

The Muslim Woman as a Manager: A Comparative Study Between Religious and the Secular Muslim Women in Israel

Falasteen Hamdan¹

¹Girne American University (GAU)

Abstract

The current study examined the lived experiences of Muslim women managers in Israel to better grasp how their experiences of gender equality, discrimination and challenges in relation to leadership were shaped by their religious and secular identities. The study was motivated by the clear lack of representation of women in leadership roles, often leaving them feeling unqualified or unwelcome; further, the study sought to learn about the intersection of religiosity and women's access to leadership roles. The study contributes to the existing literature on intersectionality regarding the experiences of women leaders by comparing how the Muslim women leaders manage cultural and patriarchal barriers to their advancement. The findings presents new insights into how minority women leaders engage with gendered leadership in their respective minority society. A qualitative methodology corresponding to constructivist and interpretivist paradigms was employed for the data collection through semi- structured interviews and focus group discussions with a sample of 40 Muslim women managers (20 religious and 20 respondents who defined themselves as secular). Thematic analysis revealed distinctions in both religious and secular women experiences regarding management challenges, although both groups reported compounding stereotypes, organizational obstacles and selective staff attitudes. The general conclusion painted a dismal picture of the future of equitable leadership among Arab Muslim women in Israel, unless more culturally appropriate systemic developments, leadership programs and policies are created that incorporate both differentials of the socio-cultural resistance of gender and religious identity. Theoretically, this research study contributes to understanding intersectionality and its implication on policy-making in economic and organizational inclusiveness in society characterized by stratified work and gendered environments.

Keywords: Muslim women managers, gender equality, religious Muslim women, secular Muslim women, Arab society in Israel, workplace discrimination, gender stereotyping, leadership barriers, glass ceiling.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study aims to examine how Muslim women managers in Israel, both religious and secular, view and experience workplace equality, discrimination, gender stereotyping, and staff attitudes in their workplaces. Through a qualitative research approach, the study examines how the process of religiosity affects the difficulties and opportunities of these women and how impermeable cultural norms, institutional barriers, and social expectations inform their leadership positions. Through semi- structured interviews and focus group discussions with 40 participants, the study shows that while both groups are facing discrimination and the limits of accessibility to promotions of women, those relegated to the religious identity have a multi-layered experience of dual discrimination due to their visible religious identity whilst the secular Muslim women have faced much of their own particular biases but exclusively gender from the workplace.

Scope of this study explores the status quo of Arab Muslim women in management in Israel accountability as discussed in the public organizations context attributed to the intersecting framework of their gender, religious identity, and organizational culture. Key concepts identify: gender equality, which refers to the equal access to rights, responsibilities, and opportunities regardless of gender (Nanni, 2023); and gender stereotyping which is defined as the views or beliefs of generalized assumptions about the attributes associated with men and women (Little, 2024). In addition to these concepts, the study which cites Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) refers to the "glass ceiling" as the barriers that women face where these barriers do not have the same limits for men to formally advance or progress based on their male defined status. The work is specified within a sociocultural context of Arab society in Israel where patriarchy remains entrenched in the cultural habit of family structure (Meler & Marnin-Distelfel, 2023) aspects of religion framed around women's perceived roles in society (Koburtay et al., 2022). By highlighting the different lived experiences of the women on the religious vs secular spectrum, the study keys comparative contribution to the literature of gender and leadership in contexts that are minority and/or religiously conservative.

The study employed a qualitative method which is firmly rooted in the constructivist and interpretivist

paradigms. The focus of qualitative research is in the subjective construction of reality as indicated in the semi-structured interviews and group discussions with participants (Creswell, 2020; Fodouop & Arthur, 2024). Thematic analysis revealed substantial differences in the ways in which religious and secular women may see fairness in the workplace with the secular group being much more inclined to denounce genders discriminatory practices, whereas the religious participants contextualized the inequality based on the accepted potential for social cultural context of their daily experiences. Other pertinent findings identified double standards related to gender being gendered with decreasing outcomes for conclusions based on those with visible religiosity. Findings also discussed the differences between workplace praise and support within the workplace staff influenced by their religio-cultural norms of how they perceived the religio-cultural background and behaviors. The study concludes by recommending culturally sensitive leadership development programs, targeted mentorship, and policy reforms that recognize the dual burden of gender and religious identity. Ultimately, it calls for institutions to create inclusive environments that embrace diversity without reinforcing traditionalist constraints, offering a path forward toward equitable leadership representation for Arab Muslim women in Israel.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Arab Society in Israel

