



Women in Leadership Collective
Celebrate, Empower, Equip

Uphill Battle

Experiences of Alliance Women in Ministry

Final Report

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Submitted By

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Uphill Battle: Experiences of Alliance Women in Ministry

Executive Summary

The Women in Leadership Collective (WLC) is a national initiative launched in early 2021 to celebrate, equip, and empower women in leadership. A vital step in planning and implementing the initiative is understanding the experiences of Alliance women in local and global ministry contexts. Therefore, in October 2021, a research team was charged to conduct a national survey of all female licensed workers. Due to a tagging error in the national database, some male workers received the survey and submitted their responses. In total, 216 female and 75 male workers participated in the survey. In addition, we invited the female respondents to participate in a focus group to share their lived experiences as ministry workers with The Alliance Canada. Across Canada, we conducted 11 focus groups over zoom with 66 participants.

Key Findings:

In general, this study found that the denomination has made progress in moving women into senior leadership roles at the local, district, and national levels. The decision to ordain women in 2012 was a significant turning point that enlarged the pool of available female workers for senior leadership positions.

1. Leadership Roles

There are now a few women in senior/lead pastor roles, serving as assistant district superintendents, and holding positions in the national and district offices. However, at the local church level, many female workers feel their roles are mainly restricted to children, youth, and women's ministries. Additionally, female workers observe a widespread preference towards males in hirings and promotions. As a result, several workers reported having to move from one district to another to find a job within the Alliance.

2. Credentialing and Ordination

In terms of ordination, the national data indicated 18.1% of women and 72.5% of men are ordained. The number separating ordained female and male workers is lower in the survey but is still significantly different. Worth noting is the considerably high number of female respondents holding non-portable licenses compared to the male respondents.

3. Factors Affecting Women's Engagement in Leadership Roles

Several study participants enjoyed the support of male and female mentors who opened doors for them and provided encouragement. However, a male-centered and misogynistic work environment in certain local churches and international contexts has significantly and negatively impacted the experiences of many female workers.

4. Resources Required for Enhancing Women's Participation in Leadership Roles

- a. Support for women to receive the required training and opportunities to receive a portable license and serve beyond a particular local church needs to be explored.
- b. Afford mentorship and a support network to help move female workers toward engaging in leadership positions.
- c. Within the Alliance family, the work environment should be a safe and healthy space for everyone. For female workers to thrive, they need a secure, just, and respectful work environment.

- d. Provide family support so female workers can have time and energy to fulfill their calling while caring for young families and/or elderly parents. With more female workers involved in Alliance ministries, policies and procedures for maternity leave must also be established.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Most importantly, our research has revealed a desire among female workers to collaborate with our male peers in following Jesus on His mission – respecting, affirming, loving one another, and spurring each other on in our journey with Christ. It was found that, in general, a deeply rooted male-centred culture, more than theological convictions, currently affects the experience of female workers in our Alliance Canada family. The encouragements and challenges women face vary much more between churches than across districts or missional regions. Moving forward, women need to be invited into various decision-making roles at the local church, district, and national levels. Their involvement is vital to shifting our ministry culture towards a mutually respectful one for both male and female workers to thrive.

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The Women in Leadership Collective (WLC) is a national initiative launched in early 2021 to celebrate, equip, and empower women in leadership. The WLC is guided by the experiences of women as they work to encourage and connect women leaders and find the resources they need to overcome barriers and thrive wherever God calls them to serve. In July 2021, our research team was charged with conducting a study which would allow us to understand and learn from the experiences of Alliance women in local and global ministry contexts.

Research Questions

In 2016, General Assembly adopted the official statement on the roles of men and women in ministry.¹ This statement affirms both egalitarian and complementarian understandings of these roles. The denomination welcomes male and female workers to fill denominational leadership positions, and is committed to train, credential, and ordain those who diligently study and interpret the Scripture according to their convictions.

This official statement guided the questions we sought to answer, which included:

1. How well have women been able to fill denominational leadership positions in the local church, in the district, and at the national level?
2. How well are we doing in terms of training, credentialing, and ordaining women?
3. What factors affect, positively and negatively, the engagement of women in leadership positions?
4. What resources need to be put in place to better equip women leaders?

Methodology

The study used a combination of survey and focus group methods to explore female workers' experiences as Alliance ministers in Canada and abroad. In October 2021 invitations were extended to all licensed female workers to respond to a survey to gain a snapshot of the leadership positions women were engaged in across Canada and in global contexts. Workers were asked to provide their views on factors that might have affected their engagement with leadership roles. An invitation was subsequently extended to all women survey respondents to participate in a focus group. The purpose of the focus groups was to provide an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of Alliance female workers.

Participants

The response rate to the survey was 79%. Due to a tagging error in the national database, some male workers received the survey and submitted their responses. In total, 216 female workers and 75 male workers participated in the survey. Additionally, 37 people responded but did not complete the survey. These responses were not included in the data and analysis. Across Canada, we conducted 11 focus groups with a total of 66 participants.

¹ Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada, *Statement on the Roles of Men and Women in Ministry*, 2016.

Male colleagues who shared their insights were much appreciated, but this study was designed to learn from female workers’ experiences. Therefore, this report will focus on summarizing the women’s responses. However, data obtained from the male workers are included in a comparative analysis with the female data (See Section 3.4 in this report).

Comparison of the age distribution and licensing status of women in the survey with the national statistics (Figures 1 and 2) indicates that our sample is representative of female workers in the Alliance.

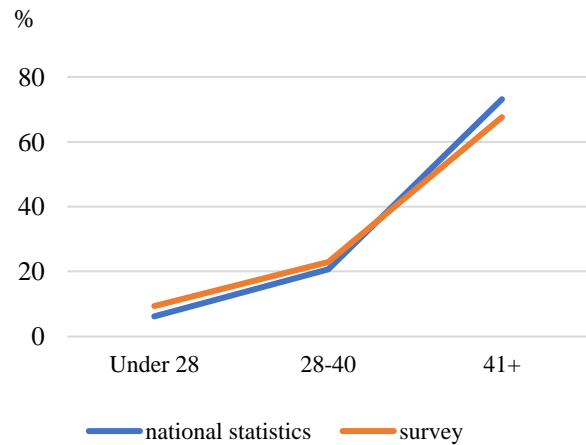


Figure 1: Age Distribution of Female Respondents

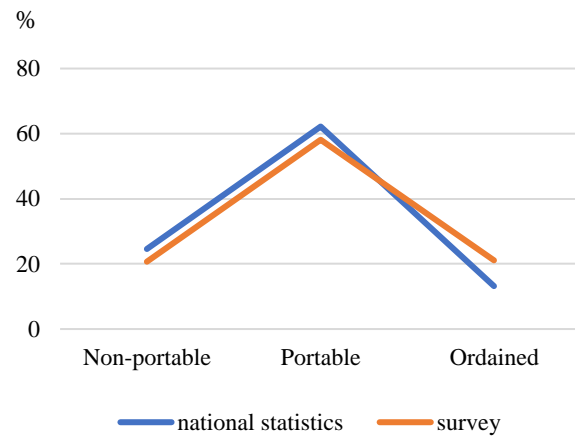


Figure 2: Credentials and Ordination of Female Respondents

The age distribution of the male respondents aligns perfectly with the national statistics (Figures 3) but not in the licensing status (Figure 4).

