

Benchmarking women's leadership programs in Jordan: aligning national practices with international competency frameworks

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Abstract

Purpose – This research identifies gaps in women's leadership programs in Jordan by benchmarking them against international best practices, aiming to develop more gender-responsive and contextually relevant training initiatives.

Design/methodology/approach – The study combines interviews with 20 community leaders and a desk review of 48 international competency frameworks, 21 Jordanian leadership programs and 23 international programs.

Findings – Jordanian programs tend to emphasize management skills while underrepresenting strategic thinking, emotional intelligence and cultural intelligence. Interviews highlighted the importance of communication, public speaking and mentoring, while benchmarking emphasized client orientation and leading change. Both sources agreed on the importance of accreditation, mentoring, and networking, though with different justifications. Cultural norms, high costs and a shortage of qualified trainers emerged as key barriers.

Practical implications – The study offers actionable insights for policymakers and training providers to improve women's leadership programs by aligning them with international standards while tailoring them to local needs.

Social implications – Strengthening leadership programs for women can promote gender equality, increase women's representation in decision-making roles and support inclusive socio-economic development.

Originality/value – This study offers a contextualized analysis of Jordanian leadership programs, benchmarked against global frameworks and provides culturally relevant recommendations that contribute to the field of women's leadership development.

Keywords Leadership, Competency frameworks, Gender-responsive training, Leadership development in MENA, Gender, Jordan

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Women remain underrepresented in senior leadership roles across all industries (WEF, 2023). Various factors contribute to this disparity, including different leadership-career aspirations (Carbajal, 2018), gender inequality and bias (Carbajal, 2018; Kalaitzi *et al.*, 2019; Ely *et al.*, 2011), work-life conflict (Ramseook-Munhurrin *et al.*, 2025; Khader *et al.*, 2022; Roth *et al.*, 2016; Kalaitzi *et al.*, 2019), lack of transparent recruitment and selection process (Roth *et al.*, 2016), lack of equal career opportunities (Kalaitzi *et al.*, 2019), stereotypes (Ramseook-Munhurrin *et al.*, 2025; Khader *et al.*, 2022; Kalaitzi *et al.*, 2019), Limited access to networks and sponsors (Ely

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et al., 2011), lack of confidence (Kalaitzi *et al.*, 2019), and lack of mentorship (Roth *et al.*, 2016; Carbajal, 2018). Further, women's under-representation is often linked to a lack of the personality traits and skills needed for decision-making roles (Ely *et al.*, 2011).

In Jordan, women hold top managerial positions in only 3.1% of firms, placing the country 126th out of 146 on the Global Gender Gap Index (WEF, 2023). Studies have identified key barriers to women's career advancement, including work-life balance challenges, systemic gender inequalities, and, most notably, cultural and social norms (Ensour *et al.*, 2017; Khader *et al.*, 2022). Applying a multi-level lens (Khan *et al.*, 2024), these challenges can be categorized into institutional, organizational, and individual barriers. At the institutional level, deeply rooted cultural and societal norms, including those influenced by religious and traditional values, create a restrictive environment for women's public participation (Ensour *et al.*, 2017; Khader *et al.*, 2022). Organizationally, a lack of transparent recruitment processes, a shortage of female mentors and sponsors, and entrenched male-dominated networks systematically hinder women's progression (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Roth *et al.*, 2016). At the individual level, challenges such as work-life conflict and a lack of confidence are prevalent (Kalaitzi *et al.*, 2019; Khader *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, Khan *et al.* (2024) highlight a more insidious barrier they term the "internalization of subjugation," whereby women may feel pressured to adopt masculine leadership styles to be seen as legitimate, a phenomenon that echoes the constraints of traditional, gender-neutral leadership models.

However, recent research highlights that women in the region are not merely passive subjects of these norms but active agents who develop strategies to navigate them. For example, Tlaiss and Khanin (2023) identify two distinct forms of agency among Saudi senior managers: crafty agency, where women strategically work within traditional expectations (e.g. amplifying family commitment, enacting respectful femininity), and determined agency, where they challenge norms through self-promotion and competitive professionalism. These findings illustrate that women's leadership strategies are fluid and interconnected, shaped by their interaction with the gendered context—an insight that is critical for designing leadership development programs that are truly responsive to local realities.

In developing countries like Jordan, efforts to promote gender equity depend heavily on effective training programs. Lack of qualifications and inadequate training have been cited as major obstacles to women's career progression (Khader *et al.*, 2022). Noreen (2015) argues that in such contexts, women's empowerment remains elusive without structured, high-quality training opportunities.

Although women demonstrate strong potential for leadership, a fundamental shift in development approaches is needed to increase their representation in senior roles (Fortier and Murray, 2017). However, the effectiveness of many leadership programs has come into question. Fortier and Murray (2017) identified the absence of a clear theoretical framework as a key limitation in program design, hindering the delivery of robust training.

Despite widespread acknowledgment of cultural and social norms as barriers to women's advancement (Ensour *et al.*, 2017; Abuhussein and Koburtay, 2021; Khader *et al.*, 2022), most existing programs lack cultural sensitivity. This underscores the need to design training that not only incorporates global best practices but is also adjusted to the Jordanian cultural context.

Accordingly, this research addresses the urgent need for a culturally responsive leadership training model tailored to Jordan. It aims to identify existing gaps in women's leadership programs, with a focus on integrating global standards and local relevance.

Literature review

Leadership is commonly defined as the process of influencing a group of individuals to achieve a shared vision (Northouse, 2016; Robbins and Judge, 2019). It was also defined as a communicative process of social influence (Ruben *et al.*, 2017). Maxwell states that leadership is influence, nothing more, nothing less (Suciu *et al.*, 2023). Although leadership can arise from a formal position of authority, not all managers are leaders, and not all leaders are

managers. Holding a formal organizational position does not guarantee effective leadership. In fact, informal leadership -the ability to influence others outside of formal structures-can be as crucial, or even more important, than formal leadership (Robbins and Judge, 2019).

While traditional leadership theories have focused on inherent traits or universal behaviors, contemporary scholarship emphasizes leadership as a set of developable competencies situated within specific contexts (Ruben, 2019; Ngayo Fotso, 2021). This shift reframes leadership development from a one-size-fits-all model to a strategic process of identifying and cultivating the specific competencies required for effectiveness in a given environment.

