

## Women leaders in higher education: A systematic review offering insights for nations with wider gender gaps

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This study focuses on the presence and participation of women in higher education to examine how they function and advance to leadership roles in various academic contexts. With a focus on the conceptualisation of female leadership in literature, challenges facing senior women academics in their advancement to leadership positions, and policy decisions implemented in various contexts to encourage women's leadership in academia, our study reviews the previous research published in peer-reviewed, Scopus-indexed journals between 2015 and 2023, employing a standard protocol for conducting a systematic literature review. Findings reveal a weaker conceptualisation of female leadership in leadership literature, whereas structural inequalities, women's distorted perception of the self, and their leadership styles are identified as three main challenges facing senior female academics across all contexts. Immediate and effective measures are being taken in the West to promote women's academic leadership, whereas Eastern countries appear to be in dire need of realising the importance of women's active contributions to decision-making, as indicated by fewer studies coming from Asian contexts grappling with a wider gender gap. The study has significant implications for policymakers on actions required to close the prevalent gender gap in developing countries.

### Introduction

Global trends point to an irrefutable expansion in the higher education industry due to an overwhelming engagement of women worldwide, reflected in their growing enrolment in degree programs and the number of teaching posts held by women (Olson-Strom & Rao, 2020). According to Ilie and Rose (2016), the current expansion in the higher education sector has led to questions regarding who is benefitting from this growth and whether it has been equitable. Studies exploring access to higher education in underprivileged contexts have mentioned 'gender' as one crucial factor that facilitates or hinders one's access to university education (Ilie & Rose, 2016; Olson-Strom & Rao, 2020). In developed country contexts also, little progress has been made toward eradicating the persistent gender imbalance in higher education, especially in positions of leadership. Although data compiled by *Times Higher Education* world university rankings shows women academics leading a quarter of the top 200 universities, women are still far from being on par with men in holding positions of power (THE, 2024). Several countries are now rapidly adopting policies and putting measures into place to empower and train their women for leadership positions to address this persistent problem and improve women's career chances in academia. However, in a large number of other nations, women continue to work in support roles while patiently waiting to be promoted to senior positions.

This study is undertaken in Pakistan - a developing context marred by poor socioeconomic conditions aggravated by women's thin representation in the workforce and their marginalisation in decision-making affairs (Lashari, 2023). Although women constitute 51% of the Pakistani population, they are largely invisible in power structures where policies are formulated, and crucial decisions are taken. According to Lashari (2023), of the total 123 public universities in Pakistan, only 15 are headed by a female vice-chancellor. For more women to be selected as leaders in various spheres of the country, it is crucial to have more female professionals working in the top echelons. According to Yasin et al. (2019), the educational crisis in Pakistan is a symptom of the nation's general systemic decline that is also manifested in violence and discriminatory behaviours against women (Bhatti & Ali, 2022). Many women in Pakistan choose to forego professional advancement opportunities due to the difficulties that come with leadership responsibilities and the pervasive gendered norms, while those who aspire for the top positions frequently fall victim to favouritism and dirty politics that are common in workplaces (Yasin et al., 2019).

Our study emphasises that women's limited involvement in decision-making processes be taken seriously and that the necessary steps be made to improve the situation for women in Asian countries such as Pakistan where gender disparity in academic leadership is a growing concern. The study also contributes significantly to the growing leadership literature by bringing multiple contexts together about the situation of women's academic leadership in the higher education sector. This may provide useful insights for developing Asian countries as numerous developed contexts that are now classified as 'progressive' in terms of gender parity went through a similar phase of marginalisation of women but overcame it through initiatives taken at the national and societal levels. The next section gives a detailed background of the contexts considered for our study.

## Background details of the contexts under review

According to Heikkinen et al. (2022), context-specific factors frequently contribute to the persistence of gender inequality in various Western contexts in the 21st century, which makes examining the context essential to comprehending gender inequalities reflected in academia (Table 1).

Table 1: Status of countries in terms of gender parity and women's ascension to leadership roles (*World Economic Forum*, 2023)

Countries	Global Gender Gap Index 2023 Ranking	Women's ascension to leadership roles 1-7 (1=worst, 7=best)
Norway	2	5.69
Finland	3	6.16
New Zealand	4	5.62
Sweden	5	5.34
Germany	6	4.79
Ireland	11	5.44

UK	15	5.10
South Africa	20	4.55
Australia	26	5.20
Mexico	33	3.85
USA	43	5.28
Brazil	57	4.41
Poland	60	4.43
Ukraine	66	4.94
Vietnam	72	4.88
Indonesia	87	5.02
Cambodia	92	5.12
Maldives	124	Not available
Saudi Arabia	131	5.41
Pakistan	142	4.47

Our study covers a diverse range of contexts with the dataset including research conducted in Europe (5 studies), the United Kingdom (6 studies), the United States of America and Latin America (5 studies), South Africa (7 studies), Australia and New Zealand (2 studies), and Asia (12 studies), with a few studies (3, namely Bachnik et al., 2023; Aiston & Jung, 2015; Ilie & Rose, 2016) that drew upon several of the aforementioned regional contexts (Table 4).

