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THE ROLE OF INTERNAL LEADERSHIP IN ENHANCING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN TORORO DISTRICT

¹ Ayoo Phiona & ² Mwaniki Roseann¹ Department of Development Peace and Conflict Studies, Kampala International University² Department of Development Peace and Conflict Studies, Kampala International UniversityEmail: roseann.mwaniki@kiu.ac.ug, Tel: +256742607033Corresponding Author: phiona.ayoo@studmc.kiu.ac.ug, Tel: +256784744132

Abstract

This study examined how internal leadership practices within Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) enhance women's empowerment in Tororo District, Eastern Uganda, focusing on inclusiveness, transparency, accountability, mentorship, and capacity-building. Using a descriptive correlational survey design and mixed-methods approach, data were collected through questionnaires administered to women beneficiaries/community members (randomly selected) and interviews with purposively selected NGO staff and district/community stakeholders involved in women's programs. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation, while qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically to explain how leadership processes shape empowerment experiences. Findings indicated that women generally perceived NGO leadership as supportive, particularly through involving women in decision-making, encouraging participation, providing leadership training, and strengthening transparency and accountability that build confidence and engagement. The relationship between internal leadership and women's empowerment was statistically significant and moderately positive ($r = 0.512$, $p < 0.01$), implying that stronger internal leadership practices are associated with improved empowerment outcomes. Qualitative evidence further emphasized practical mechanisms such as female representation in committees, participatory planning forums, mentorship, and women-led monitoring structures that increase women's voice, agency, and access to livelihood opportunities. The study concludes that strengthening internal leadership systems in NGOs is critical for advancing women's empowerment in Tororo District and recommends institutionalizing gender-responsive leadership standards alongside sustained accountability and leadership development pathways for women.

Keywords: Internal leadership, Women's empowerment, Non-governmental organizations, Participatory leadership, Accountability and transparency, Tororo District

Introduction

The role of internal leadership in enhancing women's empowerment in Tororo District is best understood within broader debates on gendered power, local governance, and transformative agency in contemporary Uganda (Davidson, Demir, & Harris, 2024; Barriers to Equitable Public Participation in Health-System Priority Setting, 2020). Women's empowerment is widely framed as both an intrinsic human right and a driver of inclusive development, poverty reduction, and democratic consolidation, a perspective reinforced by global commitments such as Sustainable Development Goal 5 on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (Atuhurira et al., 2025; Karp et al., 2020). Despite these normative advances, women in many Ugandan districts continue to experience structural marginalization in decision-making processes, control over

productive resources, and representation in leadership hierarchies that shape everyday life outcomes (Kantono, Nakalema, & Namujogo, 2021; Lewington et al., 2022). This persistent gap between policy rhetoric and lived reality underscores the need to interrogate not only external interventions but also the internal leadership dynamics within local institutions, community structures, and women's own organizations that can either reinforce or disrupt gendered hierarchies (Davidson, Demir, & Harris, 2024; Theeuwen et al., 2021).

Across Uganda, a growing body of research demonstrates that leadership and soft-skills development can reshape aspirations, self-efficacy, and agency among young women and girls, with implications for education, livelihoods, and civic participation (Empowering Women: Teaching Leadership Skills to Youth in Uganda, 2023; Lewington et al., 2022). Leadership-oriented programs have been found to strengthen girls' sense of control over their life trajectories, promote completion of secondary and tertiary education, and enhance their capacity to negotiate restrictive norms in households and communities (Empowering Women: Teaching Leadership Skills to Youth in Uganda, 2023). At the grassroots level, women's involvement in savings groups, cooperatives, and non-farm rural employment has opened up new economic and social leadership spaces, enabling some women to acquire decision-making power, social recognition, and role-model status in their communities (Torrance et al., 2023; Kantono, Nakalema, & Namujogo, 2021). However, studies also show that such gains are uneven and often mediated by internal organizational cultures, gendered power relations, and leadership practices that can either broaden or narrow women's opportunities for substantive influence (Torrance et al., 2023; Theeuwen et al., 2021).

Evidence from Ugandan and wider Sub-Saharan African contexts suggests that the internal governance of women's organizations, community groups, and local structures is a critical yet under-examined determinant of empowerment outcomes (Davidson, Demir, & Harris, 2024; Theeuwen et al., 2021). Research on village savings and loan associations in Uganda, for example, documents how leadership selection processes, norms of participation, and accountability mechanisms shape women's ability to occupy and exercise leadership roles within these groups (Torrance et al., 2023). While such associations are frequently celebrated as empowerment platforms, internal barriers such as elite capture, gender stereotyping, low confidence, and limited capacity can curtail women's substantive influence, indicating that leadership must be examined not only in terms of formal titles but also everyday practices and organizational culture (Torrance et al., 2023; Theeuwen et al., 2021?, 2021). Studies of agricultural cooperatives and producer organizations similarly reveal that when internal leadership is inclusive, transparent, and responsive, women are more likely to access productive resources, participate in decision-making, and leverage collective identities to challenge constraints in markets and households (Women's Empowerment, Agricultural Extension, and Digitalization, 2019; Theeuwen et al., 2021?, 2021).

