



Pathways to Women's Leadership in Cambodia's Decentralized Public Administration: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study explores women's leadership pathways within Cambodia's sub-national administrations. It examines how women attain leadership positions, develop leadership capability, and navigate organizational and socio-cultural challenges that shape their leadership experiences in decentralized public administration.

Methodology: A qualitative exploratory design was used. Data were collected through two individual and seven group semi-structured interviews involving 25 women leaders and officials from provincial, municipal, district, and provincial departmental administrations. The Khmer-language interviews were transcribed, translated into English, and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Main Findings: Three interrelated themes were identified: becoming women leaders, developing leadership capability, and negotiating and sustaining leadership. The findings demonstrate that women's leadership develops through the interaction of personal agency, family and organizational support, continuous professional learning, and resilience in addressing organizational and socio-cultural barriers within decentralized public administration.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study proposes an empirically grounded framework of women's leadership pathways within decentralized public administration. It advances leadership and public administration scholarship by explaining how personal, organizational, and institutional factors interact to shape women's leadership development and strengthen inclusive local governance in an under-researched developing-country context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership has become increasingly important in public administration as governments confront complex policy problems, institutional change, technological disruption, fiscal pressures, and rising public expectations. Public leaders are therefore expected to do more than supervise administrative routines. They must coordinate diverse stakeholders, support organizational adaptation, exercise accountability, and create public value under conditions that differ from those of private organizations [1]. Recent reviews similarly point out that public-sector leadership is shaped by distinctive institutional demands, including political oversight, multiple accountabilities, and competing public interests [2], [3].

Scholarship on women's leadership has moved beyond descriptive representation, or women's numerical presence, toward substantive authority and meaningful participation in public decision-making [4]-[6].

International policy and public-administration research similarly emphasize women's participation in governance [7], [8]. Leadership diversity can broaden the experience and knowledge available to public decisions and strengthen responsiveness and inclusion [7], [9]. This argument does not presume that women are inherently more effective leaders.

The continuing underrepresentation of women in senior public leadership cannot be explained by qualifications or aspirations alone. Gendered Organization Theory shows how apparently neutral structures and routines can reproduce a masculine model of the ideal worker and leader [10]. Role Congruity Theory explains prejudice that arises when leadership expectations conflict with gendered expectations of women [11]. Together, these perspectives indicate that women's advancement depends on competence and agency as well as developmental assignments, sponsorship, networks, and organizational recognition [12].

Women's developmental needs change across career stages, and municipal managers continue to negotiate gendered expectations, caregiving responsibilities, and demands to establish professional legitimacy [13], [14]. These studies frame leadership pathways as organizationally embedded processes and not as outcomes of individual effort alone. Altogether, the literature identifies four interacting elements in women's leadership pathways: personal agency, capability development, organizational support, and institutional context. However, most research examines representation, promotion inequality, or barriers separately. It provides less explanation of how women enter leadership, develop capability through work, and sustain authority within decentralized administrations in developing countries.

Decentralization transfers political, administrative, and fiscal responsibilities to sub-national governments and is intended to improve responsiveness, efficiency, and participation [15]-[17]. Its outcomes nevertheless depend on institutional design, local incentives, administrative capacity, and leadership quality [18], [19]. Leadership is therefore central to whether devolved authority produces effective and inclusive local governance. Local government is a major arena for women's participation in public decision-making [19], [20]. Formal representation, however, does not guarantee substantive authority. Gender stereotypes, unequal access to networks, organizational culture, and limited decision-making power continue to constrain leadership [11], [12], [14], [21].

Recent evidence from local administrations in Malawi and Nepal shows that women continue to negotiate organizational, bureaucratic, and socio-cultural constraints despite expanded formal opportunities [22], [23]. Recent public-sector studies also demonstrate that women's career needs vary across generations, organizational context affects entry and retention, gendered leadership evaluations persist, and career resilience depends on institutional and family support. These 2023–2024 studies establish the continuing relevance of women's leadership after the pandemic without assuming that all national settings operate in the same way. Moreover, these studies have advanced knowledge of representation and barriers, but they devote less attention to the connected process through which women enter leadership, learn through work, exercise authority, and remain in leadership roles [13], [22], [24]. This gap is particularly important in decentralized administrations, where responsibilities have expanded faster than evidence on women's leadership development [25], [26].

Leadership capability is developed through experience and relationships, not fixed at appointment. Leader development strengthens individual knowledge, judgement, self-awareness, and identity; leadership development strengthens collective capacity to influence and coordinate others [27], [28]. In public organizations, these capabilities include technical competence, collaboration, adaptability, and ethical judgement, and they develop through workplace learning and organizational support [3]. Challenging assignments, reflection, feedback, mentoring, and professional networks provide important mechanisms for capability development [28]-[30]. These resources are particularly important for women working in male-dominated environments [13], [14], and women's professional organizations can provide confidence, peer learning, and career support beyond formal structures [31].