Effective leadership involves traits and behaviors, but these alone do not guarantee success; contextual factors also play a crucial role (Ruben, 2019). While some leaders naturally exhibit traits like extraversion and self-confidence, anyone can develop them through training (Robbins and Judge, 2019). Structured initiatives—courses, workshops, job rotation, coaching, and mentoring—enhance leadership capabilities, with mentorship particularly critical in the early stages of women’s careers (Robbins and Judge, 2019; Ramseook-Munhurrun *et al.*, 2025).

Ely *et al.* (2011) highlight that becoming a leader is a dynamic process that involves internalizing leadership qualities into one’s identity. Training programs play a vital role in facilitating this process by engaging individuals in tasks associated with leadership, thus shaping their leadership identity and effectiveness.

When designing leadership training, competencies should be framed within a broader model. A leadership competency combines knowledge, skills, and abilities essential for effective leadership and forms the basis for selection, development, and performance management (Calhoun *et al.*, 2008). The term “competency” highlights that both understanding (knowledge) and enactment (skill) are crucial (Ruben, 2006, 2019). Knowledge refers to understanding a concept, while skill is the ability to apply it effectively. The “knowing–doing gap” describes cases where theoretical understanding does not translate into action, though some may demonstrate skill without full understanding. Both facets can be developed through experience or leadership programs.

Leadership training programs are usually guided by established frameworks that outline the required competencies. A competency framework is a valuable tool for understanding and developing leadership competencies (Ruben, 2019). Ruben argues that these frameworks inform program design, assessment, self-reflection, and ongoing improvement. *Ruben’s Competency-Based Leadership Framework underpins this study and guides its evaluation of Jordanian programs.*

Developing leadership competencies is essential for organizations aiming to prepare their next generation of leaders (Syahierah *et al.*, 2017). They set clear standards for effective leadership behavior (Conger and Ready, 2004), help identify leadership potential, and inform program design (Sherman *et al.*, 2007). Ngayo Fotso (2021) further emphasizes that 21st-century leadership requires integrating a strong concern for people, digitalization, innovation, and the public good.

Several attempts were made to identify core competencies needed for women. In this context, Esser *et al.* (2018) stress the need to develop a framework that incorporates the key competencies required of female leaders in male domain industries. Women leaders can attend both women-only and mixed-sex programs to achieve different objectives (Ely *et al.*, 2011). Mixed-sex programs strength lie in integrating women into the organizational network (Debebe *et al.*, 2016), however, gender-responsive programs promote shared leadership development, who understand the value and need for shared leadership. Johnson *et al.* (2023) claim men must be thoughtfully integrated into women leadership programs, so they have the opportunity to listen and learn from their female colleagues. They can then take that knowledge and reflect on how they can collaborate to make the workplace more equitable. However, programs that aim to target both genders frequently overlook the specific needs of women, and in some cases, could more effectively cater to the unique requirements of men (UNDP, 2014).

Women's leadership programs emphasizing relational connectedness, interactive learning, and practical and philosophical development have the greatest impact (Brue and Brue, 2016). It was found that participants in women-only programs tend to have overwhelmingly positive evaluations of their experiences, citing changes such as greater confidence, sense of agency, expanded networks, skill development, and self-awareness (Debebe *et al.*, 2016). They also maximize unique learning strategies of collaboration while developing role models, networks, mentors, and managing the authenticity and balance of women being true to themselves (Brue and Brue, 2016).

Furthermore, women-only programs allow participants to interact with similar others to give the support, validation, and social comparison they need as they try to know themselves and the leadership roles they want to play (Ely *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, some research suggests that gendered pressures persist in mixed-sex settings and this in turn inhibits safety for women and suppresses their capacity to explore the gendered aspects of their leadership experiences (Debebe *et al.*, 2016).

However, a significant critique in the literature is that many leadership frameworks and programs remain gender-neutral in design, thereby overlooking the distinct sociological and organizational challenges women face (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Debebe *et al.*, 2016). For women, the progression into leadership often involves navigating identity tensions, systemic biases, and a relative lack of sponsorship. Consequently, programs focused narrowly on standard managerial competencies may be insufficient. This gap is particularly evident in mixed-sex settings, where gendered pressures can inhibit safety and suppress women's capacity to explore the gendered aspects of their leadership experiences (Debebe *et al.*, 2016).

This critique provides a strong rationale for women-specific programs. Women's leadership development often requires a "safe space" to explore identity, suggesting that competencies related to self-awareness, resilience, and building networks are fundamental (Debebe *et al.*, 2016). Programs designed with this in mind—those that address relational connectedness, interactive learning, and philosophical development—have the greatest impact (Brue and Brue, 2016). These environments allow women to interact with peers who provide crucial support and validation as they forge their leadership identities (Ely *et al.*, 2011).

However, women's leadership development programs may unintentionally limit development by prioritizing gender over other identities (Debebe *et al.*, 2016). It is argued that these programs should adopt an intersectional perspective to enable women leaders to examine the complexities of their leadership dilemmas holistically (Debebe *et al.*, 2016; Johnson *et al.*, 2023).

While the need for gender-responsive programs is established, a significant theoretical and practical shortfall persists. Many leadership competency frameworks remain gender-neutral, overlooking the distinct sociological and organizational challenges women face (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Debebe *et al.*, 2016). This is particularly critical in contexts like the Middle East, where women's career advancement involves several barriers (Khan *et al.*, 2024). At the individual level, women may experience an "internalization of subjugation," feeling pressured to adopt masculine leadership norms (Khan *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, women exercise diverse and multifaceted strategies, from "crafty agency" within traditional expectations to "determined agency" that challenges norms (Tlaiss and Khanin, 2023). Effective leadership development cannot rely on a single rigid model; it must support diverse leadership identities and strategies. This study addresses this gap by developing a competency framework that is gender-responsive and contextually tailored, supporting the full spectrum of agency among women leaders in Jordan.

Theoretical foundation

This study is grounded in Ruben's (2006, 2019) Competency-Based Leadership Framework. A central concept is the knowing-doing gap—the disconnect when leadership knowledge

does not translate into behavior. The framework shifts leadership development from a content-driven approach to one that assesses whether individuals can enact competencies in real contexts.

