

Women's Leadership Narratives from Higher Education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract



This study explores women's university leadership stories in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, with particular attention to how they attain leadership roles, construct their leadership identities, and navigate the challenges associated with these positions. Guided by four research questions, the study examines pathways to leadership, expressions of authentic leadership, barriers encountered in practice, and the strategies used to overcome them. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four female leaders at the University of Swabi. The interviews were transcribed and manually coded to identify recurring patterns, themes, and narrative insights. The findings indicate that women's pathways to leadership in higher education are often complex and non-linear. Participants described a range of challenges clustered around three main areas: gender-based barriers, constraints on professional development, and tensions between leadership responsibilities and family life. Despite these obstacles, the participants demonstrated persistence and adaptability, drawing on personal agency and experiential learning to progress in their careers. Overall, the study highlights that women's leadership journeys are shaped by both structural limitations and individual navigation strategies. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of leadership in higher education and underscore the importance of supporting more inclusive and sustainable pathways for women in academic leadership roles.

Keywords: Women's Leadership, Higher Education Leadership, Gender Bias, Narrative Inquiry, Academic Leadership

Introduction

University leadership is often regarded as one of the most prestigious, sought-after, and desirable positions in the job market. The position of the university president is usually perceived as the highest in the academic leadership ladder. With the inherent challenges of the position, additional challenges arise for women who wish to attain it. Over the last couple of decades, an increased concentration of women in top-level executive and administrative positions in higher education has been noted. For example, the period 1999-2009 saw the number of top executive positions in higher education administration increase by 62% for women and 27% for men (National Center for Education Statistics). However, women are still underrepresented in the higher echelons of academic administration positions.

The administrative positions that women have been able to achieve vary by type of institution. For example, community colleges appear to have concentrated larger populations of female leadership. However, the female population in leadership positions at the doctoral-granting institution remains lower, though it has improved. In 2006, women held 14% of the president positions in doctoral-granting institutions, and by 2011, this figure increased to 22% (American Council on Education (ACE), 2012). These numbers illustrate the lack of increase in the field of higher education administration leadership between men and women (Bornstein, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007a; Glazer-Raymo, 2008).

The historical evolution of women's roles in higher education reflects the institutional barriers they faced. Women entered universities later than men. Even when they gained access to higher education, they did not receive equal treatment. Women were often pushed toward the 'acceptable' and 'soft' disciplines, while the more celebrated universities remained shutting to them. In response to this, women's academies were founded, which later transformed into teachers' training colleges to meet

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the growing demand for teachers (Nidiffer, 2003). Over time, the creation of administrative positions such as the Dean of Women, who addressed the particular needs of women (including housing, academics, and student welfare), began to evolve into roles more focused on women (Nidiffer, 2003).

The implementation of Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972 and the Women's Educational Equity Act of 1974 marked significant steps toward advancing women's rights in higher education. This legislation made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of sex and compelled institutions to provide and maintain equity in each and every facet, be it admission, employment, or participation in extracurricular activities (Stromquist, 1993; Glazer-Raymo, 2008). Consequently, significant improvements were made in women's enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. Women constituted 52% of bachelor's degree holders and 36% of doctoral graduates in 1989, a substantial increase from the 1974 figures of 44% and 16% respectively (Stromquist, 1993). In 2010, women exceeded men in college enrollment by 40 percentage points (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013).

Though women's representation in faculty and administrative roles has improved, their advancement into the highest leadership categories remains disproportionately low. In 1975, women represented less than 1% of the leadership at four-year public universities. This number grew to 6% in 1987 and 27% in 2010 (American Council on Education, 1982; 1990; 2012). Even though there has been some increased willingness among governing boards and search committees to appoint women to leadership positions (Glazer-Raymo, 2008), there remains a lack of parity.

Eagly and Carli (2007a) attempt to provide a better explanation for the journeys women take to gain leadership positions, describing a shift from the glass ceiling to a more nuanced approach: the labyrinth. Unlike the glass ceiling, which suggests a barrier, the labyrinth depicts a multitude of challenges, diversions, and hurdles that women encounter and must overcome. Despite the challenges, the top leadership positions are more frequently occupied by women, a result of both women's persistence and institutional changes (Eagly & Carli, 2007a; Glazer-Raymo, 2008).

The gap between women in mid-level positions and top leadership roles remains pronounced. Although women make up about 57% of faculty and administrative positions, only 27% hold the presidency (American Council on Education, 2012). This raises the question: why is there such a disparity in vertical advancement among women in the academic workforce, and what factors account for women's strong representation in it?

