

An In-depth Analysis of Women's Leadership in the Indian Higher Education Sector

Pooja Manohar Chugh

Assistant Professor, Hind Seva Mandal's,

Pemraj Sarda College, Ahilyanagar, 414001.

Email Id: pcpoojachugh9@gmail.com Mob: 8446116569

Abstract

The representation of women in senior leadership positions within the Indian higher education system presents a significant socio-institutional paradox. Despite India maintaining the world's third-largest higher education network and women achieving high academic milestones—including earning 42% of all doctoral degrees—their presence in top-tier administrative roles remains minimal. This research paper examines the disconnect between academic success and leadership attainment, identifying critical barriers such as inadequate mentoring, networking limitations, entrenched gender stereotypes, and the "pipeline problem". By synthesizing institutional data and theoretical frameworks, this paper argues that bridging the gender leadership gap is essential for fostering inclusive, empathetic, and forward-thinking educational environments.

Keywords: Leadership, Women Leadership, challenges, benefits and strategies

Introduction:

India currently possesses the third-largest higher education system globally, following only China and the United States. As the nation moves towards becoming a pre-eminent global education hub, its infrastructure has expanded to include a total of 1,074 universities. This network comprises 460 State Universities, 128 Deemed Universities, 56 Central Universities, and 430 Private Universities. Within this vast system, there is a striking contrast between the number of women participating in teaching and research versus those holding authority. While women constitute approximately 42% of the teaching staff according to the All India Survey on Higher Education, their representation in senior leadership roles—such as

Vice-Chancellor, Registrar, Dean, and Head of Department (HOD)—is disproportionately low. Data indicates that while 66.22% of women are represented in middle-level leadership, they occupy only 6.67% of senior academic leadership roles. Furthermore, geographical trends suggest that universities in **metropolitan areas** generally exhibit slightly higher percentages of women in leadership than those in rural or semi-urban contexts.

Objectives of Study:

- 1) To study the leadership of women in higher education sector
- 2) To study the challenges of women relating to leadership in education sector
- 3) To study the benefits and strategies to improve the leadership in education sector

Institutional and Sociocultural Barriers to Advancement

The sources identify a complex web of internal and external hurdles that prevent qualified women from advancing. These barriers are often systemic rather than a reflection of individual skill or experience.

The Mentoring Deficit

Mentoring is identified as a cornerstone for career advancement, providing guidance on organisational politics, skill development, and work-life balance. In the Indian context, the lack of formal mentoring systems is particularly detrimental due to the country's patriarchal social structure and traditional gender roles. Aspiring women leaders often lack access to mentors who can help them navigate male-dominated professional norms and increase their professional visibility. Women in higher education leadership—spanning deans, department heads, and vice-chancellors—are crucial for driving innovation and fostering collaborative, student-centered environments. Despite their positive impact on institutional culture, women remain underrepresented in top positions, holding only 9.55% of leadership roles in some regions. Key challenges include systemic biases and lack of mentorship, while solutions focus on targeted development programs and active sponsorship.

- **Low Representation:** In many regions, particularly in India, women's representation in top academic leadership lags significantly behind men. For instance, only 9.55% of 1151 Indian higher education institutions are led by women.

- **Disparities:** A study in Bangladesh found 25.61% of public university leadership roles are held by women, compared to 38.08% in private universities, indicating, that private institutions may offer more gender balance.
- **Roles Held:** Women often serve in crucial, albeit sometimes undervalued, roles like Deans, Program Heads, and Directors, acting as a bridge between faculty and administration.

Benefits of Women in Leadership

- **Institutional Transformation:** Female leaders foster more resilient, collaborative, and student-centered environments.
- **Diverse Perspectives:** Their leadership styles often bring increased transparency, innovation, and adaptability to institutions, which are essential for navigating current crises in higher education.

Strategies for Advancement

- **Leadership Development Programs:** Specialized programs, such as those focusing on strategic, interpersonal, and leadership skills, are vital for empowering women.
- **Active Sponsorship:** Beyond mentorship, senior leaders should actively advocate for talented women to receive high-profile assignments and promotions.
- **Networking Opportunities:** Development programs that facilitate networking help women access information about job opportunities and conferences

Women leadership:

1. The lack of mentoring for women in leadership positions is a significant issue in India, as it is globally. This problem is particularly pronounced in educational institutions and contributes to the underrepresentation of women in top leadership roles. In the Indian context, mentoring is crucial for women's career advancement, especially given the country's patriarchal social structure and traditional gender roles (Buddhapriya, 2009).