The framework suits this research because it moves beyond inventories of program content and enables a diagnostic evaluation of whether leadership programs promote behavioral change. This is particularly relevant for women in Jordan, whose leadership unfolds within multiple contextual constraints. The internalization of subjugation (Khan *et al.*, 2024)—where women feel pressure to adopt masculine norms or suppress authentic leadership identities—represents a behavioral challenge, not simply a knowledge gap. Programs that provide leadership concepts without offering space for reflection, practice, and identity development (Debebe *et al.*, 2016) may intensify this gap.

The framework also aligns with recent discussions on women's strategic agency. Tlaiss and Khanin (2023) note that women employ forms of agency such as crafty agency (working within traditional expectations) and determined agency (challenging them). Both require the combination of conceptual understanding and behavioral competence. A competency-based framework helps evaluate whether leadership programs equip women with the capabilities needed to navigate gendered and hierarchical environments.

Competency-based models also offer a way to structure and assess leadership development initiatives. They allow analysts to examine whether programs emphasize self-awareness, emotional intelligence, communication, influence, adaptability, and ethical judgment alongside managerial content, reflecting contemporary views of leadership as relational and context-dependent.

Ruben's Competency-Based Leadership Framework therefore provides a solid foundation for analyzing women's leadership development. It frames leadership as both cognitive and behavioral, highlights relevant gendered and cultural dynamics, and offers a structure to assess whether programs foster genuine behavioral change. This framework informs the study's analytical approach and its evaluation of leadership competencies and development practices in the Jordanian context.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, comparative case study design. Data collection was conducted between December 2022 and May 2023.

Research design and paradigm

Informed by an interpretivist paradigm, the study utilized a multi-phase, comparative case study design. Ruben's (2006, 2019) Competency-Based Leadership Framework, provided the conceptual lens for the entire research process.

Sampling strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed as follows:

- (1) *International Competency Frameworks* ($n = 48$): Selected based on: (1) development/endorsement by a recognized international institution (e.g., UN agencies, multinational corporations, academic bodies); (2) public availability of detailed documentation; (3) explicit focus on leadership competencies.
- (2) *International Leadership Programs* ($n = 23$): Selected using comparable criteria to represent leading global models from academia, civil society, and policy institutions.
- (3) *Jordanian Leadership Programs* ($n = 21$): Included if they: (1) explicitly targeted women's leadership; (2) operated at the national or institutional level; (3) provided adequate documentation for assessment.

- (4) *Key Informants (n = 20)*: Community leaders from politics, academia, civil society, business, and public service were purposively selected to provide practitioner perspectives and enable data triangulation.

While purposive sampling ensured depth and relevance, it is important to note its limitations. The sample may be biased towards widely publicized or well-documented programs, potentially excluding valuable informal or undocumented initiatives. The generalizability of findings should be interpreted with this in mind.

Data collection and analysis

The methodology consisted of five interconnected steps:

- (1) *Key informant interview*: Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving familiarization, coding, and theme development to identify perceptions of leadership and program gaps.
- (2) *Analysis of international competency frameworks*: An Excel database was created to map competencies from the 48 frameworks. Using inductive thematic analysis, 215 unique competencies were identified with 348 total mentions. From these, 90 recurring competencies were grouped into 13 thematic clusters (core competencies), which were further categorized into four pillars. The remaining 125 competencies, mentioned only once or twice, were excluded. The analyzed frameworks are presented in [Table 1](#)

Preparation of Consultation Templates: Before analyzing programs, standardized consultation templates were developed to systematically collect data on program features, including addressed competencies, implementation tools, learning modalities, certification status, and assessment mechanisms. These templates were applied to both Jordanian and international leadership programs to ensure consistency and comparability of data.

- (3) *Analysis of Jordanian Leadership Programs*: Data from 21 programs were collected using the standardized consultation template through 28 mapping consultations with program focal points. All 21 programs were included in the final sample. A qualitative content analysis was applied to extract and group competencies into 16 clusters and five pillars. The 21 national leadership programs reviewed are listed in [Table 2](#)
- (4) *Analysis of International Leadership Programs*: A desk review of 23 programs was conducted to identify global best practices in design and delivery. Data were collected using the consultation templates and analyzed through inductive content analysis to map competencies and programmatic features. The analyzed international programs are presented in [Table 3](#)
- (5) *Benchmarking and Gap Analysis*: Jordanian programs were benchmarked against international competency pillars and 18 programmatic indicators, including sustainability, needs assessments, competency evaluation tools, training methodologies, long-term impact assessment, accreditation, strategies for reaching marginalized groups, and gender-specific versus mixed-gender programming. Data from desk reviews, interviews, and consultations were triangulated to ensure validity and inform the design of a proposed leadership program.

Validity, reliability, and ethical considerations

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed:

Table 1. International competency frameworks

The framework	The framework
1 Senior Executive Capability Framework	25 Key Leadership Competencies Model
2 Executive Core Qualifications	26 Civil Service Competency Framework
3 SMS Competency Framework	27 Chief Executive Competency Profile
4 Global Leadership Competency Framework	28 Competencies for Senior Managers
5 Integrative Global Leadership Framework	29 Tanzania Public Service Leadership Competency Framework
6 Competency Framework for Governance	30 Global Public Service Competencies
7 The SIGMA Radius 360 Degree Feedback Instrument	31 Integrative Global Leadership
8 3 M'S Leadership Competency Model	32 Global Leadership Development Framework
9 AstraZeneca Leadership Capabilities Framework	33 The Leadership Competencies Scorecard
10 Federal Express Leadership Qualities Framework	34 BAE Performance Centered Leadership Framework
11 Philips Leadership Competencies Framework	35 Lufthansa Leadership Compass Framework
12 The Scottish Government Leadership Framework	36 Shell Leadership Framework
13 NHS Scotland Leadership Qualities Framework	37 Vodafone Global Leadership Competencies
14 CEML Framework of Management and Leadership Abilities	38 Scottish Executive Framework
15 Investors in People Standard	39 Officers Joint Appraisal Report
16 The Chartered Management Institute (CMI) Professional Standard	40 EO for Local Government – Compendium of Competencies
17 Hamlin's Generic Model of Managerial and Leadership Effectiveness	41 National College for School Leadership – Hay McBer Model
18 Director competency Framework	42 METO Management Standards
19 Adair's Leadership Competencies Framework	43 IMF Management Competencies
20 Osborne's Standard Leadership Competencies Framework	44 The Zenger Miller Grass-Roots Leadership Model
21 Nike's Competencies Model	45 Inclusive Leadership Compass Framework
22 Cambria's Nine Bucket Model	46 Mirvis, Thompson, and Marquis Leadership Meta-Skills Framework
23 Dye-Garman Leadership Competency Model	47 Rubino's Leadership Competencies Framework
24 NCHL Health Leadership Competency Model	48 Danske Bank Leadership Competencies