This study explores the experiences women have while trying to reach leadership positions in higher education, specifically in the research-intensive processes. Overcoming organizational and cultural barriers truly demonstrates success in securing leadership positions. Women in leadership positions must manage the labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). These stories provide details of the maneuvering, strategies, and decisions in the personal experiences of the leadership trajectory and are the focus of this study.

What is a personal experience of a woman aiming for a leadership role, and why is it important to understand the role of the individual in relation to the overall framework? The answers to this question will enhance the leadership development training for others and provide support for women who desire to enter into leadership roles. The women who step into, hold, and succeed in leadership roles provide insights for others and the organization. This study is concerned with the following questions: What are the ways to university leadership for women? What barriers are encountered and how are these barriers recognized, interpreted, and negotiated?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Women and Leadership in Higher Education

Women have faced gendered structures in leadership in higher education, resulting in fewer women in the highest positions. There have been considerable advances for women in higher education, but their representation in senior leadership roles remains lacking. These gaps can be identified as structural inequities and gender biases, as well as the late entry of women into leadership roles in the profession and academia. (Eagly and Carli, 2007c; Glazer-Raymo, 2008; Rhode and Kellerman, 2007). Over the years, there has been a sustained increase in the number of women in academia. Most of this entry has occurred at the faculty and mid-level administrative positions. This entry has resulted in leadership roles. If these barriers had existed for entry into these positions, leadership roles would have been available as well. This gap in leadership positions has indicated that various barriers still exist within these institutions, some of which may be unconscious, and will require investigation into how women navigate these barriers.

The Labyrinth Theory of Leadership

One common criticism of the theory of the 'glass ceiling' is that it does not explain the obstacles that women face in their roles as leaders. It is in this regard that the metaphor of a 'labyrinth' has been adopted to describe the leadership journey of women (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). Unlike the glass ceiling, which represents a single, imperceptible barrier, a labyrinth has multiple challenges that women face as they navigate their careers, such as organizational barriers, cultural expectations, informal power relations, and other factors that affect their leadership pathways.

Eagly and Carli (2007a) state that although the pathway is challenging, achieving goals is not impossible. Women are finding ways to progress and improve by instituting changes in route, strategy, or in the normative environment. The perspective emphasizes leadership as a continually evolving, negotiated process rather than a fixed position or end, which makes it beneficial when considering real-world consequences.

Gender Stereotypes and Role Congruity Theory

Leadership perceptions are still influenced by gender stereotypes. Role congruity theory posits that social expectations shape individuals' actions to align with expected gender (Eagly & Karau, 2002). On the other hand, leadership is associated with certain personality traits, such as aggressiveness, decisiveness, and other authoritative qualities, which are deemed masculine. Women leaders face a particular challenge in being socialized to act in a competent and warm manner. Women leaders, for instance, may be perceived to be too masculine when they embrace leadership, and if they do not and they act in a stereotypically feminine way, they are deemed to be lacking in authority. Such a scenario is referred to as a double bind, and it is a common challenge in leadership (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly & Mladinic, 2011; Koenig et al., 2011; Schein & Davidson, 1993).

Research has shown that, among other factors contributing to the assessment of leadership and subsequent promotion to the role, gender bias is at play. Women leaders are, compared to their male counterparts, more likely to be criticized (Bosak, Sczesny & Eagly, 2011; Eagly & Karau, 2002). These stereotypes further deepen inequity and stagnate career advancement.

Leadership Styles and Gender

Researchers have examined the differing leadership styles of leaders of various genders. For example, transformational leadership tends to be seen more as a female style of leadership, as it relies on collaboration, communication, and motivation (Eagly, Johannesen, & Van Engen, 2003), which are relational and inclusive styles considered more effective in today's workplaces (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Simultaneously, women leaders are expected to adopt more transactional leadership styles, which include making decisions and exercising authority. Women leaders' flexibility in leadership styles exemplifies the complexities of gender role expectations. Eagly and Carli (2007) state that for women to lead effectively, they must find a way to lean more toward agency than toward a communal approach, which is typical in most organizational settings.

Bornstein (2008) contends that the leadership of most higher education institutions remains firmly rooted in a patriarchal organizational paradigm. However, it can be noted that with a shift in some leadership models toward more collaborative styles, the chances of women's success may be greater. Considering the above factors, Eagly and Carli (2007) suggest that the ability to adopt multiple leadership styles may contribute to effective leadership.

