

The Impact of Women's Participation in Management on Economic Growth: A Case of Kurdistan Region

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Abstract

Human capital is essential to the growth of the economy. However, despite steps to increase the participation of women in labour, there is still a huge gap when it comes to women representation in managerial positions. The main purpose of this study is to determine the impact of women's participation in management on economic growth in the Kurdistan Region. The study presents a literature review highlighting empirical studies in other countries and how they have benefitted from women representation in management in their economies and where they are lacking. It is the aim of the research that some lessons can be drawn from the different contexts in other countries and the results of the study be applied in the Kurdistan Region. The study revealed that there are many barriers to women ascending into managerial positions and lack of enforcement of anti-discrimination policies is one of the chief factors. In addition, countries that are deeply ingrained in men and women roles have a hard time having women in leadership positions. The study showed that a lot still needs to be done at society level, organisational level and national level and if all of these players work well towards improving women participation in management, the economy can reap great rewards from it.

Keywords: *women participation, women representation, economic growth, gender inequality, leadership*

Introduction

Women have been increasingly taking a role in the workforce and make significant contributions to the economy as well (Aydin et al, 2019). In fact their participation is one of the most discussed topics (Al-Matari et al, 2022) and garnered the attention of international organisations like the United Nations(UN) who have equality on their main agenda. Yi et al (2020) pointed out that gender inequality is one of the main obstacles to economic development hence the reasons for encouragement and promotion of equality. The United Nations and the World Bank are at the forefront of developing strategies that include women in the workforce as well as their empowerment to better positions (Devadas and Kim, 2020). A lot of countries have implemented various legislations in a bid to increase women representation in leadership positions (Chan et al, 2021).

Gender equality has increased the participation of women in the workforce by distributing resources and responsibilities. Continued women empowerment and education has also seen women rising to

greater heights and being part of the management of companies. The Global Gender Gap Report (2023) highlights that the share of women in leadership accounts for only 32.2% in 2023 and healthcare, education and government have the highest representation. However, this move is still gradual as gender inequalities (Basdekis et al, 2023) in opportunities and wages mean there are still fewer of them in high places compared to their male counterparts (Vial and Richomme-Huet, 2017). Giron and Kazemikhasragh (2022) pointed out that gender inequality leads to the decreased economic growth of a nation, as noted in developing countries.

Some countries even have laws and policies in place that act as an obstacle to women participation in leadership (UN, 2020). The European Institute for Gender Equality highlighted that improved gender equality can increase the European Union gross domestic product per capita by 3.5% by 2050. Even though the contribution of women to economic development has been acknowledged only in recent years, women have always contributed significantly to economic growth (Baerlocher et al, 2021; Gulvira et al, 2024).

Problem statement

According to a UN report, over 2.7 billion women are restricted when it comes to being part of the workplace. Wu et al (2017) highlighted that there have been a lot of interest and studies on the impact of women participation in management in relation to firm or economic performance but the results have been varied and inconclusive (Alturazza et al, 2021). Studies on the impact of women participation in management particularly in the Middle East are scarce and such a study will help to shed light on the importance of women contribution in not only companies but to the nation's economy at large. Despite efforts to improve women participation in management, the global average of firms with women top managers is at 20% (Sirivunnabood and Liao, 2021). The Kurdistan Region has one of the lowest women labour participation at 14% (World Bank, 2022) with social aspects being the chief limitation. This necessitates a look into this area of research particularly for the Kurdistan Region, to find lessons from other nations and make improvements.

The main objective for the study is to determine the impact of women participation on economic growth in Kurdistan. In addition, the researcher also explores the reasons behind the lesser women representation in managerial positions. In exploring the main question, the researcher posits that women participation in management improves economic growth; and level of human capital contribution affects the women participation in management.