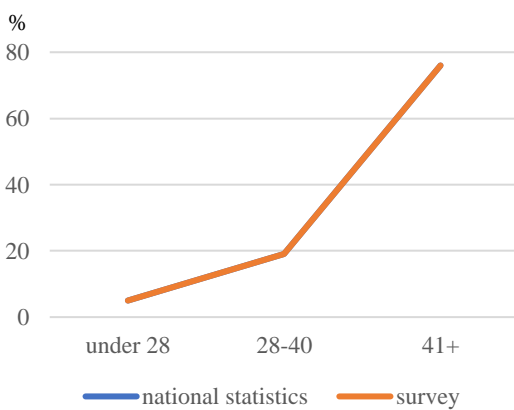


Figure 3: Age Distribution of Male Respondents

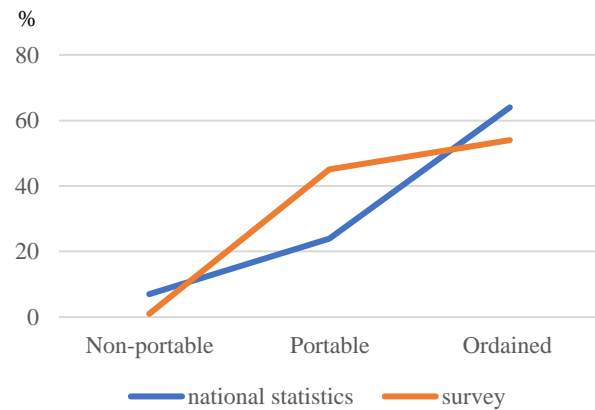


Figure 4: Credentials and Ordination of Male Respondents

Data Analysis

Data collected in this research was analyzed descriptively, thematically, and comparatively. The survey data was analyzed descriptively to provide summaries on the sample

and the participants' responses. They are described below with charts, where necessary, to help readers see the spread and shape of the data. The unit we used on the charts is the percentage of responses.

All focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The names of the participants were removed from transcripts. For reporting purposes, pseudonyms were used in citations of participants' comments. Each member of the research team read the transcripts in a reflexive way to better understand the participants' experiences. Together the team identified themes within the data. To ensure good representation of views across the nation, care was taken to select quotations from female workers in different focus groups, districts and global contexts.

As we asked further questions of the data, we conducted a few comparative studies to gain a deeper understanding of several topics of interest such as differences across the six districts and differences between the experiences of international workers and workers in the Canadian churches.

Findings

1. Survey

The findings from the completed surveys provided insight into the viewpoints, experiences, and the realities of the ministry contexts of the respondents. The discoveries have been summarized and reported according to the research questions.

1.1 Leadership roles

The survey responses indicate that a majority of the participants agreed that scripture supports women holding church leadership positions (see Fig. 5). Similarly, a high percentage of respondents agreed that leadership should be based on spiritual gifts, not gender, with 68% of respondents who strongly agree and 22% who agree (see Fig. 6).

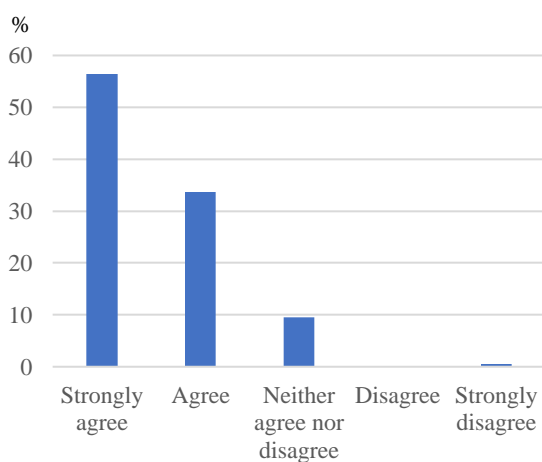


Figure 5: Scripture supports women to hold church leadership positions,

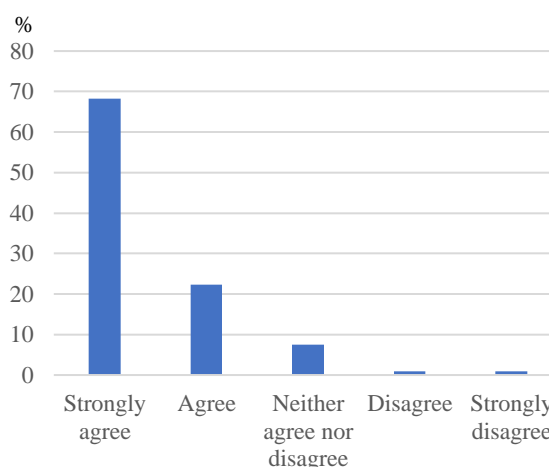


Figure 6: Church leadership depends on spiritual gifts, not gender.

The survey responses indicated that a high percentage contend that women can hold the position of elder or preacher with 61% who strongly agree and 26% who agree (see Fig. 7). The

survey indicated that women are encouraged to hold leadership positions in the churches of the majority (66%) of the respondents (see Fig. 8).

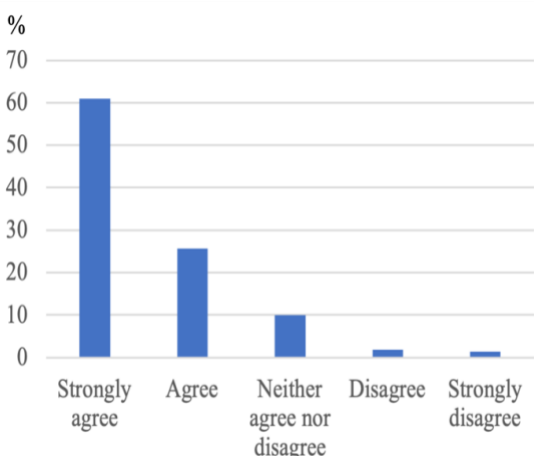


Figure 7: Women can hold the role of preacher and elder.

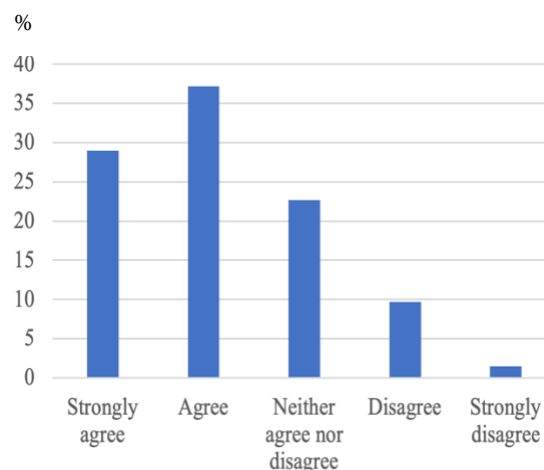


Figure 8: Women are encouraged to hold a leadership role in my church.

The survey data also revealed that about half (51%) of the churches represented by the survey respondents have had women serve on the Board of Elders, but very few churches (4%) have had women as their senior or lead pastors. A much higher number (80%) have had women serve in ministry director/coordinator capacities. Women also reported to have served on District Executive Committees and on the Board of Directors. Currently, some churches (4%) do not have any women on their leadership team, and only slightly more of the churches (9%) have more than 50% representation of women on their team.

The survey results demonstrated that encouragement into leadership is often dependent on the specific leadership position or role. Women are rarely (1 to 5 times a year) involved in preaching with 22% of all responses reporting that women have never preached in their churches. Conversely, women are regularly preaching in 10% of the churches according to the survey respondents. One of the respondents stated:

It surprised me, how regardless of the academic formation, ministry experience, and impact in the community, a male prospect is always preferable for high positions of leadership at the church.

Women are more likely to hold positions of leadership in children's, youth and women ministries. Comments of several respondents provide some insight:

Women are encouraged to lead women and children.

I feel very supported in my current role - but I would love to explore the role of Associate Pastor if that were available to me. It would not be in the current context.

1.2 Credentialing and Ordination

The survey data indicated that only 21% of the eligible women have been ordained. Among the respondents, 58% held portable licenses and 21% held non-portable licences. While several respondents believed the lack of a Master's level theological degree was the reason for receiving a non-portable licence, some respondents were not sure why they received a non-portable licence. Moreover, a few respondents were not even aware that there were two kinds of licences or that a portable licence was an option for female workers. A respondent said,

I didn't realize back then the difference between a portable and non-portable. Maybe when I applied, I did not submit any of my seminary education credentials. I don't know.

Yet for some, time required to care for a young family meant that they would rather keep a non-portable licence. The following comment from a respondent is an example.