Professional Development and Structural Barriers: Structural barriers impede women from gaining the experience and credentials required for leadership. Women encounter barriers such as limited access to leadership networks, mentorship, and slower promotion pathways (Bornstein, 2008). To overcome some of these challenges, women must build their social capital. Women must strengthen their networks, find mentorships, and be involved with leadership to be credible and visible (Eagly & Carli, 2007c). In network building and social capital, earning and retaining established networks to benefit them in their social capital building is not typical for women, as it is with men. Women, generally, differently from men, have to build networks and social capital on their own.

Building social capital and networking, as well as professional development, are often defined by institutional and informal feature expectations. Women may end up having to take on informal unpaid administrative positions for a long time and have to take up extra work for a long time to be able to be considered for leadership. These additional expectations may impede career development and create additional challenges.

Work-Life Balance and Gendered Expectations: Work-life balance is an essential aspect dominating the leadership opportunities for women. Being the primary caregiver, as ascribed by societal roles, women. This extra work is non-trivial and often influences women's professional choices, particularly when the desired leadership role is accompanied by location modifications, more time at work, and greater overall availability (Eagly & Carli, 2007b).

Women are more likely than men to change jobs for family reasons, like being scared to pursue leadership roles or taking flexible jobs to accommodate family needs. On the other hand, when men marry and have children, it is viewed more positively, as it is seen to provide greater organizational stability and the presence of leadership.

Even with these obstacles, many women manage to find ways to hold on to their leadership positions for a long time. They'll negotiate and prioritize, and they'll put a support system in place to help them balance their leadership with their other responsibilities.

Methodology

This research used a qualitative narrative methodology to investigate the lived leadership experiences of female university leaders. Given that participants can voice their experiences in their own language, narrative inquiry offers a more comprehensive perspective on how individuals articulate their meanings within their leadership journeys (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This method considers, in addition to the events in question, how participants perceive, interpret, and articulate those events over a period of time. Participants from an academic leadership background were selected by using purposive sampling. The study extended an invitation to four female Heads of Departments from the University of Swabi. Their leadership roles and the potential to bridge the study to their professional backgrounds made them appropriate participants. The sample consisted of four participants, which is a small sample size, but is consistent with qualitative research principles that value insight over generalizability. The focus was on obtaining context-driven narratives rather than on an endowment of statistically representative outcomes. The research employed semi-structured interviews, allowing interviewees to address questions that interviewers had not prepared. Participants were contacted via email and formal correspondence describing the research process and outlining the request for voluntary participation. The venue for the interviews was the University of Swabi. Each interview was approximately one hour. Interviews captured the participants' profiles and experiences while responding to the identified research questions. Questions targeted participants' leadership journeys, personal reflections, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they used to overcome them.

Interviews were transcribed in full, and analyses were conducted using hand coding. This type of coding was designed to identify key instances, recurring motifs, and narratives in the data. Unlike coding based on existing themes, themes were derived from the data itself. The themes identified were grouped into broader categories that spanned the spectrum of participants' lived experiences. This was useful in creating a fluid narrative of the participants' experiences with leadership and in resolving the tension between diversity and uniformity. In order to enhance the analysis, field notes, excerpts of participants' public addresses, and applicable news articles were incorporated. This triangulation deepened the quality analysis and the context of the participants' leadership.

This research has engaged in numerous credibility and rigor safeguarding strategies. This research used described prolonged involvement strategies during interviews as one way of obtaining rich descriptions of experiences. In developing initial themes, data triangulation was helpful in confirming themes across sources. This research has prioritized consistency in data coding and interpretation. Trustworthiness, in general, is the result of the narrative approach, meaning that participant voices and perspectives are sustained and represented. Reflexivity, in this case, was incorporated into the research process by considering the researcher's role in interpreting the data.

The study followed a strict code of ethics at every stage of study conduct. Data collection began after participants provided informed consent. Participants were informed of any voluntary aspects of the study and of the protective measures of confidentiality and anonymity. The confidentiality of participants was maintained by omitting identifying information from the transcriptions and analysis. The personal information used in this study was solely for the sake of research, and it was fully protected throughout the study.

Findings

The analysis of participants' narratives demonstrated that the trajectory toward leadership in higher education is shaped by a mix of individual agency, structural limitations, and changing occupational

circumstances. Even though the participants' stories were distinctive, several similar patterns emerged in their narratives. Such patterns are categorized into three overarching themes: pathways to leadership, challenges associated with being a woman, PD, and the balance between professional and personal life.