The results of this study are crucial to the encouragement of women participation not just in the workforce but in managerial positions. The study has the potential of providing more evidence that can be used for decision making regarding inclusion policies in Kurdistan. In addition, the results of the study can also be meaningful to companies in the Kurdistan region and lead to changes in company policies regarding inclusion and appreciation of women participation in management. Furthermore, given that there are scarce studies in this area in Kurdistan, the results of the study can contribute significantly to the much needed literature and be used as a foundation and reference point for further studies.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

Hossain et al (2017) stated that inclusion of women directors particularly on board of directors gives a different insight on things that men may not bring to the table. This is also in line with the Catfish effect theory which highlights that inclusion of women in management stimulates healthy competition in the workplace and brings new perspectives (Zhang et al, 2016). The Catfish effect contends that an addition of a competitor stimulates competition in a group setting. The addition of women, who have distinct qualities to the management is seen as a way of motivating the males to also work harder. Generally, women face challenges on their way to the top and have to work twice as hard as men. When they reach the top, they also face more scrutiny and criticism. As a result of having to navigate these challenges, women executives end up performing beyond expectation which in turn triggers the males to work harder just to not appear incompetent, all boosting firm performance.

Similarly, the Agency theory echoes the same sentiments and points out that women in management bring diverse ideas and enriches the strategy development process (Mishra et al, 2020). In contrast, Yanto et al (2019) found gender diversity on boards to have no impact on disclosures and corporate social responsibility. Yusof et al (2022) emphasised that inclusion of women in managerial positions should not just be done as a way of increasing the number of women but should be a meaningful process that appoints high-calibre women in managerial positions for positive effects to be realised. Chang et al (2024) echoed the same sentiments and highlighted that aspects like level of education can have an impact on the quality of women representation in management. Good education translates well for the economy (Collin and Weil, 2020). However, Jawhar et al (2021) pointed out that education alone was not sufficient if there were no proper inclusive policies put in place as well as recognition of women's contribution to the knowledge economy. This can be observed in the case of Romania where women representation in managerial positions was only 12.8% yet 60% of graduates are women (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020).

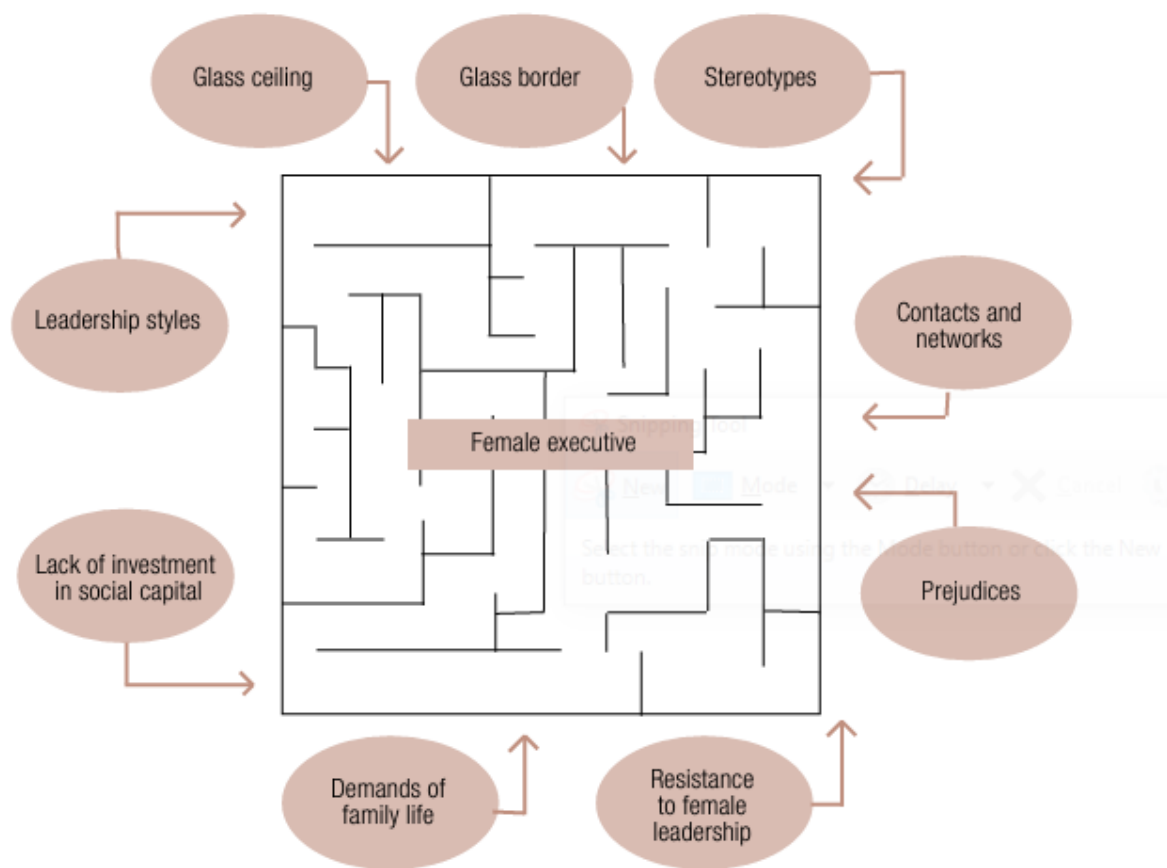
The resource dependency theory highlights linkages between firm mechanisms and external links. External linkages are necessary for company growth (Quong, 2022). In the context of women participation in management, the resource dependency theory shows how the management of a company is linked with the external environment (Wu et al, 2017). The dependency theory explains that the difference in gender brings better results and enables the firm to better estimate required resources with females bringing a transformative approach (Tahir et al, 2021). The differences in leadership styles brought by men and women to management provides better outcomes.

