

1 **PATHWAYS TO POWER: HOW WOMEN LEADERS OVERCOME** 2 **INSTITUTIONAL OBSTACLES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

3 4 **Abstracts:**

5 The underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions within Indian higher
6 education presents a significant paradox. While India maintains the world's third-largest
7 higher education system with 1,074 universities and women demonstrating strong academic
8 achievements, their presence in top administrative roles remains minimal. This study analyses
9 the disconnect between women's academic success, evidenced by 42% of doctoral degrees
10 being awarded to female candidates, and their limited representation in leadership, where
11 they constitute only 6.67% of senior academic leaders. Through the Analysis of current
12 literature and institutional data, the research identifies critical barriers including inadequate
13 mentoring systems, persistent pipeline problems, limited networking opportunities, and
14 entrenched gender stereotypes. Analysis of Central Universities reveals particularly stark
15 disparities, with women occupying merely 6.7% of Vice-Chancellor positions, 20% of Dean
16 Positions, and 28% of Department Head roles. The study argues that increasing women's
17 representation in educational leadership is essential not only for achieving gender parity but
18 also for leveraging their unique leadership qualities, including relationship-based approaches
19 and empathetic decision-making. These findings underscore the urgent need for institutional
20 reforms and targeted initiatives to bridge the gender leadership gap in Indian higher
21 education, ultimately fostering more inclusive and effective educational institutions.

22 Keywords: Women Leader, Educational Leadership, Obstacles, Strategies.

23 24 **Introduction:**

25 India has the third largest higher education system in the world next to China and United
26 States. In future, India will be one of the largest education hubs (Godara, 2016). It has a total
27 of 1074 universities, out of these 460 are State Universities, 128 deemed universities, 56
28 Central Universities, and 430 Private Universities (UGC, 25 Jan 2023). Within these 1,074
29 universities, there exists a striking contrast between the high number of women in teaching
30 roles and their minimal representation in senior leadership positions such as Vice-Chancellor,
31 Registrar, Dean, and HOD. All India Survey on Higher Education demonstrates women's
32 significant academic achievement, with 42% of doctoral degrees being awarded to female

33 candidates (Government of India, 2018). However, this educational success hasn't translated
34 into proportional leadership representation in academia. Research shows that while 66.22%
35 of women remain stuck in middle-level leadership positions (Banker & Banker, 2017; Ghara,
36 2016), they represent only 6.67% of senior academic leaders in roles such as Vice Chancellor,
37 Director, and Dean (Banker & Banker, 2017).

38 **Women leaders:**

39 Women leader's in educational leadership refer to females who hold positions of authority
40 and responsibility in managing educational institutions and systems. These roles encompass a
41 wide range of positions from school principals to university vice-chancellors, including
42 department heads, deans, and other key administrative roles in primary, secondary, and higher
43 education sectors. Women leaders have been playing an increasingly important role in
44 educational leadership in India, though their representation still lags behind men in many
45 areas. (Godara, 2016)

46 In the Indian context, women's representation in administrative roles varies across different
47 levels of education. While women constitute a significant portion of teaching staff (about
48 42% as per the All India Survey on Higher Education (2019-20), their representation in top
49 leadership positions remains low. As of 2023, India has 56 Central Universities, each led by a
50 VC appointed by the President of India for a typical tenure of 5 years. These VCs, selected
51 through a rigorous process involving search-cum-selection committees, face significant
52 challenges in representation and vacancy rates. Notably, as of 2021, only 6.7% of VC
53 positions in Central Universities are held by women, highlighting a stark gender disparity at
54 the highest level of university administration. Moving down the hierarchy, Deans, who head
55 individual schools or faculties, are appointed by the Executive Council on the VC's
56 recommendation, usually serving 5-year terms. While exact national data is limited, a 2019
57 study of 20 Central Universities revealed that women held about 20% of Dean Positions, with
58 higher representation in humanities and social sciences (30-35%) compared to STEM fields
59 (15-20%) (Sharma. Et.al 2019). At the departmental level, HODs, typically appointed on a
60 rotational basis among senior professors for 3-year terms, show slightly better gender
61 representation. A 2020 study of 15 Central Universities indicated that women held
62 approximately 28% of HOD positions (Reddy.et. al. (2020), with higher percentages in arts
63 and humanities (35-40%) compared to science and technology departments (20-25%)
64 (Reddy.et.al 2020). These statistics reflect broader trends in academic leadership, including