- (1) *Triangulation*: Data from interviews, frameworks, and programs were cross-validated.
- (2) *Expert Review*: The competency coding schema was independently reviewed by two leadership development experts to ensure inter-coder reliability.
- (3) *Conceptual Validity*: Grounding the analysis in Ruben's framework ensured a consistent theoretical lens.
- (4) *Ethical Compliance*: The study adhered to standard ethical principles. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees, and their anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed.

Results

The results that emerged from the key informants' interviews analysis are as follows:

Table 2. National leadership programs

	Program name
1	Leadership Skills for Women in The Public Sector
2	Women's Political Participation School
3	Makanati (USAID Women Economic Empowerment and Leadership Activity)
4	Women Leadership Academy
5	Democracy and Civil Society Program (Ana Usharek Mujtama3i)
6	Ana Usharek (I, Participate)
7	Empowering Young Women Leaders in Universities
8	Young Leaders Program
9	Youth Leadership Program
10	Political Academy–Shabab 20/20
11	Lead–Mentoring Program
12	The National Program for Preparing Youth Leaders
13	My Voice My Decision
14	Get On Board (Aligned with all on board platform)
15	Leadership Academy for Development
16	Female members of Jordanian political parties training
17	Health Care Certified Executive Leader Course
18	Leadership Development Fellowship
19	Leadership Program for Judges
20	Leadership Enhancement and Mentoring Program (Qimam)
21	Female Future Program

- (1) Participants were asked about their views on the purpose of a leadership program. The results showed that 60% believe its main purpose is to increase knowledge and skills, specifically leadership skills. About 35% suggested that the program should focus on preparing confident leaders. Additionally, over 25% felt it should target increasing women’s political participation, while 15% emphasized enhancing women’s public participation.
- (2) Interviewees identified several key competencies. Communication was viewed as the most important, cited by 65% of participants, followed by negotiation skills at 45%, media and public speaking at 40%, self-confidence at 35%, teamwork at 30%, and financial literacy at 25%. Decision-making was also highlighted by 25%. Additionally, emotional intelligence, strategic planning, time management, and problem-solving were each mentioned by 15% of participants.
- (3) According to 45% of interviewees, essential topics for a leadership program are communication and negotiation; worth mentioning that these topics were mentioned previously as essential skills, as well as media and public speaking. Other essential topics were networking, leadership styles, strategic planning, personal branding, financial literacy, team leadership and management, management functions, gender sensitivity and cultural differences, good governance, self-developments including growth mindset, Additional topics in order of importance are crisis management, emotional intelligence, problems solving, decision-making, legal knowledge, work-life balance, time management, and civil engagement.
- (4) Interviewees were asked how to measure the success of a leadership program and what benchmarks matter. Most emphasized the need for clear criteria and identified several assessment methods across different phases of the training cycle, as outlined below.
- Pre-training assessment: Using questionnaires to capture expectations and documenting trainees’ baseline status (e.g. position, salary, or CV) for later comparison.

Table 3. International leadership programs

Program name	Organizer
1. Global Summit of Women	Globe Women
2. Women's Director Development Program	The Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University
3. Women Political Leaders Global Forum	Women Political Leaders, Government of Iceland, and the Parliament of Iceland
4. Women's Leadership Accelerator	Online News Association
5. Women in Parliaments Global Forum	Women Political Leaders
6. Women's Empowerment Principles	UN Global Compact and UN Women
7. Women and Power	Harvard Kennedy School/Harvard University
8. Women's Executive Leadership Program	UC Berkeley Haas School of Business
9. The Leadership Academy for Development: The Role of Public Policy in Private Sector Development	Center for Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law/Stanford University
10. Women on Boards: Building Exceptional Leaders	The Wharton School/University of Pennsylvania
11. Women on Boards: Getting on and Adding Value	Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health/Harvard University
12. Women's Senior Leadership Program	The Kellogg School of Management/Northwestern University
13. Executive Leadership and Governance	University of Denver
14. The Campaign School at Yale: The Summer Session Program	The Campaign School/ Yale University
15. She Should Run	She Should Run
16. Lean in Circles	Lean In
17. Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life	The University of Texas at Austin
18. Art of Navigating Change	The Rockwood Leadership Institute
19. Leadership for a Democratic Society	Federal Executive Institute
20. Leadership Development Program	Center for Creative Leadership
21. Leadership at the Peak	Center for Creative Leadership
22. Advanced Management Program	INSEAD The Business School for the World
23. Transition to General Management	INSEAD The Business School for the World

- During training assessment: attendance, active interaction, during training individual or group feedback, and posts on social media.
 - Immediate post-training assessment: Conducted right after training using a questionnaire to evaluate reactions, training content, and trainer qualifications.
 - Medium and long-term assessments (6–24 months or 3–4 years) may measure improvements in trainees' positions, women's political participation, levels of civic engagement, the proportion taking new leadership roles, the networks formed, and overall ROI.
 - For medium-term and long-term assessments both quantitative and qualitative measurements could be used.
- (5) The interviewees were asked about the barriers to the leadership programs success. The main barriers included lack of participation due to transportation expenses, poor programs quality, inappropriate trainee selection, and cultural norms. Other barriers cited were distant training locations, family responsibilities, low motivation or growth mindset, lack of mentoring, trainer qualifications, high fees, program sustainability, limited funding, and participants' commitment issues.

