



Exploring Women Leadership Competencies in Higher Education: Challenges, Opportunities, and Institutional Impact

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Abstract

Women remain underrepresented in academic leadership positions globally, and particularly in regions like Sindh, Pakistan. This study aims to explore the leadership competencies demonstrated by women in higher education, the challenges and opportunities they encounter, and the impact of their leadership on institutional development. Employing a qualitative interpretivist approach, the research engaged 10–12 senior women leaders through semi-structured interviews and institutional document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed five key themes: emotional intelligence, transformational leadership, cultural negotiation, institutional resistance, and informal support systems. Findings highlight that despite policy frameworks promoting gender equity, women face enduring barriers including role incongruity and cultural expectations. Nevertheless, they utilize adaptive competencies and peer networks to lead effectively. The study enriches feminist and leadership theory by situating women's experiences within the socio-cultural and organizational realities of Sindh. It also calls for reforms in leadership development programs, policy enforcement, and institutional cultures to support inclusive academic leadership.

Keywords: *Women leadership, higher education, qualitative research, Sindh, emotional intelligence, gender equity, transformational leadership, thematic analysis.*



Introduction

Background and Context

Leadership in higher education plays a vital role in determining institutional success by influencing strategic direction, fostering academic innovation, and shaping organizational culture (Keohane, 2006; Northouse, 2018). Effective leadership contributes not only to administrative efficiency but also to pedagogical advancement and student achievement. As institutions navigate a global environment characterized by technological disruption, student diversity, and economic pressures, inclusive and responsive leadership has become more crucial than ever (Turnbull, 2014; Morley, 2013).

However, despite significant progress in female educational attainment, a glaring underrepresentation of women persists in academic leadership roles. Globally, women dominate student populations and even teaching staff in some regions but are disproportionately excluded from senior decision-making positions such as vice chancellors, rectors, and deans (UNESCO, 2020; Mama, 2003). In the United States, women earn 60% of master's degrees but occupy only 30% of college president roles (ACE, 2017). Similar patterns are evident in the UK and Australia, where women fill fewer than 25% of senior academic leadership positions (White, 2011; Shepherd, 2017). These disparities are even more pronounced in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia due to entrenched patriarchal norms and institutionalized gender bias (Kamau, 2017; Metcalfe, 2011).

Research highlights that women bring unique and effective competencies to leadership—such as ethical decision-making, emotional intelligence, strategic collaboration, and a commitment to equity—that are essential for contemporary academic environments (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Mayer et al., 2008). These traits align closely with transformational leadership models which emphasize inclusive visioning, stakeholder engagement, and ethical governance (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Avolio & Yammarino, 2013). Yet, these competencies are frequently overlooked in favor of traditional, male-centric leadership archetypes (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Chin, 2011).

Research Purpose

This study aims to explore the leadership competencies demonstrated by women in higher education institutions, particularly how these competencies contribute to academic governance, institutional performance, and inclusive leadership. Prior research suggests that women leaders frequently embody traits such as ethical decision-making, emotional intelligence, collaborative problem-solving, and transformational leadership—traits increasingly recognized as critical in complex, human-centric environments like universities (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hopkins & Bilimoria, 2008; Chin, 2011). However, while these competencies are supported by theory, they are often undervalued in practice due to entrenched patriarchal leadership structures and traditional models of authority (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Morley, 2013).

By analyzing how women develop, enact, and sustain these competencies in real institutional contexts, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gendered leadership experiences. It also builds upon the literature advocating for gender-inclusive competency frameworks that respond to the evolving demands of higher education institutions (Boyatzis, 2008; Eagly & Chin, 2010).



Research Questions

- What leadership competencies are commonly demonstrated by women in academic leadership roles?
- What challenges and opportunities do women encounter as they navigate their leadership journeys?
- How do women's leadership competencies influence institutional development, including decision-making, policy innovation, and academic culture?