Organizational support shapes whether these developmental opportunities are accessible and sustained. Equitable promotion, supervisory encouragement, developmental assignments, flexible arrangements, and participation in decision-making signal that women are recognized as legitimate leaders [32]. Leadership programs are most effective when capability development is combined with leadership identity and changes to gendered institutional practices [12]. Support must also respond to women's changing career and family circumstances [13].

Organizational culture and personnel practices can reproduce a double bind: women are expected to demonstrate authority and also conform to traditional gender expectations. These pressures can limit promotion, strategic assignments, and recognition even when women possess comparable qualifications and performance. Municipal research shows that women may perform additional gender work to establish legitimacy [14], and recent reviews identify organizational culture, human-resource practices, and leadership-development systems as interconnected influences on women's entry, advancement, and retention [33].

Work-family responsibilities create a further constraint because women continue to carry disproportionate caregiving obligations that can restrict developmental assignments, networking, and mobility [13], [14]. Recent cross-cultural evidence indicates that career resilience depends on personal agency together with organizational and institutional support [34]. Institutional arrangements also influence promotion, bureaucratic authority, and access to consequential assignments. Formal appointment does not necessarily provide equivalent

decision-making authority or strategic influence, particularly when organizational rules and gendered expectations shape the exercise of authority [23]. This institutional perspective is directly relevant to women's leadership pathways in decentralized administration.

Cambodia's decentralization and deconcentration (D&D) reforms have progressively transformed sub-national administrations (SNAs) into the principal institutions responsible for local governance, public service delivery, and local development. Initiated through the establishment of elected Commune/Sangkat Councils in 2002 [35] and strengthened by the Organic Law of 2008 [36], successive reforms have expanded the responsibilities of provincial, municipal, district, and Khan administrations and emphasized institutional capacity, administrative modernization, and effective local leadership [25], [37], [38].

Women's leadership has likewise become an explicit priority within Cambodia's governance reforms. The Neary Rattanak VI (2024–2028) [39] identifies women's leadership and governance as a strategic priority for advancing gender equality, and the Strategic Plan to Increase the Number of Women in Management Positions in Administration at Sub-national Level (2024–2028) [40] seeks to strengthen women's representation in leadership and management positions across SNAs through targeted institutional and human resource development measures.

Despite these policy commitments, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions within SNAs. Existing evidence indicates that leadership progression continues to be influenced by organizational hierarchies, traditional gender norms, and unequal access to leadership development opportunities, proposing that increasing representation alone is insufficient to achieve substantive leadership participation [41]. Cambodia therefore serves as a valuable context for examining how women attain leadership positions, develop leadership capability, and navigate organizational and institutional barriers within decentralized public administration.

Cambodian scholarship and policy documents have examined women's political representation, participation in commune governance, gender equality, and barriers to local office [13], [14], [33], [37]. They have not adequately explained how women move into appointed leadership across SNA levels, how they build capability through everyday work, or how organizational support, family responsibilities, and gendered expectations interact after appointment.

International research similarly tends to isolate representation, promotion, or organizational barriers [13], [14], [22]. Evidence remains limited on the connected pathway from leadership entry through capability development to leadership sustainability in decentralized developing-country administrations [19], [20]. This process-level omission is the specific research gap addressed by the study. The study therefore examines how women enter leadership in Cambodia's sub-national administrations, how workplace experience and professional relationships contribute to capability development, and how women negotiate organizational and socio-cultural constraints in sustaining leadership.

Specifically, the study explores women's pathways into leadership positions, examines capability development through workplace experience and organizational support, and investigates how women negotiate constraints across their leadership careers. The study contributes a contextually grounded account that connects leadership entry, development, and sustainability. It extends Cambodian evidence beyond elected representation, shows how individual and organizational conditions interact within decentralized administration, and informs gender-responsive leadership development and human-resource practice.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Research Design and Research Location

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate women's leadership pathways within Cambodia's sub-national administrations (SNAs). A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' lived experiences, leadership development, and perceptions of organizational and socio-cultural factors shaping their leadership journeys. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suitable for examining complex social processes and generating an in-depth understanding of context-specific phenomena [42], [43].

The study was conducted in Kampong Thom Province, Cambodia, where decentralization reforms have strengthened the roles and responsibilities of provincial, municipal, district, and departmental administrations. The province was selected because it included women occupying diverse leadership and managerial positions across multiple levels of sub-national administration, making it an appropriate setting for examining leadership pathways within Cambodia's decentralized public administration.

2.2. Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to recruit information-rich participants with direct experience of women's leadership in Cambodia's sub-national administrations [44]. The sample included senior and middle-level women leaders and five women officials at the pre-management career stage. The officials were eligible because they were women civil servants in the participating administrations, had direct experience of the organizational setting, and could describe career aspirations, opportunities to assume responsibility, and support and constraints encountered

before formal managerial appointment. Their inclusion captured leadership pathways before, as well as after, entry into management; job title alone was not treated as evidence of leadership potential.

