as indicated in Table 3?. The observed discrepancy or paradox between increasing membership and stagnant leadership representation underscores the need to investigate the underlying barriers that hinder women's ascension to leadership roles, despite their numerical strength within unions.

Table 3: Trade Union Membership Profile by Gender 2005-2020

Union Name	Members	Women percent	Women leaders	Men leaders
TUCTA	845,417	62%	36%	64%
TUICO	98,299	55%	1%	99%
TTU(CWT)	419,028	58%	3%	97%
RAAWU	11,004	72%	1%	99%

Source: Labour Market Profile (2021-22)

Participants linked the low percentage of women in trade union leadership to prevailing beliefs that favour males in these positions. These beliefs include the perception that women lack a strong voice, are not courageous, and that effective leaders are inherently male. Additionally, stereotypes suggest that women have limited time for leadership due to other responsibilities and are primarily suited for domestic roles. Moreover, it was noted that these beliefs and stereotypes supporting male dominance in union leadership are perpetuated not only by male members but also by women themselves, who may endorse them either unconsciously or uncritically. The following quotes illustrate:

"*Women are not good at leadership in trade unions… Males deserve to be the leaders. Leadership means many things…. sometimes confronting employers or dealing with union members. A lot of time can be wasted… Women's responsibility is to take care of the family. Will they be able to handle both*?" (Interview Informant 5, June 2024).

"*At one of our branch meetings, one of the executive leaders who attended the meeting complained that women are incapable of discharging our union leadership duties. I think it is right; when it comes to matters of trade unions, women are docile. Union leadership needs people who are vocal and strong to deal with employers*" (Interview Informant 10, June 2024).

These underlying beliefs discourage women from pursuing trade union leadership roles and reinforce support for male candidates. Consequently, women often lose confidence in contesting for leadership positions, thus resulting in their continued underrepresentation.

"*In my experience of seven years in a trade union, women are not involved in leadership roles. Male leaders have been surpassing the executive positions. I think it is because of lack of confidence among women and the dominance of males—'mfumo dume'* (male dominance system)." (Interview Informant 7, June 2024).

This narrative highlights the systemic barriers that perpetuate gender inequality in trade union leadership, thereby necessitating urgent attention and intervention.

Gender Stereotypes and Domestic Responsibilities

The underrepresentation of women in trade union leadership is significantly attributed to gender stereotypes that associate women with domestic duties. Interviews with participants revealed that women are often expected to perform caregiving and household responsibilities, as illustrated by the following quote:

"*How can I balance responsibilities? I am responsible for family duties: looking after the children's welfare, cooking, and doing laundry for my husband. Who else will do all these? A woman should be responsible in the family*"(Interview Informant 4, June 2024).

Moreover, it was reported that these multiple household responsibilities leave women with insufficient time to engage in leadership roles within trade unions. One participant articulated this challenge:

"*Leadership needs full commitment; it requires a person with responsibilities in the union and not elsewhere. Trade union leaders attend meetings and sometimes travel. Imagine I am a wife with children, in addition to my husband. I don't have enough time to balance duties*" (Interview Informant 2, June 2024).

This evidence underscores how entrenched gender roles not only shape perceptions of women's capabilities but also hinder their participation in leadership positions within trade unions.

Lack of Motivation

Despite the pervasive gender-based stereotypes that restrict women's access to leadership roles within trade unions, their aspirations for such positions are further constrained by a notable lack of motivation. This deficiency often stems from discouragement expressed by fellow union members, including some women who undermine their peers' ambitions. Such dynamics not only perpetuate existing barriers but also inhibit the potential for meaningful female representation in union leadership. This sentiment is echoed in the following quote:

"*I remember that one of the questions I was asked at the meeting, when I expressed my interest in becoming a union leader for the executive position, was why I decided to leave my family responsibilities at the expense of trade union leadership. I was very much disappointed. The question was posed by my fellow women.*" (Interview Informant 15, June 2024).

Informants also raised concerns regarding jealousy among women, particularly when peers exhibited aspirations to contest for leadership roles. The absence of women in executive positions further exacerbates this issue because the lack of role models and mentors limits support for aspiring female leaders. This lack of mentorship is identified as a significant barrier that further demotivates women's access to leadership roles in trade unions, hindering their potential to advance within these organizations. One informant articulated this concern:

"*Whom can I learn from? We don't have any women in the executive positions of leadership from whom I could learn*" (Interview Informant 17, June 2024).