Mentoring relationships provide aspiring women leaders with guidance on navigating organizational politics, developing leadership skills, and balancing work-life responsibilities - all of which are particularly challenging in the Indian cultural context (Khanna, 2012). Pipeline problem – The "pipeline problem in women leadership positions" refers to the decreasing representation of women at higher organizational levels, particularly in leadership roles. Educational and early career disparities, especially in STEM fields, can set the stage for future imbalances (Blickenstaff, 2005). As women progress professionally, they often encounter barriers to advancement, including gender bias and stereotypes (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Work-life balance challenges disproportionately affect women (Hewlett, 2002), while a lack of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities hinder their career progression (Ibarra et al., 2010). Organizational cultures favouring masculine leadership styles (Ely & Meyerson, 2000) and self-selection out of leadership roles due to perceived barriers (Sandberg, 2013) further exacerbate the issue. Lack of networking – Networking is crucial for career development, but women are faced unique challenges: 1. Access to informal networks: Women have less access to informal networking opportunities, which can be critical for career advancement (van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). 2. Balancing professional and personal obligations: Work-life balance issues can make it challenging for women to participate in networking events, particularly those occurring outside of regular work hours (Mason et al., 2013). Lack of role model – Women leaders often face a significant challenge in the lack of female role models in top leadership positions (Connie, 1988; Hawkins, 1991). This scarcity of successful women in administration leads aspiring female leaders to emulate their male counterparts, potentially adopting masculine qualities in the belief that these traits are essential for success. The absence of mentors who can guide women through professional norms, work activities, and networking relationships further compounds this issue (Noe, 1988). Mentors play a crucial role in advancing women's careers by increasing their professional visibility, clarifying career aspirations, and helping them navigate the realities of male-dominated work

environments. Gender stereotypes – Women face stereotypes or biases that affect their ability to network effectively in male-dominated environments (Ibarra et al., 2010). Gender stereotypes often portray women as nurturing and intuitive, but less capable in quantitative analysis and decision-making (Castro, 1990; Asthana, 1992). These stereotypes, along with discriminatory practices, hinder qualified women from attaining leadership positions (Asthana, 1992; Pyke, 2001). Whisker (1996) argues that sex role stereotyping, which favors males, is a fundamental obstacle to women's advancement in management. The perception that women lack the necessary qualities for successful administration persists, with some believing women are too emotional or illogical for such roles (Hammound, 1993). This stereotyping has led institutions to resist appointing women to administrative positions. Lack of support system, Women have historically faced a significant lack of support and encouragement in pursuing professional careers, as identified by several researchers (Connie, 1988; Pyke, 2001). This deficit of support extends across various spheres of their lives, including friends, family, and academic mentors. The challenge is compounded by the dual responsibilities women often bear, balancing work and family obligations (Cahalan, 2007; Cook, 2007). Multiple studies have highlighted that a majority of women administrators report insufficient support systems as a significant barrier to their career advancement (Cahalan, 2007; Cook, 2007; Santee, 2006; Wilbanks, 2005). This underscores the critical role that comprehensive support plays in women's ability to achieve and maintain leadership roles in their careers.

Challenges and Barriers

- **Systemic Biases:** Women face institutional obstacles, including gendered expectations and limited policy-level support for career advancement.
- **Mentorship Deficits:** Women often find it harder to secure mentors compared to their male counterparts, with only 37% of women finding it easy to find a mentor compared to 50% of men.

- **Work-Life Conflict:** Limited support systems, such as childcare, hamper women's potential in leadership positions.
- **The "Pipeline Problem" and Leaky Pipeline:** The "pipeline problem" describes the phenomenon where women's representation decreases at each higher organisational level. This is often referred to as a "leaky pipeline," where structural inequalities, such as bias in recruitment and performance evaluation, cause women to abandon their career aspirations. In India, early career disparities in STEM fields often set the stage for these future leadership imbalances

- **Networking and the "Informal Exchange"**

Networking is critical for career development, yet women face unique challenges in accessing informal networks. Because many professional networking opportunities occur outside of regular work hours, they often conflict with women's personal and family obligations. Without inclusion in these "dominant groups," women are excluded from critical information, resources, and opportunities for upward mobility.

- **Gender Stereotypes and the "Glass Ceiling"**

The "glass ceiling" refers to invisible barriers that prevent women from achieving managerial positions. These barriers are reinforced by persistent gender stereotypes that portray women as nurturing but less capable in quantitative analysis and decision-making. Some institutional cultures still perceive women as "too emotional" or "illogical" for administrative roles, leading to resistance in appointing them to senior positions.

- **The Burden of Dual Responsibilities**

Women in India frequently bear the primary responsibility for family care, including children and elderly relatives. This results in "role-strain" or "role-overload," where the competing demands of professional excellence and domestic obligations overwhelm the individual. Unlike their male counterparts, women often experience interrupted career paths to

accommodate these needs, which can significantly hinder their trajectory toward tenure and senior leadership.