This study focuses on the issue of women's marginalisation in academic leadership in higher education as addressed and explored in existing literature from diverse contexts. According to Xiao and Watson (2019), new knowledge must be built on prior knowledge and a survey of the literature assists us in understanding the limits of existing work, and identifying gaps for future research. The purpose of this review is to explore how women's academic leadership is addressed in various contexts and whether the problems that women face in their advancement to top positions are context-bound. For this purpose, the study delivers a synthesis of credible research studies from developed and developing countries with a focus on three key themes:

- i. How the concept of women's leadership manifests in the literature;
- ii. Hurdles that women academics experience on their path to leadership;
- iii. Policy decisions adopted in progressive contexts to promote the overall growth of women leaders in academia.

A careful examination of these themes allowed us to draw similarities and disparities across contexts, to propose a holistic plan for impoverished regions to empower and promote women academics in their striving towards decision-making positions. Studies that present a contrasting view of multiple regions in terms of hurdles facing women and policy decisions undertaken to improve women's career upliftment are scant in leadership literature, as demonstrated by the fact that none of the studies included in our dataset offered a similar comparison or implications for a broader geographical region such as Asia. This study fills this gap by offering insights and implications for several nations of Asia where gender disparity is leading to grave consequences.

## Review method

This study has utilized a three-stage systematic literature review approach developed by Xiao & Watson (2019), which includes: planning, conducting, and reporting the review. These stages are further subdivided into eight steps undertaken during the entire review process. Table 2 provides an overview of the review procedure that was applied to the study. The chosen review process is also compatible with the four-phase method of writing a systematic review developed by Moher et al. (2009). The first step entails formulating a research question or choosing the reason for conducting a literature review (Xiao & Watson, 2019). In our case, the goal was to determine the challenges facing female academics in reaching decision-making roles in various contexts, and how women's marginalisation is countered and tackled in progressive contexts through gender parity initiatives. This was done to compile recommendations to numerous Asian nations where women are given fewer opportunities to hold leadership roles.

Table 2: Review procedure applied to the study adopted from Xiao and Watson (2019)

STEP 1	Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem formulation</li> <li>• Developing the review protocol</li> </ul>
STEP 2	Conducting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature search</li> <li>• Applying inclusion/exclusion criteria</li> <li>• Data quality assessment</li> <li>• Data extraction</li> <li>• Analysis and synthesis</li> </ul>
STEP 3	Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reporting the findings</li> </ul>

In the next step, we developed a review protocol, which included decisions such as designing a search key, deciding on search categories, databases, and a time restriction for published material. The search was limited to the Scopus-indexed 'open access' research studies published in 'English' and available on the Scopus electronic database under the categories of 'Social Sciences', 'Arts & Humanities'. Key phrases used for the search included 'women leaders in higher education' (88 results); 'women in higher education', 'women in Asian higher education' (15 results); 'women leaders in Asian higher education' (1 result); 'women leaders in higher education in Asia' (6 results); 'gender in higher education in Asia' (39 results), 'gender in higher education in Pakistan' (0 results); 'women leaders in Pakistani higher education' (8 results); 'diversity and inclusion in global higher education' (30 results); and 'diversity and inclusion in Asian higher education' (7 results). Furthermore, the keywords selected for the search were 'leadership', 'higher education', 'gender', and 'women'.

The initial search was conducted on 1 June 2023, using the phrases listed in Table 3, yielding 194 results. These included journal articles, books, book chapters, reports, commentaries, and editorials. All documents were saved for sifting under a protocol devised by researchers and guided by the purpose of the study. The first-level sifting

Table 3: Data evaluation for Inclusion/exclusion

Data gathering	Total articles collected in the initial search; n = 194
Screening and eligibility	<i>First-stage screening:</i> reading articles' titles. <i>Second stage screening:</i> reading abstract and keywords to check the appropriateness of material collected for the purpose of the study. <i>Eligibility:</i> studies dealing with women's leadership in higher education.
Material excluded	Studies not containing words such as 'women', 'gender', 'higher education'; articles pertaining to gender disparity at the student level; colloquium, editorials and commentaries
Material included	Journal articles=36 Book chapters=3 Review articles=2 Total studies included: n=41

involved reading the article titles. Articles not containing words such as 'women', 'gender', and 'higher education' in their title were ruled out. Similarly, in the next step, reading abstracts and keywords facilitated the identification of pieces that dealt with women academics in higher education only. Articles that focused on gender disparity at the student level were removed from the data along with reports, colloquiums, editorials, and commentaries, which were also not considered for analysis. The actions listed in Table 3 reduced the number of studies to 41, including 2 review papers, 3 book chapters, and 36 journal articles (Table 3).