Additionally, women aspiring for leadership positions often experience demotivation due to derogatory labelling from their peers. One informant recounted:

> "*Previously, one woman managed to hold a higher post in union leadership. She was very vocal on union matters; however, instead of receiving positive feedback and respect, she was often perceived as having a prideful character* (mwenye nyodo, Swahili)*, and as a result, she was demoralized. The union members used to refer to her as 'mwanaharakati'* (an activist)*. Since then, we haven't had any women in executive positions of union leadership*" (Interview Informant 16, June 2024).

Some informants expressed a deep sense of fulfillment in adhering to cultural values and religious beliefs that prioritize familial and domestic responsibilities. They indicated that these values provide them with a strong sense of identity and purpose, which diminishes their desire to pursue leadership roles within trade unions. Their commitment to these traditions often shapes their aspirations and motivations, leading them to prioritize nurturing their families over seeking leadership positions. One informant reflected:

> "*I find great joy in my role as a mother and wife; my cultural values guide me, and I feel fulfilled in supporting my family*" (Interview Informant 13, June 2024).

Another articulated:

> "*My faith teaches me the importance of family, and that is where I feel my true leadership lies. Leadership in the union is not my calling; I am proud to uphold our traditions and take care of my home*" (Interview Informant 12, June 2024).

Shortcomings in the Legal and Policy Frameworks

Despite the existence of constitutions and policies within trade unions that ostensibly promote women's leadership, the practical implementation of these frameworks faces significant challenges. These challenges stem mainly from the prevailing male dominance in decision-making positions, which often undermines the enforcement of gender-equitable practices. Furthermore, the lack of robust mechanisms to oversee and regulate decision-making processes related to union leadership exacerbates these issues, ultimately hindering the effective realization of gender parity within the unions.

One participant articulated as follows:

> "*Our union has a gender equality policy that allows women to engage in leadership, but practically, the decisions regarding the nomination of candidates at different levels are male dominated*" (Interview Informant 1, June 2024).

Another participant elaborated on the impact of male power in leadership structures:

> "*Male power has affected my dream of becoming a union leader. Men hold the decision-making authority, and whatever they say must be taken as*

final. Their decisions dictate whether women can participate in union activities" (Interview Informant 8, June 2024).

Moreover, it was observed that women's inclusivity in trade union leadership is not a criterion for registration of trade unions, despite its recognized importance for promoting equitable access to leadership roles. This sentiment is echoed in the following quote:

> "*Our law does not allow any kind of discrimination at workplaces, including in trade unions. However, the law does not specify how unions should implement this. At the very least, the law could explicitly state that women's inclusion in union leadership or decision-making is a criterion for registering a trade union*" (Interview Informant 20, June 2024).

Section 62(2) of the prevailing labour law (Employment and Labour Relations Act, No. 6 of 2004 R.E., 2019) mandates that in a workplace with more than one hundred members, women employees must be represented by at least five representatives. However, it is crucial to recognize that this stipulated representation pertains solely to workplace involvement and does not extend to leadership positions within trade unions. This limitation highlights a significant gap between workplace representation and actual leadership roles for women within union contexts, thus illustrating the need for a more comprehensive approach to gender equality in union leadership.

DISCUSSION

This section critically discusses the findings from the study through the theoretical lenses of patriarchy, role congruity, and hegemonic masculinity (Walby, 1986, 1990; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The study identified several key challenges impacting women's leadership in Tanzanian trade unions, including patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, lack of motivation, and shortcomings in the legal and policy frameworks. Addressing these challenges is crucial for fostering equitable leadership opportunities. The discussion begins by examining how patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes perpetuate barriers to women's leadership and shape perceptions of female leaders within the context of trade unions.

Patriarchal Norms

The study findings reveal that patriarchal norms and beliefs favouring male dominance pose significant challenges to women's access to leadership roles in trade unions. Gender based roles and stereotypes further exacerbate these challenges (Baxter & Jack, 2020). Participants indicated that women are underrepresented in trade union leadership due to discriminatory norms rooted in patriarchy, commonly referred to as *mfumo-dume* in Swahili. In Tanzanian society, deeply entrenched patriarchal values prioritize male authority, reinforcing the perception that leadership is fundamentally a masculine domain. This cultural framework positions men as archetypal leaders characterized by qualities such as assertiveness and strength, while women are often expected to fulfill primary caregiving responsibilities, including childcare and household duties (Walby, 1986, 1990). Interviews reveal that women frequently perform domestic tasks, reflecting societal expectations that confine them to traditional roles. Such dynamics not only discourage aspirations for leadership but also underscore broader patriarchal structures that dictate gender roles. This systemic bias leads to skepticism regarding women's competencies, resulting in formidable resistance from male-dominated leadership structures. Consequently, women's ambitions are undermined,