A total of 25 women participants took part in the study through two individual interviews and seven group interviews. Participants represented provincial, municipal, district, and departmental administrations in Kampong Thom Province.

Table 1. Participant Profile

Position	Number
Provincial deputy governor	1
Provincial councilor	1
Provincial division director	2
Municipal and district deputy governor	2
Administrative directors and deputy director	2
Provincial department directors and deputy director	2
Departmental office chiefs and deputy chief	5
Municipal and district office chiefs and deputy chief	5
Women official	5
Total	25

Table 2. Interview Composition

Interview Type	Number	Participants
Individual interviews	2	Provincial deputy governor (1); Provincial councilor (1)
Group interviews	7	Twenty-three women managers and officials
Total	9	25 participants

2.3. Interview Procedure and Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed from the existing studies on women's leadership, leadership development, and decentralized public administration. The guide comprised open-ended questions exploring participants' leadership journeys, leadership capability development, organizational support, and organizational and socio-cultural challenges. Follow-up questions were used to clarify responses and encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences [45].

The study included two individual interviews with senior women leaders and seven group interviews with women managers and officials. Individual interviews enabled detailed exploration of leadership experiences at the strategic level, whereas group interviews facilitated discussion among participants with shared organizational contexts. Interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, were conducted in Khmer, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and supplemented by field notes documenting contextual observations. Audio recordings were subsequently transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

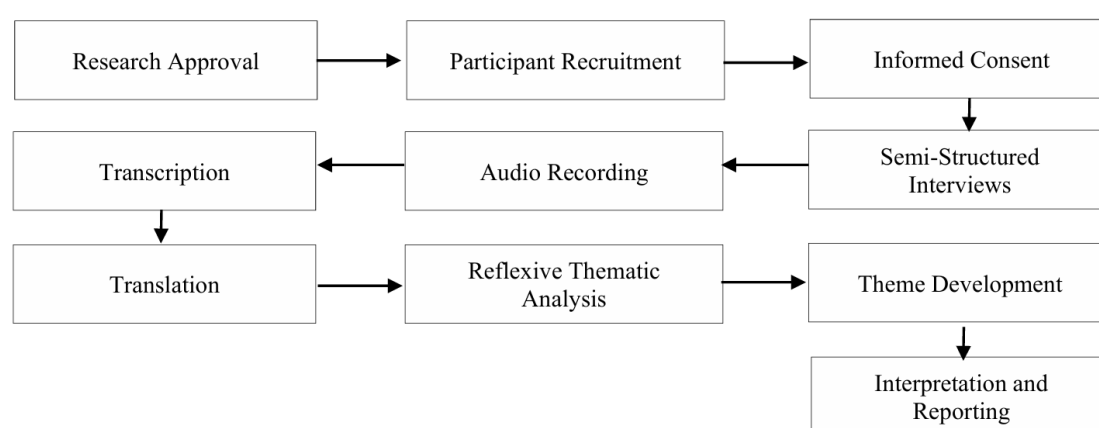


Figure 1. Overview of the Research Process

2.4. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis [46], [47]. The first author led familiarization, initial coding, and construction of the preliminary thematic framework. The co-authors reviewed coded extracts, candidate themes, theme boundaries, and alternative interpretations at successive stages. Differences were discussed against the Khmer transcripts, translated extracts, research questions, and developing

thematic map until an agreed interpretive account was reached. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, these discussions supported critical reflection and analytical challenge; they were not used to calculate inter-coder reliability or imply that coding was independent of researcher interpretation.

The analysis followed six iterative phases: (1) familiarization with the interview transcripts; (2) generating initial codes; (3) constructing preliminary themes; (4) reviewing and refining themes against the coded extracts and entire dataset; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final analytical narrative. Coding and theme development were undertaken through iterative movement between the coded data, emerging themes, and the complete dataset, which allowed themes to evolve through repeated engagement with the data and continuous comparison across participants. The final themes represented shared patterns and preserved the contextual richness of participants' leadership experiences.

2.5. Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was established following the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba [48]. Credibility was enhanced through the inclusion of participants from diverse leadership positions and administrative levels, enabling triangulation of perspectives across organizational contexts. Dependability was supported by maintaining a transparent analytical process and documenting coding decisions throughout the study. Confirmability was strengthened through iterative discussions among the research team and the maintenance of an audit trail that documented the progression from raw data to thematic findings. Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Approval of the study was obtained from the relevant authorities before fieldwork commenced. Participants received information about the study's purpose and procedures before providing informed consent. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality was maintained, and all identifying information was removed from interview transcripts and research outputs to protect participants' anonymity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Women's Pathways into Leadership

3.1.1. Personal Aspirations and Self-efficacy

Personal aspiration emerged as a key pathway into leadership. Participants consistently described leadership as beginning with a strong commitment to self-development, public service, and the willingness to assume greater responsibilities. Many did not wait for opportunities and actively sought to improve their knowledge, skills, and professional competence. One provincial council member explained:

"I accepted a leadership position because I did not want to depend on others. Therefore, I continuously worked to improve my knowledge and capabilities." (Provincial Council Member).