65 persistent gender gaps, disciplinary variations, and regional differences, with universities in
66 metropolitan areas generally showing slightly higher percentages of women in leadership
67 roles. Despite initiatives by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and Ministry of
68 Education to promote diversity and leadership development, progress remains slow. The data
69 also reveals challenges in filling top administrative positions, with a significant number of
70 vacancies affecting institutional governance. While these figures provide insights into the
71 current state of academic leadership in Central Universities, they underscore the need for
72 more comprehensive, up-to-date data collection and targeted efforts to address disparities and
73 enhance diversity across all levels of university administration.

74 **Why we need women leaders in educational leadership:**

75 The increasing involvement of women in educational administration is becoming more
76 crucial. By increasing women's participation in educational administration, we can achieve
77 more balanced, effective, and forward-thinking of educational institutions, better suited to
78 meet the challenges of modern education(Godara,2010). The importance of having women in
79 educational leadership roles stems from their unique qualities and the positive changes they
80 can bring to the field. Women often have a natural inclination towards nurturing and caring,
81 which can transform the sometimes-impersonal nature of educational administration into a
82 more compassionate and supportive approach. Having women in leadership positions is also
83 vital for addressing gender-specific issues in education. When women are absent from
84 decision-making roles, their concerns and perspectives may be overlooked in important areas
85 like promotions, hiring, and resource allocation. Including more women in leadership ensures
86 a more diverse range of viewpoints and often results in greater attention to teaching, teachers'
87 needs, and students' well-being. (Godara, 2010). Women's intuitive decision-making skills
88 and emotional intelligence can be especially valuable in navigating complex educational
89 challenges. Their leadership approach often emphasizes flexibility, empathy, and shared
90 responsibility - qualities that align well with modern organizational needs. Women leaders
91 often lead with an ethic of care that's based on relationships rather than rigid rules. This
92 approach can create more nurturing and progressive educational environments. Women in
93 leadership positions can introduce much-needed flexibility, empathy, and shared
94 responsibility in administration. Women's inclusion in leadership positions is crucial for
95 several reasons, spanning social, economic, and political domains. Their inclusion brings
96 tangible benefits to organizations, economies, and societies at large. However, it's important

97 to note that simply having women in leadership roles is not enough; organizations and
98 societies must also work to create inclusive environments where women leaders can thrive
99 and their contributions are valued and leveraged effectively.

100 The authors of the paper has reviewed various literature and identified some of the barriers
101 which women leaders face. These are discussed in brief.

102 **Women leadership: obstacles**

103 **Lack of mentoring** - The lack of mentoring for women in leadership positions is a
104 significant issue in India, as it is globally. This problem is particularly pronounced in
105 educational institutions and contributes to the underrepresentation of women in top leadership
106 roles. In the Indian context, mentoring is crucial for women's career advancement, especially
107 given the country's patriarchal social structure and traditional gender roles (Buddhapriya,
108 2009). Mentoring relationships provide aspiring women leaders with guidance on navigating
109 organizational politics, developing leadership skills, and balancing work-life responsibilities -
110 all of which are particularly challenging in the Indian cultural context (Khanna, 2012).

111 **Pipeline problem** - The "pipeline problem in women leadership positions" refers to the
112 decreasing representation of women at higher organizational levels, particularly in leadership
113 roles. Educational and early career disparities, especially in STEM fields, can set the stage for
114 future imbalances (Blickenstaff, 2005). As women progress professionally, they often
115 encounter barriers to advancement, including gender bias and stereotypes (Eagly & Carli,
116 2007). Work-life balance challenges disproportionately affect women (Hewlett, 2002), while
117 a lack of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities hinder their career progression (Ibarra et
118 al., 2010). Organizational cultures favouring masculine leadership styles (Ely & Meyerson,
119 2000) and self-selection out of leadership roles due to perceived barriers (Sandberg, 2013)
120 further exacerbate the issue.