entrenching their underrepresentation in pivotal roles and perpetuating gender inequity within the union context (Chikoko, 2021). Comparative studies in other contexts, such as Nigeria, highlight similar patterns, documenting how women are often stereotyped as lacking the requisite attributes for leadership, with a culture of male dominance discouraging competition for these positions (Adefolaju, 2013). These findings underscore the urgent need for interventions aimed at challenging patriarchal norms and fostering inclusive leadership practices within trade unions. There is a potential to enhance women's representation and participation in leadership roles by addressing these systemic barriers, ultimately contributing to greater gender equity in the workplace.

Gender Stereotypes

The impact of gender stereotypes on women's access to leadership roles is profound and multifaceted. Studies indicate that the unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities significantly contributes to decreased job satisfaction and stunted career advancement opportunities for women as they strive to balance competing demands (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). In Cambodia's garment industry, Pereira (2016) illustrates how entrenched divisions stereotype women as inherently incapable of assuming union leadership roles, thereby reinforcing the perception that such positions are predominantly for males. This perception diminishes recognition of women's leadership potential and perpetuates a self-fulfilling prophecy, making women less likely to be considered for leadership opportunities.

Interviews with participants reveal the weight of these stereotypes. Women are often expected to prioritize caregiving and household responsibilities, leading to insufficient time for engagement in leadership roles. One participant summarized this challenge: "How can I balance responsibilities? I am responsible for family duties: looking after the children, cooking, and doing laundry. Who else will do all these?" (Interview Informant 4, June 2024). Another added, "Leadership requires full commitment; it's not possible when I have family obligations" (Interview Informant 2, June 2024). These insights underscore how entrenched gender roles not only shape perceptions of women's capabilities but also hinder their participation in leadership positions within trade unions.

This dynamic aligns with role congruity theory, which posits that women are often perceived as incongruent with leadership roles, leading them to internalize these stereotypes and limit their ambitions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Historical perspectives further illuminate these gendered perceptions. Ancient Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, reinforced notions of female inferiority in leadership capacities, arguing that women lacked the requisite qualities for leadership unless they transcended their maternal roles (Johanna, cited in Ruether, 1985). Such classical views resonate with contemporary patriarchal theory (Walby, 1986, 1990) and reinforce prejudicial attitudes toward women in leadership positions. Numerous studies document the prevalence of a male-dominant culture within workplaces that marginalizes women and hinders their professional advancement (ILO, 2016). Moreover, these patriarchal norms extend beyond trade unions into the political sphere, where entrenched cultural beliefs perpetuate systemic inequalities that adversely affect women's participation. Recent empirical research in Pakistan and Indonesia elucidates how these norms deny women opportunities within political contexts, rooted in pervasive perceptions of their inferiority (Elizabeth *et al*., 2023; Gandal *et al*., 2023; Idrus *et al*., 2023). To create a more equitable division of labour, it is essential to challenge traditional norms and advocate for shared responsibilities within the family.

Research suggests that when men engage actively in domestic responsibilities, it alleviates the burden on women and fosters a more collaborative family environment (Sayer, 2005). Societal change must also be supported by policy initiatives promoting work-life balance, such as parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and accessible childcare services. These measures can help families share responsibilities more equitably, thereby enabling women to pursue professional opportunities without the constraints imposed by traditional gender expectations. In conclusion, the intersection of patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes creates a challenging environment for women aspiring for leadership roles in trade unions. Addressing these structural and cultural barriers is imperative for fostering an equitable landscape that encourages women's leadership. The society can pave the way for greater representation of women in trade union leadership and challenge the hegemonic masculinity that continues to dominate this sphere by critically examining and dismantling the patriarchal frameworks that sustain these inequities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Lack of Motivation

The lack of motivation among women to pursue leadership roles within trade unions results from a complex interplay of societal expectations, internalized stereotypes, and personal values. Despite the pervasive gender-based stereotypes that restrict women's access to leadership positions, their aspirations are further constrained by a notable lack of motivation. This deficiency often arises from discouragement not only by male members but also from fellow women, who sometimes undermine their peers' ambitions. One participant articulated this discouragement, recalling, "When I expressed my interest in becoming a union leader, I was asked why I decided to leave my family responsibilities for trade union leadership. I was very disappointed as the question came from a fellow woman" (Interview Informant 15, June 2024).