A deputy provincial governor similarly emphasized that personal determination was the most important factor in women's leadership progression:

"Whether a woman becomes a leader depends on her willingness to develop herself. Family circumstances and other factors matter, but personal determination is the most important." (Deputy Provincial Governor).

Other participants viewed leadership as an opportunity to contribute to society through public service. One woman official noted:

"I wanted to become a civil servant because I wanted to contribute to society and serve the people." (Woman Official).

These accounts suggest that participants perceived leadership as a developmental process driven by intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and commitment to public service. Confidence was not regarded as an innate characteristic but as something strengthened through continuous learning and workplace experience. This finding supports leadership development research emphasizing self-efficacy and experiential learning as important foundations of leadership capability [49], [50].

3.1.2. Family Encouragement and Support

Family encouragement and support emerged as important enablers of women's leadership pathways. Most participants described parents, spouses, and other family members as providing emotional encouragement, practical assistance, and confidence that enabled them to pursue leadership opportunities alongside their professional and family responsibilities. The participants identified family support as a key factor influencing their

leadership progression. Participants consistently emphasized that encouragement from parents motivated them to pursue education, career advancement, and leadership responsibilities. One participant reflected:

“My parents always encouraged me to continue my education and supported every opportunity that allowed me to develop myself. Their encouragement gave me the confidence to accept leadership responsibilities.” (Provincial Deputy Governor).

Support from spouses was equally important. Several participants explained that their husbands encouraged them to accept leadership positions and willingly shared domestic responsibilities, enabling them to fulfil demanding professional roles. As one participant noted:

“My husband has always encouraged me to take on greater responsibilities. Whenever I had to attend meetings or work outside the office, he willingly shared family responsibilities so that I could focus on my work.” (Department Deputy Director).

Family support also extended beyond encouragement to practical assistance and understanding during demanding periods of public service. One participant explained:

“Without my family’s understanding and support, especially in helping with household responsibilities, it would have been difficult for me to continue serving in a leadership position.” (Municipal Office Chief).

These findings demonstrate that family support functioned as both an emotional and practical resource throughout participants’ leadership journeys. Supportive family relationships strengthened participants’ confidence, reduced work-family pressures, and enabled them to pursue and sustain leadership responsibilities. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that support from spouses, parents, and other family members facilitates women’s leadership development by reducing domestic constraints and enabling career progression [4], [41]. It also aligns with Cambodia’s commitment to strengthening women’s leadership within sub-national administrations, which recognizes supportive family environments as an important enabling condition for women’s participation in public leadership [40].

3.1.3. Organizational Encouragement and Support

Organizational encouragement and support constituted another important pathway through which women progressed into leadership positions. Participants consistently described encouragement from supervisors, organizational trust, recognition of their capabilities, and opportunities for professional growth as important factors that strengthened their confidence and motivated them to accept leadership responsibilities. Participants did not attribute advancement to individual effort alone; they emphasized that supportive workplace environments enabled them to develop professionally and demonstrate their leadership potential. Participants frequently acknowledged the role of senior leaders in recognizing their abilities and encouraging them to pursue leadership positions. As one participant explained:

“My supervisor encouraged me to accept the position because he believed I was capable of doing the work. His trust gave me the confidence to take on greater responsibilities.” (Department Deputy Director).

Others emphasized that organizational support involved recognizing employees’ contributions and providing positive encouragement, which increased their confidence and willingness to assume greater responsibilities.

“When leaders recognize our work and encourage us, we become more confident and more willing to accept new responsibilities.” (District Office Chief).

Participants also emphasized that organizations facilitated leadership development by providing opportunities to learn through increasingly challenging assignments and responsibilities.

“The organization gave me opportunities to learn, develop my skills, and gradually take on greater responsibilities. Those opportunities prepared me for leadership.” (Municipal Woman Official).

Organizational support encompassed trust, recognition, and opportunities for professional development that enabled women to strengthen their leadership capability. Supportive workplace environments encouraged participants to assume greater responsibilities, demonstrate their competence, and progress into leadership roles. Similar patterns have been reported in previous studies, which emphasize the importance of supportive organizational climates, supervisory encouragement, and developmental opportunities for advancing women's leadership and career progression [12], [50], [51].