Arab society is a comprehensive and organized society, which dictates the individual's place in society and also his attitude towards others (Abu Alhaija et al., 2021). Arab society emphasizes harmony and the connection between man and his environment and especially considers interpersonal loyalty, mutual respect as the basis of human relations and giving respect and appreciation to the elders of the family. This is why the importance of the family and its relationships exceeds the importance of the surrounding society. This is expressed, among other things, in financial support, child care, help to family members, neighbors and others (Ali, 2021).

After the establishment of the State of Israel, the Arab sector underwent considerable changes. For example, the modernization process experienced by a minority that included a transition from a traditional society to a modern society (Freund et al., 2024). The transition to a modern society is characterized in the literature as a transition to an urban society, based mainly on industry, service centers, culture and consumption on a collective level. The Arabs in Israel suffer as individuals and as a group, disparities in various areas of life compared to the general population (such as education, language, land) (Chernichovsky et al., 2024)

From a sociological point of view, the Arab citizens of Israel are a different ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural and national minority, which wants to maintain its identity and is religiously and clannish heterogeneous (Amin, 2023). More than 83% of it is Muslim, 8.7% Christian and 8.3% Druze. This minority is geographically dispersed in four residential areas: the majority of Israel's Arab citizens live in the Galilee region (about 56% - Muslims, Christians and Druze). About 23% live in the triangle area, most of them Muslims. About 13% live in the Negev region, they are Muslim (Khalaily et al., 2023). About half of the residents of the Negev live in settlements that the State of Israel does not recognize as municipal and therefore they do not receive municipal services, education services, welfare, health or any other service within the settlement. The fourth area is the mixed cities where about 8% of the Arabs live (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

2.2 Structure of the Arab Family

The traditional Arab family is characterized by being patriarchal. Fathers are the most important source of authority in the family and serve as the main decision makers in the family. Examining the relationship between the individual and his family reveals that the individual's self-image is influenced by the family's good name and status, more than his personal achievements (Nijam-Achtilat, et al., 2018).

According to some scholars, the family structure of Arab families has remained unscathed by impacts of urbanization and industrialization (Al Gharaibeh, & Islam, 2024; De Bel-Air, Safar & Destremau, 2018). The families embody at least six identifying characteristics. They are extended, patrilineal, patriarchal, endogamous, patrilocal and sometimes polygamous (Asigri, et al., 2023). The Arab family boasts of having intact connections where small nuclear family units become intertwined entities via marriage (Hatem, 2018). All family members exist in cohesion. This extended nature of the family is beneficial to economic growth as all parties become actively involved in family ventures and thus, provide labor to the business (Samara, 2021). The primary focus of the family unit on the father is critical to the structure of the family

business. The father not only controls the family but also has influence in the extended affairs of the family. The authority of a man is respected by all and thus, women are subordinates in family functions (Hatem, 2018). This phenomenon is similar within the business units as men take on executive roles, while women offer supporting roles in the business.

In the analysis of Arab families' lifestyles in Israel, Al-Haj (2016) noted that the typical Arab family, although affected by the process of modernization, maintains some significant characteristics of its traditions. The family unit is hierarchic and patriarchal. Social norms prescribe different gender roles for the parents. The father bears the major social and economic responsibilities while the mother's domain is the house and the children. Parents are not expected to be their children's friends. They are expected to exert authority and demand respect (Sold et al., 2024). Love and affection are lavished on the children when they are infants but as they grow the parents, especially the father, adopt a tougher attitude, particularly to daughters. They expect their children to unconditionally obey, comply with, and fulfill their demands and expectations. When the need arises to ensure discipline and obedience, parents may resort to physical punishment (Al-Haj, 2016)

2.3 Arab Women in Israel

Arab women in Israel face many obstacles, which make it difficult for them to assume leadership positions some of the main obstacles, are connected to the characteristics of Arab society in Israel itself (Hajj-Yahya, 2017).