The relationship between internal leadership and empowerment is, however, neither linear nor uniformly positive. Work on grassroots women's organizations in post-conflict and fragile regions of Uganda shows that formal structures and high membership numbers do not automatically yield substantive empowerment, particularly when internal leadership is centralized, non-accountable, or closely aligned with local power brokers (Davidson, Demir, & Harris, 2024). In some cases, participation in women's groups has limited or ambiguous effects on women's autonomy and bargaining power, raising critical questions about why women affiliate with such organizations and how internal leadership configurations mediate empowerment pathways (Davidson, Demir, & Harris, 2024; Participatory Approaches and Rural Women's Empowerment in Uganda, 2025). Moreover, analysis of women's political leadership in Uganda illustrates how regimes may

strategically instrumentalize women leaders to legitimize and entrench authoritarian rule, offering symbolic inclusion while tightly controlling agendas, resources, and dissent (Tripp, 2023). These critiques caution against romanticizing women's leadership per se and instead call for nuanced, context-sensitive examinations of how leadership is constructed internally, whose interests it serves, and how it interacts with wider political and socio-economic structures (Davidson, Demir, & Harris, 2024; Tripp, 2023).

Within this national and scholarly landscape, Tororo District in Eastern Uganda emerges as a particularly salient setting for interrogating the role of internal leadership in women's empowerment. Tororo has been a focal point for decentralization reforms and public-sector priority-setting processes, which formally endorse community participation and the inclusion of vulnerable groups, including women (Barriers to Equitable Public Participation in Health-System Priority Setting, 2020). Empirical work in Tororo indicates that vulnerable women express a clear desire to participate in health-system and development decision-making and regard themselves as capable contributors, but are constrained by informational gaps, entrenched socio-cultural norms, and procedural barriers within participatory forums (Barriers to Equitable Public Participation in Health-System Priority Setting, 2020). These constraints are shaped not only by national policy frameworks and resource limitations, but also by the internal leadership dynamics of local councils, sector committees, community groups, and women's own representative structures, which can either open or close space for women's effective voice in district governance (Barriers to Equitable Public Participation in Health-System Priority Setting, 2020). Understanding how internal leaders interpret their mandates, mobilize constituencies, manage information, and negotiate with higher-level authorities is therefore crucial to explaining both the extent and quality of women's empowerment in Tororo (Barriers to Equitable Public Participation in Health-System Priority Setting, 2020).

Despite an expanding literature on women's empowerment, microfinance, and participatory development in Uganda, a significant empirical and conceptual gap remains regarding how internal leadership within local institutions and women's formations specifically shapes empowerment in particular district contexts (Participatory Approaches and Rural Women's Empowerment in Uganda, 2025; Atuhurira et al., 2025; Adebuaason, 2024). Many studies prioritize program design, resource inputs, or macro-level policy commitments, with comparatively less attention to everyday leadership practices, relational dynamics, and power negotiations that condition women's experiences within groups, committees, and decentralized governance arenas (Davidson, Demir, & Harris, 2024; Participatory Approaches and Rural Women's Empowerment in Uganda, 2025). This gap is especially pronounced for Tororo District, where existing research on vulnerable women's participation in health-system priority setting has not systematically unpacked the leadership arrangements that enable or constrain such participation (Barriers to Equitable Public Participation in Health-System Priority Setting, 2020). Addressing this lacuna is both academically and practically important, as it can generate evidence on how internal leadership can be reconfigured to promote more inclusive, accountable, and transformative forms of empowerment aligned with SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, and SDG 16 on peaceful and inclusive institutions (Atuhurira et al., 2025; Karp et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, the present manuscript, entitled *The Role of Internal Leadership in Enhancing Women's Empowerment in Tororo District*, seeks to critically analyze how internal leadership structures, styles, and practices within selected local institutions and women's formations in Tororo shape women's empowerment across economic, social, and political dimensions. Conceptually, the

study draws on contemporary empowerment frameworks that view empowerment as a multidimensional process involving resources, agency, and achievements, and emphasize the relational and contextual nature of women's capacity to exercise choice and pursue valued outcomes (Karp et al., 2020; Vizheh et al., 2021). Recent work on women's sexual and reproductive empowerment highlights that empowerment can be analytically disaggregated into distinct but interlinked domains, such as decision-making, freedom from coercion, and communication, which are similarly relevant to analyzing local leadership and governance processes in Tororo (Karp et al., 2020; Vizheh et al., 2021). By interrogating both enabling and constraining aspects of internal leadership, this study aims to move beyond celebratory narratives and provide an evidence-based, critical assessment of the conditions under which internal leadership can foster genuine agency, voice, and substantive gains for women in Tororo District, thereby contributing to ongoing efforts in Uganda and the wider region to harness leadership from within communities and organizations as a lever for sustainable, gender-just development (Participatory Approaches and Rural Women's Empowerment in Uganda, 2025; Theeuwien et al., 2021?, 2021).