The Stakeholder theory contends that the management of a company provides the connection between the company and the stakeholders. The management lends more credibility to the stakeholders. Investors are interested in gender diversity which provides balanced decision making processes that involve both men and women. Others point out that women in management draw more investors and groups particularly regarding issues of corporate social responsibility. However, the Vase theory contends that women in management are just there for show, just like flowers in a vase. They do not have much of a say in decision making and are just there to keep up appearances. The Vase theory highlights that women are not really given any real power and are marginalised out of core business and assigned tasks that are not that crucial to the company as they are risk and competition averse.

This also tends to be in line with the Social Cognition theory which deals with behaviour and alludes that social behaviour has an impact on how others interact and that the minority subordinates the majority in most cases. In most cases women are underrepresented in managerial positions (Sirivunnabood and Liao, 2021). In this regard, considering that women in management are almost always lesser than men, their contribution is likely not to have much impact as the majority rule usually triumphs. That means companies that have lesser females in management, women may not have that much decision making power or impact on the firm financial performance.

Barriers to women participation in management

Factors affecting women in managerial positions



Oboh et al (2022) states that glass ceiling and discriminatory tendencies are some of the issues surrounding hindrances of women participation in management. In addition, cultural norms also play a significant part in the involvement of women in the workforce (Samargandi et al, 2019). Asubiro-Dada (2019) contends that cultural norms affect the ascension of women into managerial positions. The society is generally patriarchal (Musoka and Muya, 2018) and men accorded the decision-making powers. Mutuma et al (2022) contends that most companies are built on patriarchal lines and naturally discriminate against women in the workforce. This leads to certain stereotypes regarding women in positions as well as a general reluctance on men's part to have women in managerial positions (Jayachandran, 2021).

Blanton et al (2019) also pointed out that sexist attitudes exist generally, and women are generally regarded as secondary earners. The scholars also explained that this also occurs a lot in professions that are male dominated where women find it difficult to get into. This was supported by Lopez et al (2023) who pointed out that jobs that are normally associated with women are undervalued. Even salaries provided to women are lower than what men earn with salaries being 15% lower than that of men in the European Union (Dahlum et al, 2022). In times of financial crises, women are always the first to be let go meaning financial crises negatively affect women participation in the labour force (Blanton et al, 2019).