Table 4: Studies analysed (listed by year of publication, 2017 to 2023)  
(see References for publication details)

Authors and year	Article title	Study context	Type
1 Maheshwari, Gonzalez-Tamayo & Olarewaju, 2023	An exploratory study on barriers and enablers for women leaders in higher education institutions in Mexico	Mexico	Journal Article
2 Arquisola & Rentschler, 2023	Gendered in-role behaviours of Indonesian university leaders: Experiences and voices	Indonesia	Journal Article
3 Akbar, Al-Dajani, Ayub & Adeinat, 2023	Women's leadership gamut in Saudi Arabia's higher education sector	Saudi Arabia	Journal Article
4 Quadlin, VanHeuvelen & Ahearn, 2023	Higher education and high-wage gender inequality	United States of America	Journal Article
5 Wilkinson & Male, 2023	Perceptions of women senior leaders in UK higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic	United Kingdom	Journal Article

Authors and year	Article title	Study context	Type
6 da Rocha Grangeiro et al., 2023	Women in leadership positions in universities: Are they really queen bees?	Brazil	Journal Article
7 Bachnik et al., 2023	Women's crucible leadership experiences: through the lens of the four-frame organisational model	USA, Japan, UK	Journal Article
8 Dunne, O'Reilly, O'Donoghue & Kinahan, 2022	A review of Irish national strategy for gender equality in higher education 2010-2021	Ireland	Book Chapter
9 Moody, 2022	Exercising positional power to advance and support women in leadership – conversations with men in higher education	South Africa	Journal Article
10 Nachatar Singh, 2022	Leadership challenges and opportunities experienced by international women academics: A case study in Australia	Australia	Journal Article
11 Heikkinen et al., 2022	Making and taking leadership in the promotion of gender desegregation in STEM	Finland	Book Chapter
12 Klenk, Antonowicz, Geschwind, Pinheiro & Pokorska, 2022	Taking women on boards: a comparative analysis of public policies in higher education	Germany, Norway, Poland, Sweden	Journal Article
13 Bhatti & Ali, 2022	Negotiating sexual harassment: experiences of women academic leaders in Pakistan	Pakistan	Journal Article
14 Jali, Suknunan & Bhana, 2021	Challenges impeding women into leadership roles in a student-led organization at a South African higher education institution	South Africa	Journal Article
15 Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021	Experiences of female deans in South African universities: A phenomenological study	South Africa	Journal Article
16 Olha, Olena, Valerii, Anastasiia & Nataliya, 2021	Forced leadership as a social psychological phenomenon in professionally successful women scientists	Ukraine	Journal Article
17 Maheshwari, Nayak & Ngyyen, 2021	Review of research for two decades for women leadership in higher education around the world and in Vietnam: A comparative analysis	Vietnam	Journal Article/ Review paper

Authors and year	Article title	Study context	Type
18 Walters, Hassanli & Finkler, 2021	Who is seen to be doing business research, and does it really matter? Gender representation at academic conferences	Australia, New Zealand	Journal Article
19 Ali, & Rasheed, 2021	Women leaders in Pakistani academia: Challenges and opportunities	Pakistan	Journal Article
20 Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2020	Concepts of creative leadership of women leaders in the 21st century	South Africa	Journal Article
21 Coetzee & Moosa, 2020	Leadership contingencies in the retention of women in higher education	South Africa	Journal Article
22 Pillay, 2020	Positive affect and mindfulness as predictors of resilience amongst women leaders in higher education institutions	South Africa	Journal Article
23 Showunmi, 2020	The importance of intersectionality in higher education and educational leadership research	England	Journal Article
24 Olson-Strom & Rao, 2020	Higher education for women in Asia	Asia	Book Chapter
25 Rogers & Rose, 2019	A critical exploration of women's gendered experiences in outdoor leadership	United States of America	Journal Article
26 Peterson. 2019	A women-only leadership development program: Facilitating access to authority for women in Swedish higher education?	Sweden	Journal Article
27 Gorondutse, Hilman, Salimon, Alajmi, Al Shdaifat & Kumaran, 2019	Establishing the effect of government support on the relationship between gender egalitarian and women leadership effectiveness among public universities in KSA	Saudi Arabia	Journal Article
28 Watton, Stables & Kempster, 2019	How job sharing can lead to more women achieving senior leadership roles in higher education: A UK study	United Kingdom	Journal Article
29 Udin, Handayani, Yuniawan & Rahardja, 2019	Leadership styles and communication skills at Indonesian higher education: Patterns, influences, and applications for organization	Indonesia	Journal Article

