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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

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Abstract

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

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Introduction:-

India has the third largest higher education system in the world next to China and United States. In future, India will be one of the largest education hubs (Godara, 2016). It has a total of 1074 universities, out of these 460 are State Universities, 128 deemed universities, 56 Central Universities, and 430 Private Universities (UGC, 25 Jan 2023). Within these 1,074 universities, there exists a striking contrast between the high number of women in teaching roles and their minimal representation in senior leadership positions such as Vice-Chancellor, Registrar, Dean, and HOD. All India Survey on Higher Education demonstrates women's significant academic achievement, with 42% of doctoral degrees being awarded to female candidates (Government of India, 2018). However, this educational success hasn't translated into proportional leadership representation in academia. Research shows that while 66.22% of women remain stuck in middle-level leadership positions (Banker & Banker, 2017; Ghara, 2016), they represent

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only 6.67% of senior academic leaders in roles such as Vice Chancellor, Director, and Dean (Banker & Banker, 2017).

Women leaders:

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

In the Indian context, women's representation in administrative roles varies across different levels of education. While women constitute a significant portion of teaching staff (about 42% as per the All India Survey on Higher Education (2019-20), their representation in top leadership positions remains low. As of 2023, India has 56 Central Universities, each led by a VC appointed by the President of India for a typical tenure of 5 years. These VCs, selected through a rigorous process involving search-cum-selection committees, face significant challenges in representation and vacancy rates. Notably, as of 2021, only 6.7% of VC positions in Central Universities are held by women, highlighting a stark gender disparity at the highest level of university administration. Moving down the hierarchy, Deans, who head individual schools or faculties, are appointed by the Executive Council on the VC's recommendation, usually serving 5-year terms. While exact national data is limited, a 2019 study of 20 Central Universities revealed that women held about 20% of Dean Positions, with higher representation in humanities and social sciences (30-35%) compared to STEM fields (15-20%) (Sharma. Et.al 2019). At the departmental level, HODs, typically appointed on a rotational basis among senior professors for 3-year terms, show slightly better gender representation. A 2020 study of 15 Central Universities indicated that women held approximately 28% of HOD positions (Reddy.et. al. (2020), with higher percentages in arts and humanities (35-40%) compared to science and technology departments (20-25%) (Reddy.et.al 2020). These statistics reflect broader trends in academic leadership, including persistent gender gaps, disciplinary variations, and regional differences, with universities in metropolitan areas generally showing slightly higher percentages of women in leadership roles. Despite initiatives by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and Ministry of Education to promote diversity and leadership development, progress remains slow. The data also reveals challenges in filling top administrative positions, with a significant number of vacancies affecting institutional governance. While these figures provide insights into the current state of academic leadership in Central Universities, they underscore the need for more comprehensive, up-to-date data collection and targeted efforts to address disparities and enhance diversity across all levels of university administration.

Why we need women leaders in educational leadership:

The increasing involvement of women in educational administration is becoming more crucial. By increasing women's participation in educational administration, we can achieve more balanced, effective, and forward-thinking of educational institutions, better suited to meet the challenges of modern education (Godara, 2010). The importance of having women in educational leadership roles stems from their unique qualities and the positive changes they can bring to the field. Women often have a natural inclination towards nurturing and caring, which can transform the sometimes-impersonal nature of educational administration into a more compassionate and supportive approach. Having women in leadership positions is also vital viewpoints and often results in greater attention to teaching, teachers' needs, and students' well-being (Godara, 2010). Women's intuitive decision-making skills and emotional intelligence can be especially valuable in navigating complex educational challenges. Their leadership approach often emphasizes flexibility, empathy, and shared responsibility - qualities that align well with modern organizational needs. Women leaders often lead with an ethic of care that's based on relationships rather than rigid rules. This approach can create more nurturing and progressive educational environments. Women in leadership positions can introduce much-needed flexibility, empathy, and shared responsibility in administration. Women's inclusion in leadership positions is crucial for several reasons, spanning social, economic, and political domains. Their inclusion brings tangible benefits to organizations, economies, and societies at large. However, it's important to note that simply having women in leadership roles is not enough; organizations and societies must also work to create inclusive environments where women leaders can thrive and their contributions are valued and leveraged effectively.

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

Women leadership: obstacles**Lack of mentoring –**

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.

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

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

Conclusion:-

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 inclusive institutional growth.

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