In a lot of countries, particularly developing countries, there are gender roles (Nassar et al, 2021) and roles at home are usually the obligation of the women (Omran et al, 2022; Dahlum et al, 2022). As a result, they have to take care of their families and create a balance between work and familial obligations (Sirivunnabood and Liao, 2021). However, as the familial demands can be too much, women end up being forced to pursue one and this is usually family and their careers suffer (Buterin et al, 2023). Sometimes women end up taking part time jobs instead of full employment (Hayashi, 2021).

Method

The study employs a literature review research design exploring different effects on different countries in relation to women participation in leadership. The study highlights countries with high and also those with low participation in leadership. Lessons will be drawn from these results and recommendations provided on the Kurdistan region.

The studies used for the reviews were those that focused on women participation in the economy and particularly those in managerial positions. No literature review studies were included, only studies that based their results on primary research were used. Both cross sectional and longitudinal studies were used and particularly the longitudinal to provide a clearer view on long term effects. The study utilised different countries across the globe so as to provide different experiences from different settings.

In addition, the study also highlighted some measures that have been put in place in a few countries to improve women participation in management and the impact on economic growth.

Women labour participation and economic growth

A nation's economic growth can be observed from various measures like GDP, various forms of capital and assets (Asubiaro-Dada, 2019). Dutta and Maus (2021) highlighted that the increased involvement of women in parliament resulted in positive increases in education as well as health expenditure (Fokam et al, 2021) and both these are associated with economic growth. Economic growth is measured by different things that have been evolving over the years to include innovativeness, cultural factors and trade openness. Capital accumulation can also affect economic growth, with increased capital formation, a nation can produce more. Relevant investments in vital material like equipment increases productivity hence economic growth. The International Monetary Fund purported that if gaps in labour participation are closed, this can add as much as USD 28 trillion to GDP by 2025 (Largade, 2019). Women bring different and new insights from those of men hence their contributions are complementary (Ostry et al, 2018) scholar explained that women in labour increases availability of scarce resources and thus increases growth.

However, the largest part of a country's wealth is within the people (World Bank, 2018). Gender discriminatory tendencies therefore are a limitation to a country's ability for wealth creation (Klasen, 2017). Increased education and empowerment of women, raises their income and the nation's GDP (Asubiaro-Dada, 2019; Faryaar et al, 2022). Besporstov and Sinclair (2022) contend that calculations of GDP actually do not account for contributions from household work which is around 37.3% contribution to GDP (Statistics Canada, 2021). The ILO (2016) highlighted that global loss of human capital as a result of gender inequality is around USD 160.2 trillion

Mirziyoyeva and Salahodjaev (2023) conducted a study to determine the impact of women participation on economic growth. The study revealed that a 10% involvement of women in position of power in parliament raised the GDP by 0.74 units and capital formation by 0.97 points. These results also were in line with those of Buterin et al (2023) whose longitudinal study revealed that women participation in leadership increased GDP growth in the European Union. Data was used for 27 European Union countries over a 13 year period from 2009-2022 based on fixed and random effects. The study revealed that the European countries with the lowest GDP were also those that had the least women labour participation. In addition, in these countries the compensation and working conditions are terrible which does not motivate women to actually want to work. The study also found a direct significant relationship between female unemployment and GDP. The study also showed that a percentage increase of women in parliament, a decision making platform, increased GDP by 365.64 euros.

This resonates with results by Ramdayani et al (2021) whose study showed that increased women in politics encouraged Islamic economic development in Indonesia. Wu et al (2017) explored the impact of women participation in top management in China using level of education as a moderating variable. Only firms on the Chinese stock exchange were used. The study revealed that increased participation of women in top management resulted in improved firm and economic growth.

Similarly, Dahlum et al (2022) conducted a study across different non-Western countries to determine the impact of women participation in politics in the economy. The study was based on 277 countries, covering a period of 13 years from 2009 to 2022. The study revealed that increased women participation and education led to increased long term economic growth. The researcher also recommended programs that include women more as they are affected by family obligations a lot. Alturazza et al (2021) determined the consequences of gender inequality on economic data in developing countries from 1990 to 2017. Similar results were found on increased women participation leading to economic growth. However, the results were not the same for the Sub-Saharan Africa region, revealing that despite the highly educated women, there were still hindrances in their ascension to positions of power. The study recommended inclusive educational policies as well as a change in cultural practices for women to take up more positions of power. Likewise, Lawanson and Umar (2019) advocate for increased education of women to avoid economic losses.