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- (6) Participants were asked about the importance of accrediting leadership programs. Almost all interviewees emphasized accreditation significance and provided various reasons to support their views. The most common justifications included: accreditation enhances the program value, ensures the program quality and credibility, and support promotion.
 - (7) Regarding gaps in national leadership programs, the majority noted that inappropriate trainee selection is a key issue, which could be resolved by implementing proper selection criteria. They suggested that choosing committed, willing-to-learn women based on qualifications and capabilities would enhance competitiveness. Around 20% emphasized the need to align programs with Jordanian culture, localize them according to community needs, and base them on realistic assessments. Other gaps included limited practical training and role models 15%, poor trainer qualifications 10%, and, to a lesser extent, lack of gender sensitivity. Participants also felt that current programs often overlook participants' real needs.
 - (8) According to 45% of interviewees, leadership programs should prioritize strengthening marginalized women's self-confidence, followed by improving communication skills. Additionally, 15% highlighted the importance of developing emotional intelligence, promoting political participation, and expanding networking opportunities. When asked how marginalized women in Jordan can be reached, participants pointed to community-based organizations (CBOs) and other civil society organizations (CSOs).
 - (9) To ensure marginalized women's participation, interviewees emphasized the need to provide transportation or accommodation if required. Previously, 15% of participants had identified transportation as a barrier, making it a key theme. Training should not be conducted only in Amman, the capital; 20% highlighted the need to hold sessions in participants' governorates. Earlier, 15% noted that programs focusing mainly on Amman left people in other governorates feeling excluded, reinforcing this as a basic theme. Additionally, interviewees stressed that training quality should be high and proper selection methods should be used.
 - (10) Participants shared their views on whether women's leadership programs should be delivered in separate settings for each leadership level or in a unified setting with staged progression. About 60% of participants preferred separate settings, noting that this allows the training to better address the specific knowledge and needs of each group. However, they indicated that integrating levels later in the program could enhance representation, facilitate experience-sharing, and support the development of a more diverse and inclusive internal network.
 - (11) Participants were also asked whether women-only leadership programs or mixed-gender programs would be more impactful. About 70% recommended beginning with women-only sessions to build confidence and foundational skills, followed by mixed-gender sessions in later stages of the program.

Identification of international leadership frameworks core competencies

A desk review was conducted to identify the main competencies highlighted in international leadership frameworks. We found 215 occurrences out of 348, but only 90 competencies were consistent. After analyzing these 90 skills, 13 core competencies were identified through pattern recognition and grouped into thematic clusters.

- (1) 65% of the competencies clustered under Leadership and Strategic Thinking, comprising 11 recurring competencies: Leadership (10), Strategic Vision (6), Create Vision and Strategy (3), Strategic Leadership (2), Strategic and Governance Leadership (2), Compelling Vision (2), Setting Directions (2), Thinks Strategically (1), Mission communication (1), Future Focus (1), and Shapes Strategic Thinking (1).
- (2) 48% of the competencies clustered under Communication, including 12 recurring skills: Communication (12), Coaching and Communicating (1), Communication Integrity (1), Intercultural Communication (1), Values Communication (1), Listening Skills (1), Interpersonal Behavior (1), Interpersonal Competencies (1), Interpersonal Excellence (1), Interpersonal Factor (1), People Abilities (1), and Personal and Interpersonal Skills (1).
- (3) 44% of the competencies clustered under Self-Awareness, Self-Efficacy, and Confidence, including 13 competencies: Self-Awareness (3), Courage (3), Continuously Improving (2), Personal Effectiveness (2), Displays Personal Effectiveness (2), Personal Management and Drive (2), and five others appearing once each (Understanding, Managing and Developing Self; Well-Cultivated Self-Awareness; Grow Yourself; Self-Knowledge; Self-Leadership; Self-Reflection; Self-Regulation).
- (4) 42% of the competencies clustered under Analytical, Problem-Solving, and Decision-Making, including Analytical (4), Problem Solving (4), Decision-Making (4), Good Judgment (3), Gathering Information and Gaining Understanding (2), and three others appearing once each (Thinking Abilities; Tolerance for Ambiguity; Solving Problems and Taking Decisions).
- (5) 40% of the competencies clustered under Emotional and Cultural Intelligence, including, Emotional Intelligence (3), Cultural Intelligence (3), Adaptability (3), Flexibility (2), Resilience (2), and seven others appearing once each (A Real Way with People; Agreeableness; Charisma; Empathy; Handling Pressure; Stability/Stress Tolerance/Low Neuroticism; Extroversion/Sociability).
- (6) 33% of the competencies clustered under *Achieves Results*, including Achieves Results (10), Overall Leadership Effectiveness (1), Resource Management (2), Professional Effectiveness (2), and Manage Resources (1).
- (7) 33% clustered under *Power and Influence*, including Building Coalitions (4), Building Relationships (3), Impact and Influence (2), Building Connections (2), and five others appearing once each (Creating Internal Networks; Influencing Direction; Manage Information; Persuasiveness; Negotiation/Listening Skills/Capacity to Influence).
- (8) 27% clustered under *Engaging and Empowering Others*, including Developing Others (7), Empowering and Involving People (3), and Engaging People (3).
- (9) 27% clustered under *Ethicality and Inclusiveness*, including Integrity (5), Embed Diversity and Inclusion (3), and five others appearing once each (Ethical and Inclusive Leader; Honesty; Reliability; Uphold Integrity and Respect; Conscientiousness).
- (10) 21% clustered under *Working in Teams/Building and Leading Teams*, including Building and Leading Teams (3), Team Building (3), Teamwork (3), and Collaborative Working (1).

- (11) 17% clustered under *Clients/Beneficiaries-Oriented*, with one competency repeated 8 times: Focus on Customer.
- (12) 17% clustered under *Leading Change*, with one competency repeated 8 times: Leading Change.
- (13) 17% clustered under *Innovation*, including Innovation (5), Creativity (1), Entrepreneurial Leadership (1), and Taking Initiative (1).

Later, the 13 clusters of competencies were grouped into pillars as follows:

Pillar 1 (Personal): formed from three clustered core competencies from 32 competencies (Self-Awareness, Self-Efficacy and Confidence, Emotional Intelligence and Cultural Intelligence, Ethicality and Inclusiveness).

Pillar 2 (Leadership): formed from four clustered core competencies from 25 competencies (Leadership and Strategic Thinking, Power and Influence, Innovation, Leading Change).