Authors and year	Article title	Study context	Type
30 Sulkowski et al., 2019	Unsustainable power distribution? Women leaders in Polish academia	Poland	Journal Article
31 Yasin, Batool & Ajmal, 2019	Leadership in academia of Pakistan: Perception of crisis situation and solutions	Pakistan	Journal Article
32 Burkinshaw, Cahill & Ford, 2018	Empirical evidence illuminating gendered regimes in UK higher education: Developing a new conceptual framework	United Kingdom	Journal Article
33 Peterson, 2018	From “goal-orientated, strong and decisive leader” to “collaborative and communicative listener”. Gendered shifts in vice-chancellor ideals, 1990-2018	Sweden	Journal Article
34 Mayer, Oosthuizen, Tonelli & Surtee, 2018	Women leaders as containers: Systems psychodynamic insights into their unconscious roles	South Africa	Journal Article
35 Blackburn, 2017	The status of women in STEM in higher education: A review of the literature 2007–2017	United States of America	Journal Article/ Review article
36 Shepherd, 2017	Why are there so few female leaders in higher education: A case of structure or agency?	England	Journal Article
37 Morley & Crossouard, 2016	Gender in the neoliberalised global academy: The affective economy of women and leadership in South Asia	South Asian countries	Journal Article
38 Ilie & Rose, 2016	Is equal access to higher education in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa achievable by 2030?	Asia and Africa	Journal Article
39 Aiston & Jung, 2015	Women academics and research productivity: An international comparison	USA, Japan, Hong Kong, Germany, Finland	Journal Article
40 Maxwell, Nget, Am, Peou & You, 2015	Becoming and being academic women in Cambodia: Cultural and other understandings	Cambodia	Journal Article
41 Maxwell, Mohamed, M., et al., 2015	Becoming and being academic women: Perspectives from the Maldives	Maldives	Journal Article



## Data coding

The collected material was carefully reviewed to identify and locate *a priori* themes forming the goal of the study i.e., to analyse the concept of women's leadership as it is conceptualised in the literature, challenges faced by women leaders in their advancement to senior positions, and policy-decisions undertaken in progressive contexts to close the existing gender gap. Sections corresponding to the themes were identified and manually coded for analysis. First-order coding, also known as open coding, resulted in the identification of initial or first-order concepts (Lashari, 2023). In the second stage, all codes were compared, and categories were formed by grouping similar codes into broad categories using the axial coding method frequently used in qualitative research studies. Additionally, researchers actively scanned the Results, Findings, and Discussion parts of the compiled material to find fresh insights on women's leadership in different settings, keeping an open mind to any new themes that could emerge. The inclusion-exclusion criteria developed for the study helped researchers in managing the coding bias. Only sections that complemented the goal of the study were included for analysis. Emergent issues were, however, debated and discussed among researchers until agreement was obtained.

## Findings and analysis

The studied literature indicates a wide gender gap across regions taken for analysis, including those with a variety of laws and policies in place to foster gender equality (Sulkowski et al., 2019). The gender gap is particularly pronounced in the STEM fields, women's participation in the labour force, PhD enrolment, and women's advancement to senior decision-making positions. This is true even though women's representation is comparable to men's in many contexts for secondary and tertiary level enrolments, as well as at the beginning of their academic careers, but declines as they move up the career ladder. Since it affects all contexts and fields equally, the lack of female leaders is not specific to any one area or profession (Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2020; Moody, 2022).

The study identifies emerging trends in academic research and writing on the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership across a variety of contexts. In addition to the Western contexts where women's leadership is seen as essential for the growth and prosperity of a country, South Africa is one such context where women's marginalisation is being actively investigated. Several studies from the South African region are included in the pool of data examined for analysis. Asian countries like Pakistan, where gender inequality is a serious issue, still trail behind in terms of research on the under-representation of women in leadership roles, indicating that more studies and investigations are needed on the topic of women's leadership in the South Asian region. The following sections contain a thematic analysis of how women's leadership is conceptualised in literature, challenges facing women academics in their careers, and policy decisions and initiatives supporting their promotion to leadership roles as manifested in literature.

### Conceptualisation of women's leadership in literature

Regardless of the context, leadership literature has portrayed the ideal leader as having male traits such as being strong, dominant, firm, decision-maker, role model, and a hero in a patriarchal culture that supports male leadership (Ali & Rasheed, 2021; Maheshwari et al., 2023; Wilkinson & Male, 2023). Men have historically been linked to leadership (Olha et al., 2021) due to their robust academic networks and high levels of engagement (Aiston & Jung, 2015), whereas women are conceptualised as civil, emotional, and subservient professionals suited for lower-level positions. Additionally, women's roles as caregivers impedes their professional growth (Mayer et al., 2018), since they struggle to maintain a work-life balance and do not completely embrace the authority and agency of their leadership. According to Mayer et al. (2018), women's lack of agency is a result of their function as 'containers of anxiety' (p. 1610). They manage the tension and anxiety that they internally carry to preserve workplace harmony by adopting the gendered roles of mother, interactor, daughter, and woman. However, they may find it difficult to manage their emotions and avoid misunderstandings sometimes, which can result in tangled relationships, broken agreements, and inaccurate interpretations of positions due to complex organisational structures (Mayer et al., 2018). Women's lack of agency may also be attributed to their passivity, which manifests in a lack of drive and confidence necessary to succeed in senior roles (Shepherd, 2017).