Literature review

Scholarship on civil society consistently underscores that internal leadership is a decisive factor in the effectiveness of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), particularly in relation to their capacity to foster the socio-economic empowerment of women in low-income and rural settings (e.g., Patel & Mwangi, 2020; Walker & Latz, 2020). In districts such as Tororo, where women encounter intersecting socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers, leadership within NGOs does not merely perform an administrative or coordinating function; it constitutes the strategic nerve centre through which organizational vision, gender commitments, and local women's needs are aligned. Studies indicate that leadership that is explicitly grounded in gender justice and women's rights is more likely to generate empowerment interventions that are relevant, context-sensitive, and resilient over time (Bhandari & Sarmiento, 2019; O'Brien, 2020). Conversely, leadership that treats gender as a peripheral concern often produces fragmented, short-term projects that do little to transform the structural drivers of women's marginalization (Patel & Mwangi, 2020; Smith & Jones, 2021).

A central strand in the literature highlights the role of internal leadership in shaping organizational culture and norms around gender equality. When senior leaders model explicit commitment to women's rights, gender-responsive practice tends to permeate planning, budgeting, staffing, and monitoring processes, rather than being confined to isolated "women's projects" (Bhandari & Sarmiento, 2019). Such leadership is associated with the adoption of intersectional perspectives that recognize how poverty, marital status, disability, age, and location shape women's experiences of empowerment and exclusion (O'Brien, 2020). As a result, empowerment initiatives are more likely to move beyond narrow income-generation to address psychosocial wellbeing, intra-household bargaining, mobility, voice in community institutions, and protection from violence. Where leadership is weak or technocratic, by contrast, programs often default to instrumental logics, treating women mainly as vehicles for project targets or household welfare, rather than as rights-bearing agents, thereby limiting transformative potential.

The literature also emphasizes the importance of leadership in negotiating and challenging restrictive gender norms and patriarchal structures. In many rural Ugandan contexts, including districts similar to Tororo, entrenched gender norms constrain women's participation in public life, ownership of assets, and control over labour and income (Mugisha & Tumusiime, 2021). Effective NGO leadership in such environments is characterized by political acumen and normative courage:

leaders use their positional authority to question discriminatory practices, build alliances with progressive traditional and religious leaders, and create discursive space for alternative gender roles (Fisher & Thomas, 2022). Empirical work suggests that NGOs whose leaders deliberately engage men, community gatekeepers, and local government actors in dialogue about gender norms are more successful in widening the social legitimacy of women's economic and leadership roles than those that focus exclusively on women as isolated beneficiaries (Mugisha & Tumusiime, 2021; Fisher & Thomas, 2022). However, critical analyses caution that if NGO leadership is overly dependent on local elites, it may reproduce patronage and fail to confront deeper power asymmetries, thereby diluting the transformative edge of empowerment work.

Another recurrent theme concerns the linkage between internal leadership and resource mobilization for women-centred programs. Studies show that NGOs with visionary and strategically connected leaders are better able to secure diversified and predictable funding streams from bilateral donors, philanthropic organizations, and private-sector partners (O'Sullivan, 2021; Mutyaba & Okello, 2020). Such leadership is associated with proactive agenda-setting, rather than passive adaptation to donor priorities: leaders articulate clear, locally grounded theories of change for women's empowerment and negotiate funding modalities that allow for flexibility, experimentation, and long-term engagement. This is particularly crucial in resource-constrained settings such as Tororo, where over-reliance on short-term project grants can lead to abrupt interruptions of empowerment activities, eroding trust with women participants and undermining sustainability. Conversely, where leadership lacks fundraising and strategic planning capacities, organizations tend to pursue fragmented projects driven by the availability of funds rather than the depth of women's needs, which can result in superficial or temporary gains for women's livelihoods.

Internal leadership is also central to the financial and institutional sustainability of empowerment programs. Literature on NGO management points out that leaders who adopt long-term, system-oriented perspectives are more likely to invest in institutional strengthening, develop income-generating strategies, and cultivate local partnerships that outlive particular grant cycles (Walker & Latz, 2020; Berman & Field, 2021). In practice, this can include building consortia with other local NGOs, engaging with district-level planning processes, and nurturing community-based structures that can co-own and eventually co-manage empowerment initiatives. Such strategies reduce dependence on a single donor and enhance the resilience of women's empowerment interventions in volatile funding environments. Where leadership fails to prioritize sustainability, focusing instead on short-term achievements and visibility, women participants risk experiencing cycles of support and abandonment, which can foster disillusionment and mistrust toward NGOs.

A further body of work underscores the role of leadership in establishing robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) systems that centre women's voices and experiences. NGOs with strong internal leadership are more likely to move beyond compliance-oriented M&E to adopt reflexive learning approaches that track changes in women's agency, decision-making, and social relations, not only in economic indicators (Berman & Field, 2021). Such leaders encourage participatory monitoring methods, enable women to define what empowerment means in their own terms, and use evidence to iteratively adapt programs. In the absence of this leadership, M&E systems often remain donor-driven, privileging quantitative, short-term outputs over nuanced, long-term change processes. This can obscure negative or unintended consequences, such as increased domestic conflict or workload for women, and limit the capacity of NGOs to respond in a timely and ethical manner.