3.1.4. Institutional Opportunities under Decentralization

Participants recognized that Cambodia's decentralization reforms and gender-responsive policies had created a more enabling environment for women to assume leadership positions within sub-national administrations. Although participants consistently emphasized that leadership progression depended on personal determination, family encouragement, and organizational support, they also acknowledged that legal and policy frameworks had expanded opportunities for women to participate in leadership and decision-making.

Several participants underscored the important role of government policies in creating opportunities for women to enter leadership positions. One provincial council member explained:

"The Constitution guarantees equal rights for women and men, and this principle has encouraged more women to participate in leadership and decision-making." (Provincial Council Member).

Another participant emphasized that affirmative policies had increased women's opportunities to assume management positions:

"The government's policy requiring at least one female deputy governor has created more opportunities for women to become leaders." (Municipal Deputy Governor).

Participants also noted that recruitment and promotion policies had become more open and supportive of women's advancement.

"Today, women have greater opportunities because recruitment and promotion are more transparent, allowing us to compete fairly based on our abilities." (Municipal Woman Official).

These accounts suggest that decentralization reforms and gender-responsive policies have strengthened the institutional environment supporting women's leadership. Participants viewed legal protections, affirmative measures, and more transparent recruitment practices as creating opportunities that were less accessible to previous generations of women. This interpretation aligns with Cambodia's ongoing commitment to promoting women's leadership through the Strategic Plan to Increase the Number of Women in Management Positions in Administration at Sub-national Level (2024–2028) [40] and Neary Rattanak VI (2024–2028) [39]. It is also consistent with international evidence indicating that institutional reforms and supportive policy frameworks can expand women's access to leadership, particularly when complemented by organizational support and individual capability development [19], [22].

3.2. Developing Leadership Capability

3.2.1. Professional Competence

Professional competence emerged as the foundation of effective leadership. Participants consistently emphasized that women leaders developed professional competence through a combination of formal education, continuous learning, practical experience, and progressively greater workplace responsibilities. They did not view competence as an inherent attribute and described it as a capability cultivated through everyday administrative practice, problem-solving, and sustained engagement with public service.

One participant emphasized the importance of continuously improving knowledge and skills to meet the demands of leadership:

"A leader must continuously develop her knowledge and capabilities because learning is essential for leading others effectively." (Department Director).

Another participant stressed that practical experience was equally important for developing leadership capability:

"Knowledge alone is insufficient. Leaders also need practical experience to understand problems, make sound decisions, and guide others effectively." (Municipal Office Chief).

Participants further emphasized that effective leaders require a sound understanding of laws, regulations, and administrative procedures to make informed decisions, provide appropriate guidance, and respond effectively to emerging challenges. Professional competence was viewed as developing through practical experience and continuous learning and not through formal qualifications alone. Technical expertise, administrative knowledge, and experiential learning were perceived as mutually reinforcing dimensions of leadership capability. This interpretation aligns with leadership development scholarship, which conceptualizes leadership capability as evolving through workplace learning, experience, reflective practice, and organizational learning [24], [50], [52].

3.2.2. Professional Conduct and Interpersonal Relationships

Professional conduct and interpersonal relationships emerged as essential capabilities that enabled women to lead effectively within sub-national administrations. Participants emphasized that effective leadership extended beyond technical competence to include work discipline, professionalism, humility, respect for colleagues, cooperation, and positive attitudes. These qualities were regarded as fundamental for building trust, maintaining productive working relationships, and fostering a collaborative organizational environment. One provincial council member pointed out the importance of discipline and professionalism:

"I always uphold work discipline, time discipline, solidarity, and positive attitudes in carrying out my responsibilities." (Provincial Council Member).

Another participant emphasized that successful leaders should demonstrate humility and respect when working with others:

"A leader should remain humble, respect colleagues, and cooperate with everyone because good relationships make our work easier." (Provincial Division Director).

Participants connected professional conduct with practical problem-solving. One departmental office chief explained, *"When colleagues support one another and share their experiences, it becomes easier to solve problems and carry out our responsibilities effectively."* Mutual respect enabled women leaders to seek advice, exchange experience, reduce interpersonal friction, and coordinate responses to workplace challenges. The quotation does not document a specific conflict episode, so the interpretation is limited to the problem-solving function described by the participant. These relational capabilities are consistent with public leadership research [50], [52].

3.2.3. Commitment to Public Service

Commitment to public service emerged as a defining capability that enabled women leaders to sustain their leadership roles and contribute effectively to local governance. Participants consistently emphasized that leadership required more than professional competence and positive interpersonal relationships. It also demanded a strong sense of responsibility, perseverance, dedication, and a genuine commitment to serving citizens. These qualities were developed through practical experience and reinforced by participants' determination to fulfil their responsibilities despite increasing workloads and organizational challenges. One participant explained:

"Once we accept a leadership position, we must be fully committed to fulfilling our responsibilities and serving the public to the best of our ability." (Department Director).