The United Nations (2019) conducted a study in relation to women representation in labour in Jordan. The report revealed gender discrimination which impeded women in participating in labour, let alone managerial positions. Jordan has since taken steps to address workplace gender discrimination by setting laws like the Equal Remuneration Convention, there are still other laws that are discriminatory in place (UNDP, 2018). Women are not allowed under their Labour Code to work in certain industries, in certain work that is perceived as hard and to work at certain times. Lack of enforcement of rules and policies still remains high (World Bank, 2019; ILO, 2019). The labour law does not also explicitly

rebuke gender discrimination in hiring processes. There is general discrimination against married women which hinders their rising to the top (UN Report, 2019).

Mutuma et al (2022) explored the impact of women leadership participation in Kenya. A mixed research design was employed involving the quantitative aspect and interviews with women in leadership. The study revealed that gender played a role in the assumption to higher positions in public services and a lot of older people were in managerial positions. In addition, more years served in public service. Contrary to popular belief, the study also revealed that the majority of the women in managerial positions were actually married, whilst the norm is having married women having too many responsibilities to manage higher positions. Interviews conducted revealed that organisational barriers were the chief drivers of women failing to get into leadership positions. Women in leadership advocated for reforms not only at an organisational level but also at government level to put in place and implement inclusive policies that promote women in leadership. The study also revealed that despite attempts to actually put inclusive frameworks in place in the constitution, the National Policy on Gender and Development principles are not followed up on and implemented.

Policy development

In a bid to increase women participation in managerial positions, many countries have developed policies that encourage women participation. Countries like Portugal, Norway, Poland, among others, introduced a quota system to create balanced diversity in managerial positions (Nassar et al, 2021). Norway took legal measures to increase the number of women in managerial positions at national level. Public companies in Norway are required by law to have a quota of at least 40% women representation on their boards otherwise the company has to be dissolved (Buterin et al, 2023). However, imposing quotas is not enough; this should be backed up inclusive policies that are enforced (The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), 2019)

In the UK, the Hampton-Alexander Review on FTSE women leaders has been in constant review since Lord Davies of Abersoch set down some directives in 2011 regarding women on boards and the government built upon it once the initial threshold was met. Initially the target was 25% women 2015. In 2024, women representation by the FTSE 100 actually is 42.7% leadership occupied by women and the board being 47% women. Over 20% of new startups in the UK were female-led and the number of companies started by women is on the rise. Likewise, FTSE 250 and 350 have around 42% women directorship. Currently, the Hampton-Alexander Review on FTSE Women has been replaced by the FTSE Women Leaders review which has a target of 40% women representation in FTSE 350 by 2025. The Fawcett Society report Sex & Power 2022 highlights the representation of women in managerial positions across different sectors in the UK. The report revealed that there are twice as many men compared to women in positions of power and other ethnic minorities are even more underrepresented to the extent that there are no black women in the FTSE 100 management. The FTSE management only has 8% women representation and in some sectors like sports the representation of women is drastically declining. The report highlighted that there are only a third of women in top decision making positions.