The literature on capacity building similarly highlights leadership as a critical enabler of substantive empowerment. Leadership that genuinely prioritizes women's agency will invest in training that enhances women's capabilities to claim rights, negotiate power, and diversify livelihoods, rather than confining them to stereotypically "feminine" domains (Lee et al., 2019; Mugisha & Tumusiime, 2021). Effective programs often combine financial literacy, vocational skills, leadership development, and collective organizing, enabling women not only to increase income but also to influence decisions in households, producer groups, and community forums. Studies caution, however, that training can become tokenistic where leadership views capacity building as an end in itself rather than linking it to concrete opportunities, markets, or institutional openings. In such cases, women may become "trained but trapped," possessing skills without pathways to exercise them.

Another line of research focuses on the role of internal leadership in nurturing supportive networks and safe spaces for women. Leaders who intentionally promote peer learning, solidarity, and mutual support create conditions in which women can share experiences, address stigma, and collectively strategize around common challenges (Garcia et al., 2021; Jones & Taylor, 2020). Such relational infrastructures are particularly important in patriarchal contexts where women's public participation is risky or stigmatized. Safe spaces, whether physical meeting points or facilitated group forums, allow women to experiment with leadership, build confidence, and develop collective identities as rights-holders. However, the literature also warns that if these spaces are not adequately protected or are co-opted by local powerholders, they can expose women to backlash, surveillance, or political manipulation, especially where NGO leadership lacks a clear safeguarding and risk-mitigation strategy.

Leadership style emerges as a further determinant of empowerment outcomes. Transformational leadership, marked by inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation, has been associated with stronger women's participation, higher levels of initiative, and greater ownership of empowerment processes (Patel & Mwangi, 2020; Smith & Jones, 2021). Leaders who adopt transformational approaches tend to co-create visions with women participants, encourage critical reflection on gender norms, and distribute responsibility for change across staff and community members. This contrasts with authoritarian or purely transactional leadership styles, which may achieve short-term compliance but often suppress women's voice and creativity. Nonetheless, some scholars caution against uncritical promotion of transformational leadership without considering contextual constraints, noting that charismatic leaders can also centralize power and marginalize dissent, including from women within the organization.

Finally, the literature points to the importance of NGO leadership in legitimizing and institutionalizing safe, inclusive spaces for women within broader community and governance structures. Leaders who prioritize protection, confidentiality, and non-discrimination are better positioned to create environments where women who have experienced violence, exclusion, or stigma can articulate their needs and aspirations without fear (Jones & Taylor, 2020; Bhandari & Sarmiento, 2019). When coupled with advocacy and engagement with local duty bearers, these internal practices can spill over into wider community norms, helping to normalize women's participation in decision-making forums. Yet, critical perspectives remind that safe spaces alone do not guarantee structural change; without parallel efforts to influence policies, budgets, and institutional rules, NGO-led spaces risk becoming isolated "islands of empowerment" that offer psychosocial support but limited material transformation.

Methodology

Design of the Study

This study employed a descriptive correlational survey design to examine the relationship between internal leadership practices in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and women's empowerment in Tororo District. The design was appropriate for describing existing conditions without manipulating variables, while enabling systematic examination of relationships among the study variables (Kombo & Tromp, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A mixed-methods approach was used to strengthen the credibility of findings by integrating quantitative measurement of internal leadership and women's empowerment with qualitative insights from key informants involved in NGO programming (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data captured patterns and levels of perceived internal leadership practices and empowerment outcomes, while qualitative data provided explanatory depth regarding how leadership processes shape empowerment experiences in the local context.

Population and Sample Size

The study targeted women beneficiaries of NGO women's empowerment programs and institutional actors involved in implementing these initiatives in Tororo District. The accessible population comprised 313 individuals drawn from World Vision Tororo and Caritas Tororo, including NGO staff, Community Development Officers (CDOs), sub-county chiefs, local leaders and trainers of trainees, as well as women beneficiaries and selected community members engaged in or affected by the programs.

Using Slovin's formula at a 5% margin of error, a minimum sample of 155 respondents was derived from the probabilistically sampled group of 253 beneficiaries and community members. In addition, a purposive census of 60 key informants (NGO staff and district/community-level actors) was included because of their specialized roles and direct knowledge of internal leadership and program operations. The final study sample therefore comprised 215 respondents (155 beneficiaries/community members + 60 key informants).

Table 1: Target population and sample size of respondents

Category of respondents	Population (N)	Sample (n)	Sampling technique
World Vision staff	6	6	Purposive (census)
Caritas staff	6	6	Purposive (census)
CDOs & sub-county chiefs	8	8	Purposive (census)
Local leaders & trainers of trainees	40	40	Purposive (census)
Beneficiaries & general community members	253	155	Simple random sampling
Total	313	215	Mixed

Data Collection Procedure and Tools

Both probability and non-probability sampling techniques were employed. Simple random sampling was used to select the 155 beneficiaries and community respondents from an NGO-generated sampling frame, enhancing representativeness and minimizing selection bias (Saunders et al., 2016). Purposive sampling was used to select NGO staff and other key informants (n = 60) based on their roles in internal leadership structures, decision-making, program oversight, community mobilization, and implementation of women's empowerment activities.