This dynamic perpetuates existing barriers and it inhibits the potential for meaningful female representation in union leadership. Informants noted feelings of jealousy among women, particularly when peers aspired to contest for leadership roles. The absence of women in executive positions exacerbates this issue; without role models and mentors, aspiring female leaders receive limited support. As one participant lamented, "Whom can I learn from? We don't have any women in executive positions from whom I could learn" (Interview Informant 17, June 2024). Moreover, the derogatory labeling of women who dare to aspire for leadership roles further demotivates them. One informant recounted the experience of a previous female leader who, rather than receiving respect, was labeled as "prideful" and demoralized: "Since then, we haven't had any women in executive positions" (Interview Informant 16, June 2024). Interestingly, some informants expressed a sense of fulfillment in adhering to cultural values and religious beliefs that prioritize familial and domestic responsibilities. One participant reflected, "I find great joy in my role as a mother and wife; my cultural values guide me, and I feel fulfilled in supporting my family" (Interview Informant 13, June 2024).

Another articulated, "My faith teaches me the importance of family, and that is where I feel my true leadership lies" (Interview Informant 12, June 2024). These sentiments highlight how traditional values can diminish the desire to pursue leadership roles within trade unions. This lack of motivation is further exacerbated by a culture that downplays women's achievements and contributions, leading to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt (Larsson & Hultman, 2023). Addressing this challenge necessitates not only the promotion of female leaders but also the establishment of mentorship programs to inspire and guide aspiring women leaders (Schmidt, 2022). The interplay of gender stereotypes, societal expectations, and institutional barriers

underscores the urgent need for concerted efforts to dismantle the obstacles hindering women's leadership aspirations in Tanzanian trade unions. An environment that encourages diverse leadership paths can be created by fostering supportive networks, promoting female role models, and challenging negative perceptions. This approach aligns with the theoretical frameworks proposed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), which emphasize the importance of addressing hegemonic masculinity within these organizations. Ultimately, enhancing women's representation in trade union leadership will require a multifaceted strategy that actively engages all stakeholders, including men and potential allies, in the pursuit of gender equity (Tatah & Ndakeyo, 2023).

Drawbacks in Legal and Policy Frameworks

Drawbacks in legal and policy frameworks significantly hinder women's representation in trade union leadership. Inadequate laws and policies that fail to enforce gender equity create a conducive environment for discrimination (UN Women, 2021). Without robust legal backing to promote women's leadership, trade unions often lack the necessary incentives to prioritize gender parity. It is essential for policymakers to establish and enforce regulations that support women's participation in leadership roles by ensuring that trade unions reflect the diversity of their membership (European Commission, 2021). In Tanzania, women's prospects for leadership roles in trade unions are similarly constrained by weaknesses in the legal and policy frameworks. Although labour law mandates that unions with more than one hundred members should include at least five female representatives, this stipulation applies exclusively to workplace contexts rather than leadership positions within trade unions. The law does not clearly articulate how trade unions should incorporate women into leadership roles, thus rendering it ineffective in supporting women's advancement. One informant noted that women's representation in trade union leadership is not a criterion for registering a trade union in Tanzania. The Tanzania Labour Profile further documents unsupportive legal and administrative policies as significant barriers to women's access to leadership roles in unions (Tanzania Labour Market Profile, 2021/2022).

While equal representation of women as a criterion for union registration is relatively rare globally, some regions and countries have initiated efforts to develop legal frameworks or policies aimed at promoting gender equality within trade unions. Notable initiatives include those by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the Confederation of Swedish Trade Unions, which have formulated policies that incorporate gender perspective across all trade union structures. The ETUC has amended its constitution to recognize gender equality as a guiding principle in the composition of secretariats and delegations (ETUC Annual Gender Equality Survey Report, 2018). These initiatives have yielded positive outcomes, as evidenced by an increase in the number of women in leadership roles. The ETUC's survey on the gender dimension in decision-making bodies cite Sweden and Norway as exemplary cases, where trade unions have achieved a representation of women at 40 percent in executive committees (Fulton & Sechi, 2018).