At the time, I was a single parent and didn't need extra work. A portable licence meant going right into ordination and I didn't have the capacity.

1.3 Factors Affecting Women's Engagement in Leadership Roles

The survey responses demonstrated that the local church environment and encouragement from the leadership impact engagement in leadership roles. Certain respondents commented that there was a disparity with what was stated about women in leadership and how they were encouraged in engaging in leadership. A respondent stated:

Our church has said they are in favour of women in all roles; however, during the pandemic the cracks began to really show. I have been quite discouraged and disappointed by the continued, "boys club" formation of leadership teams. I have honestly felt more freedom and respect as a woman in ministry at a previous complementarian church that I served at.

The support of women varied significantly, depending on the local church. While there was a perception that there is progress, many respondents felt that there were limitations to using spiritual gifts to lead. Limiting factors included senior pastors, leadership, and lack of a clear pathway for women to rise to leadership.

1.4 Resources Required for Enhancing Women's Participation in Leadership Roles

There was significant agreement among the survey respondents reporting a need for more resources and support for leadership development, with 23% who strongly agree and 43% who agree. (See Fig. 9) Most respondents reported feeling supported by the leaders of their churches with 36% who strongly agree and 33% who agree. (See Fig. 10) Some respondents felt supported generally in their role but not for specific tasks such as preaching, leading men or planting churches.

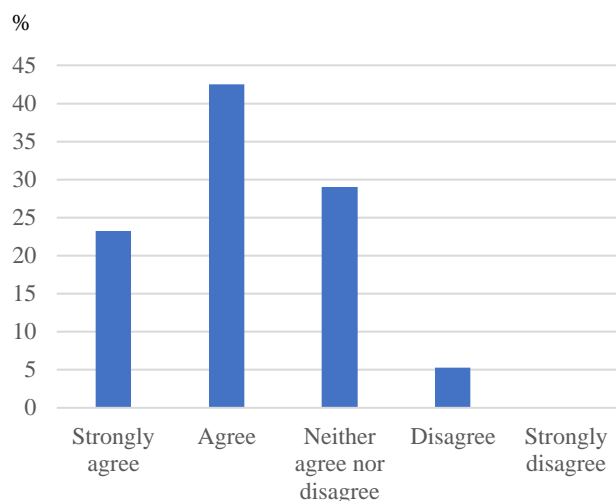


Figure 9: I would benefit from more resources and skill development to advance in leadership.

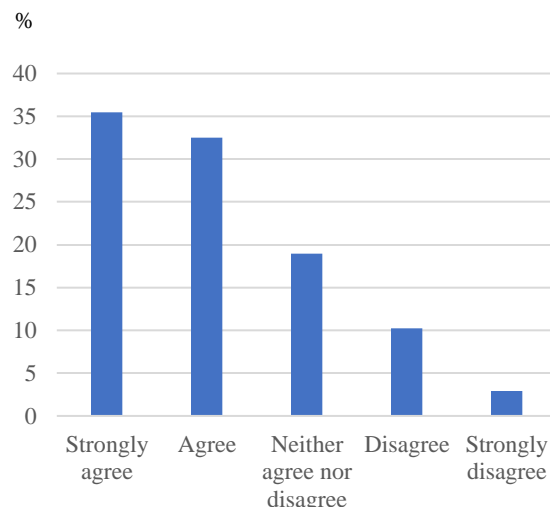


Figure 10: I feel supported by the leaders of my church in pursuing leadership.

The survey responses demonstrated that many women have not felt that they have been given equal opportunity in ministry leadership when compared to male co-workers. Of the respondents, 35% disagreed or strongly disagreed when asked about equal opportunities (See Fig. 11). In addition, a large majority reported that a clear pathway for women to rise to leadership within the Alliance Canada is lacking. Of the respondents, 37% were neutral and 35% disagreed or strongly disagreed (See Fig. 12).

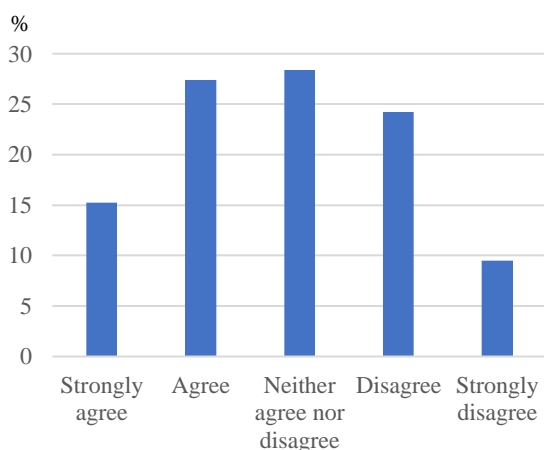


Figure 11: I have been given equal opportunities in ministry leadership as my male co-workers.

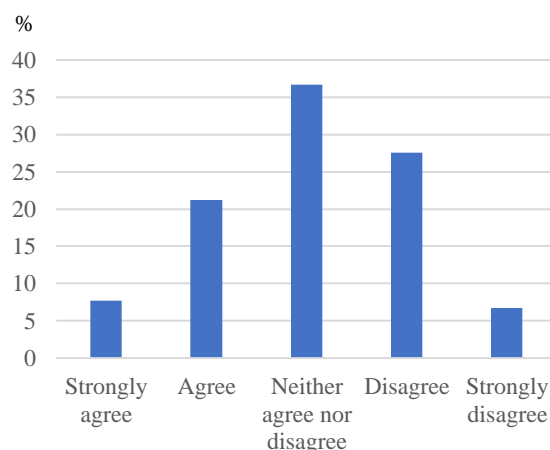


Figure 12: There is a clear pathway for women in our denomination to rise to leadership positions

The respondents were asked what would be of benefit to them with regard to resources and skill development to advance in leadership. Many commented that they would benefit from increased networking and mentorship. Their comments included the following:

I would like to network with other female leaders

Mentorship opportunities, connections within the district of other women on the same journey

I would so appreciate opportunities to develop the gifts of the Spirit in me that benefit the denomination and other local churches. It would be great, developmentally, to be trained and mentored outside my local context, and serving other local churches in the denomination would help create much needed connection and networks...

Accessibility to leadership conferences, resource recommendations (books, podcasts, etc.)

2. Focus Groups

The title of this report, *Uphill Battle*, was the major theme arising from the focus group discussion. While it is described as a battle or a struggle, it is essential to note that many female workers also observed a positive change in the denomination towards involving women in leadership roles. For example, Abigail², who entered church ministry in the early 90s, celebrates how there are now women preachers in some churches and female senior leaders in her district. However, glancing back over her ministry journey, Abigail uses the term “uphill battle” to describe fighting every step of her way to be licensed and ordained. Even after she was ordained, many struggles continued. Recently, Abigail moved to her current church. This church has just decided to allow women to be elders with a very close vote and “a lot of hurt.” Abigail says,

It makes it an uncomfortable place to be. I’m not sure who supports women in ministry and who doesn’t. ... I try not to push myself forward too much. . . I am kind of in this uncomfortable position of being ordained in a church where we know that about 30 percent of the people don’t really support the idea of women as elders. And you know, you’re just not very sure. So, there’s this discomfort. And for me it has left me with a wariness.

As we unpack the theme of *uphill battle*, we will see the ministry journeys of many participants are similarly filled with a mix of encouragement, hurt and a sense of wariness and uncertainty.

2.1 Leadership roles

Several seasoned workers confirmed what was seen in the survey: women are increasingly involved in various leadership roles.

2.1.1 Limited ministry roles for women

Examples were voiced that suggest significant changes since the early 90s. In the survey it was evident that women are increasingly involved in various leadership roles. For example, Ida looks back to the early 90s when no women could be elders or ordained. She celebrates that there are now women preachers in many churches across Canada and two female assistant district superintendents in her district. However, many barriers remain.

² To protect the identity of the participants, all names used in the report are pseudonyms. Identifiable information such as the name of the district and church is also removed from quotes included in this report.

In local churches across Canada, women are mostly employed for children, youth, and women's ministries. Many, as Jane said, "are just directors. They can't be pastors because of the view that their church holds." Martha, a children's pastor, says, "But definitely, in this church and in many churches, kids and family would be seen as kind of as far as I can go. . . in being part of the ministry team at a church. And it's not necessarily where I want to see myself fitting long term." The lack of opportunities for women like Martha, who feel called to general pastoral ministry, discourages them from staying with the church.

Naomi, a young worker who was hired as an "administrative assistant," commented that the church offered to her the position of children's pastor, saying, "I haven't seen good examples of women pastors that weren't just children's pastors or weren't just worship pastors or weren't just women's ministry pastors. It's a situation where I can't see myself in a future leadership position." As such, Naomi is staying on as an administrator while looking for ministry opportunities elsewhere. Similarly, several women, who saw no chance to assume leadership roles like their male counterparts, have been exploring options such as re-training to be a counselor or a chaplain, moving to a different denomination, or joining a parachurch ministry.

In several focus groups, participants observed with some concern that women like Naomi are hired for administrative roles which involve certain pastoral duties, such as leading the children's ministry. However, as this study only invited licensed workers to participate, we cannot verify if this is a widespread phenomenon.

It should also be noted that several female workers disagree that women should be allowed to assume all leadership roles. Rebecca, for example, does not think women should be senior pastors because she does not "see the biblical standard for that."

2.1.2 Male preference in hiring

The preference for a man to fill a vacancy can be as subtle as in the job postings. A church will indicate that they are looking for a "man of God" or use the "he" pronoun throughout the posting. Female workers not only feel discouraged by this approach but some, especially young seminarians, are very uncertain about their future and their decision to pursue ministry training.

In some cases, women already working in a church find the prospect of moving to a position they are passionate about to be an impossible goal. Sandra, who is completing the ordination process, commented with some sadness that "when it comes to full-time positions, it is definitely about filling them with the right men, and then the leftovers kind of go to the women."

In some cases, gender seems to be more important than the official status of the workers. For instance, Karen described how she felt totally "ignored" when the senior pastor left. She was the only licensed worker in the church. She was discouraged from applying because the leadership said they needed a man for the vacant position. Karen commented that during that time, "I'm not allowed to preach. I'm not allowed to participate in decisions that are made by the board. I'm not even consulted on anything. It just feels very grievous to me. And so now that they have trained some men to preach, now they don't...I feel like they don't need me anymore."

It is particularly grievous for Karen because she was asked to preach several times to fill in when the previous pastor was on vacation. Yet, in this transitional period, the church preferred to ask men to fill the preaching role, men who did not have any ministry training and were not licensed workers. Karen's situation is, unfortunately not unique. Several people in various focus groups describe being "used" when they are asked to fill in for a position (e.g., interim lead,

preaching) but are later told that they would not be considered for the position because of their gender.

In Lydia's case, the preference for a male worker over a female worker for a full-time position is unfair and put her in a difficult financial situation. Lydia is a single mother who works part-time with a church as the community group pastor. Her passion has always been in discipleship. Recently, a full-time position became available for a combined portfolio of worship and discipleship. However, when Lydia enquired about the position, the leadership told her, "We need another man. And we need him to do the half-time discipleship because no man would come for only a part-time job. . . So, we've got to make our role as big as...and give as much wage from the budget to make sure we get a man to come." Meanwhile, Lydia struggles with two part-time jobs to make sure she can pay her bills.

2.1.3 Inequity in pay and job title

Another theme common in various districts is that, compared to male workers doing the same job, women are paid less and often not given the same title. These differences can be seen clearly in Odilia's experience. She recounts talking with a male worker who stepped in for her maternity leave. This pastor was younger and had not completed his ministry training degree. She said, "So I just, you know, random evening talking over pizza talking, say, 'Oh, I get paid this amount of money.' And he responded, 'You get paid what?' 'I get \$15,000 a year more than you. And I'm not educated.' And I asked in return, 'Pardon? And you get the title of pastor?' I could not believe that."

In another instance, a young worker, Phoebe, worked as an intern at a church when a male intern from the same college was placed there at the same time. "And I was told that I would be a ministry intern, and he would be a pastoral intern. It was very clearly because of my gender. . . I think it made it awkward for the other guy, too. He responded, 'I'm so sorry. This is just so weird. We're doing the exact same thing, and yet I've been given this title and this role.'"

As these cases illustrate, female workers often find that their male counterparts receive a higher salary even when they have the same or higher education than male workers in the same role. Many women see that not having the pastoral title while serving as a pastor can be confusing to the congregation. It may also deprive the female worker of due respect. Queenie's experience illustrates this issue well. Her church celebrates Pastor Appreciation Month to honour their pastors, but Queenie is not celebrated because she does not have the title of a pastor. She says, "Honestly, I could care less whether I'm called pastor or not. It's the way that I'm treated. I feel like within my church because I don't have the title. . . I feel like I'm not given the level or respect that the other staff have."

2.2 Credentialing and Ordination

Many focus group participants saw the decision on the ordination of women at the 2012 General Assembly as essential for equipping women for ministry. Betty commented that the opportunity for women to be ordained has enlarged "the pool of women available to do things." Additionally, the mandate for ordination, as Lynne said, applies to "anybody, as soon as you have a portable license, you need to go through this training. So, in that sense, I felt like it upgraded the whole denomination in some ways, as everybody has to do it." Therefore, she thinks the decision in 2012 has upgraded the whole ordination process across the board – it's the requirement for men and women.

However, the requirement for all workers with a portable license to complete the ordination process has been a mixed blessing, especially for women with young families or other caregiving responsibilities. While they are keen on pursuing ordination, studying outside of work hours is not something they can easily handle. Additionally, for women working in churches that do not support the ordination of women, as in the case of Diana, the requirement to be ordained “is another level of frustration” that she avoids.

Diana’s concerns about the enforcement of ordination as a requirement is valid when we see how this requirement could backfire on female workers. Nadine’s experience is perhaps extreme, but the existence of cases like this is important to note. Nadine is a seasoned worker who has served in both global and local contexts. She is grateful for the district’s support in her preparing for ordination. However, Nadine says,

But as soon as the District contacted senior leadership about me beginning to prepare for ordination, things changed -- strongly and quickly. I was suddenly told I’m not good enough, I have no calling, and that I’m not a good fit for this church. And then, ironically, a couple of days after that conversation in front of staff, in front of everybody, I was told that really, I’m nothing more than an office worker or a clerk. They offered me a full-time position, which was confusing. . . . When I was accredited, the district said, “You are now a pastor.” And right away the parents and the children themselves started calling me pastor. And that was fine. The senior leadership even affirmed that. But when ordination was brought up, they told me I am not a pastor, and to remove that title from the office door and my cards and my nametag.

Several women mentioned an inequity in how male and female workers are supported during preparation for ordination. They observed that church leaders see supporting male workers as important for the church, while financial support and time for studying are seldom provided for female workers. For example, Fiona described how her church pushed all the male workers through ordination, but for her “just seemed to push it under the rug.”

2.3 Factors Affecting Women’s Engagement in Leadership Roles

Many participants in the focus groups pointed to a deeply rooted, male-centered culture in the churches, regardless of their theological convictions. Cecilia explained,

I’ve been in ministry since my late teens in one form or another. And I’ve served in all kinds of churches in the denomination, but also on the egalitarian/complementarian spectrum. I would say that the places I feel least safe about my footing are in egalitarian spaces where there has been a decision to accept women in ministry, but the practices and the culture have not caught up with the decision.

Similarly, several women describe the existence of a “boy’s club” culture. Deborah, who is a team leader at a local church, describes it this way:

I’m middle management. But there are times when the guys are so used to working with guys and not with women that they do not think about where that exclusion happens. . . . earlier you spoke about the hot tub – that’s happened to me

as well. Or you get invited out after work to go to the pub or whatever. It's the men that are going out. Most of the women are going home. They don't think about inviting you out... And although it's not a meeting, they decide something, and then you get informed of the decision. It isn't intentional; it's just the way things have been for so long.

While unintentional, the male-centered culture sometimes creates a misogynistic work environment for female workers, in which they feel devalued, dismissed, and voiceless. To be sure, many women also shared their experiences of being encouraged by champions or mentors. Their mixed experiences are summarily reported below:

2.3.1 Encouragements

There was no lack of examples of encouragement voiced in the focus groups. Participants said encouragements often come from a male colleague, a senior pastor, or a professor who opens doors, affirms, and encourages women to exercise their gifts. Unfortunately, women mentors and role models are harder to find because of our short history of women serving in leadership roles. However, several participants shared being blessed to have found one. For example, Hannah recounted how a woman who served as an associate pastor in the church, gave her speaking opportunities. She allowed Hannah to accompany her to "every space that she was invited to" so that she could gain experiences and exercise her gifts.

These encouraging encounters happen in both egalitarian and complementarian settings. In fact, several women talked about often feeling more respected and honoured in a complementarian church than in an egalitarian church. For example, Audrey described how women are not expected to speak at her current church's pastoral weekly prayer meetings. She said, "I was frankly shocked with the unexpected ways in which I felt more empowered in the complementarian settings than I am in this egalitarian setting."

2.3.2 Workplace Harassment

Examples of harassment were many and were brought up in all the focus group meetings. However, it is worth noting that it is not always male leaders who act objectionably. For Xenia, "it was actually [the senior pastor's] wife who was verbally abusive towards me. And she would constantly put me in my place and tell me the things I was not allowed to do." Additionally, the experience of harassment is not necessarily related to working in a complementarian environment, which, again, points to a deeply rooted, male-centered culture in our churches.

Several women who have come into ministry from the marketplace used the word "shocked" in describing their experiences. One of them was Tabitha. She described her experience as "a sort of culture shock. . . this organization that is very patriarchal, and I could see that there is a system. . . a lot of systemic barriers to the diversity of women. And coming from someone who used to champion diversity in the workplace, it was a big shock." The shock that female workers like Tabitha allude to is a misogynistic culture in evidence in the inappropriate language and behaviours that are disrespectful, demeaning, and dismissive towards women.

a. Microaggressions

The focus group participants suggested that microaggressions are often normalized. As Elizabeth said, these microaggressions come from "various angles, various people, at various times." She gave as an example an elder using a Tupperware container to whack her on the head

while saying, ‘What’s a nice girl like you not married?’” Similarly, Faye spoke of a male pastor who always pats her on the head when he walks past her. Behaviours such as these make women feel minimized and uncomfortable and are offensive.

b. Inappropriate language

In addition to demeaning actions, some women described the inappropriate language used by their male colleagues when talking about female workers. For instance, Gabriella says, “I hear it all the time ... women in ministry referred to as ‘girls,’ and even as ‘little girls.’” Several participants reported male co-workers making comments about how they look. Agnes, for example, quoted a male pastor who said to her, “How are you a pastor? You’re pretty!” Barbara’s supervisor told her that the congregation would never take her seriously because she is pretty.

c. Overlooked and voiceless

There were many examples voiced of female workers feeling brushed aside, overlooked, and voiceless. Recently, Deborah’s church created a team to re-visit their adult discipleship strategies. However, Deborah, who has 60% of the church’s adult population within her portfolio, was not invited to the table. There was no representation of women on this revisioning team. When women like Fanny wanted to contribute to the church’s overall vision, she was told to “stay in [her] lane.” One woman who feels quite strongly about a situation spoke of being “brushed aside as ‘being emotional.’” Several women spoke of how they had to share their ideas with a male colleague and let their male colleague be their spokesperson to implement a new program or contribute a view to a current issue being discussed at the church.

At District Retreat, Sarah sits around a table with several male workers. One of them asks her, “So who do you belong to?” It takes a moment for Sarah to realize he is asking about her husband, who is not part of the group. Comments like this reveal a common assumption that females are not expected to join a pastoral group. When a female worker attends a pastoral meeting, a common assumption is that she is a pastor’s wife and not a pastor.

On the other hand, when a couple serve together in ministry, the wife is expected to support her husband’s ministry instead of having her own ministry portfolio. Anna observes, “In my ministry, I’m not the wife of the pastor. I am a pastor. And nor should I be treated as a pastor’s wife, with statements like ‘You are the wife of the pastor.’ I have my own gifting, my own calling, my own talents. But there’s an assumption that I’m just blindly following my significant other or spouse.”

In sum, not being acknowledged as a person with unique gifts and calling is hurtful to these women. The male-centered culture and misogynistic behaviour and language create an unfair and uncomfortable work environment for female workers. Joelle left her job in the corporate world to work in a church. She says, “It has been part of my journey where I felt safer in non-Christian contexts than in the church. It was emotionally safer. I was more respected and consulted than I was in my own church.”

Women in the focus groups voiced that there was no safe person to whom they could turn when they experienced harassment. Kitty commented,

There’s no system, no policy to which I as a woman can appeal. The board, the elders actually asked me not to report it. So if I was being mistreated by the senior

pastor, should I report to the district? Is there something like... is there a system that can help me to speak up. Or do I have to just swallow it myself?"

Linda, who works in a different district from Kitty commented,

I don't have a safe place to go and there's no one in power to talk to. So I guess I would like to be...to have another body of authority that I can go to and say "This is my experience. What should I do?"

2.4 Changes Required for Enhancing Women's Participation in Leadership Roles

It is clear from the focus group discussion that, as a denomination, we have come a long way in supporting women in pursuing their calling and using their gifts to serve the Lord. We see evidence that some female workers, like Carmen, have "overwhelmingly positive" experiences in church ministry. She credits her lead pastor, who "very much celebrates and elevates women as pastors, women as elders, women in leadership. And that is the culture that our lead pastor set when he planted the church 10 or 12 years ago. It's the culture of the church." Many women talked about the need to create an enabling culture that gives an intentional place to women, respecting them as valuable persons, affirming their calling and gifting.

2.4.1 Focus on God's mission

While female workers did not agree on everything, they agreed that men and women should lay aside theological differences and find ways to serve respectfully and lovingly together. Acknowledging that men and women are on God's mission together, as Ruth expressed it, is "one of the greatest blessings." She suggested that "in the midst of theological difference, we can serve well together if we all lay down all of the elements that feed into that." We need to approach the issue with openness and humility while keeping our hearts and minds on the mission that God has invited us into.

Another reminder from the focus groups was that we are engaging in a spiritual battle. Cecilia observed, if we allow the church to be divided along gender lines, we are inadvertently allowing the enemy to immobilize half of God's army, thus holding the church back. She urged all of us to fight the battle with prayer while committing to "honour and release and bless its daughters to function fully in the gifting and calling that they have."

2.4.2. Create a safe and respectful culture

While the 2012 General Assembly is recognized as a milestone for expanding women's roles, a few of those present found it a traumatizing and dehumanizing experience. Several focus group participants reminded us that the issue being discussed is not an abstract idea when it comes to the discussion on leadership roles of women. It is about real persons sitting in the room. As men and women work together daily, there is a need to be mindful of language and actions that can be hurtful and demeaning.