The Unique Value of Women's Leadership

Increasing women's participation in higher education governance is not merely a matter of social justice; it is essential for institutional effectiveness. Women leaders bring distinct qualities that align with modern organisational needs:

- **Relationship-Based Approaches:** Women often lead with an "ethic of care" that prioritises relationships over rigid, impersonal rules.
- **Empathetic Decision-Making:** High levels of emotional intelligence and intuitive skills allow women to navigate complex educational challenges with compassion.
- **Focus on Well-being:** Research suggests that women in leadership positions tend to pay greater attention to teaching quality, student well-being, and the needs of teachers.
- **Resilience and Stress Management:** Scientific evidence suggests women may be better prepared for certain types of leadership stress; for instance, higher levels of the enzyme **aromatase** in the prefrontal cortex may contribute to greater resilience in the face of chronic stress.

Strategies for Overcoming Obstacles

For women to achieve sustained career growth in the Indian higher education sector, the sources propose several multi-layered strategies:

1. Strategic Mentoring and Sponsorship

Developing formal mentoring relationships is vital to help women navigate workplace dynamics. Beyond mentoring, sponsorship is crucial—where individuals with power and authority use their influence to "vouch" for a woman's competence and legitimise her identity as a high-potential leader.

2. Robust Support Systems

Institutional excellence must be supported by domestic and workplace flexibility. The combination of technology-enabled domestic solutions and flexible workplace policies creates an environment where women can balance professional goals with personal responsibilities.

3. Institutional Reform and Training

There is an urgent need for comprehensive data collection to address administrative vacancies and disparities. Furthermore, implementing unconscious bias training for hiring panels can help ensure that qualitative and quantitative measures are assessed fairly during recruitment and promotion processes.

4. Creating a Healthy Reporting Culture

To retain women in leadership, institutions must ensure a safe working environment. This involves creating a healthy reporting culture for sexual harassment, ensuring no-retaliation policies are enforced, and providing Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) to support family needs.

Conclusion:

The landscape of women's leadership in Indian higher education remains a "compelling paradox". While women have mastered the academic requirements for leadership, the institutional gates remain largely closed.

Achieving gender parity is not merely a matter of equality; it is fundamental to creating forward-thinking educational institutions capable of meeting the challenges of the 21st century. As India expands its global footprint in education, it must ensure that women are not just participants in the classroom but architects of institutional policy. Systemic change—ranging from legislative enforcement to cultural shifts in the workplace—is required to ensure that the "leaky pipeline" is repaired and that women leaders can thrive, contribute, and be valued for their unique authority

The landscape of women's leadership in Indian higher education presents a compelling paradox. The research identifies several critical barriers impeding women's advancement to leadership positions. The importance of increasing women's representation in educational

leadership cannot be overstated. Women leaders bring unique qualities to administrative roles, including empathetic decision-making, relationship-based leadership approaches, and attention to teaching and student well-being. Their presence in leadership positions is crucial for addressing gender-specific issues in education and ensuring diverse perspectives in institutional decision-making processes. The transformation of Indian higher education leadership to achieve gender parity is not merely a matter of equality; it is crucial for creating more balanced, effective, and forward-thinking educational institutions capable of meeting the challenges of modern education. As India continues to expand its role as a global education hub, ensuring women's equal participation in leadership positions becomes increasingly vital for sustaining academic excellence and fostering institutional growth.

References: -

1. All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE). (2020). AISHE 2019-20 report. Ministry of Education, Government of India. <https://aishe.gov.in/aishe-final-report>
2. Buddhapriya, S. (2009). Work-family challenges and their impact on career decisions: A study of Indian women professionals. Vol 34(1), pp31 to 46.
3. Blickenstaff, J. C. (2005). Women and science careers: Leaky pipeline or gender filter? *Gender and Education*, Vol 17(4), pp 369 to 386.
4. Banker, DV & Banker, K, (2017), Women in Leadership: A Scenario in Indian Higher Education Sector, *Riding the New Tides: Navigating the Future through Effective People Management*, pp 239 to 251.
5. Choudhary, R. (2010). Case studies of women administrators in higher education system of India [Doctoral Thesis]. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/58105>
6. Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). *Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders*. Harvard Business Press.
7. Ely, R. J., & Meyerson, D. E. (2000). Theories of gender in organizations: A new approach to organizational analysis and change. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol 22, pp 103 to 151.

8. Godara, R. (2016). Women in Higher Education Governance. International Journal of Advanced Research in Education & Technology (IJARET), Vol 3(3), pp 121 to 131. https://www.academia.edu/76600365/Women_in_Higher_Education_Governance
9. Ghara, T. K. (2016). Status of Indian Women in Higher Education. Journal of Education and Practice, Vol 7(34), pp 58 to 64.
10. Government of India. (2018). All India Survey on Higher Education 2017-18. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. <http://aishe.nic.in/aishe/view>

□□□