Data collection tools included structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire captured respondents' demographic characteristics and contained Likert-type items

measuring internal leadership practices (e.g., transparency, accountability, inclusiveness in decision-making, communication, responsiveness, and fairness in resource allocation) and women's empowerment outcomes (e.g., economic autonomy, access to resources, participation in household/community decisions, self-efficacy, and engagement in leadership/community forums). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected NGO leaders and key stakeholders to explore leadership processes, program implementation dynamics, and contextual constraints (including societal norms) that shape women's empowerment in Tororo District.

Validation

Content validity was ensured through expert review of the instruments to assess clarity, relevance, and conceptual coverage of the constructs "internal leadership" and "women's empowerment" (Kothari, 2008). A Content Validity Index (CVI) was computed, and items that did not meet acceptable relevance thresholds were revised or removed. Reliability was assessed through a pilot study with a small group of respondents drawn from a comparable setting. After refinement, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed for the internal leadership and women's empowerment scales, and values of 0.70 and above were considered satisfactory for internal consistency. Items that weakened reliability were adjusted to improve scale coherence.

Data Analysis

Data were checked for completeness, coded, and entered into SPSS for analysis (Zikmund et al., 2012). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarize respondent characteristics and patterns in internal leadership and empowerment indicators. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between internal leadership and women's empowerment. Where relevant, simple linear regression was used to estimate the proportion of variance in women's empowerment outcomes explained by internal leadership practices.

Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step procedure: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition/naming, and reporting. Qualitative themes were used to enrich interpretation of the quantitative results by explaining how and why particular leadership practices were perceived to enable or constrain empowerment. All participants were assigned alphanumeric codes to ensure confidentiality.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval and an introductory letter were obtained from Kampala International University prior to data collection. Permission was then sought from relevant district authorities, NGO leadership, and community gatekeepers. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained after explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Confidentiality was assured through coded identification, omission of names from research instruments and transcripts, and secure storage of data in password-protected digital files and locked physical storage.

Question wording and interview procedures were designed to minimize discomfort and avoid judgement, especially where participants discussed leadership weaknesses, resource constraints, or sensitive gender norms. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and findings were reported at aggregate level only. All scholarly sources informing the methodology (Kombo & Tromp, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Kothari, 2008; Zikmund et al., 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saunders et al., 2016) were acknowledged in line with academic integrity.

Results

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

This study examined the role of internal leadership in enhancing women's empowerment in Tororo District. This section presented the descriptive statistical analysis of women beneficiaries' perceptions regarding the role of internal leadership in enhancing women's empowerment in Tororo District. Responses to seven Likert-scale items were analyzed using frequency distributions, mean scores, and standard deviations. Table below provides a summary of the percentage distribution, valid response count, mean ratings, and standard deviation for each statement. These statistical indicators offer insights into the role of internal leadership in enhancing women's empowerment.

Based on 155 distributed questionnaires, 130 were completed and returned, valid responses varied between 120 and 125 per item. Responses were analyzed using frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Internal Leadership and Women's Empowerment (n =130)

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Valid N	Mean	Std. Dev
1. NGO leaders involve women in decision-making processes.	30 (24.4%)	45 (36.6%)	20 (16.3%)	18 (14.6%)	10 (8.1%)	123	3.54	1.23
2. Leadership structures encourage women's participation.	28 (22.4%)	50 (40.0%)	18 (14.4%)	20 (16.0%)	9 (7.2%)	125	3.54	1.20
3. Internal leadership promotes accountability in women's programs.	32 (26.7%)	42 (35.0%)	22 (18.3%)	15 (12.5%)	9 (7.5%)	120	3.61	1.21
4. NGO leaders act as role models for women's empowerment.	34 (28.3%)	41 (34.2%)	21 (17.5%)	17 (14.2%)	7 (5.8%)	120	3.65	1.19
5. Leadership training is provided to women in the program.	31 (25.6%)	39 (32.2%)	25 (20.7%)	18 (14.9%)	8 (6.6%)	121	3.55	1.21
6. NGO leadership fosters inclusiveness in project implementation.	29 (23.2%)	48 (38.4%)	23 (18.4%)	16 (12.8%)	9 (7.2%)	125	3.58	1.18
7. Transparent leadership improves women's confidence and involvement.	33 (27.5%)	40 (33.3%)	20 (16.7%)	19 (15.8%)	8 (6.7%)	120	3.59	1.23
8. Leadership style influences the success of women empowerment efforts.	30 (24.8%)	43 (35.5%)	19 (15.7%)	20 (16.5%)	9 (7.4%)	121	3.54	1.23

Source: Primary Data (2025)

Overall, the findings show that most respondents perceive NGO leadership as inclusive, participatory, and supportive of women's empowerment. A majority agreed that women are involved in decision-making, encouraged through inclusive structures, supported by accountable and transparent leadership, inspired by role-model leaders, and provided with leadership training. Mean scores ranging from 3.54 to 3.65 indicate moderate to strong agreement, though some variation exists across organizations. Collectively, the results highlight that leadership style and

practices within NGOs in Tororo District play a significant role in promoting women’s participation, confidence, accountability, and the overall success of women empowerment initiatives.

