

## Breaking Barriers: The Development of Leadership Identity among Female Academics

Shubhashree Dash<sup>1\*</sup>, Prof. Sarat Kumar Rout<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on obstacles that female academics face while trying to become leaders in educational institutions. Moreover, it draws attention to traditional stereotypes and institutional barriers such as the glass ceiling and sticky floor, which become hurdle in career paths of women. Stereotypical patriarchal norms are often attached to caregiving and other family responsibilities always restrict them and create challenges as well. This paper highlights the importance of transformational, relational, and authentic leadership models and their benefits for the female academics. Further, it highlights the grassroot movements, networking, and mentorship made the women empowered to overcome the structural barriers and develop leadership identities. Intersectionality with gender is also analysed in relation to the compounded barriers faced by women from marginalized communities. The paper suggests structural changes for policy, inclusive workplace culture, and educational initiatives to create equitable leadership opportunities. The study envisions a future in which female academics may strongly embrace leadership roles, benefiting both themselves and the larger educational landscape by addressing institutional and societal concerns.

**Keywords:** *female academics, leadership identity, barriers, leadership, gender equity*

Female academics face significant challenges despite progress in gender equity. They struggle to balance work and family due to insufficient institutional support (Bierema, 2016; De Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009; Shepherd, 2017). Women leaders often face the hardship because of the deep-rooted societal norms, especially patriarchal expectations, which cause self-doubt, stress, and stagnation in the careers of women (Ghundol & Muthanna, 2025; Gander & Sharafizad, 2025). Deep-rooted societal norms and patriarchal expectations foster biases against female leadership, causing self-doubt, stress, and career stagnation (Ghundol & Muthanna, 2025; Gander & Sharafizad, 2025). Women are compelled to play multiple roles and face discrimination in institutions because of the societal norms in the exchange, sacrificing their career growth (Alshdiefat et al., 2024; Islam et al., 2023; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Mental exhaustion and bias as well as unfair judgment create issues in the progression of women's leadership positions (Nkosi, 2024). Moreover, over the course of their career progression, women often prioritize traditional caregiving roles, which ultimately limits

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Education, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, dashshubhashree95@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6382-6443>

<sup>2</sup>Department of Education, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, saratrou2007@rediffmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6478-3807>

\*Corresponding Author

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their leadership opportunities (Aderibigbe et al., 2023; Ohalete et al., 2023). Burnout and career disruption also happen because of such pressures (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Traditional gender roles and social conditioning influence the leadership identity of women (Jenkins & Finneman, 2018). When women align their values with leadership behaviours, then authentic leadership can be developed (D'Intino et al., 2007). Deep-rooted Stereotypical gender roles always reinforce traditional roles and create hindrances for women, also restricting how women see themselves and how others around them perceive them (Ellemers, 2018). Multiple identities, such as gender and race, overlap and affect leadership growth, as highlighted by Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality model. Shared vision and motivation are emphasised by transformational leadership, which usually aligns with women's leadership styles (Burns, 1978; Chakraborty & Chakraborty, 2004). The current paper explores how the women academics overcome the challenges they face in the system of education and how they reshape their leadership identities and create their own equitable space in the leadership sphere.

### ***Historical and Social Context: Leadership Identity Development among Female Academics***

Severe challenges like Stereotypical gender roles and systematic barriers are faced by women in educational leadership roles, which limit their career growth. It is always believed that leadership is a male-dominated job influenced by patriarchal norms. Traditional leadership styles, such as the authoritarian and top-down approach model, always undermine the collaborative styles of leadership, which are usually associated with women (Ndlovu, Tekere, & Gibbs, 2016). As Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi (2023) highlighted, these typical cultural notions of males as good leaders or “think manager-think male.” maintain these inequalities. The idea of an authoritative leadership style is challenged by transformational and relational leadership models, which are inspired by feminist theories. The authoritative model is not only the best or only model, as proved by Mary Kay and Mother Teresa by following the servant and authentic leadership approach. Gander & Sharafizad (2025) proposed to eliminate obstacles and promote inclusion by their EQUAL framework. All these attempts have always been focused on overcoming the stereotypical beliefs regarding women's leadership and promoting equality in that field (Ndlovu et al., 2016; Gander & Sharafizad, 2025).