Romania has been making great improvements regarding policies that improve women participation in labour and managerial positions following joining the EU. Legislations were put in place to improve the education of women so that they would be in a better position to join the labour force. Romania

had an increase in women representation in management in their adherence to EU policies and principles. Law No. 202/2002 focuses on gender balance and seeks to promote more women into decision making positions (Nassar et al, 2021). However, the National Institute of Statistics (2019) revealed that improvements were still needed as there was still underrepresentation of women in key positions in crucial industries like construction and industry where there were only 27.8% women. In terms of politics, the representation of women in Romania was much lesser with only 16.7% ministerial representation (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020). Women in managerial positions were also found to be much lesser in Romania in large listed companies with only a 12.8% representation. Even the European average also shows that there is still room for improvement as revealed in the 29.3% representation (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020). However, in other companies other than large listed companies, Romania has more than 50% women managerial representation. The Labour Code governing work policies is based on equal remuneration between men and women (Labour Code, 2019). As a result, the gender pay gap is among the lowest in Europe. However, matters of segregation still occur with some roles perceived as masculine and some as feminine and women also having a higher concentration in lowly paid jobs. In addition, Romanian women undertake more familia obligations taking care of their families and having household duties more than men. However, despite all these, Romania is making great strides and has a higher representation of women in male-dominated industries (European Commission, 2018). .

Kurdistan Region perspective

Despite Kurdish women having worked within politics during times of conflict and conducting peace negotiation, their influence has waned and they are regarded as just people to be seen not heard (Bagheri, 2022). Kiwan et al (2016) highlighted that Kurdish women contributed to the economy greatly until the 1991 Gulf War. According to Sen et al (2022), the Kurdistan Region has a very low percentage of women representation in the labour market, at 14%. Cultural and societal beliefs are some of the reasons for this low participation. El Feki et al (2017) highlighted these norms particularly in the Middle Eastern Region where most men believe that the woman's place is at home and the men have a right to monitor their movements. Despite the increase in the number of educated women in the Kurdistan Region, the number does not correspond to the labour force participation (Kabeer, 2019). The ILO report (2022) contends that women labour participation is 10.4% with single women making up the majority of the workforce.

Mothers tend to work more with an estimated 11 hours of work at home which is unpaid (Macques, 2023). Family responsibilities is the reason there are fewer mothers working in paid work (Lugo et al, 2020). The Kurdistan Region is very patriarchal and women are perceived to lose respectability if they work at certain hours particularly working with people not members of their family (Ismail 2022). Women are responsible for childcare as there is not much outside childcare because of beliefs and also lack of finance hence the women take care of their kids or entrust a family member to do so (Redaeli et al, 2023).

There is a general frowning upon women working in the private sector (Sryoka, 2023) and it is characterised by more discrimination and poor wages (World Bank, 2021). Public sector and shorter hours are deemed more acceptable (ILO, 2022). There are now more NGOs advocating for women's rights in the Kurdistan region and helping to work towards favourable inclusion policies. There is also a quota system in place which requires 25% women representation in parliament in an effort to be

more inclusive for women in decision making roles. However, Marques (2023) explained that laws need to be put in action and be also supported and implemented by the society for all of these efforts to come to fruition.

A study done by Kiwan et al (2016) revealed that women participation in labour positions had increased over the years. However, there was a noted lack of inclusion in decision making in those in senior positions of leadership and they are often just regarded as proxies. Interviewed women highlighted issues of abuse which made them fearful and they pointed out they also wanted to be in positions of power where they can be heard not just be visible. The women are just there for show in leadership position in the political set up. Participants of the study also highlighted that women are regarded as inferior and this narrative has to change from the family set up and women brought up with leadership qualities instilled in them. Provision of childcare was also brought up as a measure that can help women be free to participate more in workplaces. Awareness and training were also highlighted as a need to bring awareness to issues arising as well as ensuring that organisations coming in to help work effectively together with local organisations on a long-term basis with follow up.

Discussion

The study has revealed that there is still a lot of work that needs to be done in improving women representation in management. Several studies highlighted the importance of educating women and ensuring that they are equipped with essential skills and competencies to be in managerial positions. However, other studies where women have higher education like Romania still have issues regarding discriminatory tendencies in the workplace. This shows that education alone is not enough but there should be proper enforcement of implemented policies in conjunction with the policies for them to work. This is also echoed by Anggraeni et al (2022) who highlighted that the working environment, policies and wages should all be worked on and favourable in order for women to thrive. Asubiaro-Dada (2019) pointed out that accountability is necessary if benefits of women participation in labour for the economy are to be realised.