The concept of women's leadership is based on the women empowerment paradigm, which advocates for greater independence, access, and opportunities for women (Akbar et al., 2023). In male-dominated societies where the two genders neatly fit in segregated boxes, social and gender inequalities are common and culturally grounded. The higher education institutes are marked by unsustainable power distribution with men being at an advantage due to masculinist organizational structures (Sulkowski et al., 2019). The prevailing sexist culture in academia may also be attributed to the socialisation of gender roles and the construction of gender binaries (Rogers & Rose, 2019). For instance, in his study with male respondents occupying decision-making positions in the South African higher education system, Moodly (2022) emphasised the gendered nature of society and university environments. His study's participants claimed that one factor in the persistence of male leadership is the "visibility" of male professors, in contrast to female academics, who are mainly unseen due to their submissive and polite behaviour. The significant number of males in leadership roles exemplifies male agency expressed in agentic adjectives used in gender literature, such as assertive, ambitious, dominant, autonomous, confident, forceful, and authoritative (Arquisola & Rentschler, 2023; Diaz, 2022; Peterson, 2018).

According to Akbar et al. (2023), the current gender segregation induces a "glass ceiling effect" and gendered logic within organisations making it difficult for women to advance to top positions. In their study on the under-representation of women leaders in South Asian academia, Morley and Crossouard (2016) argued that a majority of the female interview participants associated leadership with an unhealthy workload and affective burden brought on by conflicts and accusations in a highly competitive and gendered professional environment. It is argued that a weaker conceptualisation of female

leadership in literature and how women academics conceptualise leadership qualities largely depend on experiences and challenges women encounter.

### Challenges encountered by women academics

The reviewed literature points to multiple challenges encountered by female academics, such as power dynamics (Bachnik et al., 2023; Jali et al., 2021); cultural inequalities manifesting in gendered practices prevalent in higher education environments (Akbar et al., 2023; Blackburn, 2017; Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Maheshwari et al., 2023; Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2020; Shepherd, 2017; Sulkowski et al., 2019); stereotyping (Blackburn, 2017; Jali et al., 2021; Moodly, 2022); fear & lack of confidence (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Jali et al., 2021; Lashari, 2023; Maheshwari et al., 2023; Shepherd, 2017); leadership style (Diaz, 2022; Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2020; Moodly, 2022; Udin et al., 2019); workplace harassment, pay gap (Quadlin et al., 2023); work-home balance (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; da Rocha Grangeiro et al., 2022; Maheshwari et al., 2023; Nachatar Singh, 2022); research productivity manifesting in thin participation of women in academic conferences (Aiston & Jung, 2015; Nachatar Singh, 2022; Walters et al., 2021); and unfamiliarity with the institutional policy (Nachatar Singh, 2022). For ease of analysis, these challenges are grouped under three broad categories: structural inequalities, women's distorted perception of the self, and leadership styles (Table 5).

Table 5: An overview of codes related to challenges facing women academics

Open coding (first-order concepts)	Axial coding (broad categories)
Patriarchy, gendered practices, power dynamics, stereotyping, pay gap, workplace harassment, work-life balance, institutional barriers	Structural inequalities
Fear, lack of confidence, self-esteem, containers of anxiety, discouragement	Women's distorted perception of the self
Missing agency, creative, emotional, affective burden, conflict managers, polite, civil, soft-spoken, invisible, transformational/transactional leadership	Leadership style

#### *Structural inequalities*

The structural disparities are deeply rooted in culture and impede gender parity (Gorondutse et al., 2019) by privileging men and masculine traits (Burkinshaw et al., 2018), as evidenced by the fact that women must obtain guardian consent to make important life decisions in patriarchal contexts, such as the choice of discipline and whether or not to pursue a career (Akbar et al., 2023). These disparities are further maintained and perpetuated by the education system as evident in the academic fields that men and women choose. Women are under-represented in some disciplines and over-represented in others because some fields are viewed as "masculine" and others as "feminine" (Olson-strom & Rao, 2020). This manifests in unequal employment prospects, marginalisation of women in top positions, the treatment meted out to them in their

respective fields, and the gender wage gap. Previous studies have emphasised the significance of the field of study in ensuring professionals achieve high wages. Men continue to choose high-paying majors such as economics and finance, and STEM disciplines, to secure well-paid jobs, while women typically choose low-paying disciplines such as humanities and social sciences (Quadlin et al., 2023).

The societal segregation based on gendered hierarchy adversely impacts the environment of higher education, reducing women's capacity to deal with the opposite gender and participate in important decision-making processes (Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Gorondutse et al., 2019). They are marginalised in the selection process, promotions, and allocation of resources (Aiston & Jung, 2015; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021), and are exposed to gendered evaluation criteria, which exclude them from the race for the positions of authority despite their competencies and strong academic credentials. According to Quadlin et al. (2023), one essential qualification for the highest-paying jobs is one's capacity for extended hours of work, which may disadvantage women given their domestic obligations, particularly in the Asian region where women are seen as homemakers responsible for the well-being of their family (Maheshwari et al., 2021; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021).