Pillar 3 (Leadership Communication): formed based on three clustered core competencies from 19 competencies (Communication, Working in Teams, Building and Leading Teams, Engaging and Empowering Others).

Pillar 4 (Management): contains three clustered core competencies from 14 competencies (Analytical, Problem Solving and Decision-Making Skills, Achieves Results, Clients/Beneficiaries-Oriented).

Analysis of leadership programs in Jordan

A desk review was performed of 21 national leadership programs to identify core common leadership competencies. This resulted in 96 core competencies, which reoccurred a total of 208 times. All 96 core competencies were grouped and assigned to 16 clusters. The grouping was confirmed by two experts; HR and Leadership.

- (1) Competencies cluster around Civil Society Competencies; which reoccurred as (Advocacy 7, Stakeholder’s analysis 2, Community Needs Assessment 4, Civil society leadership 4, Monitoring and evaluation 2, Proposal writing 1, Developing Interventions 1, 1, Developing Monitoring and Evaluation plan 1).
- (2) Competencies cluster around Political Literacy; including (Elections 4, Democracy 3, read reports and policies ability 1, Corruption issues 1, Local history and culture 1).
- (3) Competencies cluster around Legal and Economic Literacy which reoccurred as (Financial Planning 2, Economics 2, Climate and energy 1, Constitutional and regulatory skills 1, Legal references 1)
- (4) Competencies cluster around Digital Competencies; including (Digital safety and personal security 2, technology usage 1, Cyber bullying 1).
- (5) Competencies cluster around Operational Management; including (Conflict management 7, Strategic Planning 4, Change management 2, Delegation 1, Human Resources Management 1, Management Skills 1, Operational planning 1, Performance management 1, Quality Management 1, Recruitment and retention 1, Reporting quality data 1, Supervision and coaching 1, Planning 1, Staff satisfaction 1, Approaches to External Monitoring 1, Client flow 1, Crisis Management 1).

- (6) Competencies cluster around Analytical, Problem Solving and Decision-Making (Critical Thinking 4, Decision Making 4, Problem solving 4, Research 4, Analytical skills 2, Data collection 1, SWOT and PESTEL analysis 1, Technical Skills 1).
- (7) One competency cluster around Achieves Results; the Productive Meetings competency which occurred only once.
- (8) Competencies cluster around Communication; (Communication Skills 7, Networking 4, social media 3, Traditional Media 2, Presentation 1, Professional and personal skills 1, Rhetoric 1, Fireside chat 1 and Interpersonal relationship management 1).
- (9) Competencies cluster around Teams work; including (Team Building 3, Leading and Developing Teams 1, collaboration 1).
- (10) One competency cluster around Engaging and Empowering Others; the Employee engagement competency which occurred only once.
- (11) Competencies cluster around Leadership and Strategic Thinking; (Leadership 15, Policy Making and development 13, corporate governance 6, Transformational leadership 3, Board competence 2, Crisis leadership 1 and, Participatory leadership 1).
- (12) Competencies cluster around Innovation (Design thinking 1, Entrepreneurship and innovation 1, Taking Initiative 1, Innovation and excellence 1, Social Entrepreneurship 1, Creative Intelligence and Human-Centered Design 1).
- (13) Competencies cluster around Power and Influence; (Dialog and negotiation skills 5, Setting priorities, sequence actions and build coalitions 2 and, Lobbying 1).
- (14) Competencies cluster around Personal effectiveness; (Confidence 2, Improving Self-Awareness 2, Motivation and Encouragement 2, Reconciling Work and Family Affairs 2, Self-Discovery Strengths and Values 1, Self-Empowerment 1, Self-Management 1, Time-Management 1 and, Learning Styles 1).
- (15) Competencies cluster around Ethicality and Inclusiveness; including (Diversity and Gender 8, Human rights 5, Inclusion of Disable and Marginalized people 1, dealing with vulnerable 1, Values and guiding principles 1, Women's rights in the sustainable development goals 1, Creating psychologically safe workplace 1 and, Safety culture 1).
- (16) Competencies cluster around Emotional and Cultural Intelligence; (Emotional Intelligence 1, Empathy 1 and Self and Emotions management 1).

Later, the 16 clusters were observed to have thematic communalities and were further grouped into 5 pillars as follows:

Pillar 1 (Personal): formed from three clustered core competencies from 20 competencies (Self-Awareness, Self-Efficacy and Confidence, Ethicality and Inclusiveness, Emotional and cultural Intelligence).

Pillar 2 (Leadership): formed from three clustered core competencies from 16 competencies (Leadership and Strategic Thinking, Innovation and Power and Influence).

Pillar 3 (Leadership communication): formed based on three clustered core competencies from 13 competencies (Communication, Teams work and Building and Leading Teams, Engaging and Empowering Others).

Pillar 4 (Management): based on three clustered core competencies from 26 competencies (Management Operational, Analytical, Problem Solving and Decision-Making Skills, Achieves Results).

Pillar 5 (Public service and civil society): based on four clustered core competencies from 21 competencies (Civil Society, Political Literacy, Legal and Economic literacy, Digital skills).

National leadership programs gap analysis

In comparison to the most common core competencies found in international frameworks, it was found that national leadership programs in Jordan have fewer competencies covered in personal, leadership and leadership communications pillars. However, the Jordanian frameworks have more competencies covered in the Management pillar and have an added Public Service and Civil Society pillar as follows:

- (1) Two clusters in the Leadership Competency Framework did not show in the National Leadership Programs: Leading Change (under Leadership Pillar) and Clients/Beneficiaries-oriented (under Management Pillar)
- (2) National programs in Jordan are leaning a lot towards Management and away from Leadership and Strategic Thinking. There are more Innovation cluster related competencies in the Leadership Pillar. However, it has a lot less Leadership and Strategic Thinking cluster and Power and Influence cluster competencies.
- (3) National leadership programs are less focused on efficiency and effectiveness as managing resources efficiently and achieving goals as fewer competencies covered in the Achieves Results under the Management Pillar.
- (4) National leadership programs did not pay attention to beneficiaries/community/followers/people as the Clients/Beneficiaries-oriented cluster is non-existent in national leadership programs (under Management Pillar)
- (5) Not enough Engaging and Empowering Others cluster competencies catered to under the Leadership Communication pillar. Furthermore, fewer competencies dedicated to Communication cluster in general under the same pillar.
- (6) Of the existing clusters, Emotional and Cultural Intelligence cluster under the–Personal pillar–has the most deficiency in terms of competencies dedicated. Furthermore, the Self-Awareness, Self-Efficacy and Confidence cluster has less emphasis under the same pillar. The gap analysis results are presented in [Table 4](#).

[Figure 1](#) illustrates the gap analysis results between common core competencies across local leadership programs in Jordan and international leadership competencies frameworks, highlighting key strengths and areas for development across personal, leadership, communication, management, and public service pillars.

National programs benchmarking against international best practice findings

While comparing 21 national programs with global best practices in leadership program design and implementation, a purposeful sample of 23 international programs was reviewed. Eighteen best practices were used for the comparison, revealing the following gaps as shown in [Table 5](#):

Table 4. National leadership programs pillars gap analysis

Competences pillars	Core competencies/ International leadership frameworks frequency	Core competencies/ National leadership programs frequency	Gap
Personal	32	20	–12
Leadership	25	16	–9
Leadership Communications	19	13	–6
Management	14	26	12
Public Service and Civil Society	0	21	21
	90	96	6

Discussion

This study offers insights into the current state of women's leadership development programs in Jordan and contributes to the discourse on gender-responsive training practices. By benchmarking national programs against international frameworks, this study reveals a significant imbalance: an overemphasis on management-related competencies in Jordanian programs, often at the expense of leadership communication, strategic thinking, and personal development. This managerial focus aligns with a technocratic view of leadership that prioritizes administrative efficiency over transformative capacity. Significantly, it overlooks the deeper leadership capacities women require to navigate the complex, hierarchical, and gendered environments outlined by [Khan *et al.* \(2024\)](#). Our findings thus empirically validate the critiques of [Ely *et al.* \(2011\)](#) and [Debebe *et al.* \(2016\)](#), demonstrating how conventional, gender-neutral models fail in practice to address the identity-driven challenges faced by women.

The findings of this study offer strong empirical support for [Ruben's \(2006, 2019\)](#) Competency-Based Leadership Framework, particularly the notion of the knowing–doing gap. The benchmarking analysis shows that Jordanian leadership programs heavily emphasize knowledge-based managerial and administrative content while underrepresenting behavioral, relational, and strategic competencies. This imbalance reflects the precise pattern Ruben describes: participants receive substantial conceptual information but are given limited opportunities to translate this knowledge into observable leadership behavior. The limited focus on emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and leading change further indicates a conceptual bias toward managerial tasks rather than adaptive or transformative leadership. This gap is intensified by the scarcity of reflective, experiential, and relational learning components—such as mentoring, coaching, and practice-based exercises—which are essential for bridging the knowing–doing gap and supporting the development of authentic leadership identities.

The limited emphasis on emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and leading change in national programs points to a conceptual gap that hinders the development of emotionally intelligent, adaptive, and change-oriented leadership. This deficiency is particularly problematic in light of research showing that women leaders often face pressure to conform to masculine norms, a process described as the “internalization of subjugation” ([Khan *et al.*, 2024](#)). By failing to create a “safe space” ([Debebe *et al.*, 2016](#)) to explore and develop an authentic leadership identity, Jordanian programs risk reinforcing this very internalization. They teach women *what* to do without addressing *who* they can be as leaders, thereby widening, rather than bridging, the “knowing–doing gap” ([Ruben, 2019](#)).

The proposed competency framework developed through this study advances existing knowledge in two key ways. First, it adapts Ruben's model to a regional and cultural context,

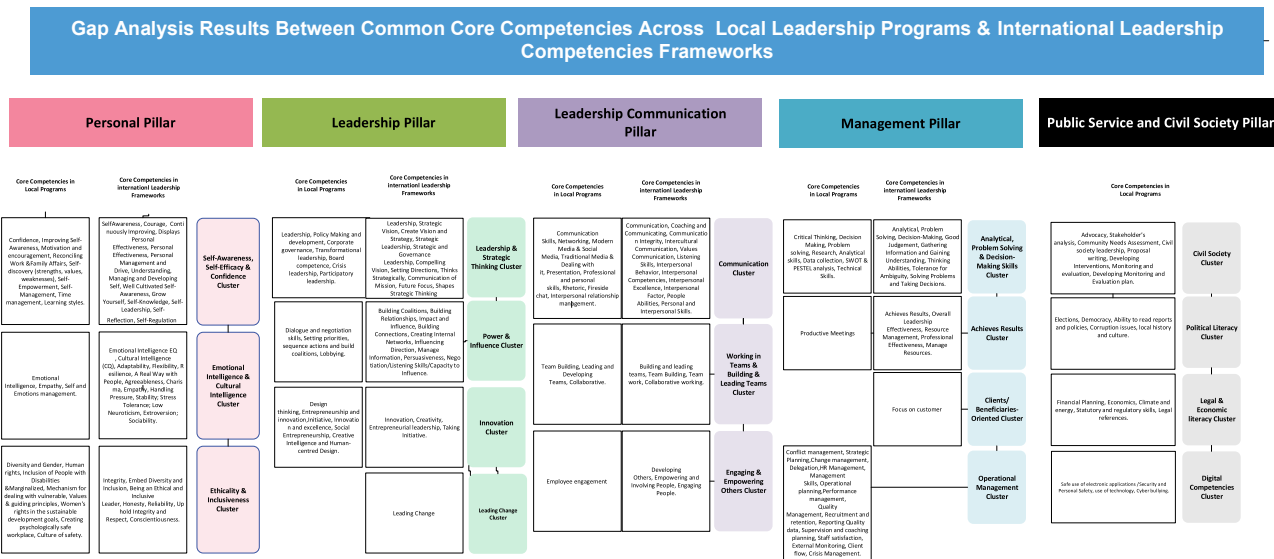


Figure 1. Gap analysis results between common core competencies across local leadership programs and international leadership competencies frameworks