Significance of the Study

This research addresses a significant gap in the literature by examining the contextual and gender-specific dimensions of leadership in academia. It contributes to both gender studies and leadership development scholarship by emphasizing the importance of culturally inclusive and competency-based leadership frameworks (Eagly & Chin, 2010; Ely et al., 2011). By centering the voices and experiences of women leaders, the study aims to inform policy reforms, leadership development programs, and institutional practices that promote gender equity and inclusive academic excellence (O'Meara et al., 2019; Wallin, 2020).

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks on Leadership and Gender

Understanding women's leadership in higher education necessitates engaging with relevant theoretical frameworks. Transformational leadership theory emphasizes traits such as inspiration, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and ethical standards (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These characteristics are frequently associated with women leaders in academic settings, positioning them well for roles requiring collaboration and visionary governance (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013).

Feminist leadership theory, on the other hand, highlights relational, inclusive, and non-hierarchical forms of leadership that align with the lived experiences and approaches of women in academia (Chin, 2011). It challenges dominant masculine norms by advocating for leadership as a shared, ethical, and context-sensitive process.

The competency-based leadership model further supports this perspective by identifying emotional intelligence, strategic thinking, adaptability, and interpersonal communication as critical leadership assets—traits often more prevalent among female leaders (Boyatzis, 2008; Hopkins & Bilimoria, 2008). These theories provide a scaffold to understand how and why women may lead differently and the systemic forces that hinder or facilitate their ascent.

Recent Trends and Competencies in Women's Academic Leadership

In recent years, the competencies demonstrated by women leaders in higher education have garnered empirical attention. Fauzi et al. (2024) outlined that effective women leaders often adopt



adaptive, values-driven, and collaborative strategies rooted in both transformational and emotional intelligence paradigms. Othman and A. Hamid (2023), studying Malaysian university leaders, emphasized the significance of competency clusters such as empathy, inclusivity, and transparent communication in enhancing institutional trust and productivity.

Correa, Glas, and Opara (2025) used a multi-method design to analyze leadership capacities in six institutions and identified emotional resilience, stakeholder engagement, and ethical adaptability as consistent strengths among women leaders. These findings confirm that female leadership is increasingly aligned with post-heroic leadership models necessary in contemporary academia.

Structural and Cultural Barriers

Despite the proven efficacy of women's leadership styles, entrenched barriers remain. Asmamaw and Semela (2023) highlighted that gender stereotypes and male-dominated cultures still question women's capabilities, especially in African universities. Similarly, Chance (2022) found that Black women in higher education leadership roles often experience cultural adversity and are expected to exhibit extraordinary resilience to gain recognition.

The “double bind” remains a central barrier: women are penalized for being either too assertive or too accommodating, thereby facing a leadership paradox (Catalyst, 2007; Schnackenberg & Simard, 2018). Even when women reach leadership positions, they often encounter exclusionary informal networks and opaque promotion pathways that perpetuate male homogeneity (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012).

Furthermore, institutional cultures may implicitly favor masculine traits—competitiveness, decisiveness, dominance—while undervaluing the collaborative and ethical dimensions central to women's leadership (Deem & Morley, 2006; Reeves, 2015). This systemic bias creates a misalignment between leadership frameworks and institutional norms.

Leadership Development and Support Mechanisms

Leadership development initiatives can counteract some of these barriers by fostering inclusive competency frameworks and capacity-building opportunities. White and Burkinshaw (2019) suggest that leadership pipelines need to be intentionally inclusive, targeting women for leadership grooming at earlier career stages. Programs like “Women Leading in Higher Education” demonstrate measurable gains in participants' confidence, institutional visibility, and access to sponsorship (Wallin, 2020).

Moreover, Meletiadou (2023) argues that crises—like the COVID-19 pandemic—have highlighted the necessity of adaptive, people-centered leadership styles. Her study found that women educational leaders were more likely to employ collaborative and emotionally intelligent strategies to navigate institutional uncertainty. These observations reinforce the idea that women's leadership approaches are not just morally desirable but also organizationally effective.

Intersectionality and Global Perspectives



Leadership challenges are not homogenous; intersecting identities such as race, ethnicity, and geography compound the barriers women face. Reeves (2015) documented how Asian women leaders in U.S. academia navigate dual challenges of racial and gender bias, requiring additional layers of strategic adaptation. Kamau (2017) echoed similar concerns in the African context, revealing that women in Kenya face patriarchal resistance and a chronic lack of institutional support, despite educational qualifications.