Challenges like Organizational bias and societal norms, which priorities stereotypical gender roles, like caregiving, over a career, are faced by female academics. Concepts like “glass ceiling” and “sticky floor” refer to the prevention of women from career progression by creating invisible hindrances; moreover, women fail to get the highest levels of leadership and stay in low-wage and low-mobility jobs. Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi (2023) discussed these concepts by highlighting succession planning of leadership. Many initiatives have been undertaken to bring positive changes and to encourage women to take on leadership roles by organizing mentorship programs, grassroots movements, and gender-sensitization programmes (Gander & Sharafizad, 2025; Smith & Sinkford, 2022). For Normalizing female academics in leadership roles, progress in cultural beliefs and policy frameworks is needed (Smith & Sinkford, 2022; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Women's empowerment is required to achieve gender equality in the field of educational leadership by bringing systematic reform and cultural changes (Gander & Sharafizad, 2025; Ndlovu et al., 2016).

### ***Barriers to Leadership***

#### **i) Socio-Cultural Obstacles to Leadership Identity Formation**

Conventional gender roles, established stereotypes, and patriarchal thoughts are creating obstacles for women in successfully attaining leadership positions. According to traditional patriarchal norms, leadership is considered a male trait, so women often face difficulty getting that recognition and professional advancement (Alshdiefat et al., 2024; Islam et al., 2023;

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Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Tran & Nguyen, 2020). In higher education the situation is even worse, as women get extremely limited opportunities because of discrimination (Bierema, 2016; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). Women leadership capabilities have always been undermined because of established stereotypes and reinforced the outdated beliefs (Bishu & Headly, 2020; Sharafizad et al., 2024). Most of the time, balancing both the responsibilities of family and work restricts women's roles in academics (Cortis et al., 2022; Piggott & Pike, 2020). Since the women are engaged with household duties because of established patriarchal norms their leadership opportunities became limited (Gander, 2018). Policies have been focusing on women by bringing reforms, as they have been underrepresented historically, but they have failed to achieve their intended goals. It is because people assume women are chosen to fill a spot only instead of their talent, which is named as "token" appointment (Morley, 2024; Duan et al., 2023). It is even much worse and harder for women from marginalized communities; these restrictions and obstacles hold them back more hardly (Emon & Nisa, 2024). Women usually don't get the opportunity of training, skills, or resources to develop their leadership or mentorship qualities, which makes the existing problem much worse and promotes the gender gap (Awain et al., 2024).

### **ii) Institutional Barriers and Structural Constraints**

Women face severe challenges in progression of leadership because of pertinent gender stereotypes in the field of education. The continued existence of systematic inequalities in policies, outdated curricula and absence of gender sensitization programs actively reinforcing the inequalities (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2017; Thomson et al., 2022). Female participation is exceptionally low in the decision-making process as there are a lot of structural barriers apart from policy frameworks, like poor and insufficient infrastructure, limited resources. These structural barriers are seen to be reinforced by gender-stereotyped curriculum in undergraduate courses which limit the opportunities of female student to experience and nurture leadership skills (Blumberg, 2008). Additionally, the women are expected to perform domestic activities and manage their work-life at the same time but because of insufficient strategies of work-life balance in the workplaces create substantial barriers for the women (Bierema, 2016). These are some reasons for creating barriers for women in leadership and decision-making roles.

### **iii) Psychosocial Aspects of Identity Formation as a Leader**

Leadership identity is developed through self-reflections, inner confidence, and effective interpersonal relationships. The psychosocial framework by Chickering (1993) suggests that leadership development is marked by a transition from individual autonomy to a state of interconnectedness and the critical role of a relational approach (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Komives et al., 2006). Rather than leadership identity being static, it is a dynamic process that also transits through internal or individual conviction and social narratives (Ford, 2010). Awareness and exploration, leader identification, leadership differentiated, and generativity are four pivotal stages identified by McKenzie (2015). Moreover, self-efficacy, social influences, and reflective practice are also being emphasized in these stages in the process of leadership development. Leadership identity is developed through two factors, like engaging in hands-on experience in relational environments and belief in self-efficacy (McKenzie, 2015).

### ***Breaking the Barriers: Leadership Identity Development***

- 1. Mentorship as a critical force:** Mentorship serves as a catalyst for women by which they can navigate these systematic social prejudices and develop their leadership abilities. Mentorship was a key to facilitate the women of South Africa's KwaZulu-

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Natal to break through and challenge patriarchal male-dominated traditions and create inclusive learning environments (Nkosi, 2024)

