

Transformational Leadership Style, Motivation to Lead, Challenges and Obstacles of Female Academic Leaders in Malaysian Public Universities

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Abstract

Women leaders often face challenges in positioning themselves for leadership roles including finding the appropriate and effective leadership styles in the organisation. This research is significant as it highlights the appropriate types of leadership for women and explains the problems, barriers, and motivation that women require when they lead in university. This qualitative study uses a thematic analytical approach and semi-structured interviews conducted on eight female academic leaders from public universities in Malaysia. The thematic analysis discovered twelve themes and they are individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, charisma & idealistic influence, lead colleagues and staff, work life balance, gender bias, lack of self-confidence, potential and opportunities not being given, family, faculty/department, and colleagues. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that women academic leaders instill transformational leadership styles in their leadership. These findings propose that the university's top management and policymakers should offer women more potentials and possibilities to maintain equality and the well-being of women as leaders. More studies are needed to uncover the needs of transformational leadership for women leaders, as well as the characteristics that drive them to become leaders, utilising a larger sample size that includes all Malaysian public universities.

Keywords: Leadership Styles, Transformational Leadership, Women Leadership, Higher Education

Introduction

Developments that occur in the era of globalization today create changes in various aspects of life. There is no doubt that the changes that occur also bring various challenges that everyone must face in various contexts of life. Every individual needs to be brave to face the upcoming challenges. This includes leaders in the higher education sector. Women also play

a leadership role in higher education. There are studies that examine the role of women in various employment sectors. This study focuses on women leadership in public universities because this sector requires competence and courage in implementing the transformation as planned and has implications for stakeholders.

Public universities are institutions that have good governance in the process of appointing female academics to assume academic leadership positions. This is very important to support the aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals as well as the ability to succeed on the national agenda. In addition, academic leadership positions in public universities are more flexible than those in private universities because they have a clear appointment period and job specifications. In addition, the challenges, obstacles, and motivations of women leaders in public universities may differ from those in private universities or other sectors because it also depends on the climate and culture of the organization.

Undoubtedly, women can and are capable of leading because leadership skills can be formed and learned. However, knowledge and academic background alone are not enough to place women in the highest leadership composition of universities. Female leaders need to have extensive knowledge in addition to emotional and mental strength. Many young lecturers have very good knowledge, but unfortunately, they lack self-confidence (Sharifah Hapsah, 2020). There are also many women who are qualified to be leaders, but they are not chosen because of various factors that contribute to the situation. This situation does not help the country achieve the objective of 30% decision-making in organizations or institutions, whether in the government or private sector. To date, the gender gap index in Malaysia recorded 0.682 in 2023 and is ranked 102 out of 146 countries (World Economic Forum, 2023). This shows that subtle discrimination still occurs in the context of the country's higher education. A study by Pandit and Paul (2023) found that the number of women holding top leadership positions is low. This shows the need for gender diversity in leadership. Accordingly, this study explores women's views on transformational leadership styles in women's leadership in universities. Research was also conducted on views related to challenges, obstacles, and motivation in leadership. The leadership style for women who are suitable for higher education is still unclear. This makes it possible to conduct this study primarily in the context of women's leadership in an organization with predominantly male leaders.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to

- i) explore views related to transformational leadership among women academic leaders
- ii) explore views related to challenges and barriers faced by women academic leaders
- iii) explore views related to motivational factors to lead among women academic leaders

Conceptual Framework

This study uses three theories that are used as the conceptual framework of the study, namely; (i) transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), (ii) Motivation Theory to Lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001) and the Glass Ceiling Concept (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986) as illustrated in Figure 1 below

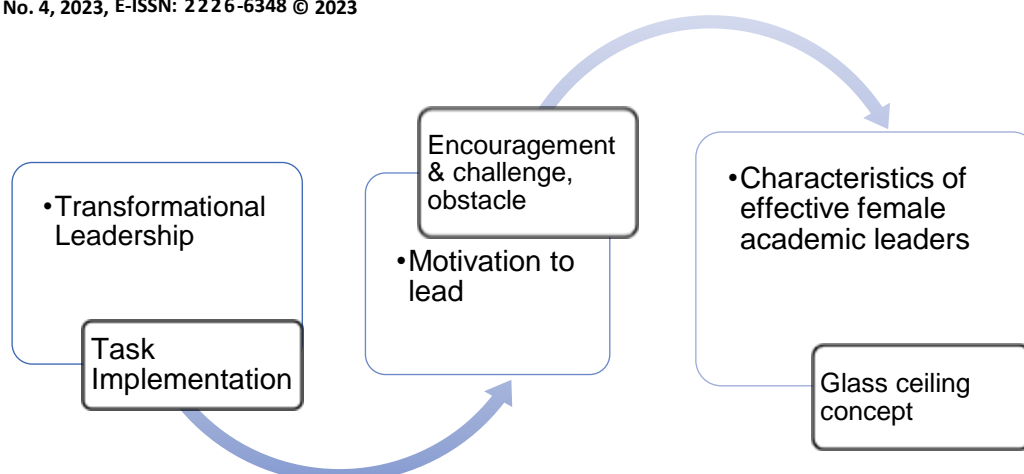


Figure 1: *The Conceptual Framework is based on the Theory of Transformational Leadership (Burns & Bass 1985), the Theory of Motivation to Lead (Chan & