

## EMPOWERING VOICES: CONFRONTING THE GLASS CEILING FOR EGYPTIAN WOMEN IN THE TOURISM AND HERITAGE SECTOR

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**Abstract:** Women’s involvement in the Egyptian tourism and heritage management has been increasing over the past few decades, especially in archaeology, heritage conservation and site management. However, there is no evidence to date that they can crack their glass ceiling and move above into senior leadership positions in the Egyptian tourism industry despite their growing proportion in the labour market. This study explores the barriers preventing Egyptian women from attaining more leadership positions in heritage and tourism management and discusses practical solutions for overcoming such challenges. A phenomenological approach, adopting in-depth interviews, with experienced women in Egypt who have progressed in the tourism and heritage sector. Thematic analysis resulted in identifying five key challenges for their accessibility to leadership, i.e. organizational and structural issues, regulatory issues, cultural and social norms, individual issues and historical issues. Each of these issues or challenges has sub issues, which all combined to deter Egyptian women’s accessibility to leadership despite the interventions recently made by the government for women empowerment. All these challenges are overlapped and combined to hinder the ascent of women into leadership in heritage sites. These issues are associated with prejudice against female managers, who are stereotyped and perceived as nurturing and housewife, while leadership requires certain traits such as decisiveness, assertiveness and dominance as society and other colleagues assumed. This prejudice is noticed in minimizing the role of women and stigmatizing them as leaders by providing either negative or less favourable evaluation of them. The results align with notion made by Role Congruity Theory and Glass Ceiling Theory. The results suggest that addressing these concerns is vital for ensuring better integration of women in labour market and ultimately to the economy overall. Special attention should be to addressing the cultural and organizational challenges to enable women move above the glass ceiling and achieve senior positions in the Egyptian tourism industry. The research suggested several policy and practical implications for decision makers and senior management of the tourism and heritage sector in Egypt. This research acknowledges the importance of policy reforms, support actions, and institutional development to increase women’s empowerment in Egyptian heritage.

**Keywords:** Egyptian women, gender equality, glass ceilings, heritage, leadership, tourism, women empowerment

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### INTRODUCTION

Women encompass about half the Egyptian population (CAPMAS, 2025). However, according to recent report on global gender gap published in July 2022 by the World Economic Forum showed that Egypt has a significant gender disparity across several sectors, e.g. education, health, and economic participation, as it was ranked 129<sup>th</sup> out of 146 countries. Additionally, a significant gender employment gap exist as the current state of women employment is 18 % in comparison to 73 % for men employment (World Bank, 2024). This employment gap is dedicated to perceptual, structural and legal blocks (World Bank, 2024). The access to leadership becomes more challenging for such employment women as about quarter of the Egyptian society do not support women participation in workforce and certainly in leadership (World Bank, 2024). The same report by the World Bank (2024) showed that addressing such challenges and shuttering this employment gap would significantly impact on the Egyptian economy and could boost it by about 56 %. Hence, the report confirmed a need for a radical change, especially in policy reform and adjusting the mindset and social perceptions of working women.

Egyptian women have played a fundamental role in Egyptian heritage within the realms of religion, politics, and leadership (Kasseem, 2000; Hassan, 2019). Notwithstanding this, there is a lack of women leaders in many sectors due to gender inequality and other sociocultural factors that indicate a form of barrier to access leadership due to what so called “glass ceiling” (Henry, 2011; Sobaih 2015; El-Fiky, 2023; World Bank, 2024; Elbanna, 2025). Glass ceiling occurs when women cannot reach the upper echelons, although they have the required knowledge and experience due to non-physical barriers, albeit invisible obstacle such as biases and improper practices, that women face and limit their opportunities in the workplace (Cotter et al., 2001; El-Fiky, 2023, Sobaih & Abu Elnasr, 2024, Pascual-Fuster et al., 2025). Similar to other sectors in Egypt, women in tourism and heritage sector are expected to experience this phenomenon as they are underrepresented in leadership

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(El-Fiky, 2023; World Bank, 2024; Elbanna, 2025), albeit there is no updated research that explored this issue in heritage context, particularly in countries like Egypt where heritage encompasses a great aspect of both economy and society.

Egypt, through its 2030 vision, has made great efforts to promote economic growth and safeguard gender equality, while appreciating its cultural heritage as an essential component of sustainable economic development (Egypt's Vision 2030). Despite women represent a significant percentage of university graduates in Egypt, women still make up a small percentage of the labour force (only 18 %) (World Bank, 2024) and many women are employed in informal and agriculture-related jobs with no social insurance or job security (Sobaih 2015; Richardson & Wilson, 2024; World Bank, 2024). Furthermore, the Egyptian heritage sector is a major driver of tourism and preservation of cultural memory, it is a male-dominated industry with limited participation of women, particularly in leadership roles (Lwamba et al., 2022).