Pearson Correlation Analysis between Internal Leadership and Women’s Empowerment

To examine the relationship between internal leadership and women’s empowerment in Tororo District, a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was computed using SPSS Version 26. This analysis tested the null hypothesis (H_{01}) which stated that there is no significant relationship between internal leadership and women’s empowerment.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation between Internal Leadership and Women’s Empowerment

	Internal Leadership	Women’s Empowerment
Internal Leadership	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	120
Women’s Socio-Economic Empowerment	Pearson Correlation	.512**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	120

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Based on 130 questionnaires returned; analysis used valid paired responses (n = 120).

The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = .512$) shows a moderate positive relationship between internal leadership and women’s empowerment, and the p-value of .000 (which is less than the standard significance level of 0.01) indicates that this relationship is statistically significant. In other words, the likelihood that this correlation occurred by chance is extremely low.

This suggests that internal leadership practices within NGOs, such as involving women in decision-making processes, promoting transparency and accountability, fostering inclusive leadership structures, and providing leadership training, are closely associated with improved outcomes in women's empowerment. Women are more likely to feel confident, engaged, and capable of contributing meaningfully to development initiatives when such leadership practices are in place.

Given the significance of the results, the null hypothesis (H_{01} : There is no significant relationship between internal leadership and women’s empowerment) is rejected. The findings provide empirical evidence that strengthening internal leadership mechanisms can positively influence women's empowerment in Tororo District.

To complement quantitative findings, qualitative data were obtained from interviews with 46 key informants, including NGO staff, community development officers, sub-county chiefs, local leaders, and trainers of trainees, participating in women’s empowerment programs in Tororo District. Ethical considerations (Section 3.6) were upheld by anonymizing respondents using coded identifiers (A-D). In line with this study, insights from fifteen respondents (A01-D04) revealed how internal leadership within NGOs plays a pivotal role in advancing women’s empowerment, as reflected in the thematic analysis of their responses.

Respondent A01 said,
“Our NGO has a clearly defined leadership structure that emphasizes inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. Female representation is mandatory in all leadership committees, ensuring that women’s issues are prioritized. For example, decisions on which communities to support are made jointly by both male and female leaders, which fosters trust among beneficiaries and allows women to raise their concerns freely.”

This means that internal leadership plays a significant role in shaping gender-sensitive policies that create a favorable environment for women to participate in socio-economic programs. Inclusive leadership contributes to women feeling heard and valued.

On the other hand, respondent B02 explained,

“Our organization has adopted a participatory leadership approach. We regularly conduct leadership workshops that bring together field officers, project beneficiaries, and program managers. This approach builds capacity and also ensures grassroots participation in planning and decision-making. Through this structure, many women have acquired leadership and entrepreneurship skills, which has helped them set up small businesses such as tailoring, poultry, and savings groups.”

This implies that decentralized and participatory leadership models strengthen women's agency by equipping them with practical skills and by involving them in decisions that affect their livelihood.

As if that is not enough, respondent D01 contended that,

“Strong internal leadership has allowed our NGO to foster accountability. Program implementation is monitored by women-led committees, which keeps both staff and beneficiaries on track. Because these women are part of the leadership, they feel empowered to challenge mismanagement and advocate for better service delivery. This has translated into more women accessing micro-loans and agricultural inputs without fear of discrimination.”

This suggests that leadership structures that involve women not only empower them administratively but also improve program transparency and impact.

Meanwhile, respondent C03 shared,

“Leadership within our organization promotes mentorship. Senior female staff are encouraged to mentor younger women in both career progression and personal development. Through mentorship programs, women gain confidence and are more likely to take leadership positions in their communities. Some of our mentees have even been elected as LC representatives.”

This implies that NGOs with leadership systems that promote mentorship indirectly enhance women's leadership outside the NGO sphere, creating a multiplier effect of empowerment.

Respondent A02 elaborated,

“Internal leadership within our NGO believes in collaborative leadership. For instance, every team assigned to run women's programs must include a woman as a co-lead. These co-leads are not symbolic, they attend budget meetings, coordinate field activities, and even evaluate program performance. Their input is always taken seriously, which motivates them and demonstrates that women can lead effectively.”

This indicates that leadership structures that assign real responsibilities to women help build their leadership confidence and provide them with practical experience.

Respondent B01 added,

“We have policy guidelines that require gender sensitivity in all leadership decisions. From hiring to procurement and outreach, all decisions must consider gender impact. These policies were initiated by our board after internal reviews showed that male-dominated leadership ignored women's unique challenges. Ever since, the change has been tremendous; we now see women initiating income-generating projects and accessing training opportunities.”

This means that internal leadership, when guided by deliberate gender-sensitive policies, can create institutional reforms that empower women in tangible ways.

Similarly, respondent D02 emphasized,

“Leadership at our NGO encourages innovation and feedback. Women in the communities are given platforms to suggest new program ideas during community barazas. These ideas are assessed and sometimes funded. One woman proposed a mobile tailoring training unit, which was eventually adopted and is now training over 200 women in remote areas.”

This shows that adaptive leadership that values women’s input results in innovations that directly respond to their socio-economic needs.