Another participant emphasized the importance of perseverance in leadership:

"Leadership requires patience, commitment, and determination. Difficulties are inevitable, but we must continue working towards our goals." (District Deputy Governor).

Participants regarded commitment as the driving force that encouraged them to continue learning, adapt to changing responsibilities, and remain dedicated to improving public services. They viewed leadership as a long-term responsibility that required resilience, accountability, and a willingness to place organizational and community interests above personal considerations. Commitment therefore strengthened not only their capacity to lead but also their ability to sustain leadership effectiveness over time. This interpretation is consistent with public leadership studies, which identifies public service commitment as a key driver of leadership effectiveness, resilience, and sustained organizational contribution [1], [24].

3.3. Sustaining Women's Leadership in Organizational and Socio-cultural Contexts

3.3.1. Navigating Organizational and Socio-cultural Constraints

Women leaders described sustaining leadership as requiring continuous negotiation with both organizational and socio-cultural constraints. Participants explained that, despite increasing opportunities for women to assume leadership positions, they often encountered limited support from colleagues, unequal recognition of their capabilities, and gendered expectations regarding appropriate leadership roles. These challenges required women to demonstrate their competence consistently and adapt to institutional practices and workplace relationships. Several participants observed that women did not always receive support from colleagues, including other women.

"Women often do not support one another. Instead, there is jealousy and criticism among women themselves." (Provincial Council Member).

Another participant reflected on the discouragement encountered in the workplace.

"People criticize us and do not want to see us move forward." (Provincial Deputy Governor).

A department office chief further explained that women leaders were sometimes not regarded as equally capable.

"They do not really value us. They underestimate our abilities." (Departmental Office Chief).

Participants also noted that organizational practices frequently reflected traditional gender expectations. Women were commonly assigned responsibilities related to social affairs, women's affairs, human resources, and administrative functions, whereas strategic and decision-making responsibilities were more often associated with men.

"I am responsible for public services, administration, social affairs, women's affairs, and human resources." (Municipal Deputy Governor).

Another participant similarly observed:

"Whenever the work is related to gender, it is usually assigned to women." (Departmental Office Chief).

The comments concerning criticism and limited support among women require cautious interpretation. Participants referred to jealousy, criticism, and discouragement, but the interview evidence did not establish a single explanation for these experiences. One possible explanation is competition arising from the limited number of leadership opportunities available to women. Another is the internalization of gendered organizational norms, through which women, as well as men, may reproduce prevailing assumptions about women's suitability for leadership. Interpersonal tensions unrelated to gender may also have contributed to these experiences. Therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that women inherently undermine one another. Instead, they indicate that some participants experienced limited solidarity within organizational environments characterized by restricted leadership opportunities, gendered expectations, and unequal recognition. Further research involving women and men across different organizations is needed to distinguish the relative influence of competition, internalized gender norms, and ordinary workplace tensions. Despite these constraints, participants sustained their leadership roles through professional competence, supportive relationships, and continued engagement in their organizations [12], [14], [21].

3.3.2. Negotiating Gender Norms and Work–Family Responsibilities

Women leaders described balancing professional and family responsibilities as one of the most persistent challenges in sustaining leadership roles. Participants explained that, despite their leadership responsibilities, they continued to bear primary responsibility for household duties, childcare, and family caregiving. These expectations often created competing demands on their time and energy, requiring them to negotiate continuously between their professional and personal roles. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that traditional gender roles continue to shape women's leadership experiences by creating work–family tensions and limiting career advancement [53], [54]. One provincial council member described the challenge of balancing work with domestic responsibilities:

“After work, women still must go home to cook, shop, and take care of household responsibilities. Sometimes it is difficult to maintain punctuality because we must leave work early or arrive late due to family obligations.” (Provincial Council Member).

Another participant emphasized the difficulty of caring for children alongside leadership responsibilities:

“It became particularly difficult after having children because my family and I had to divide our time to care for them. The greatest challenge was managing time.” (Orovincial Deputy Governor).

For some women, family responsibilities directly affected career decisions. As one office chief explained:

“My husband was often jealous when I worked late or travelled for work. I also had to care for my children and my elderly parents. Only after many conversations and greater understanding from my family was I able to continue my work with more confidence.” (District Office Chief).

Participants also noted that leadership positions required personal sacrifices that sometimes influenced decisions about accepting promotion. One deputy office chief explained that assuming a higher leadership position would require sacrificing more personal and family time and continuing to fulfil expectations as both a mother and a wife. These findings indicate that sustaining women’s leadership involves more than overcoming organizational barriers. It also requires continuously negotiating traditional gender norms and family expectations that assign women primary responsibility for caregiving and household management. Nevertheless, participants demonstrated resilience by working with their families, adapting their responsibilities, and seeking understanding from spouses and relatives. Supportive family relationships therefore emerged not only as a facilitator of leadership entry but also as a critical resource for sustaining leadership over time. This interpretation aligns with international research showing that family support, equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities, and changing gender norms are essential for enabling women to pursue and sustain leadership careers [53], [54].