The Arab society is a patriarchal society with clear peasant roots, the power structure considers decision-making and leadership-positions as a male role. In particular, the elder men of the family are considered to hold the right of representation for the family as a whole (Khelghat-Doost & Sibly, 2020). The quality of leadership is viewed as a male attribute, and contrary to what the society expects from women. The patriarchal system's norms, attitudes, and beliefs act as control structures to preserve the existing order (Hajj-Yahya, 2017). Arab women are educated and socialized to act within the patriarchal system as a primary control system. While many Arab women's organizations claim women's rights as their goal, they nevertheless replicate the hierarchical system in which the women were educated (Shahriariyanehsari et al., 2024). Arab women are educated to concentrate on domestic issues rather than public issues, and to conform rather than oppose (Said-Foqahaa, 2011). Also, women often internalize a sense of their own inferiority, which limits their options and choices. Due to this education, women's perception of themselves and their abilities is an obstacle to their aspiring for leadership positions. Furthermore, the division of labor by gender is very rigid within Arab society in Israel (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Despite the fact that an increasing number of Arab women are working outside of their homes, the main responsibility for household tasks remains with them. This double work week is another obstacle to Arab women's aspiring for leadership positions. Finally, the lack of support systems for Arab women who wish to compete for leadership positions, and the limited opportunities for her (Hilal et al., 2024).

The Arab population in Israel follows unique social and cultural traditions that are largely similar to those found across the Arab world. At the same time, they live in a Western-style democratic country, which has influenced their way of life. Younger generations often adopt more progressive ideas and attitudes (Rosen & Miaari, 2025). The Arab community in Israel is undergoing a gradual social transformation, reflecting a mix of traditional and modern values. This group is diverse, with individuals situated at various points along a spectrum between modernity and conservatism (Darr, 2018). Politically, they continue to be recognized as an indigenous minority.

Indeed, in recent times, there have been positive changes in Arab women's status in Israel, mainly because of some legislative practices about women's workplace positions (Batshon, 2022). Unfortunately, even after a substantial increase in the number of women becoming highly educated and seeming to be able to work outside their households, it has not brought an increase in female roles employment wisely as well as economically.

Arab women in Israel continue to face significant discrimination due to the influence of deeply rooted traditional customs and societal norms (Gabaren, 2020). Gender roles in Israeli Arab society are shaped by two main contexts. First, the intra-cultural context reflects a patriarchal social model that enforces male superiority and female inferiority, often justified by religious practices, such as modesty in women's attire and restrictions on interactions with men. For example, young women in high schools are expected to conform to traditional precepts, particularly as they approach marriageable age. Many Arab Muslim families in Israel uphold strict social mechanisms to preserve these traditional values, often resisting modern influences (Zoabi & Savaya, 2016). Second, the inter-cultural context highlights the tension between Arab minority families and the dominant Jewish culture, which imposes discriminatory policies

and differing views on women's roles. While encounters with Western values and professional environments challenge the established social order in Arab society, they also often cause frustration and mental stress for Arab women (Elias et al., 2019).

Despite the challenges, only a small number of Arab women in Israel have managed to break through the "glass ceiling," which restricts their opportunities for professional recognition and social mobility (Khalid & Aftab, 2023). According to the Galilee Association, less than three percent of Palestinian Arab women in Israel occupy senior management positions (Darr, 2018). Gender discrimination and traditional norms often lead public sector employers to assign women roles associated with household and childcare services, aiming to shield them from competition with men. In the education sector, while women make up 58 percent of the workforce, male principals are often preferred, particularly in Druze and Bedouin communities, highlighting persistent gender inequalities (Frei-Landau & Avidov-Ungar, 2022). These disparities reflect a broader societal context where women must balance their efforts to engage with modern opportunities while adhering to Islamic traditions. This unique environment shapes family dynamics, lifestyle, perceptions of justice, and career trajectories in ways distinct from Western societies. Such gender segregation and cultural expectations perpetuate the invisibility of women in leadership roles and add layers of complexity to their professional advancement.