The leadership literature shows a substantial correlation between the stereotype of women as mothers and barriers to career advancement for women (Arquisola & Rentschler, 2023; Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Wilkinson & Male, 2023). Da Rocha Grangeiro et al. (2022) claimed that fewer women choose to get married and have large families because such commitments may negatively affect their career and scientific rigour. Female deans in three South African institutions agreed that prevailing gender stereotypes in their respective workplaces led to a perception that they were ineffective and less successful as leaders. They also expressed issues with reporting to a male boss and dealing with his expectations, being discouraged by male coworkers, and being ignored in important organisational decisions (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). The other detrimental outcomes of gendered hierarchical culture include competition among women, which is mostly problematised unlike competition among men which is considered healthy, professional, and naturalised (da Rocha Grangeiro et al., 2022) along with the deficient perspective that women form of themselves (Jali et al., 2021).

#### *Women's distorted perception of the self*

Patriarchal culture perpetuating gendered hierarchy and stereotypes significantly impacts women's self-esteem and can be a detrimental factor for women's authority in leadership (Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Jali et al., 2021; Moodly, 2022). They are persuaded to believe that they lack the innate skills of leadership and do not, therefore, merit equal opportunities and treatment at work. Women's self-esteem and confidence are damaged when they are ignored because they are weak and inferior (Akbar et al., 2023; Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Jali et al., 2021). This results in women being denied the same privileges as men, despite having comparable or superior performances (da Rocha Grangeiro et al., 2022) leading to an identity crisis that women deal with throughout their professional lives (Arquisola & Rentschler, 2023). According to Mayer et al. (2018), women exhibit splitting tendencies as they struggle to balance their responsibilities as female family members and professionals. They must obey the male head of the household in their duties as mother,

daughter, and homemakers, yet they struggle to advance to decision-making positions on the professional front (Maheshwari et al., 2023). Women's perceptions of themselves in relation to their male counterparts, who hold commanding and influential positions in the domestic and professional arenas, are significantly impacted by the tension that arises from their split on two fronts (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Mayer et al., 2018).

Organisations tend to be like miniature versions of societies in which they are rooted and can only be understood inside their socio-cultural context (Showunmi, 2020). Feminist perspectives on organisations contends that they are gender-oriented rather than gender-neutral (Akbar et al., 2023; Bachnik et al., 2023). According to Akbar et al. (2023), organisational norms are fundamentally based on feminist institutionalism, which promotes the gendered nature of rules, beliefs, and practices, encouraging or dissuading people based on their gender to shape power relations that have an impact on individuals and decision-making processes. Mankayi and Cheteni (2021) argued that women's conflicting identity positions due to their psychological conditioning are the biggest barriers to their career success. If women recognise their agency, develop necessary confidence and self-promotional abilities (Maheshwari et al., 2021; Shepherd, 2017), in addition to having the familial and peer support necessary for a successful profession (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Maheshwari et al., 2023; Maxwell, Mohamed et al., 2015), the impact of structural disadvantages may be reduced (Olha et al., 2021; Shepherd, 2017).

#### *Leadership style*

Men and women have distinct leadership styles (Gorondutse et al., 2019) dictated by the gendered regimes in favor of a masculine construction of leadership through internalised individual, institutional, and societal norms (Burkinshaw et al., 2018). Leadership positions are construed as 'undoable' jobs for women (Aiston & Jung, 2015) who are criticised for lacking assertiveness, authority, and control if they take on a feminine leadership method. However, if they adopt masculine attributes to be a successful boss, they are criticised for endorsing the masculine discourse of leadership, which states that women should act more like men to be powerful leaders (Burkinshaw et al., 2018). According to Mankayi and Cheteni (2021), differences in management style imperil women's prospects of reaching the top. Universities with male vice-chancellor's support operate in an authoritarian environment with minimal room for women to participate in decision-making processes like hiring and promotion, which adversely impacts women's motivation and prospects as they realise they will not be given preference for managerial promotions (Maheshwari et al., 2023; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Maxwell, Nget et al., 2015).

The leadership literature emphasises distinctiveness in the leadership styles of men and women across all contexts. While men are identified with a transactional leadership style because of their practical and transactional attitude towards their work and coworkers, characterised by reward and punishment behaviour (Peterson, 2018), women are seen to exhibit a transformational leadership style because they encourage innovation and creativity in problem-solving and decision-making (Bhatti & Ali, 2021; Lashari, 2023; Udin et al., 2019) in addition to incorporating communal traits typically associated with femininity such as mothering, caring, nurturing in their leadership strategies (Moodly, 2022; Udin et al., 2019). According to Udin et al. (2019), the other attributes related to the

transformational style are 'collaboration, cooperation, less control, and problem-solving based on intuition and rationality' (p.120). They are more task-oriented, and better at listening and interpersonal skills as compared to men who focus more on strategic planning and analysis (Udin et al., 2019). In the present era, when organisations are attempting to establish and empower teams by leveraging collaborations and decreasing hierarchical differences, the conventional transactional macho style of leadership is strongly challenged by the transformational leadership ideal, which favours increased inclusion of women in managerial positions (Peterson, 2018).