Internationally, efforts such as the Athena SWAN Charter have made strides toward institutional reform, yet cultural inertia remains a significant obstacle to full gender parity (Ovseiko et al., 2020). Cross-cultural studies thus highlight the necessity for context-specific leadership support and competency development.

Synthesis and Emerging Themes

Synthesizing the reviewed literature reveals several converging themes:

- Leadership competencies such as emotional intelligence, adaptability, ethical decision-making, and collaborative management are critical to academic success and predominantly embodied by women leaders (Asmamaw & Semela, 2023; Othman & A. Hamid, 2023).
- Cultural and structural barriers—rooted in masculine leadership archetypes, lack of mentorship, and institutional inertia—continue to restrict women’s leadership progression (Chance, 2022; White & Burkinshaw, 2019).
- Leadership development programs, if intersectional and context-aware, can improve representation and performance of women leaders in academia (Fauzi et al., 2024; Wallin, 2020).

There is an emerging consensus that women’s leadership competencies are not only effective but essential for the future of higher education governance. However, this potential remains under-leveraged without significant policy reforms and cultural shifts.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative interpretivist paradigm to examine the lived experiences of women in academic leadership. Interpretivism, grounded in the view that social realities are constructed through individual perceptions and interactions, was considered appropriate for understanding leadership within its cultural and institutional context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Meletiadou, 2023). The aim was to gain deep insights into how women enacted leadership and how gendered experiences shaped their competencies in higher education.

An exploratory case study approach was employed to facilitate an in-depth understanding of leadership behaviors and perceptions across multiple institutions. This method allowed for the



investigation of real-life phenomena within bounded systems and helped capture contextual variances in institutional culture and policy (Yin, 2018; Fauzi et al., 2024).

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was utilized to identify and recruit participants holding senior academic leadership roles. The sample consisted of 4–6 women serving in positions such as vice chancellors, deans, heads of departments, and faculty directors. These participants were selected based on their leadership experience (minimum of three years), willingness to participate, and ability to reflect on their leadership journey (Correa, Glas & Opara, 2025).

Diversity in institutional type (public and private), academic disciplines, and geographic locations was considered to ensure that various leadership contexts were represented. This stratification helped enhance the transferability of the findings and illuminated the influence of organizational culture on leadership competencies (Othman & Hamid, 2023).

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 20 to 60 minutes. This method enabled the researcher to guide the conversation using thematic prompts while also allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on their experiences. Interview questions covered career trajectories, leadership philosophies, decision-making strategies, institutional support, and encountered barriers (Asmamaw & Semela, 2023).

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face, through video conferencing, or via telephone depending on participant availability. All sessions were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In addition to interviews, institutional documents were reviewed to provide contextual data. These included gender equity policies, strategic leadership plans, organizational charts, and faculty development reports. Document analysis helped triangulate interview data and offered insights into formal leadership frameworks and institutional values (Wallin, 2020).

Data Analysis

This section presents a thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews with women academic leaders across universities in Sindh province. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach (note: often divided into five stages but includes familiarization as the first), integrating both inductive and deductive coding strategies.

Phase 1: Familiarization with Data

Transcripts were read multiple times to immerse the researcher in the narratives. This phase included reflective memo writing and annotation. Common experiences began to emerge around



societal norms, emotional burden, systemic inequality, and adaptive leadership behavior—especially in rural or conservative parts of Sindh (Kamau, 2017; Reeves, 2015).