Moving forward, female workers need a work environment in which they feel safe, valued, and honoured. Vivian suggested that "regardless of where one might fall on the spectrum of complementarian to egalitarian, I think the question of how we give voice to women and how we allow them to flourish in the gifting that God has given them are important questions to ask, at the level of the local church all the way to the top [of the denominational structure]." Many participants in the focus groups shared a similar view. Their suggestions fell into four categories:

- a. Address inequity in pay and title
The focus group participants wondered whether the understanding among church leaders of the role of women in the family is, perhaps, narrow and outdated. In Canada, families often require two incomes to meet their financial needs. A single woman also has the same economic reality as a single man. Therefore, where men and women perform the same duties, they should be given the same wages and job titles. Several women spoke of inviting the church to honestly examine whether the issues of pay inequity and withholding the title of pastor are rooted in a gender-based bias or a flawed theological conviction.
- b. Expand representation at all levels of leadership
A suggestion put forward in all focus groups was to ensure women are intentionally invited to all levels of leadership (national, district, and local). In addition to ensuring that the voices of women are heard at all levels of governance in the denomination, the increased visibility will be an encouragement to emerging leaders while addressing the difficulty emerging women leaders have in finding female mentors.
- c. Support the singles
Single women face discrimination at two levels: because of their singleness and because of their gender. Hence the importance of ensuring that they are honoured, their voices are heard, and their gifting affirmed.
- d. Ombudsperson
Within a hierarchical and male-centered work environment, some women found it difficult to find a person open to hearing their concerns. Having a person outside of their ministry setting, an ombudsperson, would provide a place where women can voice their concerns and seek advice on a particular issue.

2.4.3 Learn Together

According to focus group participants, forming an enabling culture will require that men and women adopt a listening posture so as to learn from each other's experience and gain perspective on gender-related issues. The suggested learning might include:

- a. Understanding workplace harassment
Sylvia represented several participants who indicated that attending the focus group had helped her realize that certain behaviours and language have become so normalized in her thinking that she has stopped recognizing them as harassment. Participants acknowledged that male workers might also face harassment at work. Therefore, participants proposed that training about workplace harassment be required of all workers in the same way as has the training on sexual abuse.
- b. Wrestling with Scripture together
Instead of holding firmly to one theological position, focus group participants invited all workers to adopt an open posture of learning about various interpretations of the key passages concerning women in leadership and the overall themes of the Bible on the issue.

In addition to training for workers, focus group participants voiced a need for the ongoing denominational support of elders and congregations to wrestle with questions surrounding women in leadership. Nancy, for example, wondered if women could be invited to come alongside men and help them understand the value God has placed on women in the church.

2.4.4 Enabling strategies

Having discussed the challenges, female workers discussed strategies that will support them in exercising their gifts and fulfilling God's call on their lives.

a. Coaching and networking

Many female workers called for a support network to share their stories and hear how others have dealt with specific situations. They also expressed desire for a woman mentor to guide them on their ministry journey. Several women involved in general pastoral roles suggested that the gender-segregated coaching that is common across Canada is very restrictive. They would like to be involved in coaching opportunities with their male peers.

b. Support family roles

In our somewhat male-centered culture, female pastors are a relatively new phenomenon. Among the focus group participants were several who are young mothers. They reminded us that policies and procedures for maternity leave have not been established, which is reflected in a lack of support by some churches.

Additionally, female workers are often the caregivers in their families. As mentioned in the ordination section, they do not always have support to engage in study within work hours. Irene emphasized that such support is important for one who is "a woman pastor who's also a mom who's also in leadership in the church." The need for flexibility in work hours was expressed in focus groups. Irene shared how the manner in which her church supported her might be an example for other churches to consider. Her church allowed her to work flexible hours so she could attend to her children when they were out of school and work more hours when her family's situation allowed. Kay stressed that "unless we find ways to have more flexibility in our workplaces, in our church culture, I think we're going to find that lack of flexibility will continue to be a barrier that keeps women out of ministry."

An exceptional example in one church sees the church providing childcare to several female staff members, so they can bring their children to work and have them cared for in the workplace. Such provision of childcare may not be possible in every church's budget but was cited as a creative example of church support for female workers.

3. Comparative Analysis

In response to questions raised by the Alliance leadership, the research team combined the data from the survey and data from the focus groups and conducted three comparative analyses:

- a. The experience of female workers in Canadian ministries compared with those in Global Ministries
- b. Possible differences among workers across Canadian districts
- c. The views and experiences of female workers in ethnic churches.

With the unanticipated availability of a set of male data, we proceeded to compare the male and female cohorts' views on women in leadership. We acknowledge the comparison result can only be seen as preliminary as we did not invite all male workers to complete the survey. However, this comparison can provide an initial indication of differences in views and experiences of workers between the two genders.

3.1 Difference between international and Canadian workers

There was a generally perceived inconsistency between global and local (Canadian) ministries as to how women are supported in leadership roles. Some international workers involved in the focus groups indicated they have more freedom in preaching, teaching, and leading a church. It is common for married women to feel they are sent as "equal ministers" with their husbands. However, being treated equally has not been a universal experience among international workers (IWs). Not all IWs have the same experience. Some of them find their roles to be restricted because of their gender. In a focus group where these differences were discussed, Vivian commented that "things are different depending on your team and your region."

The male-centered culture described above exists in at least some regions of the Global Ministry context. Tina says, "From what I have seen of IWs, most often husbands are asked to be leaders, and the spouse plays a supporting role (lives in his shadow). IWs are treated as one unit when they are married, and there is very little separation in terms of identity and roles. If my husband already has a leadership role in the field, it's not likely I would be considered for a leadership role in a different area.

As such, some female IWs feel that they have lost their identity as an individual having unique giftings. For example, Ellen mentioned that when her husband was appointed to lead in a specific area, "it was just by default, because [she] was married to him, that [she] was appointed to be a leader." She felt that her identity as a person with unique giftings and calling had been ignored. As a wife, she was automatically expected to share her husband's responsibilities and give up her passion for a different ministry area. These IW women believe that leadership training and opportunities to speak into the strategic direction of the region are often given to men.

Single women find it particularly difficult. For example, Yani, who served in a local church before going to her current international assignment, said, "We are the second option. It seems like this [holding a leadership role] is encouraged if there are no men that fit the role first. There is no support for pursuing leadership in the home church or as an IW on the field." Similarly, Wilma found the lack of support for her as a single woman IW to be troubling. Many people have said to her, "Oh, you're going alone? Like you're going to be okay without a husband there to protect you?" While acknowledging the good intention behind such statements, Wilma did not welcome the idea that women are weaker beings that need men's protection.

3.2 Differences across districts

In general, the differences across districts are small. However, a couple of notable findings emerged:

- a. Representation from the St. Lawrence District was very small (5/218 responses in the survey, and 1/66 participants in the focus groups). Therefore, we did not include the responses from the St. Lawrence District in the comparative analysis.

- b. The responses from the survey data show that workers in the Canadian Midwest District are unique in the following ways:
- 1) They are younger, with 87.5% of respondents between the age of 31-50 (equally 43.75% in the subgroups of 31-40 and 41-50).
 - 2) They have the highest number of non-portable licence (31.25 vs. the average of 20.2 across districts) and the smallest number of ordained workers (12.5 vs. the average of 19.5 across districts).
 - 3) Workers in The Midwest District are outliers in the degree of agreement they show in the following 2 statements in the survey
 - Women are encouraged to hold a leadership role in my church. (37.5 vs. the average of 60.9)
 - I feel supported by the leaders of my church in pursuing leadership. (43.75 vs. the average of 77.4)
- c. Qualitatively, workers in the Pacific, Western and Central districts felt that “the Alliance Church is moving in a more positive, inclusive direction.” This comment was absent among the responses in focus group participants from the other three districts (Midwest, Eastern and St. Lawrence). Several workers have moved from the eastern part of Canada to the west. In Helen’s experience, she found that “when we (she and her family) moved further west, I found more freedom and more acceptance for who I was, and more encouragement.”

3.3 Practices in ethnic churches

When participants of ethnic churches were put into a group for analysis, similar themes as reported in Section 2 above were observed. Some female workers in the ethnic churches find their experiences encouraging, while others face the same difficulties as workers in other Canadian churches. The differences in their experiences do not directly relate to the patriarchal culture in some ethnic churches. It is culture itself and the practices of individual churches that have a much more significant impact on women’s experiences.