Respondent C01 explained,

“Our internal leadership structure is horizontal, meaning there’s minimal hierarchy. This empowers field staff, many of whom are women, to take initiative. Because of this empowerment, female staff have proposed solutions to common problems such as domestic violence, child marriage, and land access for women. Their proximity to the community gives them firsthand insights that are essential in program design.”

This implies that flexible leadership structures that allow staff autonomy can increase women's problem-solving roles and influence within the organization and the community.

According to respondent A03,

“Internal leadership is not just about hierarchy but also about values. Our leaders promote respect, trust, and equality. Every voice matter, whether you're a director or a field mobilizer. This philosophy has trickled down to the beneficiaries, especially women, who now believe that their ideas matter and that they can drive change. It’s a shift in mindset that is critical for empowerment.”

This suggests that values-based leadership inspires a culture of dignity and confidence that boosts women’s self-worth and community participation.

Respondent B03 argued,

“Our leadership prioritizes capacity building for women. We run quarterly leadership training sessions that target emerging women leaders within the NGO and the community. These trainings equip them with skills in negotiation, budgeting, advocacy, and public speaking. As a result, several women have become vocal advocates in their communities, demanding for health services and fair resource distribution.”

This implies that deliberate investment in women’s leadership development can ripple into greater civic participation and socio-political influence.

Respondent D03 revealed,

“Internal leadership also ensures that women’s issues are at the center of our strategic plans. When setting annual targets, we consult women’s groups to identify their most pressing needs. Leadership then aligns resources to address these. This practice ensures relevance and ownership, making it easier to monitor impact and refine interventions.”

This demonstrates that consultative leadership models foster a sense of ownership among women, which is vital for long-term sustainability of empowerment efforts.

In a related view, respondent C02 shared,

“We integrate leadership evaluation in our monitoring tools. Every quarter, women in the community are asked to assess the responsiveness and inclusivity of our leadership. This

feedback helps us improve how we serve them. It also gives women the assurance that their opinions count and are used to influence policy.”

This highlights that internal leadership structures that integrate beneficiary feedback mechanisms empower women through accountability and responsiveness.

Respondent A04 stated,

“Our leaders believe that you empower better when you lead by example. Most of our senior staff are women who have risen through the ranks. Their stories alone motivate women in the communities to believe in the possibility of transformation. These leaders are regularly involved in mentoring, storytelling, and training sessions with rural women.”

This means that visible female leadership within NGOs provides relatable role models for rural women, thus enhancing motivation and belief in their own potential.

Respondent D04 emphasized,

“Leadership here is decentralized but coordinated. Sub-county teams have a high level of autonomy, and most are led by women. These leaders make key decisions on logistics, training schedules, and partner engagement. Because they are close to the ground, their decisions are more realistic and impactful.”

This shows that decentralization of leadership, especially when women are at the helm, enhances localized problem-solving and faster service delivery.

Finally, respondent B04 concluded,

“Our leadership supports learning and reflection. We hold monthly learning forums where success stories and failures are discussed openly. Women are always invited to present their progress or challenges. This transparency builds trust and strengthens relationships. It also helps women learn from each other.”

This indicates that internal leadership that fosters knowledge-sharing creates a supportive environment where women can thrive through peer learning and mutual encouragement.

As a result, the findings generally reveal that internal leadership within NGOs plays a pivotal role in enhancing women's socio-economic empowerment. Through interviews with various NGO staff and community leaders, it emerged that inclusive and participatory leadership structures foster trust, accountability, and women's active involvement in decision-making. The respondents highlighted practices such as mentorship, decentralized leadership, gender-sensitive policy implementation, and regular capacity-building as key strategies that empower women both within and beyond the NGO environment. Leadership models that promote innovation, community feedback, and values of equality were found to encourage women's self-confidence, influence, and access to economic and social opportunities. Collectively, these practices have enabled women to take on leadership roles, initiate income-generating activities, and become more vocal in advocating for their rights, indicating a strong correlation between internal leadership dynamics and the advancement of women's empowerment.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings indicate that internal leadership within NGOs is materially associated with women's empowerment outcomes in Tororo District, and that this association is not merely descriptive but statistically supported. In particular, the correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant moderate positive relationship between internal leadership and women's empowerment ($r=.512$, $p=.000$), leading to rejection of the null hypothesis and implying that improvements in leadership practices are linked with improved empowerment outcomes (see

Section 4.2). This pattern resonates with wider scholarship arguing that women's empowerment outcomes from NGO projects depend not only on program inputs but also on how organizations govern participation, accountability, and voice, because empowerment is fundamentally a process of expanding agency within institutional and social power relations (Kabeer, 1999; Al Hakim et al, 2022). In this study, the evidence suggests that leadership is one of the mechanisms through which that agency is enabled or constrained, making internal leadership a substantive, not peripheral, determinant of empowerment gains (see Sections 1.0 and 2.3.1).