In addition to women's participation in executive committees, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has proposed a quota system or special seats for women. According to the ILO's observations (2016), quota systems have been effective in highly male-dominated global unions, such as the International Federation of Building and Wood Workers and the International Transport Workers' Federation, facilitating equal participation by women in their governance structures. Similarly, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) implemented a quota system, resulting in an increase in women's representation

in leadership roles from 25% in 2015 to 40% in 2019 (Mahlatsi, 2019). Related studies in Nigeria have acknowledged that quotas or special seats for women facilitate their placement in decision-making and leadership positions within political parties (Ifejika & Ojo, 2024). While the quota system has become important in enhancing women's descriptive representation in Tanzania, it has not effectively promoted substantive representation, leaving men as the dominant gender in leadership positions (Mutasingwa, 2023). Reflecting on these initiatives to address barriers to women's access to union leadership, it is crucial to note that their suitability depends on the specific context. While quota systems or proportional representation may enhance women's visibility in trade unions, in Tanzania, such measures might inadvertently discourage merit-based leadership or leadership based on individual qualifications. Consequently, this approach might not lead to genuine influence for women in decision-making within union leadership. Indeed, proportional representation could prioritize meeting numerical targets over addressing the underlying issues that impede women's access to leadership positions, including entrenched patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes that align women predominantly with domestic responsibilities, as this study reveals. As highlighted in other studies, "women's exclusion from leadership positions is a mere symptom of several underlying problems related to the intertwinement of both structural barriers and a pervasive patriarchal culture that is perpetuated by both unions and employers" (Babak *et al.*, 2018).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examines the challenges women face in accessing leadership roles in Tanzanian trade unions. It identifies barriers to representation using frameworks of patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, and role congruity theory. Key barriers include entrenched patriarchal norms, male dominance, restrictive gender roles, lack of motivation among women, and inadequate legal frameworks. Deeply rooted patriarchal values sustain male dominance in union leadership, limiting women's advancement opportunities. Legal inadequacies hinder women from contesting these barriers, thus perpetuating marginalization and creating a hostile environment for aspiring female leaders. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach: reforming legal and policy frameworks for gender equity, implementing quota systems to enhance representation, and fostering cultural shifts within trade unions. Educational programs to raise awareness about gender stereotypes and supportive legal frameworks are essential for promoting women's leadership. Additionally, creating networks that empower women and encourage their participation in leadership is critical. Trade unions can better reflect their diverse membership and advocate for all workers by addressing these barriers. The findings underscore the urgent need for concerted efforts to dismantle structural impediments to women's leadership in trade unions and promote gender equality in Tanzania.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the challenges faced by women in accessing leadership roles within Tanzanian trade unions, targeted initiatives are essential. First, it is crucial to implement educational programs that raise awareness of the impact of patriarchal norms on gender equality and leadership. These programs should emphasize the importance of women's leadership, as noted by Ndlovu (2022). Collaboration among trade unions, government, NGOs, and community-based organizations (CBOs) will facilitate these efforts. Engaging men as allies is also vital; involving them in discussions about shared responsibilities, both in families and within trade unions, can challenge entrenched patriarchal stereotypes. This strategy aligns with Connell's (1987) theorization on gender relations and Tatah and Ndakeyo's (2023)

documentation. Additionally, promoting inclusive leadership structures is important. Trade unions should encourage balanced participation in executive committees and create spaces for women to voice their concerns, including flexible childcare arrangements. Establishing women's committees within unions will prioritize women's issues and enhance their representation in decision-making processes. Strengthening the legal and policy framework is crucial for promoting women's access to leadership roles, and advocating for reforms in trade union laws can enhance legal structures, as highlighted by Meena et al. (2017) and the AFL-CIO (2005). Furthermore, trade unions should prioritize issues of women in their constitutions to combat underrepresentation, as emphasized by the Trade Unions Congress of Tanzania (TUCTA, 2004). Finally, implementing empowerment initiatives such as training, networking, and mentorship programs (Mthembu, 2020; Nkumbule and Perumal, 2023) will further develop women's leadership capacity. Tanzanian trade unions can create a more equitable environment that enhances women's leadership and strengthens the overall labour movement by adopting these recommendations.

LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

This study used qualitative data from women's perspectives, which might not fully capture the challenges women face in leadership roles within trade unions. Future research should incorporate men's viewpoints and insights from NGOs focused on gender issues to enrich understanding. Employing survey methodologies could provide a broader dataset on barriers to women's leadership in Tanzanian trade unions. A significant limitation is the scarcity of published secondary information; thus, much relevant data remains unpublished. Future studies should engage directly with trade union offices to access these documents. Addressing these limitations will enhance the understanding of the barriers to women's leadership and inform strategies for promoting gender equity.

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