These structural inequities are exacerbated by conventional social standards and organizational prejudices that impede women's professional advancement in the broader tourist and heritage sectors (Canton, 2021). Even with efforts to implement gender equality, the proportion of women who occupy leadership positions in Egypt's heritage sector remains significantly lower than that of men (Lwamba et al., 2022). A recent experimental study by Caria et al. (2025) on the barriers to women employment in Egypt showed that Egyptian women have limited employment opportunities compared to men due to social and cultural norms. The same study showed a gap between desired and existing jobs, especially for women. Another recent study (Elbanna, 2025) confirmed many obstacles, such as societal expectations and perceptions of working women, gender-based discrimination, organisational support and work-life conflict, among Egyptian working women that affect their success and achievement of their potential in leadership. Furthermore, firm culture beliefs regarding gender, discriminatory practices, and lack of institutional support for women's career growth and development operate as barriers for both women employment and their access to senior management (Thelwall & Kousha, 2017; Caria et al., 2025).

However, various national initiatives are being undertaken to advance gender equality in Egypt, despite the main challenges that continue to face it. For example, the National Council for Women collaborated with organizations like USAID to carry out several initiatives to advance women's economic participation and empowerment (Roberts & Primorac, 2021). There is, however, a lack of recent studies regarding career development for women in the heritage field, and therefore an insufficient understanding of specific factors contributing to the glass ceiling in this important sector to the Egyptian economy as previous studies (El-Fiky, 2023; World Bank, 2024; Elbanna, 2025) were addressing glass ceiling, gender equality, career development on Egyptian women in general, not in certain sector such as tourism and heritage.

This research explores obstacles that hinder women in accessing leadership in the Egyptian tourism and heritage sector. The research delves into all obstacles that could hinder women to access leadership as recent research (Elbanna, 2025) called for comprehensive understanding of issues that affect women career to attain the uppermost rung of power and tackle gender inequality. Elbanna (2025) called for understanding these obstacles from social, cultural and economic dimensions. This research aims to investigate whether such barriers are only invisible, e.g. bias, as glass ceiling suggests (Cotter et al., 2001) or there are physical barriers that should be identified. The research also aims to understand whether the limited access to leadership among women is due to prejudice against them as Role Congruity Theory (RCT) as noted by Eagly & Karau (2002), which created a stereotype about the role of women in society and workplace. It is important to understand such notion and if there are other obstacles that work against women in leadership. Hence, the research undertook a qualitative approach to delve in these obstacles by phenomenological approach drawn on the lived experience of women in this sector by using the initial themes emerged from theories and recent literature. The research answers these research questions, 1) What obstacles hinder access for women to senior management in the Egyptian tourism and heritage industry? 2) What could be done to overcome the glass ceiling in the Egyptian tourism and heritage industry?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Theoretical foundation

There are many theories that addressed women access to leadership. Feminist theories, which have evolved over times with many waves of thoughts, were among the first that addressed gender equality in leadership. The waves of thoughts moved from addressing legal and political inequalities (first wave early in 20<sup>th</sup> century), cultural and social inequalities (second wave from 1960 to 1980), diversity and intersectionality (third wave from 1990s to 2000s), to digital interaction (fourth wave, post 2000s) (Tong, 2024). The feminist theories differentiate between sex "biological traits" and gender "role and behaviour" arguing that gender is socially and culturally constructed; hence, theories advocates for equality including access to leadership (Tong, 2024). One of the theories that also addressed barriers for women's accessibility to leadership is Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), which suggested gender differences in behaviour is dedicated to their social role; therefore, that leadership is seen as men role, which limit women opportunities in leadership. This theory was further developed by and introduced the RCT (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which also explains why women have limited access to leadership. The RCT stresses the effect of prejudice against women leader because of stereotypes about gender role in society and workplace. The theory assumes mismatch between women traits (se perceived by the society, e.g. communal and nurturing) and leadership traits (e.g. assertive and decisive). Therefore, the RCT argues that this mismatch leads to either negative evaluation of women as leaders or at least less favourable assessment of women as leaders because of bias of how women and their social role are perceived by society. The current study uses the RCT to understand women's accessibility to leadership positions in the Egyptian tourism and heritage sector.

### 2. Glass ceiling women's empowerment and access to leadership

Glass ceiling, first mentioned by Marilyn Loden in 1978 in her speech about women leadership and developed by many scholars (e.g. Cotter et al., 2001; Bertrand, 2011) as a key obstacle that hinder women to access senior management

positions. It was referred to it as an invisible obstacle preventing women from career progression or entrepreneurship, although they have the required experience and qualification (El-Fiky, 2023; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). These invisible obstacles include biases and discriminatory actions by team members or organization that affect women's advancement in their career and reaching top management positions. Despite glass ceiling cover all marginalised group, most studies (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; El-Fiky, 2023; Federo, 2024; Sobaih & Abu Elnasr, 2025; Matsa & Miller, 2025) adopted it to explore women's progression at their organisations and their under representation in leadership positions.

Studies (Manzi & Heilman, 2021; Ibarra & Stengel, 2021, El-Fiky, 2023; Sobaih & Abu Elnasr, 2024, Matsa & Miller, 2025) have been conducted about glass ceiling confirmed barriers have deep-rooted cultural, social, and organizational customs. The glass ceiling seems to be common in cultures with strong family traditions, such as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). To address gender inequality in heritage management, a thorough analysis of the three dimensions, namely, political, social and psychological aspects is important (Elshaer et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2022; Solmaz & Ehtiyar, 2025). Understanding the factors that affect women empowerment is important to address gender inequality (Elshaer et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2022). Sobaih & Abu Elnasr (2024) argued that it is important that both scholars and policy makers delve deep into the barriers of glass ceiling to better address this phenomenon and find proper solutions for these challenges. Elbanna (2025) emphasized the importance of adopting gender-equality policies, women empowerment and undertaking cultural reforms to ensure women's progression in their career. Similarly, Szentgróti et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of women empowerment in tourism leadership to ensure sustainable development.

The Egyptian government has recently started programs that focused on eradicating gender inequality as part of Egypt's Vision 2030; in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Egypt's Vision 2030 is a long-term development strategy that places a high priority on women's empowerment across all sectors (Idowu et al., 2020). Some of these programs involve legislative actions focused on widening employment for women, enhancing equity, and offering channels for developing leadership capabilities for them. Despite these programs, the impact of these interventions varies, and the obstacles remain, particularly in terms of poor workplace protection and deep-rooted cultural values that restrict female roles. A comprehensive plan that incorporates public awareness, legal reform, and targeted initiatives to build women's leadership skills will be essential to achieving meaningful progress (Jayachandran, 2020). Raising barriers for Egyptian women needs to overcome a variety of institutional and cultural barriers in multiple ways (Deen et al., 2016). Education heightened social awareness, and robust legal frameworks are all essential components of empowerment strategies that support opportunities for female leadership (Sobaih & Abu Elnasr, 2024). Women's empowerment in the heritage sector is essential for advancing gender equality and fostering sustainability (Said et al., 2022).

### 3. Women in the Egyptian tourism and heritage

A review of research identified limited published studies on women in the Egyptian heritage as studies often focus on either hospitality of tourism industry (Kattara 2005; Sobaih, 2015; Sobaih, 2018; Abou-Shouk et al., 2021; Mousa et al., 2023; Rashwan et al., 2024). For example, the study of Kattara (2005) on career challenges for female in Egyptian hotels found several reason preventing them from achieving senior management positions, including discrimination and lack of support from their organisations. Similarly, Sobaih (2015) found Egyptian women are segregated in minimal hotel jobs.

Abou-Shouk et al. (2021) found that women's empowerment in Egypt is a key determinant of sustainable tourism development, albeit it is highly affected by cultural norms. Mousa et al. (2023) found that women representation in tour guidance and travel agencies is determined by three main factors: religious, contextual and media influence. Rashwan et al. (2024) highlighted the role of non-governmental organisation in empowering Egyptian women for tourism development.

Egypt's heritage is crucial to preserving its cultural legacy and bolstering tourism. Egyptian women have made significant contributions to heritage management and museums (Clark, 2019). Egyptian women play a key role in maintaining and promoting Egypt's rich cultural legacy (Khairy, 2024). Ancient Egyptian women used to have equal legal and political rights as confirmed in ancient manuscripts (Hassan, 2019); however, current studies and reports (Hassan, 2019; World Bank, 2024; Elbanna, 2025) confirm gender gap in Egypt. Despite representing a good proportion of heritage-related sites, women often encounter obstacles such as gender bias and a lack of career development opportunities (Khedr, 2017) supporting CRT and glass ceiling framework. Underlying social conventions continue to promote a perception that heritage management leadership positions are best filled with males, in part a reflection THE political and physical requirements of the career. This stereotype promotes a gendered labor divide, and therefore, restricts career development for "female" professionals (Elbanna, 2025).

In addition, these obstacles are compounded through pay gaps and a lack of leadership development programs (Loumpourdi, 2023). Egypt's economy depends heavily on heritage tourism. Notwithstanding this, like men, women contribute to this career field via various tasks such as community engagement, storytelling, and cultural interpretation (Bond et al., 2008).

These jobs not only highlight the role of women in safeguarding cultural heritage, but they also present avenues for entrepreneurship and leadership development. Despite this, several obstacles have yet to be addressed, including restrictions in access to financial sources, networks, and entrepreneurial guidance (El-Feky, 2023). Women working in heritage tourism often face financial and social barriers that inhibit them from starting and growing companies (Fathy et al., 2020).

## METHODOLOGY

### 1. Research framework

The current study utilized a qualitative approach including a phenomenological stance (Casey, 2000) to investigate the lived experiences of women involved in managing Egyptian tourism and heritage, with specific regard to obstacles posed by the glass ceiling impacts and striving to career progression to senior management roles (Corrêa et al., 2024).

Individual experiences of women in leadership roles in heritage were found to be best understood through the establishment of qualitative methodology, which allows for rich analysis and interpretation of respondents' experiences and the contexts they convey (Jesús Carrasco-Santos et al., 2024). The research utilized descriptive phenomenological analysis as suggested by Casey (2000). This approach focuses on the essence of lived experience by the participants and allows the researchers to suspend their personal biases and beliefs to focus on participants' viewpoints.

To shed light on the fundamental structures of the phenomenon under study, researchers momentarily suspend their presumptions using a procedure known as bracketing, as described by Moustakas (1994). Using this approach, the study sought to identify the main barriers the glass ceiling that women in Egyptian heritage tourism and management live from their point of view and how they experience and overcome of these obstacles from their perspectives.

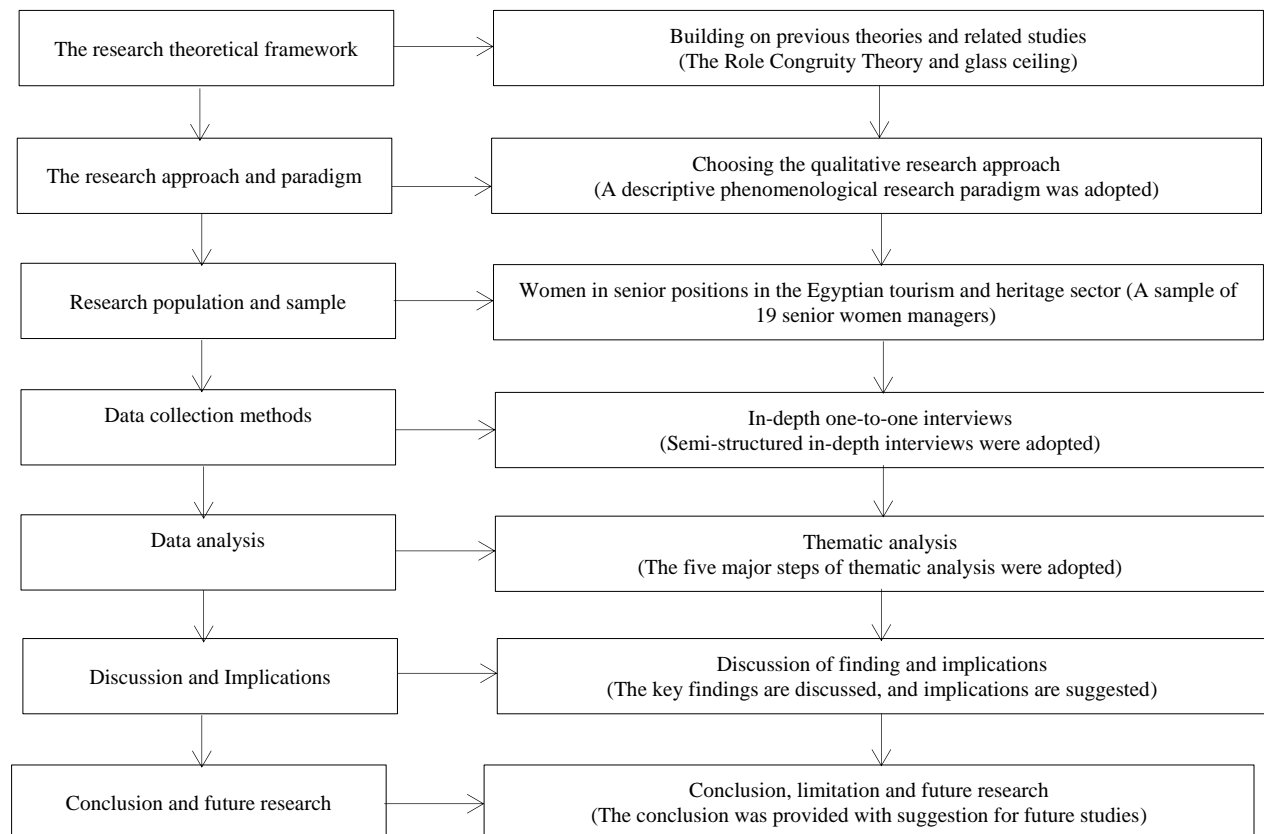


Figure 1. The research framework

## 2. Data collection methods

The study's primary method of data collection was in-depth, face-to-face semi-structured, interviews to understand women lived experience of their career progression and obstacles they faced to achieve leadership positions in the Egyptian tourism and heritage management. This method enabled collecting rich, in-depth narratives, allowing for a thorough examination of participants' feedback and in-depth insights using their lived experiences (Seidman, 2006). All interviews were undertaken at a convenient place for all participants after they gave their full consent for participation in the study. The study's goals and objectives were discussed before the interviews started. The participants were asked to give a short background themselves and their professional experiences. Discussion with participants included their progression, barriers they lived and how they overcome including other suggested interventions. Interviews were audio recorded, and notes were taken for preparing the script. The average time of the interviews was about an hour for each interview.