Pathways to Leadership

The participants showed a wide range of variations and non-sequential methods of achieving leadership roles. For some, becoming a leader was a role that was not career-planned ahead of time, and instead, it was something that emerged or developed holistically over time. Out of the four participants, two stated that they had not desired to be Heads of Departments. For them, the circumstances of becoming leaders were the result of other people pushing them combined with healthy career evolution. One of the interviewees described the circumstances and remarked, "I don't believe in making such pre-planned decisions in advance for the future... it often happens unexpectedly."

In the same way, another interviewee explained that at first, it was fine for her to be a senior lecturer, and at that time, the prospect of her being in a leadership role was nowhere in her. What was the cause of her being in a leading role was to get direct solicitations from other people in her family.

On the other hand, the rest of the interviewees described leadership to be one of the career goals that they had. They often spoke of a mentor or some early event that inspired and motivated them to act aggressively. One of the interviewees described the period of her undergraduate studies as the time when she was first encouraged to be a leader and that changed the course of her career for the better. Another interviewee stated that her participation in the leadership activities of students was one of the major factors that helped her land the jobs that she had. There are diverse and conflicting narratives of leadership, suggesting the differing pathways and methods of achieving leadership roles.

Gender-Related Barriers

All respondents noted that gender was a major issue in their leadership experiences. Gender bias was present in both the institutional frameworks in which the respondents operated, as well as the frameworks that defined the interpersonal relationships that were present. In the course of their experiences, respondents noted the prevalence of disbelief, a reduction in the extent to which they were supported, and, in some cases, the presence of a colleague who actively opposed them. One example of this was the lack of support that comes with being in a higher position of leadership: "When you reach the top, you suddenly feel a lack of cooperation... people become suspicious or even try to undermine your work."

One participant acknowledged that her qualifications were of little consideration, and her appointment was even seen as a concession to her gender: "People assumed I was selected because I am a woman... they ignored my qualifications and experience." These instances show that there are negative perceptions of women in positions of leadership. Participants noted that women in positions of leadership are more likely to be settled within position within the roles of being more nurturing and more flexible. These women are likely to face criticism when they are exercising their role as leaders.

Likewise, some respondents mentioned that they have experienced workplace harassment and institutionalized discrimination. There is a well-documented persistence of gender bias in leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Bornstein, 2008; Eagly & Chin, 2010; Carli & Eagly, 2012; Madden, 2011; Hoyt, 2005).

Professional Development

Professional Development is integral to pathways to leadership roles. The participants in this study described their careers as a series of incremental steps, involving the development of skills and the acquisition of experience through continuous learning. No participants described a rapid or direct leap to a leadership position, and all stressed the need to move upward through the ranks of academia and administration.

One of the participants explained, "I followed the traditional route... I served as a junior faculty member and then senior faculty for many years before moving into leadership." Another participant described how additional responsibilities helped build her professional profile. She described how taking on many administrative roles, often without paid compensation, to gain experience and visibility within the institution. "I worked in different administrative positions... not for salary, but to gain experience and move forward." Another participant explained the important role that mentoring relationships had on professional development. For many participants, mentoring

relationships helped them to make more constructive choices about their careers, especially with respect to the timing of leadership transitions. The participants all described the opportunity for professional development and growth, describing the processes as filled with challenges. They spoke of the need to achieve a delicate balance between their teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities, often at great personal cost.

Work–Life Balance

Another key theme in the participant narratives is the struggle with balancing family and personal commitments with professional obligations. All the participants recognized that a leadership role requires a lot of work, often outside regular work hours. Some participants reflected on how family commitments had an impact on their career choices. One participant reflected on how she postponed taking on leadership roles until her children were grown: "...as I could not balance both, I didn't take on leadership roles until my children were more self-sufficient."

In addition, considerations about marriage and partners affected the choice of the next step in a career. Some participants talked about how they made certain career choices out of opportunities for their partner. This casts career and personal life in a more interrelated space. The participants seemed not to regret their choices and stressed that patience, the right timing, and a step-by-step approach are key to getting to where one needs to be. One of the participants expressed, "...with time, things don't have to be accomplished all at once...with time, things build up that prepare you for leadership roles." All in All, participants described work-life balance as something dynamic and constant, as opposed to something static and constant.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand the leadership experiences of women leaders in the university setting, drawing on participants' narratives, with the objective of examining how women leaders achieve leadership positions, how they navigate barriers, and how they maintain their leadership positions over the long term. The findings illustrate that women leaders cannot be described as having linear pathways and/or predictable journeys in leadership. The journeys of women leaders are influenced by a fusion of barriers and enablers, including structural, agency, and situational matters across different time frames in their careers.