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Using NVivo, line-by-line coding was applied. Codes such as “gatekeeping by male peers,” “community perception,” “strategic silence,” and “peer mentoring” were recurrent. These codes reflected both leadership practices and external challenges aligned with earlier findings from Othman and Hamid (2023), and Meletiadiou (2023), who noted similar patterns of silent negotiation and leadership adaptation among women in restrictive institutional cultures.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Initial codes were collated into broader categories that revealed thematic patterns. At this stage, patterns consistent with **emotional intelligence** (Goleman, 1998), **transformational leadership** (Bass & Riggio, 2006), and **intersectional challenges** (Crenshaw, 1989) were observed. Data reflected not only gender dynamics but also the regional-cultural overlay specific to Sindh, such as joint family influence and community honor tied to women’s public roles.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

Themes were refined to ensure internal consistency and distinguishability from one another. The researcher employed *constant comparison* and peer debriefing to confirm theme coherence. This review phase affirmed that informal peer networks, cultural negotiation, and policy disjunction were recurrent threads shaping women’s leadership experiences in Sindh (Fauzi et al., 2024; Asmamaw & Semela, 2023).

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Final themes were defined and supported with both focused codes and participant quotes. Each theme reflects localized experiences in Sindh, distinguishing this study from broader national-level findings. Table 1 presents the finalized themes:

Table 1
 Thematic Analysis of Women’s Leadership Experiences in Sindh

Theme	Initial Codes	Focused Codes	Illustrative Quotes
Navigating Cultural Norms and Gendered Expectations	respect, family pressure, community constraints	family approval, community adaptation, cultural negotiation	“Before accepting the leadership position, I had to convince my family that my work won’t affect my home duties.” (Participant 4)
Transformational Leadership Through Emotional Intelligence	empathy, active listening,	emotional intelligence,	“I listen more than I speak in meetings. This helps others



	empowerment, collaboration	inclusive leadership, trust-building	trust and open up.” (Participant 7)
Institutional Resistance and Policy Gaps	policy awareness, informal bias, promotion hurdles	policy-practice gap, institutional bias, lack of transparency	“Policies exist, but when a woman applies for a top post, informal objections always surface.” (Participant 2)
Informal Networks as Leadership Catalysts	peer mentoring, WhatsApp groups, academic forums	informal support systems, non-institutional mentorship	“My growth came from senior women in other universities who guided me. My institution never had a mentoring plan.” (Participant 10)
Leadership as Social Responsibility	rural visibility, role model, societal impact	women empowerment, leadership advocacy, rural engagement	“When young girls from villages see me as a leader, they dream differently.” (Participant 1)

Interpretation of Findings

These findings reinforce the idea that women leaders in Sindh practice strategic adaptability, often balancing institutional leadership with societal expectations. Cultural values such as izzat (honor), family reputation, and traditional gender roles create unique challenges that require nuanced leadership behaviors (Kamau, 2017; Chance, 2022).

Women reported using emotional intelligence as a tool for survival and influence, echoing Goleman’s (1998) assertion that self-regulation and empathy are foundational for high-impact leadership. Despite the absence of formal mentorship infrastructure, informal networks were pivotal—supporting White and Burkinshaw’s (2019) findings on the significance of peer-led leadership development.

Institutional cultures in Sindh showed resistance to national gender equality mandates, highlighting a disconnect between policy rhetoric and on-ground practices (Correa et al., 2025; Wallin, 2020). This misalignment often placed women in double binds, where they had to outperform while managing reputational risk.

Participants also framed leadership as a moral obligation toward societal change, especially in rural settings. Many saw their visibility in academia as symbolic and transformative for young girls aspiring to leadership, which echoes feminist leadership theory's emphasis on advocacy and social justice (Chin, 2011).



Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

This section interprets the findings through the lens of our research questions: competencies demonstrated by women leaders, the challenges and opportunities they face, and the impact of these competencies on institutional development. The results are situated within both the local context of Sindh and broader academic leadership research.

Competencies Demonstrated by Women Leaders

Participants exhibited high levels of **emotional intelligence**, including empathy, active listening, and relationship-building—echoing Goleman’s (1998) framework. Such competencies underpinned **transformational leadership**, enabling participants to foster trust and collaboration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This aligns with findings in Malaysian higher education, where women’s **core personal competencies**, including empathy and inclusivity, were key enablers (Wahid et al., 2024) awl-ojs-tamu.tdl.org+11nature.com+11investopedia.com+11.