## 3. Participants

The major selection criteria of participants included women holding senior management positions in the Egyptian tourism and heritage sector, particularly in museums, heritage sites or related entities. These are the segments targeted for the interviews. Senior managers in hotels, restaurants, travel agents and airports were excluded from selection because there were many studies on these segments, albeit no published studies on women in heritage as discussed earlier. Notwithstanding this, there are no official published statistics about the proportion of female managers in this sector despite it was obvious that their number was limited (El-Gohary, 2016). It was difficult to find the participants due to their limited number of women holding senior management position in Egyptian heritage sites. The study included interviews with 19 female managers who are progressed at heritage sites. In terms of participants' accessibility, they accessed through colleagues and the research team network as the team have previous experience in this career.

The number of interviews was sufficient after saturation of data was achieved and there was no new information given by participants (Fusch, 2015). Hence, the team stopped the interview after conducting 19 interviews.

#### 4. Ethics Issues

Ethical considerations took a paramount position during the conduct of the study in a quest to maintain integrity in the inquiry and protect the welfare of participants (Arifin, 2018). Following all ethical guidelines, participants in the study were notified that taking part in it was purely voluntary and that at any stage, they could withdraw with no consequences. The goal of the study was fully explained to participants before their response, and they were requested to sign a consent form. In addition, in a quest for confidentiality, participant roles and identities were replaced with codes during the analysis and reporting of findings. In addition, no information that could reveal participant identities was collected. Participants were told that their contribution would only be used for academic purposes and that information about them wouldn't be shared, so concerns about power relations and privacy were addressed.

#### 5. Data Processing

As mentioned before, the study employed a phenomenological approach, conducting in-depth interviews to gain insight into participants lived experiences. The data analysis involved five phases utilizing thematic analysis. Step 1 began with transcribing the recorded interviews, followed by multiple readings of the transcripts by the researchers to capture initial thoughts. In step 2, initial codes were developed, focusing on notable features within the data. Similar codes were grouped into a theme. Building theme from the coded extracts was the third step. Reviewing these ideas and developing a thematic map for analysis comprised step four as themes' refinement. In step 5, the final themes were defined and presented. Five main final themes emerged from the study as the main obstacles to the glass ceiling: organizational issues, societal and cultural issues, individual issues, legislative issues, and historical issues. These issues offer a thorough grasp of the obstacles preventing women from accessing leadership in the Egyptian heritage sector as will be presented and discussed in the next sections.

### RESULTS

#### 1. Demographic data

As already mentioned, this study focuses on women contributing to the management of the Egyptian heritage sites. Therefore, all participants were women, and they all had bachelor's degrees or higher. Interestingly, 10 of the 19 participants received a master's or PhD in a cultural heritage-related subject. Participants are between 30 and 50 years old. Only eight of the participants were at the top of their organizations and the rest (11 participants) were the assistants to the head of the organization "museum" or the top manager of the division "general administration".

#### 2. The main obstacles preventing women from leadership

##### a. Social and cultural issues

Interviewees argued that in the Egyptian society, women are socially and culturally expected to be responsible of their household and their kids' affairs, which could negatively affect their professional aspirations. The interviewed women reported that they feel judged for choosing to work outside their home, i.e. holding professional career. This problem is more evident when they hold managerial positions as they will be busier with their professional career and administrative tasks. They added that societal norms regularly equate professional ambition with a lack of dedication to family as one of them commented about how her contribution to career and their social role were perceived by the society and her colleagues:

*I've got a PhD, but they still believe and keep telling me that my place [i.e. working space] is in the kitchen!* [WM12].

Participants raised the issue of absence of their family support, which creates significant work-family conflicts. Women also said that these barriers to their career advancement, reinforce the glass ceiling, especially in male-dominated fields like heritage as they assumed. They added that women cannot hold senior managerial position because these are male not female jobs. Their family members inform them that: *Big jobs need tough minds, not emotional women* [WM15].

The above comment reflects how family perceive working women and those in leadership. Respondents indicated that they were expected to perform traditional household duties in addition to their professional responsibilities. These dual tasks lead to increased stress and limits career progression. Participants argued that the Egyptian community at many workplaces do not accept women at leading position, such as heritage management, due to personal traits that do not exist (as they assume) among women. One of the managers commented: *Lots of people think I do not fit with leadership position just because I'm a woman—they assume my emotions will get the best of me* [WM02]. *Women just aren't built for leadership-men do it better* [WM07]. Furthermore, tourism-related jobs, particularly in heritage management, are frequently perceived as less prestigious in Egyptian society. Many respondents noted that misconceptions about careers in heritage, as part of tourism, contribute to the belief that such roles hold lower status compared to other industries. Women's contributions, especially in leadership positions, are frequently undervalued, discouraging them from pursuing managerial roles. It was argued that without sufficient family support to work in heritage, many women struggle to balance work and family obligations, further hindering their professional growth or be reluctant to seek leadership roles.

##### b. Regulatory barriers

Interviewed managers argued that women in Egypt's heritage sector face a glass ceiling because of regulatory hurdles. They believe that women are unable to obtain equal managerial opportunities in the workplace due to the lack of legal protection and the absence of implementing anti-discrimination laws. One of the participants noted that higher levels always believe that: *Leadership is a man's job..... Women just don't know how to handle it* [WM03]. Despite efforts to promote gender equality, several respondents feel that there is no legal framework in place to empower women in heritage sectors. Due to the lack of explicit laws and regulations requiring equal opportunities for women, many victims of discrimination are unable to access institutional support or legal recourse. A couple of managers stressed the role of

presidency in supporting working women. One of them commented on this: *We need the President to step in and force a quota for leadership positions. There is no choice for women; it has just happened. Otherwise, there's no way it will happen* [WM10]. This regulatory gap makes women more vulnerable to structural challenges in their careers. The number of women in high positions is not fixed, and although the nation has anti-discrimination laws, they are not always adhered to. As a result, women are typically overlooked for senior positions in front of men, which limits their career advancement opportunities.

### c. Organizational issues

One of the main factors contributing to the glass ceiling for women in Egypt's heritage sector is organizational barriers. The key challenges related to the organization and its structure include inadequate leadership support, exclusion from professional networks, and deeply ingrained gender stereotypes. One of the senior managers argued that a male colleague said to her when she argued about her right to be a senior manager:

*You are a woman, so take care of your children and keep your mouth shut* [WM11].

Interview managers argued that many female professionals report a lack of institutional support for career advancement, with numerous women feeling overlooked for growth opportunities and that their contributions go unrecognized. Women have limited access to essential career opportunities and perpetuating gender inequality within the sector. As a result, women face significant obstacles in advancing into leadership roles, further restricting their professional growth.

The participants emphasized that without sufficient institutional support; many women struggle with their professional growth and acceptance of leadership roles. Hence, women could be excluded from this support and network as one of managers commented: *Men are running everything. They are looking for their interests through connections and blocking us from getting in any way they can. Honestly, we are excluded* [WM04].

Networking is a critical factor in career progression, yet women in Egypt's heritage industry often find themselves excluded from valuable professional circles. One interviewed manager argued that men should always be managers. She commented on his words: *In the end, she'll quit for her kids and the house, so why waste the opportunity here?* [WM14].

### d. Personal issues

The interviewed managers argued that absence of certain personal qualities, like psychological empowerment, interpersonal skills, and self-confidence, greatly hinder women's career advancement in Egypt's heritage industry. Gender stereotypes are a significant barrier in the heritage sector, often limiting women to administrative or support roles while men dominate leadership positions. Hence, these traits are important for their success. One of the participants said about this issue:

*No one sees that we have the skills and knowledge, but they only see us preparing Mahshi and Molokhia* [some types of Egyptian food] *in the kitchen. We must trust ourselves and feel confident to deal with this* [WM18]. One of the most important factors is the lack of self-confidence among some working women, which was raised as a significant barrier preventing women from breaking the glass ceiling and reaching top positions. Women frequently voice concerns about some women's skills or credentials, which deters them from seeking leadership positions, which could be captured from the following quotes made by interviewees when they commented about how others affect them and their need for self-confidence and psychological empowerment to deal with this: *At the end of the day, she'll get married and stay home, so what's the point of being a manager?* [WM19]. *Hearing "you can't" and "you don't know how" so much made us afraid to step up, so we just settled for watching from the sidelines* [WM16]. This insecurity is further reinforced by cultural beliefs that question women's leadership potential, deepening their sense of inadequacy. One of the leaders said: *They hang a sign that says "Men Only" on leadership* [WM06]. Although interpersonal skills are essential for career progression, many women in the heritage sector find it difficult to succeed in male-dominated workplaces. They have a good feeling that their opinions are not heard and that their contributions are not appreciated at work. Additionally, these other challenges resulting from their lack of confidence in social situations hinder their ability to advance in their careers. Managers commented a lot of interpersonal communication and skills at their institutions that have issues with integrating women into network. These skills and networking are important to deal with managerial job. A comment below could indicate to this issue: *We're fighting to earn our rights, while men get everything done while just chilling at the café* [WM01].

*Women can't handle big positions—they're just not built for the pressure* [WM09]. These additional challenges, which result from their lack of confidence in social and administrative support, hinder their motivation to advance in their careers. A combination of internal self-doubt and external obstacles, like societal expectations and workplace discrimination, causes many women to feel disempowered. Moreover, the community usually repeats a classic line as it could be seen from the following comment: *What are you going to do with the position anyway? In the end, the kids brag about their dad* [WM13]. The rigidity of the status quo regarding the retention of management titles for men is one significant obstacle. However, interviewees argued that many decision-makers assert statements such as:

*This job needs someone who can make tough decisions, not someone emotional like women* [WM05].

### e. Historical issues

The participants reported that women have always been critical to Egyptian society, yet they have been unable to advance in their careers and have full access to leadership throughout history. Interviewees argued that Hatshepsut and Cleopatra achieved leadership positions, albeit they were exceptions since their leadership was not predicated on male support, and they faced "denial" or "devaluation" as they commented. Across history, various barriers have limited women's participation in governance, administration, and intellectual fields, reinforcing the phenomenon of glass ceiling. Few of participants commented about this as one commented: *Look at our history, you may understand why there are no women in leadership. How many women were women leaders were in our history?* [WM06].