121 **Lack of networking** - Networking is crucial for career development, but women are
122 faced unique challenges:

123 **1. Access to informal networks:** Women have less access to informal networking
124 opportunities, which can be critical for career advancement (van den Brink & Benschop,
125 2014).

126 **2. Balancing professional and personal obligations:** Work-life balance issues can make it
127 challenging for women to participate in networking events, particularly those occurring
128 outside of regular work hours (Mason et al., 2013).

129 **Lack of role model** - Women leaders often face a significant challenge in the lack of
130 female role models in top leadership positions (Connie, 1988; Hawkins, 1991). This scarcity
131 of successful women in administration leads aspiring female leaders to emulate their male
132 counterparts, potentially adopting masculine qualities in the belief that these traits are
133 essential for success. The absence of mentors who can guide women through professional
134 norms, work activities, and networking relationships further compounds this issue (Noe,
135 1988). Mentors play a crucial role in advancing women's careers by increasing their
136 professional visibility, clarifying career aspirations, and helping them navigate the realities of
137 male-dominated work environments.

138 **Gender stereotypes** - Women face stereotypes or biases that affect their ability to
139 network effectively in male-dominated environments (Ibarra et al., 2010). Gender stereotypes
140 often portray women as nurturing and intuitive, but less capable in quantitative analysis and
141 decision-making (Castro, 1990; Asthana, 1992). These stereotypes, along with discriminatory
142 practices, hinder qualified women from attaining leadership positions (Asthana, 1992; Pyke,
143 2001). Whisker (1996) argues that sex role stereotyping, which favors males, is a
144 fundamental obstacle to women's advancement in management. The perception that women
145 lack the necessary qualities for successful administration persists, with some believing
146 women are too emotional or illogical for such roles (Hammound, 1993). This stereotyping
147 has led institutions to resist appointing women to administrative positions.

148 **Lack of support system** - Women have historically faced a significant lack of support
149 and encouragement in pursuing professional careers, as identified by several researchers
150 (Connie, 1988; Pyke, 2001). This deficit of support extends across various spheres of their
151 lives, including friends, family, and academic mentors. The challenge is compounded by the
152 dual responsibilities women often bear, balancing work and family obligations (Cahalan,
153 2007; Cook, 2007).). Multiple studies have highlighted that a majority of women
154 administrators report insufficient support systems as a significant barrier to their career
155 advancement (Cahalan, 2007; Cook, 2007; Santee, 2006; Wilbanks, 2005). This underscores
156 the critical role that comprehensive support plays in women's ability to achieve and maintain
157 leadership roles in their careers.

158 **Strategies for women leaders to overcome their obstacles in leadership**
159 **position:**

160 Here the author found some literature review, and the following section explores various
161 strategies that can assist women leaders in overcoming their obstacles to their professional
162 advancement. Women in leadership advancement requires strategic mentoring relationships to
163 navigate workplace dynamics, particularly in Indian contexts where formal guidance helps
164 overcome traditional barriers (Sharma & Gupta, 2019). Effective networking facilitates
165 knowledge exchange and mutual support across various professional levels, while robust
166 support systems - combining technology-enabled domestic solutions with flexible workplace
167 policies - create an environment conducive to both professional excellence and personal
168 balance (Godara, 2010). Together, these elements form a foundation for women leaders to
169 overcome institutional obstacles and achieve sustained career growth.

170 **Conclusion**

171 The landscape of women's leadership in Indian higher education presents a compelling
172 paradox. The research identifies several critical barriers impeding women's advancement to
173 leadership positions. The importance of increasing women's representation in educational
174 leadership cannot be overstated. Women leaders bring unique qualities to administrative
175 roles, including empathetic decision-making, relationship-based leadership approaches, and
176 attention to teaching and student well-being. Their presence in leadership positions is crucial
177 for addressing gender-specific issues in education and ensuring diverse perspectives in
178 institutional decision-making processes. The transformation of Indian higher education
179 leadership to achieve gender parity is not merely a matter of equality; it is crucial for creating
180 more balanced, effective, and forward-thinking educational institutions capable of meeting
181 the challenges of modern education. As India continues to expand its role as a global
182 education hub, ensuring women's equal participation in leadership positions becomes
183 increasingly vital for sustaining academic excellence and fostering inclusive institutional
184 growth.