2.4 Barriers to Women in Top Leadership Positions

Arab women encounter a multitude of barriers in their journey to attaining the top leadership positions, due largely to cultural, social, organizational, and individual dimensions. In terms of social dimensions, the entrenched gender stereotypes and perceptions that men are suited for leadership based on ambition and assertiveness and that women primarily assume the role of caregiver limits women's identity as positional leaders, with both internal and external resistance to women's advancement (Lwamba et al., 2022; Peus et al., 2015). Thelma and Ngulube, (2024) document that societal expectations, such as prioritizing family duties and enduring prejudicial attitudes, contribute to the loneliness and professional burdens women face when assuming leadership roles. The concept "glass ceiling" provides an apt description for these unseen barriers (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Cultural and religious barriers are still significant obstacles to women's access to senior leadership opportunities in many Arab communities. Koburtay and his colleagues (2022) highlighted the fact that although Islam does not preclude women's involvement and participation in leadership, practices of patriarchal/masculine interpretations of religious texts - inextricably linked to deeply held tribal and cultural traditions - assert different gender stereotypes. Many of the female leaders advised that Islam acknowledges women's rights and recognition; however, societal norms; tribal customs; and male-dominant institutions, shape expectations and expectations of the nature of women's roles in public, as well as women as leaders, prioritizing them in their roles as domestic caretakers. Organizational barriers, including structural inequalities like hiring practices biased against women, a male-dominated decision-making culture, lack of mentoring for women, and unequal access to training and development, continue to impede women's leadership opportunities (Opara, 2025). Barriers include acceptance of the "old boys' club" mentality and the workload of administrative duties (Feeney, 2017). At the individual level, these barriers manifest as adhered to social beliefs, the fear of interpersonal failure or family disruptions, and general tendencies to minimize high-stress roles (Bondarchuk et al., 2023).

2.5 Gender Discrimination in Israel:

Gender discrimination against Arab women in Israel is a serious issue caused by cultural, religious, and systemic barriers (Jerjes-Loulou, 2023). Arab women often face challenges in education, employment, and leadership because of traditions that give more power to men and limit women's opportunities (Arar, 2017). Laws that mix civil and religious rules, especially in personal matters like marriage and divorce, often favor men and leave women at a disadvantage (Karazi-Presler & Sasson-Levy, 2022). In the job market, Arab women earn less, are less likely to work in high-paying jobs, and often have to work part-time because childcare options are limited. This makes many women financially dependent on men (Fuchs & Friedmann-Wilson, 2018). The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict adds to these problems, as security concerns push the needs of Arab citizens, especially women, to the side. While there are laws like the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Law to promote equality, cultural and institutional resistance has slowed progress. Some organizations are working to improve the situation, but real change is happening slowly (Cohen-Almagor & Maroshek-Klarman, 2022). Gender inequality in Israel presents a complex and dual reality, where progress in areas like education,

employment, and political representation contrasts sharply with persistent patriarchal norms and systemic discrimination. Women in Israel have achieved higher educational attainment compared to men and have increased their participation in the workforce, but they remain concentrated in lower-paying jobs and are significantly underrepresented in leadership positions (Ben Eliyahu et al., 2024). Cultural and religious traditions, particularly in personal laws regulated by religious courts, contribute to maintaining women's subordinate status. For example, religious norms often dictate women's roles in marriage and public life, limiting their autonomy. Additionally, the intersectionality of gender with ethnicity and religion exacerbates disparities, as Arab women face both gender- and ethnicity-based discrimination, resulting in lower employment rates and wages compared to Jewish women. Furthermore, domestic violence remains a critical issue, reflecting the entrenched power imbalance between genders. Although feminist movements in Israel have made strides in advocating for women's rights, challenges remain in dismantling deeply rooted social and legal structures that perpetuate inequality (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2019).

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The current study uses a qualitative research methodology to investigate the perceptions and lived experiences of religious and secular Muslim women managers in Israel. A qualitative methodology was employed as it can provide good insight into complex socially embedded phenomena, such as gender stereotyping, discrimination, and obstacles to leadership, that are best examined through their own narratives and perspectives. As Creswell (2020) states, qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining issues related to identity and culture and social meaning-making. Furthermore, Feely (2019) notes that qualitative inquiry helps the rich understanding of participants' subjective realities and how they interpret their positions and situations in their socio-cultural space. The interpretivist and constructivist paradigms that inform this research situate the study by asserting that reality is socially constructed and formed through individual experiences (Fodouop & Arthur, 2024), which have lent themselves for examining religion, gender, and work-based leadership.