3.4 Comparison of Female and Male Data

The opportunity to do an initial comparison of female and male respondents’ views offers us a glimpse into the different views and experiences between the two cohorts. These results are helpful as we as a denomination move forward in supporting female workers to work in both egalitarian and complementarian churches. However, the interpretation of these results must be taken with caution as the survey was designed with female workers in mind. We are not sure if the male respondents were expressing their views on leadership roles in general, or specifically on female leadership.

3.4.1 Leadership Roles

In the male respondent’s cohort, a significant number of them are lead/senior pastors. Male workers who placed themselves in the “other” category were men holding denominational leadership positions such as District Superintendent or Assistant District Superintendent. Conversely, in the “other” category of female respondents there were a range of ministry-specific titles such as children or youth pastor, chaplains and spiritual directors, or those working in the national or district offices with one Assistant District Superintendent.

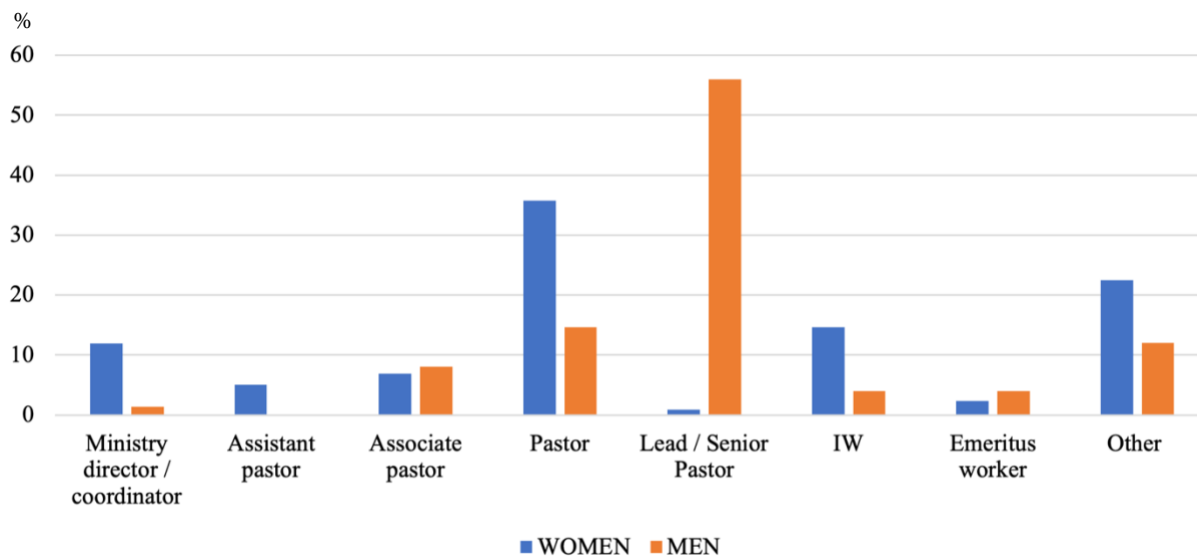


Figure 13: Job Titles of All Respondents

When considering the views of female and male workers on leadership roles, there were differences between the two cohorts’ views on Scripture’s support for women in leadership and gender consideration for leadership roles. *

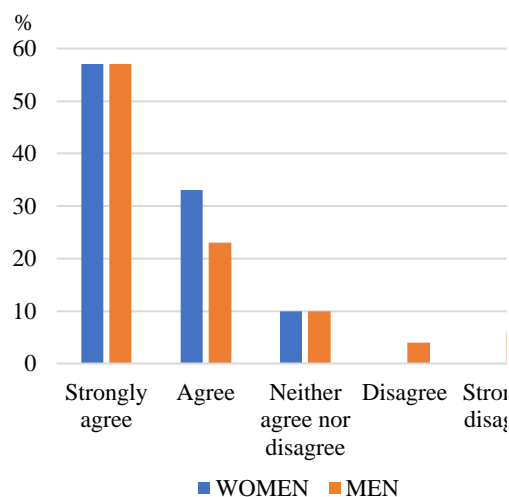


Figure 14: Scriptures supports women to hold church leadership positions.

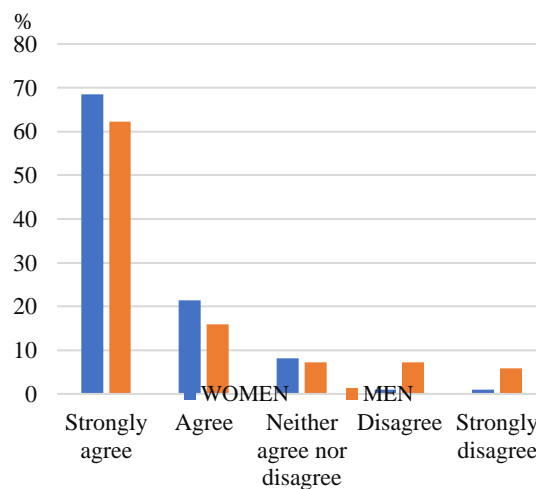


Figure 15: Church leadership depends on spiritual gifts, not gender

When the questions specifically addressing women’s roles as pastors and preachers, female and male respondents’ views are more aligned with each other (Figure 16). Most respondents in both cohorts agreed that their churches encouraged women to hold a leadership position (Figure 17).

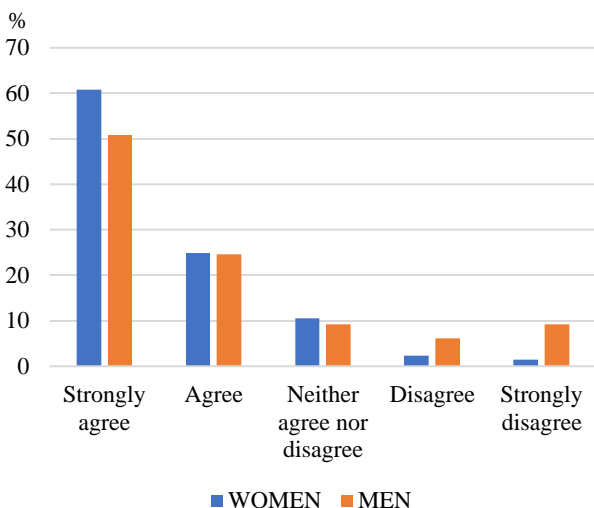


Figure 16: Women can hold the role of preacher and elder.

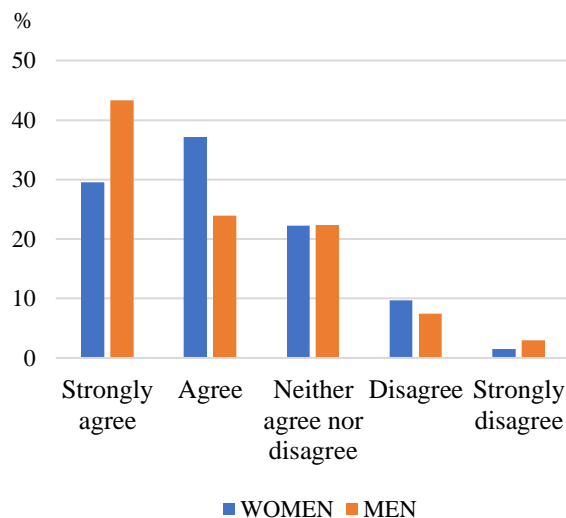


Figure 17: Women are encouraged to hold a leadership role in my church.

3.4.2 Credentialing and Ordination

In terms of ordination, the national data indicated 18.1% of women and 72.5% of men are ordained. The number separating ordained female and male workers is not as high in the survey but is still significantly different. Worth noting is the considerably larger number of female respondents holding non-portable licences, as compared to the male respondents.