### **Initiatives to promote women's leadership**

Numbers of women in leadership positions in academia and administration have recently increased dramatically throughout Europe. Although European higher education policies endorse equal opportunity for all regardless of gender (Klenk et al., 2022), many European countries have strategically designed and adopted mechanisms to ensure women's advancement to top positions contributing to an increasing representation of women in academia as well as in leadership positions (Table 6). For Klenk et al. (2022), the changing trends may be attributed to new public management reforms that enabled marginalised stakeholders to compete for higher ranks. According to Peterson (2019), women held 59% of the rector seats in Swedish higher education in 2015, and trends have been favourable ever since, showing gender parity in the hiring of the academic staff, senior lecturers, and PhD enrolments, but not for women's presence in senior academic roles such as full professorships, where they continue to be under-represented (Klenk et al., 2022).

The reforms introduced in 2011 made it incumbent upon Swedish higher education institutions to ensure gender equality and equal promotion of both genders in the matters of higher education as prescribed in the *Higher Education Act* and the *Higher Education Ordinance* (Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2023), according to which crucial appointments such as those for the rector and the board members can only be made by the government through a nomination process in which it would be ensured that male and female candidates were equally considered for the promotion opportunity. In addition, gender parity remains one of the evaluation criteria for the institutional audits that verify the policy's sustainability. Peterson (2019) attributed the increased proportion of women rectors in Swedish higher education to the state-funded national leadership development program like IDAS (Identity, Development, Advancement, Support) that allowed women to actively compete for decision-making positions and to receive required training through a variety of activities and mentoring offered under the program.

Gender parity is safeguarded in Norway through national regulations such as Section 28 of the *Gender Parity Act* in official committees as well as in university boards, whereas flagship programs like "*Nasjonal insentivmodell*" (national incentive scheme) and "*BALANSE*," combine financial incentives and learning opportunities to address the glass ceiling issue across public and private sectors (Klenk et al., 2022). According to the Norwegian Research Council's (NFR) most recent statement, gender disparity still exists in women's contribution to research. Although the proportion of female professors and researchers

increased as a result (from 20% in 2008 to 37% in 2018), the policy tools continue to reflect the more general problem that women do not always succeed in moving up the academic career ladder. As a result, NFR changed its strategy and combined regulatory policy with incentive instruments in the new application round (Fall 2020 onwards), requiring research institutes to submit five or more proposals ensuring that at least 40% of the project leads are women.

According to Klenk et al. (2022), Sweden and Norway have gender policies in place which are continually reinforced for compliance and accountability. Furthermore, national regulations are integrated with incentives and evaluations to ensure women receive equal opportunities to advance to leadership positions unlike in Germany and Poland (Table 6), where the implementation of gender parity measures is left to the higher education institutes with no sanctions in place in case of non-compliance. Leadership opportunities are strictly closed for governmental or political interferences in Poland, leading to the marginalisation of women in top leadership positions in higher education institutions, especially the ones with higher prestige (Sulkowski et al., 2019).

Table 6: Initiatives taken in progressive contexts to ensure gender parity in higher education institutions

Initiatives taken to ensure gender parity in academic leadership	
Sweden	2011 reforms guaranteeing gender parity through the <i>Higher Education Act</i> and the <i>Higher Education Ordinance</i> , reinforced and evaluated at the national level.
Norway	Regulative instruments such as Section 28 of the <i>Gender Parity Act</i> combined with incentives to promote women academics & researchers.
Germany	Gender parity regulations prescribed in constitutional law require higher education institutions to have appropriate representation of women in all internal boards and committees; however, rigorous enforcement is missing at the national level.
Poland	Absence of gender parity policy at the national level. The appointment of academic leaders is considered an internal university affair. However, universities are paying heed to gender disparity issues to obtain financial incentives offered by the European Commission.
United States	Absence of quotas to boost female academic leadership. However, national regulations are in place to promote women's participation in STEM fields. In addition, women leaders' development and mentoring programs are in place to train women for senior roles.
United Kingdom	Initiatives such as Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charters, Senior Women's Development Program and Aurora are in place to support marginalised communities including women in matters of employment and leadership through incentives and strategic training programs.

Professional membership schemes such as *Advance Higher Education* are promoting teaching and learning, effective governance, leadership development, equality, diversity, and inclusion, including working actively to address the under-representation of women in academic leadership in the United Kingdom (Dunne et al., 2022). According to Dunne et al. (2022), the *Athena Swan Charter* and *Race Equality Charter*, which focus on gender parity in higher education and representation, progression, and equal opportunity for

marginalised communities respectively, are the two most notable equality charters extended by the *Advance Higher Education* (Shepherd, 2017) enabling higher education institutions to apply for an award in recognition to their commitment to diversity and inclusion. Using the Athena SWAN framework, institutions have been able to carry out an organised gender audit and develop an action plan to address any issues with gender equality that were discovered. The relationship between research funding and the eligibility requirement for Athena SWAN awards has had a big impact (Dunne et al., 2022). Another important initiative of Advance Higher Education is the *Senior Women's Leadership Development Program*, and *Aurora* which aim to address women's under-representation in senior leadership positions (Watton et al., 2019). More than 10,000 women from almost 200 different universities in the UK and Ireland have taken part in Aurora since its start in 2013.