For data collection, this study had two main forms of data collection, semi-structured in-depth and focus-group discussion. Semi-structured interviews were selected as a means of data collection that would be flexible enough to explore the study's specific research questions while allowing participants' freedom to narrate their personal perspectives and experiences regarding workplace interactions, gender norms, and religious identities (Dunwoodie et al., 2023). Focus-group discussions provide an interactive dialogue or group reflection that enables shared and separate perspectives to emerge (Mwilongo, 2025). This mixed-method qualitative strategy enables participants to provide richer data and triangulate its findings for better validity (Dawadi et al., 2021). The interviews were developed from the research objectives and pre-existing literature on gender, leadership, and discrimination in Arab society (Peus et al., 2015; Khelghat-Doost & Sibly, 2020). All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and were subsequently organized thematically to identify patterns and divergences in the religious and secular experiences.

The target population consisted of Muslim women managers in Israel. A purposive sample of 40 participants was selected from that population group: 20 religious Muslim women managers and 20 secular Muslim women managers. The sample of forty was determined to achieve the aims of balance and sufficient data to examine and compare the lived experiences of women from both orientations of religion. Purposive sampling selected participants with appropriate experience and knowledge so the focus was on individuals who could provide dense descriptive accounts, relevant to the research objectives (Bouncken et al., 2025). The study considered geographical diversity to represent diversity of belief system, socio-political context, and organizational environment within the country of Israel. All participants were provided with confidentiality and anonymity, the research adhered to ethical guidelines including informed consent, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. This methodologically robust approach enables the study to address its central research question on how religion intersects with gender to shape the leadership experiences of Arab women in Israeli society.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the key findings of the study, which explores the experiences of religious and secular Muslim women in managerial roles in Israel, particularly in relation to gender equality, stereotyping, discrimination, workplace advancement, and staff perceptions. Through the voices of the participants, the themes reveal how religiosity intersects with gender to shape both opportunities and obstacles in

leadership contexts.

Theme 1: Diverging Perceptions of Gender Equality Between Religious and Secular Muslim Women

Participants had different perspectives regarding gender equality depending on their lived experiences regarding levels of religiosity. Secular Muslim women frequently expressed dissatisfaction with unequal treatment when it came to decision-making positions. One secular manager said, "I do twice as much work to prove that I deserve to be in this seat, yet my male counterparts are just 'natural leaders'" To the contrary, some religious women indicated that they perceived unequal treatment because of cultural norms, not because of overt stereotypes. One religious participant said, "I do not expect myself to be treated the same as a male in this field, it is just not how our community operates." These perceptions were similar to the work spreading across findings with Hajj-Yahya (2017). They showed that the ideology of gender equality within Arab society is mediated by religious and tradition codes that define the ascribed roles for women. For example, Arar (2017) points to the reality that religious Arab women accept unequal norms as a by-product of being socialized in a patriarchal, religious society. Given the data, while both individuals accepted norms of inequality, it seemed secular women were more often likely to more overtly act against those inequities while religious women held an implicit acceptance of these norms (e.g., viewed it as accepted in their culture).

Theme 2: Gender Stereotyping and Role Expectations in Managerial

Positions

Respondents frequently relayed the influence of gender biases on their perceptions of authority and roles. One secular manager provided a compelling story, saying, "I am seen as aggressive when I speak firmly; a man when he does this is just being assertive." Secular and religious managers largely articulated similar experiences, but religious managers felt their religious appearance provided an additional layer of unwanted expectations. "I wear a hijab and before I even say anything, people are judging me and assuming I'm conservative and that I am not assertive enough," explained one religious respondent. These experiences illustrate the gendered double standards described in Little (2024) who stated that decisiveness and ambition, both of which are leadership traits, are regarded as masculine, placing women in leadership roles at a disadvantage. Koburtay and others (2022) similarly argue that stereotypical orientations and interpretations of Islamic roles for women, often inhibit women in Islamic contexts from forming identities of modern leadership. Therefore, both religious and secular women leaders are grappling with a minefield of cultural expectations that limit their leadership.

Theme 3: Differential Experiences of Discrimination Based on Religious

Identity and Gender

The intersection of religion and gender exacerbated some religious Muslim women's experience of discrimination in the workplace. A participant who wore the hijab described this by saying, "I interviewed once, and someone told me a headscarf might be uncomfortable for clients." In contrast, secular women did not experience as much religious discrimination, but experienced gender discrimination. "They do not care that I am Muslim; they care that I was a woman trying to lead a man's world" one secular participant explained. Similarly, Frei-Landau and Avidov-Ungar (2022) noted that religiously identifiable Muslim women experience less discrimination for being women and more discrimination as women by virtue of their employable religious identity. Additionally, Cohen-Almagor and Maroshek-Klarman (2022) argued that structural and cultural opposition to legal equality kept workplace discrimination very much alive for Arab women. The above descriptions help solidify that while all Muslim women managers had biases levelled against them, religious women further experienced more overlapping biases.