The interviewees pointed out that ancient Egyptian society granted women rights such as legal property ownership and involvement in religious matters. However, most administrative and political leadership continued to be for men. Therefore, it was typically necessary for female rulers to use masculine titles and imagery to establish their power. While some women were enabled to break through gender barriers, the leadership structures were not designed to facilitate widespread female rule.

Interviewees added that women were further excluded from positions of authority and political life during the Greco-Roman era. Male domination in government was reinforced, and women were primarily limited to domestic responsibilities. Women's participation in leadership declined during the Islamic era because of their strong emphasis on traditional roles. Furthermore, throughout the Ottoman and colonial eras, professional and educational opportunities were limited. Even in the face of changes in education and employment during the 19th and 20th centuries, social norms still limited women to supporting roles rather than leadership ones; the gender barriers in male-dominated sectors, however, kept women's empowerment in tourism, museums, and heritage management limited.

### 3. Proposed solution for handling challenges for glass ceiling in heritage

A discussion with interviewees on the possible solution to meet the above-mentioned challenges, they provided several solutions that could diminish this phenomenon and contribute to women accessibility to leadership presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Proposed solution for handling challenges among women in tourism and heritage

| Challenges                               | Solutions  |
|--|--|
| Cultural and social challenges           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- launch nationwide awareness campaigns to promote the role of women in social and economic development, which ultimately contributes to sustainable development of Egypt.</li> <li>- narrate the success stories of Egyptian women leaders via various media to transform traditional stereotypes about women's leadership.</li> <li>- provide national training and coaching programs to enhance their knowledge, skills and attitude of leadership.</li> </ul>   |
| Regulatory challenges                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- apply existing anti-discrimination laws and issue clear policies regarding gender equality in hiring and promotions.</li> <li>- provide legally binding quotas to ensure women's representation in leadership roles within the heritage and tourism sectors.</li> <li>- launch governmental monitoring units to verify gender equality compliance throughout establishments.</li> <li>- offer legal support services for women facing discrimination in the workplace.</li> </ul>   |
| Organizational and structural challenges | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Implement friendly workplace policies and laws (e.g., childcare support, flexible working hours and paid maternity leave) to balance family-work responsibilities.</li> <li>- implement hiring policies that mandate gender-balanced leadership.</li> <li>- provide transparent accountability channels within institutions to address and correct patterns of gender-based exclusion.</li> <li>- encourage training and coaching programs for women leadership and coupling experienced female leaders with young professionals to build confidence and accessibility to leadership.</li> </ul>                        |
| Personal challenges                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- hosting leadership coaching to foster self-confidence and resilience among women, presented by experienced female leaders.</li> <li>- provide positive recognition and support systems based on evaluated programs (e.g., leadership, negotiation).</li> <li>- offering prospects for women to lead projects and make independent decisions, boosting women's value and empowerment.</li> <li>- launch public campaigns that counter negative gender stereotypes, especially the association between emotionality and leadership incompetence.</li> </ul>   |
| Historical challenges                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- embed the achievements of historical Egyptian female leaders into governmental education curricula to reshape societal perceptions of gender roles.</li> <li>- encourage academic research, museum exhibitions, and public lectures that spotlight women's contributions to heritage and tourism.</li> <li>- support activities that reinterpret historical narratives to recognize women's leadership experiences and achievements.</li> <li>- stage cultural events and media programs to spotlight historical and contemporary women leaders, providing inspirational role models for future generations.</li> </ul> |

## DISCUSSION

Despite notable advancements in education and empowerment initiatives, many women in Egypt continue to find it difficult to reach leadership roles (Marinakou, 2014; Caria et al., 2025; Elbanna, 2025). The primary aim of this study is to fill an existing gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of Egyptian women in the heritage sector, with a specific focus on how they confront the glass ceiling. The study involved interviews with 19 female professionals who were able to access leadership positions. The study followed a qualitative phenomenological approach supplemented with thematic analysis that served to identify the challenges these women encounter to crash glass ceiling and reach top management. The research identifies five primary barriers that challenge women's career advancement which are social and cultural, organisational and structure, regulatory, individual and historical obstacles. The results align with previous work on women's career and glass ceiling (El-Fiky, 2023; World Bank, 2024; Matsa & Miller, 2025; Elbanna, 2025).

The results showed that jobs in tourism are perceived by the Egyptian society as low-status and unsuitable for women due to direct contact with tourist and night shifts, which concurs with Sobaih & Abu Elnasr (2024). Additionally, there are cultural norms reflecting gender stereotypes that still seriously impede the advancement of Egyptian women. Women are often given family care responsibilities priority, so their professional aspirations suffer. In the workplace, where women frequently deal with prejudices regarding their skills compared to males, these stereotypes have a significant impact on women's career and progression. The study indicates that these biased opinions, which mirror the larger social norms surrounding gender responsibilities and social role in Egypt, frequently lead to women being passed over for chances for promotion. Such findings align with the RCT framework by Eagly & Karau (2002) and feminist theories (Tong, 2024) that these prejudices and categorization of women in housework and minimal jobs due to their

traits is wrong assumption and hinder women to reach top management. These barriers affect other barriers such as individual, organisational and even historical barriers as such social and cultural norms could significant other barriers.