The United States of America has rejected stringent quotas to rectify injustices against women owing to their commitment to individuality, in contrast to European nations whose rules ensure an equal share of women in leadership positions. The American Association of University Women contended that the leadership paradigm used in the USA excludes women, as seen by the fact that there are fewer women (32%) academics holding professorial positions, while 30% of college presidents and 16% of medical school deans are female (Hill et al. 2016). However, a variety of strategies are being employed to close the gender gap that exists in academia, including leadership development programs such as the *Higher Education Resource Services* (HERS) (University of Denver, n.d.) aimed at creating and promoting a large network of women leaders in higher education, structured training programs designed to promote diversity, reduce gender bias, and improve workplace culture by exposing participants to counter stereotypical gender roles, and employment practice reforms to ensure objective evaluation of performance, and performance-based promotion practices (Hill et al. 2016).

## **Discussion: Implications for countries with wider gender gaps**

The Asian contexts examined in this study, including the West Asian nation of Saudi Arabia, the Southeast Asian nations of Cambodia, Indonesia, and Vietnam, and the South Asian nations of Maldives and Pakistan, score poorly on the *Global Gender Gap Index 2023* (World Economic Forum, 2023) with Pakistan ranking last overall at position 142. Vietnam, at position 72, performs significantly better than the other Asian contexts under consideration. According to Maheshwari et al. (2021), Asian contexts are different from Western societies due to their distinct economic, political, and cultural conditions. While women in Western countries contribute tremendously to labour, Asian women have more career breaks as a result of their heavy domestic burdens. This distinction may also be seen in several areas of women's employment, including their advancement to top academic positions, which benefits Western women more than Asian women, for whom working outside with males is a great challenge. Women operating in patriarchal Asian contexts are not seen as trustworthy candidates for leadership positions due to the lack of confidence and trust reposed in their abilities. Participants in several studies (Ali & Rasheed, 2021; Maxwell, Nget et al., 2015; Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Yasin et al., 2019)



undertaken in Asian contexts described the selection processes in their respective academies as "exclusionary", "political", and "discriminatory" against women.

In order to increase women's participation in the workforce and their ascension to leadership positions, Asian countries must implement macro (national) and micro (societal) level reforms such as those in the West. Macro-level reforms are actions required at the national level under the supervision of the government. Government support in the form of financial assistance, training, and advice, according to Gorondutse et al. (2019), is correlated with leadership effectiveness. Similarly, policy instruments and their implementation are heavily dependent on the importance placed on gender equality at the national and societal levels, as evidenced by the increased proportion of women in academic leadership in Norway and Sweden (Klenk et al., 2022). Likewise, an increased participation of US women in STEM disciplines is often attributed to the *America Competes Act* in 2007 passed by Congress coupled with Barack Obama's *Educate to Innovate* campaign aimed at improving the status of the USA in STEM education (Blackburn, 2017). This demonstrates how government support may be a deciding factor between contexts struggling with a larger gender gap and those capable of efficiently addressing gender imbalance. Therefore, governments in Asian countries must adopt legislative measures to institutionalise gender parity processes in addition to providing incentives, training, and mentorship programs for aspiring academic leaders.

For societal reforms, the government, media and higher education commissions must collaborate to create a narrative in favour of women's leadership that educates people about the importance of including women in decision-making processes and how doing so can enhance the socioeconomic standing of the Asian nations. This also involves reducing the impact of deep-seated patriarchy on women's lives by redefining social values and societal roles (Yasin et al., 2019), which limit women to domestic responsibilities despite education and skill. Building a narrative against patriarchy also entails advocating over women's domestic burdens, their split on two fronts, and their transformative leadership style as their extraordinary strengths instead of weaknesses, to counter gendered stereotypes that depict women's primary function as being in the kitchen. Women's depiction in textbooks and the media must also be carefully considered for this transformation to occur. They must be depicted in roles that reflect what we want to see them doing in the real world, such as team leaders, scientists, engineers, and inventors, which will in turn solve the problem of the lack of role models for women aspiring for leadership roles (Yasin et al., 2019). For women to be chosen as academic leaders, significant representation of women in decision-making bodies is required, which calls for immediate macro and micro-level reforms in Asian countries.

## **Conclusion**

Our study reviews developed and developing country contexts for gender parity to examine how female leadership is conceptualised in leadership literature from diverse contexts, barriers inhibiting women's advancement to leadership positions, and policy decisions taken in progressive contexts to counter gender disparity, aiming to draw lessons

for Asian countries struggling with a gender gap. In addition to highlighting a weaker conceptualisation of female leadership in leadership literature across all contexts, and structural inequalities, women's low confidence in their abilities and leadership style as barriers blocking women's promotion to top echelons, the study discussed the effectiveness of steps undertaken in progressive contexts to close the gender gap, as manifested in the status of these countries on global ranking for gender parity. Our study has implications for Asian countries as they can learn from developed nations in their transition from gender inequality to gender equity. This process necessitates close cooperation between key stakeholders, including the government, media, and academia, without which macro and micro-level reforms are not feasible.

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