185

186

187 **Reference:**

- 188 All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE). (2020). AISHE 2019-20 report. Ministry of
189 Education, Government of India. <https://aishe.gov.in/aishe-final-report>
- 190 Buddhapriya, S. (2009). Work-family challenges and their impact on career decisions: A
191 study of Indian women professionals. Vol 34(1), pp31 to 46.
- 192 Blickenstaff, J. C. (2005). Women and science careers: Leaky pipeline or gender filter?
193 Gender and Education, Vol 17(4), pp 369 to 386.
- 194 Banker, DV & Banker, K, (2017), Women in Leadership: A Scenario in Indian Higher
195 Education Sector, Riding the New Tides: Navigating the Future through Effective
196 People Management, pp 239 to 251.
- 197 Choudhary, R. (2010). *Case studies of women administrators in higher education system of*
198 *India* [Doctoral Thesis]. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/58105>
- 199 Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women
200 become leaders. Harvard Business Press.
- 201 Ely, R. J., & Meyerson, D. E. (2000). Theories of gender in organizations: A new approach to
202 organizational analysis and change. Research in Organizational Behavior, Vol 22, pp
203 103 to 151.
- 204 Godara, R. (2016). Women in Higher Education Governance. *International Journal of*
205 *Advanced Research in Education & Technology (IJARET)*, Vol 3(3), pp 121 to
206 131. https://www.academia.edu/76600365/Women_in_Higher_Education_Governance
- 207 Ghara, T. K. (2016). Status of Indian Women in Higher Education. *Journal of Education and*
208 *Practice*, Vol 7(34), pp 58 to 64.
- 209 Government of India. (2018). All India Survey on Higher Education 2017-18. Ministry of
210 Human Resource Development, Government of India. <http://aishe.nic.in/aishe/view>
- 211 Government of India. (2019). All India Survey on Higher Education 2018-19. Ministry of
212 Human Resource Development, Government of India. <http://aishe.nic.in/aishe/view>
- 213 Gupta, N. (2017). Gender inequality in the work environment: A study of private research
214 organizations in India. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal, Vol
215 36(3), pp 255 to 276.

- 216 Hewlett, S. A. (2002). *Creating a life: Professional women and the quest for children*. Talk
217 Miramax Books.
- 218 Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. (2010). Why men still get more promotions than
219 women. *Harvard Business Review*, Vol 88(9), pp 80 to 85.
- 220 Khanna, S. (2012). Gender wage discrimination in India: Glass ceiling or sticky floor?
221 Working Paper 214, Centre for Development Economics, Delhi School of Economics.
- 222 Morley, L., & Crossouard, B. (2015). Women in higher education leadership in South Asia:
223 Rejection, refusal, reluctance, revisioning. British Council.
224 [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/women-in-higher-education-
225 leadership-in-south-asia](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/women-in-higher-education-
225 leadership-in-south-asia).
- 226 Mason, M. A., Wolfinger, N. H., & Goulden, M. (2013). *Gender and family in the ivory tower*.
227 Rutgers University Press.
- 228 Reddy, S., Kumar, A., & Singh, M. (2020). Gender representation in academic leadership: A
229 study of Central Universities in India. *Higher Education Quarterly*, Vol 74(4), pp 415 to
230 430.
- 231 Sharma, R., & Gupta, N. (2019). Women in academic leadership positions: A case study of
232 Central Universities in India. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, Vol
233 41(3), pp 321 to 334.
- 234 Sandberg, S. (2013). *Lean in: Women, work, and the will to lead*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- 235 Van den Brink, M., & Benschop, Y. (2014). Gender in academic networking: The role of
236 gatekeepers in professorial recruitment. *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol 51(3), pp
237 460 to 492. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12060>
- 238
- 239