The most noteworthy finding of this study is the heterogeneity in pathways to leadership. To illustrate, some participants described a definitive pathway to leadership, whereas others described it as accidental. This heterogeneity reflects the lack of a definitive pathway for women into leadership. The findings illustrated that the careers of many women have been strengthened by opportunities, encouragement, and situational choices rather than by a clearly articulated pathway. This finding reinforces the literature, as leadership is described as being the sum of intentional and unintentional encounters or experiences (Eagly and Carli, 2007a).

The findings provide strong support for the applicability of what Eagly and Carli (2007a) described as the labyrinth metaphor. Without exception, the narratives of study participants illustrated that there are no added barriers to the advancement of women leaders. The narratives of study participants illustrated that there are a number of interwoven challenges to be faced, including the inner workings of an institution, people, and society as a whole, and their respective challenges. The labyrinth metaphor is the most appropriate way of understanding the challenges that women face as they navigate through an ever-changing array of obstacles.

All narratives expressed the same form of gender bias that is deeply rooted in the societal structure. Participants shared experiences that ranged from having to prove their competence in the face of no support challenges to sheer skepticism. These experiences highlight the power of gender stereotyping when it comes to leading. Applying role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), there is a consideration of women in leadership being considered rulers with an expectation of having to control an empire with an iron fist, while also being a motherly figure who is warm and friendly. This form of expectation can cause a war of control that can determine the fate of women and their right to leadership. Findings also suggest that for women, the control of such a war determines their right to exercise leadership. Participants described 'flexible leadership styles' that require them to switch from being assertive to being collaborative. This form of considerable control suggests that leadership is not about having rigid structures, but having the ability to respond to the challenges, even when it comes to being a controlled puppeteer, in a way that does not compromise the spirit of an independent leadership model. This finding is in line with previous studies that show women have to demonstrate a

higher threshold of qualification and experience in order to be recognized as a leader (Bornstein, 2008).

Simultaneously, it becomes evident that structural barriers shape much of professional development. Participants illustrated the extent of unpaid administrative duties and other unpaid roles undertaken to gain experience and visibility. While these ultimately residual contributions were needed for professional advancement, they shed light on the inequitable burdens of women aspiring to leadership roles. The necessity to “over-prepare” illustrates inequitable systemic structures and systemic inequalities in institutions and the status quo.

Balancing professional roles, personal commitments, and family leaves adds another layer of complexity to leadership paths. It's indicative of women's occupational role adjustments in response to family demands as noted in prior studies (Eagly & Carli, 2007b). Still, it is important to note that, although these adjustments are often viewed as constraints, our study participants described them as strategic decisions within the context of other constraints they experienced in their lives.

One of the many lessons learned in this study is that, despite barriers, the participants stood firm in their goals and decisions. Resilience, perseverance, and a strong sense of purpose are what their stories exemplified. The external barriers demonstrated in their stories are a byproduct of the strong self-motivated principles that influenced their leadership. The external barriers and strong self-motivation are what this research seeks to exemplify and celebrate, as they are often overlooked in other researchers' work.

This study expands the available literature by providing context-specific insights from a developing country. With the majority of research on women's leadership conducted in the West, many of the cultural and institutional intricacies of the Pakistani context remain invisible. The study's findings attest that although there are a plethora of challenges that every leader faces, the social, cultural, and institutional context determines how the challenges manifest and the impact they have on the leader and the organization.

This study's findings have several implications. Institutions can create a more enabling environment to support women in leadership by providing fair access to professional development and mentorship opportunities. The findings point to a need for policy reform to remove systemic discrimination and to support the development of inclusive and equitable leadership approaches to counter the identified systemic barriers to inclusion. For individuals, the study underscores the importance of coping with change, resilience, and, to some extent, the flexibility to choose decisive actions that foster leadership progression. For aspiring leaders, the ability of successful women to navigate convoluted career trajectories is instrumental.

Conclusion

This study focuses on the strategic responses of upper-level university women managers to the challenges they face in their positions. Systemic discrimination, self-aspiration, professionalism, and work-life balance conflicts are the study's main focus. The study offers evidence of self-preservation and determination, resilience and flexibility, and focus. The study offers the view of leadership as an ongoing process of negotiation and work. The main contribution of the study is to confront the reality of cultural and institutional inequities affecting developing countries. The study offers an analysis of women's leadership pathways across the various strata of management and makes the case that the supportive structures within organizational systems need to be improved to enhance women's leadership.

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