Theme 4: Barriers to Advancement in the Workplace

Both religious and secular women acknowledged structural and cultural obstacles that thwart their progress. A secular manager said, "There's no mentoring, no women's training programs. The leadership pipeline is dry, for us." Religious women participants mentioned family obligations and community expectations that limited their mobility. One expressed, "I could not take a promotion in Tel Aviv because my family would not allow me to live alone there". These sentiments are echoed in the findings in Opara (2025), who found that barriers to Arab women's access to leadership positions include the absence of mentoring, gendered pathways, and community and family expectations. Moreover, Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) identified familial expectations and institutional bias that keep the "glass ceiling" upheld in patriarchal societies. The study's findings show that barriers to advancement are

shaped by broader community and family expectations along with the barriers based in the structures of the workplace particularly around religious women.

Theme 5: Staff Attitudes Toward Religious vs. Secular Muslim Female Managers

Participants commented that staff perceptions were often dictated by the level of religiosity. The religious women were often considered too conservative to lead. One participant said, "They think I'm too soft or too submissive to do the tough stuff—simply because of a prayer I said on a break." Secular women sometimes experienced distrust from more traditional staff. "Some staff say I'm too modern or I forgot about my culture," said one secular manager. Rosen and Miaari (2025) give an overview of the cultural balancing act inherent in leadership, with Arab women leaders regarded through both religious and secular filters. They found that women who are perceived to be too conservative or too liberal could find themselves professionalized in terms of their respective norms (Rosen & Miaari, 2025). These staff attitudes are informal barriers that impact the authority and effectiveness of Muslim female managers, regardless of their actual leadership style.

5. DISCUSSION

This research examined the lived experiences of both secular and religious Muslim women managers in Israel, specifically how they interpret and deal with issues of gender equality, discrimination, stereotyping, and attitudes in the workplace. It was noted that while both groups of women face structural and cultural constraints, the context and intensity of those experiences differed according to their religious affiliation. Specifically, the way that broader institutional norms, social expectations, and cultural dynamics continue to shape the role of Arab women in leadership will factor into their experiences.

A major finding of the research presented a stark contrast between the perceptions of gender equality by secular Muslim and religious Muslims women managers. The secular women participants identified their unequal treatment as a fundamental issue, clearly frustrated with the reality of needing to work harder than their male colleagues to be acknowledged; this contrasted sharply with the religious women who automatically identified the gender disparity as reflective of social selection rather than a significant issue of inequality. These contrasting attitudes are consistent with previous work by Nurchasanah and Basit (2025) that noted that for religious Muslim women, gender discrimination becomes acceptable if it reflects cultural norms, leading religious women to internalize patriarchal attributes. Tailassane (2019) contended that the socialization process in conservative Arab families legitimized men's leadership, especially for religious women. As such, women's religiosity would appear to be a factor for their expectation of equality, as well as their response to some forms of workplace inequality. A second key finding was the existence of gendered stereotyping, which was experienced in both religious and secular ways by participants. Secular women were often held to double standards in assertiveness and display of leadership behavior, while religious women experienced worldly scrutiny because of their public displays of religion (e.g., wearing a hijab); Moreover, we know that stereotyping is exacerbated or fueled by some cultural expectations. The document by Chikwe and others (2024) reminds us that women in a leadership position will often be judged more harshly than similarly performing males and their work will often be influenced by cultural expectations. Koburtay and others (2022) goes further by suggesting Islamic and tribal traditions will often amplify gendered assumptions that counter more restrained views of a figure similar to religious women (e.g., those wearing hijabs) as an authoritative leader (Koburtay et al., 2022). These describe a situation where Muslim women are encountering gendered with religious stereotypes—but notably there is a compounding case where religious women receive biases compounded with gendered/religious profiling.