3.3.3. Organizational Support and Professional Networks

Participants consistently emphasized that sustaining leadership depended not only on individual capability but also on supportive organizational environments and strong professional relationships. Although competence and commitment enabled women to attain leadership positions, continued encouragement from supervisors, collaboration with colleagues, and opportunities to learn from professional networks strengthened their confidence and helped them manage increasingly complex leadership responsibilities. Participants described supportive workplaces as those that entrusted women with meaningful responsibilities, encouraged participation in decision-making, facilitated professional development, and fostered collaboration across organizational units. These conditions enabled women leaders to maintain their effectiveness despite organizational and socio-cultural challenges. One participant reflected on the importance of encouragement from senior leaders:

“The encouragement and trust of senior leaders gave me the confidence to accept greater responsibilities and continue developing my leadership capabilities.” (District Administrative Director).

Participants also explained that exchanging experiences with peers and other women leaders broadened their perspectives, strengthened their confidence, and enabled them to respond more effectively to emerging challenges. Professional networks therefore functioned not only as channels for knowledge sharing but also as sources of mutual encouragement, practical advice, and continuous learning. These findings suggest that sustaining women’s leadership is shaped by the interaction between individual capability and organizational context. Supportive leadership, collaborative workplace relationships, mentoring, and professional networks reinforce women’s confidence, expand leadership capability, and strengthen resilience throughout their careers. This interpretation aligns with leadership development research, which identifies mentoring, organizational support, and professional networks as important mechanisms for sustaining women’s leadership and advancing career development in public organizations [12], [21], [50].

3.4. Conceptual and Practical Implications

The findings demonstrate that women’s leadership within Cambodia’s sub-national administrations develops through an adaptive process shaped by the interaction of personal agency, supportive relationships, organizational environments, institutional opportunities, and socio-cultural contexts. Women entered leadership through personal aspirations, encouragement from family and organizational leaders, mentoring, and opportunities

created by decentralization. They subsequently developed leadership capability through professional competence, professional conduct, interpersonal relationships, and commitment to public service. Sustaining leadership required them to navigate organizational and institutional constraints, negotiate gender norms and work-family responsibilities, and draw upon organizational support and professional networks. Collectively, these findings form the basis of the Adaptive Women's Leadership Pathway presented in Figure 2, illustrating how women's leadership evolves within decentralized public sector organizations.