Women in the Egyptian heritage sector face obstacles in achieving leadership positions because they are underrepresented in decision-making teams and networks. For women, especially those who also handle household duties, the demanding nature of the heritage industry, marked by long hours and high levels of stress, makes things even more difficult. The study outlines how cultural expectations about family care and a lack of work-life balance impede women's advancement to leadership positions which add to the understanding of RCT framework and glass ceiling. Women feel more emboldened to breach the glass ceiling and advance in their jobs in communities that encourage inclusive and supportive practices, which include governments that provide networking opportunities, leadership development, and mentorship programs specifically for women. Women are frequently excluded from professional networks, which can stymie their professional advancement by limiting access to critical support and empowerment resources. These results support recent studies on Egyptian women progression (El-Fiky, 2023; Elbanna, 2025)

The results found that individual factors such as low self-esteem and lack of interpersonal skill development also have a significant impact on the glass ceiling. This is an interesting finding as earlier scholars (e.g. Cotter et al., 2001; Bertrand, 2011) found that glass ceiling is invisible barrier that affect women progression, and this barrier is related to community and teamwork or organisation. However, the current research shows that this barrier could be from women themselves, e.g. their self-confidence and psychological empowerment. Indeed, women in Egypt are not pursuing leadership positions because they lack networking, support and fear failure. There is hope for change; the younger generation of Egyptian women, buoyed by increasing education levels, is developing greater self-assurance, also with governmental and organizational initiatives that are encouraging gender equality. In any case, psychological empowerment, which helps build confidence and leadership skills, is crucial. Egypt is gradually transitioning in a way that aims to expand women's empowerment (Shorbagi et al., 2017; El-Fiky, 2023). Acknowledging the value of women in leadership roles, the Egyptian government has put in place several policies to empower women and increase their access to leadership positions in the tourism and heritage industries while combating social prejudices.

The study fills a notable gap in the literature by presenting the obstacles that face females in heritage management. While earlier research has looked at the glass ceiling, it has mainly concentrated on areas outside of tourism and heritage (Rizk et al., 2022; El-Fiky, 2023) or on hospitality and tourism (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021; Rizk et al., 2022; Mousa et al., 2023; Rashwan et al., 2024) with limited attention to heritage despite its importance to the Egyptian economy. The study holds that despite some positive advancements in gender equality; there is a necessity for more effort to bridge gender gap (World Bank, 2024) and overcome the barriers that women face in the heritage sector. Policymakers are supposed to enforce the adoption of public laws that enhance women's access to leadership positions to ensure their representation in decision-making roles. The heritage sector could introduce quotas for women in senior management, and it should be supported by a robust legal framework that mandates compliance from related organisations. Policies should also address the significance of women's contributions to the sector, which are highlighted through targeted awareness campaigns across various media platforms that aim to challenge outdated stereotypes and reshape societal views of women in leadership roles. Policymakers should work alongside educational institutions to improve academic programs and training courses that focus on management and leadership skills for women, ensuring they are well-prepared to thrive in their careers. Women aspiring to lead the heritage sector should focus on strengthening their management skills and educational qualifications to better balance their personal and professional lives. A network of friends and family can also help them control their obligations.

## CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study provides some insights into the glass ceiling identified by Egyptian women in the tourism and heritage sector. The research conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with leading women in the heritage sector. The results extended understanding of RCT framework and obstacles that hinder women crack glass ceiling to reach top management positions in the Egyptian heritage sector. The results showed five main obstacles: social and cultural, organisational and structure, regulatory, individual and historical obstacles. The results confirm that various obstacles related to society and government, i.e. social and cultural, historical and regulatory obstacles, or related to organizations, e.g. structure, support and networking, or related to individual obstacles, e.g. self-confidence and psychological empowerment. These results provide comprehensive understanding of factors affect glass ceiling among Egyptian women in heritage as well as recommendation to bridging this gap. Despite the study provided some interesting findings with some recommendation for overcoming obstacles of glass ceiling among Egyptian women in heritage.

The study, like many other qualitative studies, has some limitations. The study is concerned with small sample of participants who have had leading positions to understand their lived experience. Furthermore, the study is also concerned with women in Egyptian heritage and did not have participants from other sectors. These limitations open the door for future studies. Future studies could examine the impact of government actions, corporate policies, and societal changes in fighting discriminatory practices would yield practical insights for policymakers and foundations.

Besides, future studies could investigate strategies for empowering women to navigate restrictions in their sectors and supporting leadership programs on women's career paths in heritage. Furthermore, study the perspectives of both male and female managers to gain a more comprehensive view of leadership issues and gender-related career obstacles. The research could enhance its findings by comparing women's experiences across different industries, such as healthcare, tourism, and education, to explore their experiences. Comparative studies would enable a more thorough comprehension of how institutional, social, and cultural elements affect women's career progression in various contexts.



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