Table 5. Gaps in national programs

	International programs	National programs
Needs assessment tools	Application and CV's evaluation	Application/CV review, interviews, psychometric and language tests, selection committees, interest statements, assignments
Program KPIs	Not reported	Promotion and exam pass rates; women on boards; income increase; youth outputs (policy papers, networks, priorities)
Training structure	Training – Coaching–External Networking Internal Networking -Training – Coaching	Training, mentoring, networking, initiatives, advocacy campaigns
Training approaches	Approaches: Case-studies, coaching, lecturing, discussions, and in-class exercises, panels, guest speakers, 360° feedback, conference, and role-playing Patterns: group work, projects, simulations, networking, reflection, and intensive peer and in-depth feedback	Approaches: lecturing, case-studies, exercises, discussion, and role-playing Patterns: project, presentations, and group work
Training mode	F2F/hybrid/online (mostly live)	Face-to-face; hybrid and online less common
Post-program engagement	Coaching, alumni communities, long-term peer support, 6–12-month check-ins	Mentoring, social and public initiatives
Involvement after training	Strong alumni network; long-term peer support, ongoing connections	Networking, small grants, policy work
Long-run impact measurement	Alumni platforms, company-reported indicators	Non used
Competitive advantage	Reputable institutions; expert faculty; immersive learning; research-based content; rigorous selection	Affiliations, exposure, mentoring and networking
Competency frameworks	Mostly Mostly internally developed, research-based, aligned with global practices	Generally, not framework-based; rely on needs assessment
Accreditation	Mostly not accredited Few accredited (e.g. EFMD, ILM)	Mostly not accredited, few accredited nationally
Reaching marginalized women	No reported	Through CSO's and CBO's, Alumni networks
Implementation challenges	No reported	Commitment issues; trainer availability; financial/logistical constraints; societal barriers; overnight training challenges
Support for women	Limited scholarships, group enrollment benefits	Transportation, meals, accommodation, travel; limited childcare
Sustainability	Generally sustainable via institutional stability and paid models; some tiered pricing	Largely absent

producing a gender-sensitive tool that responds to the lived realities of women in Jordan. Second, it introduces a structured and holistic set of competencies that better reflect the multifaceted roles women leaders are expected to fulfill. The integration of previously overlooked clusters—such as client orientation, leading change, and engaging others—broadens the scope of leadership development beyond technical or managerial skills and toward a more inclusive, socially aware leadership paradigm.

This orientation aligns with findings by [Githaiga \(2024\)](#), who demonstrates that greater gender diversity in leadership—specifically at the board level—can enhance ethical standards and stakeholder responsiveness. Although Githaiga’s study focused on corporate governance in the East African Community, its implications are broader: fostering inclusive leadership practices requires the intentional development of women’s competencies and their representation at all levels of decision-making. The framework proposed in this study contributes to this broader agenda by offering a practical, context-sensitive model for cultivating inclusive leadership in Jordan and beyond.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest a need for stakeholders and training providers in Jordan and similar contexts to adjust leadership development initiatives. Specifically, incorporating strategic communication, emotional intelligence, and visionary leadership into training curricula can significantly enhance program impact. Equally important is the need to address structural challenges in program design and delivery. The study identified several obstacles, including limited use of mentoring and coaching, weak post-training follow-up, and a lack of experiential learning opportunities.

The importance of peer-based mentoring tailored to women’s contexts—as emphasized by [Dajani et al. \(2021\)](#) in Jordanian universities—underscores the value of sustained, context-sensitive support systems. [Brue and Brue \(2016\)](#) further highlight the effectiveness of authentic learning tools like role-playing and small group engagement. The proposed framework responds to these needs by emphasizing not only the core competency clusters but also the learning modalities and environments through which women can most effectively develop them.

Although this study makes important contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The research focused on leadership programs within Jordan and may not capture the challenges or variations across the broader MENA region. In addition, the findings rely primarily on benchmarking analysis and interview data rather than longitudinal tracking of program outcomes. Future studies could apply the proposed framework in real-world training settings to assess its long-term impact on women’s leadership progression. Furthermore, issues like limited mentoring, program affordability, cultural barriers to participation, and need for childcare support previously noted by [Ensour et al. \(2017\)](#) and [UNDP \(2014\)](#), underscore the importance of designing programs that are both inclusive and practically accessible.

Conclusion and recommendations

There is a need to change the way we approach leadership development in order to increase the number of women in senior executive positions ([Fortier and Murray, 2017](#)). The analysis of interviews and benchmarking of national programs against international best practices yielded several important insights for the development and sustainability of leadership programs for women. Both sources emphasized the necessity of cultivating a broad range of leadership competencies, with particular emphasis on communication, negotiation skills, and emotional intelligence. While networking is highlighted as crucial in training structures, there are variations in the utilization of mentoring and coaching between national and international programs. Program success is measured through diverse metrics, including job promotions and qualitative indicators like civic engagement. Accreditation emerges as significant for program credibility and participant motivation, albeit with nuanced perspectives. Common barriers to program success include participant commitment, costs, and cultural norms. The inclusion of men in gender-mixed programs is advocated for promoting gender equality and challenging stereotypes. Sustainability efforts focus on ensuring quality content, accreditation, and partnership development, with national programs emphasizing institutionalization and fee structures. Overall, based on the findings, the following are recommendations for how to design leadership competencies framework for national leadership programs in Jordan.

- (1) Integrate balanced leadership and management competencies to develop leaders whose capabilities extend beyond technical or managerial skills.
- (2) Strengthen underrepresented areas—personal, leadership, and communication competencies—to build self-awareness, influence, and the ability to inspire and guide teams.
- (3) Fill critical gaps by adding competencies such as Leading Change and Client/Beneficiary Orientation, ensuring leaders can manage organizational transformation and effectively serve communities and key stakeholders.
- (4) Embed achieving-results competencies that emphasize efficient and effective use of resources.
- (5) Enhance communication and collaboration competencies focused on engaging, empowering, and motivating others.
- (6) Include emotional and cultural intelligence under the personal pillar to support relationship-building, inclusivity, and effective navigation of diverse environments.
- (7) Establish mechanisms for continuous evaluation and improvement, using participant and stakeholder feedback to ensure programs adapt to evolving leadership needs.
- (8) Review the relevance of the Public Service and Civil Society pillar, assessing the alignment of its competencies with national priorities and gathering participant and stakeholder feedback to determine its value and impact.

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