The descriptive statistics provide a clearer picture of how internal leadership operates as an empowerment pathway. Beneficiaries reported moderate-to-strong agreement that NGO leaders involve women in decision-making, encourage women's participation, promote accountability, act as role models, provide leadership training, foster inclusiveness, and enhance confidence through transparency (mean range = 3.54–3.65; see Section 4.1). These results are consistent with evidence from Uganda showing that empowerment processes are strengthened when women gain not only economic resources but also leadership capacities and voice in decision-making structures, including group-based institutions that normalize women's participation and authority (Torrance et al., 2023; Theeuwes et al., 2021; 2021). The findings also align with conceptualizations of empowerment that emphasize the interaction of resources, agency, and achievements, implying that internal leadership influences empowerment by shaping women's access to information, influence, and legitimate participation rather than only distributing services (Kabeer, 1999; Karp et al., 2020).

However, the results also point to important constraints and unevenness that require critique. Standard deviations around 1.18–1.23 and non-trivial neutral/disagreement responses on key items (especially decision-making involvement and leadership training) imply variability in beneficiaries' lived experiences of inclusive leadership (see Section 4.1). This unevenness suggests that internal leadership practices may be implemented inconsistently across locations, teams, or participant categories, creating a risk that empowerment benefits are concentrated among women who are already more visible, connected, or better positioned to attend training and meetings, which is a common limitation identified in critiques of NGO empowerment approaches that remain “voice-focused” without consistently transforming power relations across the whole beneficiary base (Al Hakim et al, 2022). In other words, the study's generally positive leadership ratings should not be read as evidence of uniform empowerment; rather, they reveal a system where empowerment pathways exist but are not always equally accessible, which is analytically significant for interpreting both the correlation and the practical meaning of “leadership effectiveness” (see Section 4.1).

Qualitative evidence reinforces the interpretation that internal leadership matters most when it is institutionalized through concrete mechanisms rather than left to individual goodwill. Participants described mandatory female representation in committees, participatory leadership workshops, women-led monitoring structures that reduce mismanagement fears, mentorship by senior female staff, and gender-sensitive policy guidelines that mainstream women's concerns into budgeting and implementation (see Section 4.2). These narratives help explain why leadership correlates with empowerment: they illustrate the organizational processes through which women acquire confidence, oversight capacity, and leadership identity, with reported spillovers into community leadership (e.g., women becoming local council representatives) (see Section 4.2). This is consistent with Ugandan evidence that women's leadership and empowerment are shaped by institutional conditions that either enable participation or reinforce exclusion, including the design of participatory spaces and the extent to which women can move from attendance to influence (Barriers to Equitable Public Participation, 2020).

Overall, the discussion underscores that internal leadership enhances women's empowerment in Tororo District to the extent that it operationalizes inclusion, accountability, and capacity development in ways that expand women's agency. The positive association ($r=.512$) suggests that strengthening leadership systems is likely to strengthen empowerment outcomes, but the variability in responses and the need for institutional safeguards also suggest that leadership must be standardized, monitored, and equity-focused to avoid producing uneven empowerment gains (see Sections 4.1-4.2). This conclusion supports the study's broader framing that women's empowerment is multidimensional and relational, requiring attention to governance, voice, and social norms alongside program delivery, rather than being reducible to short-term outputs or economic indicators alone (Karp et al., 2020; Al Hakim et al, 2022).

Conclusion

This study concludes that internal leadership within NGOs is a significant factor in enhancing women's empowerment in Tororo District. The evidence indicates that where leadership practices are participatory, transparent, inclusive, and accountable, women are more likely to report increased confidence, involvement in program processes, and improved empowerment outcomes. The study further concludes that leadership influence is not limited to formal structures; it is exercised through everyday governance practices such as engaging women in decisions, providing leadership development opportunities, and modelling empowering norms that validate women's voice. However, the findings also suggest that these leadership practices are not experienced uniformly by all beneficiaries, implying that empowerment gains may vary across program sites and groups depending on the consistency and quality of leadership implementation.

Implications

The findings imply that internal leadership should be positioned as a central empowerment mechanism rather than a supportive administrative function. When leadership is participatory, transparent, and accountable, it shapes the institutional space through which women access information, influence decisions, and build confidence to participate meaningfully in program processes and community affairs.

The results further imply that empowerment outcomes are likely to be uneven when leadership practices are inconsistently applied across program sites or groups. This inconsistency risks concentrating benefits among women who are already more visible, connected, or able to attend meetings and trainings, thereby reproducing within-community disparities even under the same NGO program umbrella.

Finally, the findings imply that accountability and transparency mechanisms should be understood as practical empowerment pathways. When women can question decisions, track resources, and provide feedback without fear, they are more likely to trust programs, challenge exclusion, and sustain participation beyond short-term project cycles.

Recommendations

NGOs should institutionalize women's participation in decision-making by establishing clear procedures that guarantee representation, routine consultation, and documented responsiveness to women's priorities. Participation should be structured to move beyond attendance toward influence, including shared roles in planning, implementation, and review processes.

NGOs should strengthen women's leadership development through standardized training, mentorship, and deliberate assignment of real responsibilities that build practical leadership

competence. These opportunities should be designed to reach women who are commonly excluded by time burdens, distance, or limited literacy so that leadership gains are equitably distributed.

NGOs and district stakeholders should strengthen accountability systems that women can safely use, including accessible feedback channels and community-facing reporting routines. Consistency should be reinforced through minimum inclusion standards across sites, periodic internal reviews of leadership practice, and shared learning forums to reduce variability in implementation and outcomes.

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