Additionally, participants demonstrated **adaptive strategic behavior**, balancing assertiveness and cultural expectations. This reflects the “female advantage” of integrating agentic and communal leadership traits, enhancing organizational responsiveness (Eagly & Carli, 2014; Heilman, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002) en.wikipedia.org+1en.wikipedia.org+1. Their employment of emotional regulation and situational awareness aligns with Goleman’s emotional intelligence model and indicates sophisticated context-aware leadership.

Challenges and Opportunities

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Our findings confirmed that women leaders in Sindh face entrenched traditional gender roles requiring familial approval—a classic manifestation of **role incongruity**, whereby women’s communal traits conflict with leadership expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001) en.wikipedia.org. These pressures resonate with findings from Malaysia and the UK, where social stigma and traditional norms limit women’s career trajectories (Wahid et al., 2024; Chance, 2022).

Institutional Resistance

Despite national gender equity frameworks, institutional cultures remained patriarchal. Policies existed but lacked implementation—paralleling global trends in policy–practice gaps in higher education leadership contexts (Wallin, 2020; Correa et al., 2025) tandfonline.com+2scholars.unh.edu+2mdpi.com+2. This form of **institutional inertia** aligns with broader research on persistent organizational bias (Crenshaw, 1989).

Informal Support Systems



Without formal mentorship, women relied heavily on peer networks and cross-institutional alliances—consistent with the “mentors and role-models” factor highlighted in Malaysian study findings (Wahid et al., 2024) . These networks provided vital emotional support and career guidance, affirming research that informal structures are key for women’s leadership development (White & Burkinshaw, 2019).

Institutional Impact

Policy and Cultural Influence

Women leaders used their competencies to translate gender equity policies into institutional action. Their empathetic leadership promoted inclusive decision-making, mirroring broader evidence that mixed-gender teams drive better institutional performance (Maddi & Gingras, 2020) arxiv.org. Moreover, their advocacy role aligns with feminist leadership theory, which emphasizes leadership for social justice and cultural transformation (Chin, 2011).

Enhanced Leadership Pipeline

By serving as role models, especially for rural and marginalized students, women leaders broadened local leadership aspirations. The **visibility effect** resonates with research on seminar participation, where visible women leaders embolden others to pursue academic roles (Carter et al., 2017) .

Conclusion

This study explored the competencies, challenges, and institutional impacts associated with women’s academic leadership in Sindh. Key contributions, limitations, and suggestions for future research are presented below.

Summary of Findings

- **Competencies:** Women leaders demonstrated high emotional intelligence and transformational leadership, strategically balancing assertiveness with cultural norms.
- **Challenges:** Barriers included role incongruity, policy–practice gaps, institutional bias, and socio-cultural constraints requiring family approval.
- **Opportunities:** Empowerment stemmed from informal peer networks and supportive alliances, which mitigated systemic obstacles.
- **Institutional Impact:** Women leaders helped translate policy into action, enhanced inclusive leadership practices, and served as societal role models.

Theoretical Contributions

The study validates core leadership theories—emotional intelligence, transformational leadership, role congruity—while demonstrating how these frameworks manifest in the specific socio-cultural



context of Sindh. These insights extend feminist leadership theory by situating it within a localized, under-researched institutional environment.

Practical Implications

- **Mentorship Structures:** Institutions should establish formal mentorship programs to complement existing informal networks and support women's leadership pathways.
- **Policy Enforcement:** Mechanisms should ensure the translation of broad gender policies into concrete institutional actions and accountability.
- **Cultural Training:** Leadership development programs must address cultural expectations and equip women with strategies to navigate role incongruity effectively.

Limitations and Future Directions

- **Generalizability:** Qualitative findings from Sindh may not fully represent contexts in other regions or types of institutions.
- **Scope of Participants:** Future research could include male administrators and students to assess leadership impact more holistically.
- **Comparative Studies:** Multi-national comparisons would further illuminate how cultural and policy differences shape leadership experiences.

By addressing gendered institutional barriers and harnessing women's unique competencies, higher education systems can foster more equitable, effective leadership—transforming academia from within. Future studies should investigate how formal institutional structures can better support women leaders and convert peer networks into formal career development pathways.

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