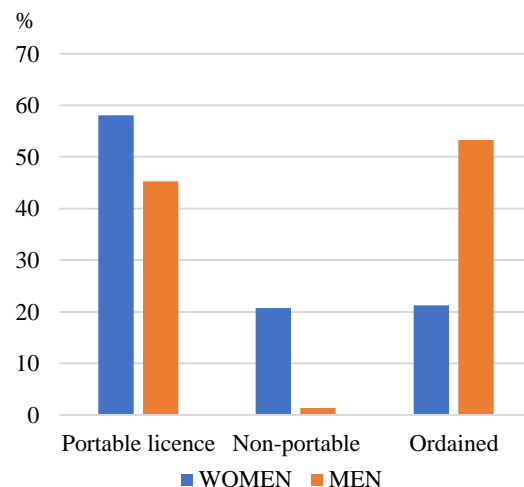


Figure 18: Licenses Held by All Respondents

3.4.3 Factors Affecting Women’s Engagement in Leadership Roles

This section is where we need to be most cautious in interpreting the comparative results. Many male respondents correctly pointed out that the statements in the survey were written with a female focus. Therefore, we cannot be sure if their responses were based on their understanding of their female colleagues’ experiences or their own experiences. But there appears to be a consensus among male and female workers that the denominational pathway for leadership positions is not very clear.

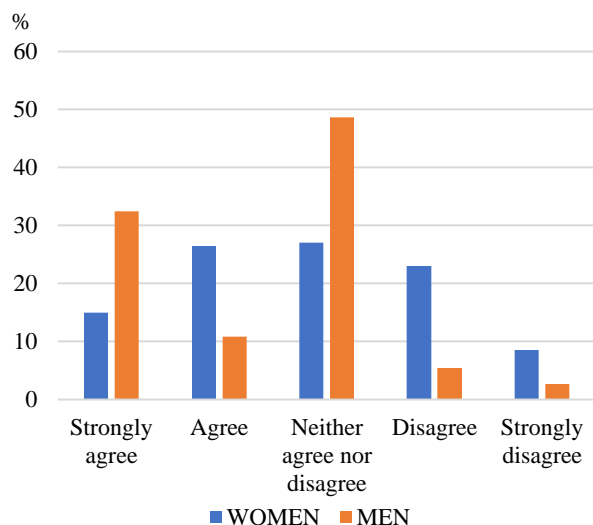


Figure 19: I have been given equal opportunity in ministry leadership as my male co-workers.

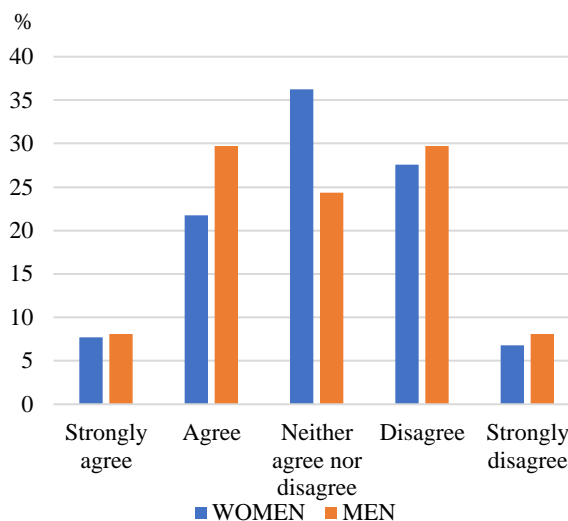


Figure 20: There is a clear pathway for women in our denomination to rise to leadership positions.

3.4.4 Resources Required for Enhancing Women’s Participation in Leadership Roles

Again, we cannot ascertain if the male respondents were sharing their views based on their own or their female colleagues’ views. Nonetheless, there is a strong alignment in the two groups in that they feel supported to pursue leadership but require further resources and skills development.

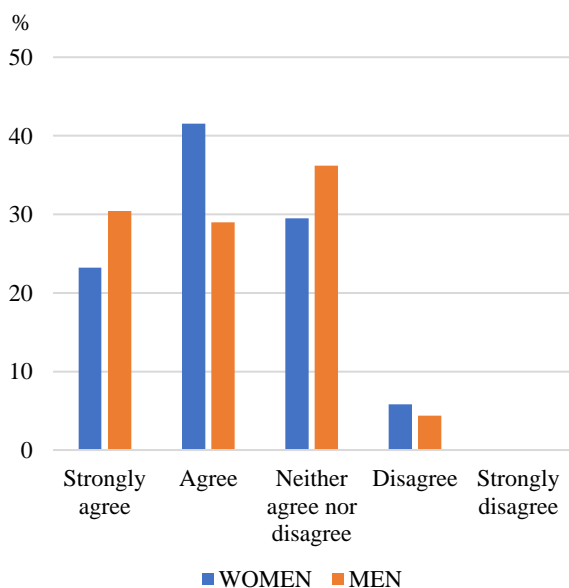


Figure 21: I would benefit from more resources and skill development to advance in leadership.

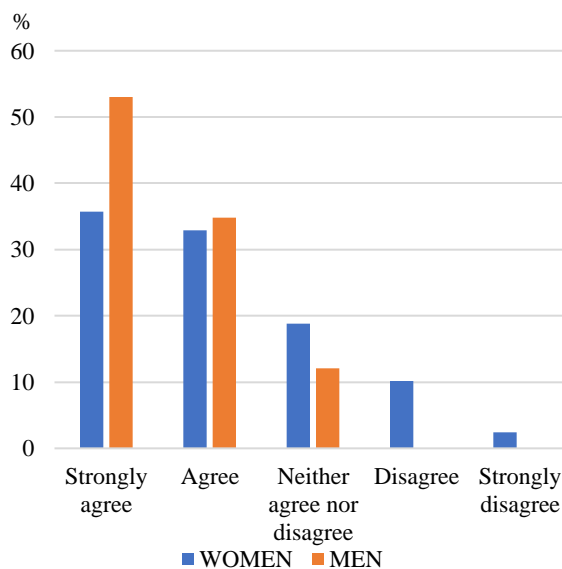


Figure 22: I feel supported by the leadership of my church in pursuing leadership.

Conclusion

This report serves to describe for the Alliance family the experiences and hopes of our female workers. With a few women in the senior/lead pastor role, serving as assistant district superintendent, or holding positions in the national and district offices, the denomination has made progress in moving women into senior leadership roles in the local church, in the district, and at the national level. However, at the local church level, many female workers feel their roles are mainly restricted to children, youth, and women's ministries. Serving as chaplains, spiritual directors, and IWs also appears to be common among the study participants involved in the study. Additionally, female workers observe a widespread preference towards males in hirings and promotions. As a result, several workers reported having to move from one district to another to find a job within the Alliance.

With ordination only available to women since 2012, it is not surprising that only a small proportion of female workers are ordained. Many study participants comment that with the changes made to the ordination process, they can see many more female workers receiving ordination, which will enlarge the pool of available female workers for senior leadership positions. However, the relatively high proportion of female workers holding a non-portable license is of concern. Support for women to receive the required training and opportunities to serve beyond a particular local church needs to be explored.

Having a mentor and a support network is essential in moving female workers toward engaging in leadership positions. Several study participants enjoyed the support of male and female mentors who opened doors for them. However, a male-centered and misogynistic work environment in certain local churches and international contexts has significantly and negatively impacted the experiences of many female workers. Within the Alliance family the work environment should be a safe and healthy space for everyone. For female workers to thrive, they need a secure, just, and respectful work environment.

Other than coaching, mentoring, and availability of support networks, perhaps what will be most essential if female workers are to have time and energy to fulfill their calling will be the providing of support that allows women to care for young families or elderly parents. With more female workers involved in Alliance ministries, policies and procedures for maternity leave must also be established.

Our research has identified areas that require further investigation, among which were the experiences of non-licensed women in ministry, women in administrative roles and a review of the licensing requirements across districts. Further research in these areas could provide valuable information about licensing procedures and pathways to leadership in the Alliance.

Most importantly, our research has revealed a desire among female workers to collaborate with our male peers in following Jesus on His mission – respecting, affirming, loving one another, and spurring each other on in our journey with Christ. It was found that, in general, it is a deeply rooted male-centred culture, more than theological convictions, that currently affects the experience of women workers in our Alliance Canada family. The encouragements and challenges women face vary much more between churches than across districts or missional regions.