The studies above also revealed that inclusion of women in management resulted in an improved economy as women bring other valuable and scarce resources that are different from those of men (Han and Noland, 2020) and increased GDP (Mirziyoyeva and Salahodjaev (2023); Buterin, 2023). A balanced representation means the availability of essential resources within the economy. Hsieh et al (2019) study showed that in the US the increase of African American women in highly skilled jobs increased productivity and matching on talent acquisition. This is in line with the resource dependency theory which encourages introduction of valuable resources in companies. In addition, it supports Lewis employment theory which purports that having a lot of people employed provides opportunity and the excess unproductive labour boosts GDP. This actually helps because women are great spenders and therefore can provide better market insights which help when it comes to trade functions. This is also in line with Flabbi et al (2019) who pointed out that women in management lead to more than 3% boost in sales as compared to that without. Solow's economic theory highlights that education can help boost economic growth and therefore should be taken seriously to improve women labour participation.

In addition, women participation in management helps provide diverse policies in the economy (Colin and Weil, 2020). It helps to close the gap between gender pay and gender labour participation which helps to boost the economy. Women participation also helps to provide policies that are favourable

on the social aspect like work and life balance as well as well being related policies. Some studies have also shown that women are generally perceived as less corrupt and more honest so they provide a good image and representation to investors. In addition, firms that have more women managerial representation have higher profitability (Tanaka, 2019).

The study revealed that women in management were concentrated in areas like care and this bodes well for the economy because women can come up with favourable decisions regarding the health sector which is very important to the economy. However, the study revealed that women in politics in Kurdistan were generally regarded as proxies and this hinders progress particularly regarding policies that can be implemented by women for women. A progressive economy thrives on contribution from both men and women. This is also in line with the studies of Saleh (2024) that pointed out that lack of women rights in Kurdistan were affecting women participation in decision making positions and affecting the economy negatively.

It is evident that cultural norms also affect women participation in management. Women generally take care of their households and from the studies this affects their careers. It is important for measures to be put in place to improve how women balance their many duties. Gu (2022) pointed out that introduction of child care policies in the province of Quebec in Canada, increased women's labour participation and helped to lower one of the barriers of their participation in leadership. Having women have more time to work actually adds more to the GDP of a nation.

Implications of the study

The results of the study reveal that a lot of work needs to be done regarding involvement of women in managerial positions. The Kurdistan Region has a lower representation and is actually missing out on a lot of potential GDP by not having a higher representation of women in decision making positions. The government needs to put in place more policies that can encourage women in management positions and in the labour force in general to be able to benefit from the inclusion of women.

In addition, the government and responsible authorities have to take into cognisance that having a high quality education is only one step. They need to put the relevant policies and also enforce them to make sure that women are properly involved in managerial positions. In addition, there needs to be some education regarding the perception of women in power positions and the need for adjustments on the side of men. Relevant organisational policies should be in place to create a conducive environment for women to thrive in powerful positions. The society itself has to be ready to have women in managerial positions as well as accept them as well. Traditionally, Kurdistan women take care of their homes and families. There needs to be some inclusive policies in that regard that can help them have a balance between work and familial obligations so that they will be able to ascend the career ladder easily.

Limitations

The study was based on a qualitative approach. The researcher recommends future studies to be based on a mixed approach to be able to determine exactly what the situation is in the Kurdistan region and to be able to compare those results with those of other countries. In addition, the research only focused on a few studies in terms of scope, future studies can incorporate more studies.

Conclusion

Women management participation positively impact the economy. There is need to boost and promote women management participation in order to reduce the current opportunity cost of trillions that are being lost as a result of limited women participation. The Kurdistan Region needs to take a leaf out of the pages of other countries that are reaping the rewards of women participation to also boost their economy. Policies need not just be implemented, but followed up and enforced to ensure they are working. Much work needs to be done to improve women participation but the social fabric itself needs to be worked on to understand the value of women participation in management in the Kurdistan Region.

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