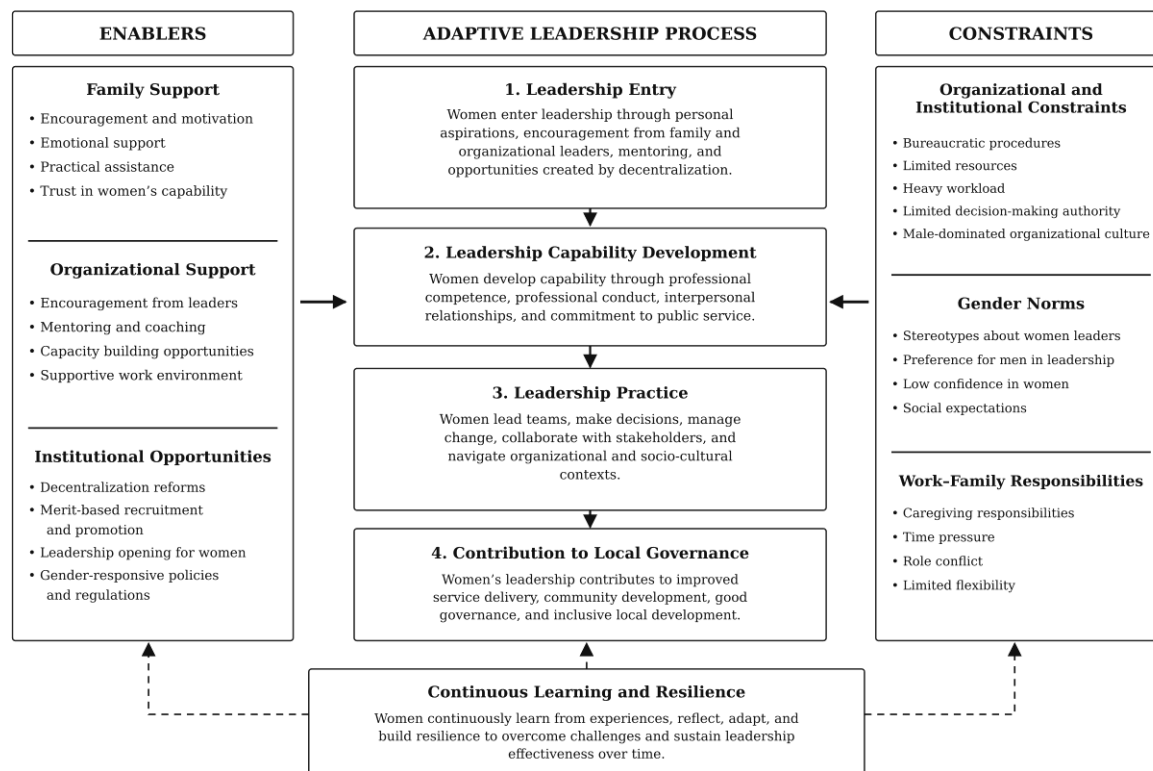


Figure 2. Adaptive Women's Leadership Pathway

The framework is developmental but not strictly linear. The downward arrows within the central pathway represent progression from leadership entry and capability development to leadership practice and contribution to local governance. The arrows from the enablers and constraints toward the central pathway indicate that leadership development is shaped by supportive and restrictive conditions. The dashed arrows extending from continuous learning and resilience toward the surrounding contexts show that women's accumulated experience, reflection, adaptation, and sustained leadership practice may gradually influence these conditions. Supportive supervisors, equitable assignments, professional networks, and family support can strengthen women's leadership development and resilience. Conversely, bureaucratic restrictions, gendered assignments, limited recognition, and work-family pressures can constrain leadership practice. Over time, sustained professional performance may increase organizational trust, normalize women's authority, widen access to consequential assignments, and strengthen support for other women. The framework therefore presents women's leadership as an adaptive process in which individual development occurs within organizational and socio-cultural conditions that women may also gradually influence through continuing leadership practice.

The findings also have important practical implications for public sector leadership development. Strengthening women's leadership requires interventions that extend beyond increasing the representation of women in management positions. Public organizations should establish leadership development programmes that integrate mentoring, coaching, experiential learning, and continuous professional development. Human resource management policies should promote equitable access to leadership opportunities, transparent succession planning, and supportive organizational cultures that recognize women's contributions and encourage inclusive decision-making. Strengthening professional networks and communities of practice would further facilitate knowledge sharing, peer learning, and mutual support among women leaders. At the policy level, decentralization reforms should continue to incorporate gender-responsive leadership strategies that reduce institutional barriers, promote merit-based leadership development, and enable women to balance professional and family responsibilities more effectively.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The study was conducted as a qualitative case study within Kampong Thom Province, and the findings may not fully represent women's leadership experiences across other provincial contexts in Cambodia. The analysis focused on the perspectives of women leaders and officials and did not include the views of male leaders or other organizational stakeholders. Furthermore, the findings reflect participants' sexperiences at a particular point in time and therefore do not capture how leadership pathways may evolve throughout different stages of women's careers. Future research could extend this work by conducting comparative studies across provinces or countries, employing mixed-methods approaches to validate and refine the proposed adaptive leadership pathway, and undertaking longitudinal studies to examine how women's leadership capabilities and career trajectories develop over time. Such research would further strengthen understanding of women's leadership in decentralized public administration and support the design of more inclusive leadership development policies and practices.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined women's pathways into leadership, the development of leadership capability, and the processes through which women sustain leadership roles within Cambodia's sub-national administrations. The findings demonstrate that women's leadership is an adaptive and contextually embedded process shaped by the interaction of personal agency, family encouragement, organizational support, institutional opportunities, and socio-cultural contexts. Leadership entry was facilitated by personal aspirations, mentoring, and opportunities created through decentralization. Leadership capability was subsequently strengthened through professional competence, professional conduct, interpersonal relationships, and commitment to public service. Sustaining leadership required women to navigate organizational and institutional constraints, negotiate gender norms and work-family responsibilities, and utilize supportive workplace relationships and professional networks.

The study contributes to women's leadership and public administration scholarship by advancing a contextually grounded understanding of leadership development within decentralized governance. It demonstrates that women's leadership extends beyond individual capability and is shaped by the dynamic interaction of organizational environments, institutional arrangements, and socio-cultural conditions. The proposed Adaptive Women's Leadership Pathway creates an interpretive framework that conceptualizes leadership development as a progressive process encompassing leadership entry, capability development, and leadership sustainability. In doing so, the study extends existing perspectives on women's leadership by integrating individual, organizational, and institutional dimensions within a single explanatory framework applicable to decentralized public sector settings.

The findings further underline the importance of creating organizational and policy environments that enable women to assume and sustain leadership roles. Strengthening mentoring systems, expanding professional development opportunities, promoting gender-responsive human resource management, and fostering supportive organizational cultures are essential for advancing women's leadership in public administration. Future research should examine the transferability of the proposed framework across different provincial and national contexts through comparative, mixed-methods, and longitudinal studies. Such research would refine understanding of women's leadership development and generate further evidence to inform leadership policies and practices in decentralized governance systems.

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