- 2. Emphasis on Networking:** Women can use professional networks to share their experiences and embrace their professional achievements, through which they can support each other. As it has been found by Ghundol & Muthana (2025) that the female scholars of Yemeni higher education used the strategy of networking sites best to establish themselves despite societal constraints.
- 3. Breaking patriarchal leadership paradigms:** advancing gender inclusive policies must be prioritized to break these glass-ceiling and male-dominated leadership culture. Leaders like Mary Kay have created an example in leadership by challenging existing models and implementing a radical shift.
- 4. Bottom-Up Movements and Cultural Reforms:** Cultural reforms through bottom-up movements: building up confidence and systematically dismantling the stereotypical barriers of patriarchy are cultivated through community-based programs and empowering the women. These reforms are also enduring cultural shifts in highly patriarchal norms (Smith, 2025)
- 5. Transformational Leadership Models:** The "think manager, think male" style of leadership creates bias, which must be challenged, and emotional intelligence must be prioritized. In the field of STEM, women utilize relational leadership to systematically dismantle the stereotypical barriers (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023).
- 6. Lifelong Learning and Development of Competency:** professional training are key to building strong and empowered female leaders specially when it is customized. The initiatives foster the resilience and leadership skills among female educators as found by Nkosi,2024 in educational institutions of South Africa.
- 7. Reformation in Workplaces towards Gender Neutrality:** policies like paid parental leave acting as support for those people who want to balance their caregiving and leadership roles at the same time. It gives scope to the parents to manage both family and leadership. Case studies in global health leadership show that these policies are playing significant roles in women's career development (Smith & Sinkford, 2022).
- 8. Intersectionality of Leadership:** women face multiple challenges at the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Breaking down these barriers creates more success both in academics along with professional areas (Llorens et al., 2021).
- 9. Transformation of Marginalized Community:** marginalized and weaker community who has low educational access have been mobilized and working together for change. It has also aimed at engaging, creating awareness, and taking actions for various communities (Kuteesa et al., 2024)

### CRITICAL DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The intersection of race, class, and gender shapes the path of leadership of women and adds many obstacles for the marginalized communities many times. These obstacles include financial constraints, limited publication opportunities, and delayed career advancement, making the path of leadership for women more difficult (Llorens et al., 2021). Such challenging experiences of women, which contribute to issues like the "leadership labyrinth" related to institutional bias and societal stereotypes, further create hindrances for women to develop professionally in the leadership field (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). So, these dismantle-leadership styles must follow the intersectional framework ideas to create more inclusive and equal opportunities.

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Leadership models like transformational and relational are more about focusing on teamwork, emotional intelligence, and honesty. These models value more to creation of inclusive work environment rather traditional power (Ndlovu et al., 2016). Famous leaders like Mary Kay and Mother Teresa challenged traditional male-dominated norms by encouraging the other leadership styles. For promoting equitable opportunity and giving a fair chance to everyone, there must be various policies like anti-discrimination laws and paid parental leave. Moreover, the curriculum to be more gender-sensitive to remove the biases (Smith & Sinkford, 2022; Kuteesa et al., 2024). Local activism and mentorship programs can help the women overcome the traditional unfair patriarchal norms and also let them access the leadership roles. Overall, these efforts work towards creating a balanced and inclusive leadership landscape by erasing the systematic barriers.

### CASE STUDIES

#### *Case 1: Women School Leaders in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa*

Nkosi (2024) discusses how the women academics must negotiate with the unfair treatment due to social and cultural barriers when they try to get a leadership position in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. With the help of networking, mentoring, and standing up for their own, they succeed. Female academics start following the relational and transformational style of leadership, which focuses on community needs and fixes the unfairness in the education system, which is mentioned by Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) influenced by critical pedagogy theory. This shows the importance of community-centered support for the development of women's leadership (Nkosi, 2024).

#### *Case 2: Feminist Leadership Models and Systemic Barriers*

Studies on extension of research work of Nkosi which adds wider perspective to women's leadership. Ndlovu, Tekere, and Gibbs (2016), who worked on feminist leadership discussed about strategies of challenging male-dominated systems by using emotional intelligence, authentic and ethical leadership. Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) use the "leadership labyrinth" model to study the institutional barriers, stereotypes, social myths faced by women. These studies show how complex and complicated the process of addressing the system of gender biases and support women in the field of leadership.

#### *Case 3: Systemic Reforms and Grassroots Advocacy*

Nkosi (2024) emphasized on transformation of institution, where a female academic can get a scope to be a leader. She has suggested continuous professional development, gender-sensitive policies and organizational restructure. She has given importance to grassroot activism plays crucial role in challenging stereotypes and changing the social norms. All these efforts reflect women's active role in overcoming these barriers and creating an inclusive and equitable space for leadership (Nkosi, 2024; Ndlovu et al., 2016; Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023)

### CONCLUSION

This paper has been discussed how the female academics face so many obstacles in leadership positions. These obstacles include biased systems, traditional gender role ideas, and additional difficulty for marginalized women. However, transformational and relational leadership models on emotional intelligence and honesty bring positive changes. To support the women in this field of leadership especially in educational system, the schools and institutions must change the traditional patriarchal rules and ways of thinking. Equal and supportive policy programs also encouraging every woman in this field.

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