The study also captures the way religious identity intersects with gender and provides different experiences of discrimination. Religious participants experienced discrimination, in part, concerning their observable religious markers. This was especially true of the hiring and promotion context. Secular participants, on the other hand, experienced discrimination centered more on their gender than their religion. See Freilanda and Avidov-Ungar (2022) who explain that religious Muslim women in Israel experience barriers to entering leadership positions, often because of stereotypes regarding their religiosity and incompatibility with contemporary professional leadership roles. Cohen-Almagor and Maroshek-Klarman (2022) note that despite legal protections afforded all women, cultural and institutional resistance has made access for Arab women to leadership positions precarious, especially on account of their religious

identity. Overall, the findings suggest that when identity is intersectional (as experienced by Arab religious Muslim women), marginalization will be compounded at work, especially in religiously oriented, organizational contexts.

Barriers to advancement emerged as a general challenge for all participants, but with nuanced differences. Secular women referred to barriers such as a lack of institutional support in the form of little mentorship and some barriers to leadership development. Religious women experienced those same institutional barriers and barriers imposed by their community, such as family restrictions related to mobility and professional/public work. This aligns with the work of Opara (2025), focused on why structural inequalities and lack of women-friendly pathways to be leaders contribute to women's career advancement inequities. Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) outline that "glass ceiling" powerlessness occurs in patriarchal cultures as traditional gender roles are maintained, and women have family roles, combined these shapes barriers to advancement. We have also contributed to these understandings by providing context to barriers that have different 'color and nuance' based on different aspects of women's religiosity. Staff attitudes toward female managers also shaped by a women's religious identity. Religious women were more likely to be perceived as passive, or had limited capacity for leadership as a result of the cultural assumptions pertaining to their religion. Secular women were sometimes viewed as 'the deviant' through the lens of those same traditional cultural values, leading to mistrust or alienation from more conservative colleagues. This links with Rosen and Miaari's (2025) findings that Arab women in Israel experience multiple layers of judgement, and where religiosity and modernity can be each their own source of prejudice. These informal workplace beliefs add to the barriers to women's effective leadership because they shape how women are viewed and subsequently supported or not, by their fellow leaders and colleagues.

6. CONCLUSION

This research investigated the lived experience of Muslim women managers in Israel with a comparative study of the experiences of religious and secular women as they both navigated gender inequality, stereotyping, discrimination, and workplace attitudes. In summary, while the experiences of the two groups have the same systemic structural issues rooted in patriarchal norms and institutional structural issues, the experiences of the two groups were structurally different. For instance, religious women more often practiced traditional methods and role expectations while also having the need to navigate a layering effect. Secular women generally confronted or made meaning of discriminatory decisions and practices. For both groups, they had to reckon with gender stereotypes, restrictive cultural norms, and limited opportunities for leadership. However, the layering of gender and religious identity trajectory between groups led to multiple distinct pathways for women to achieve leadership or advancement, of which they were unequal.

A synthesis of the main points is that institutional barriers reproduce informal social expectations based on socially defined, and perceived views of staff. The data supported past studies, including that of Freilanda and Avidov-Ungar (2022), and Cohen-Almagor and Maroshek-Klarman (2022), that compound the lack of status for Arab women, especially in sectors of perceived religious prominence. The "glass ceiling" continues to exist for women, whether they are religious or secular, but takes radically different forms—based on the framing of gender roles influenced by beliefs, family structures, and social values. In addition, the absence of organizational support, mentorship, and infrastructure that incorporates women into gender-inclusive leadership trajectories limit their advancement as leaders. This research identifies how religion and gender intersect and help illuminate how leadership is both constrained and constructed socially and culturally within the minority Arab communities in Israel.

Despite understanding these reflections, there remain a number of questions and challenges. Future research should focus on how institutions can create policy that is more egalitarian, and flexible around the unique differences of what leadership looks like under specific identities or expressions of being an Arab woman. It would also be of merit to examine how younger generations of Muslim women, with a potential hybrid identity embracing modern and traditional Islamic principles, are reshaping the workplace and work-related cultures. There is also scope to compare perceptions of women in leadership, women in education, and women in business sectors to understand how gender equality can exist in a patriarchal organizational structure. With that in mind, it is clear to say that culturally responsive practices and frameworks that support both religious and secular women without imposing expected or authoritative cultural practices or modelling social or cultural reforms toward gender equity, cannot

provide robust and sustainable paths to leadership for Muslim women. Finally, and decidedly importantly, sustained equity cannot arise without deliberate attempts to change structural policies and practices through which organizational practices and norms are developed around an understanding of identity.

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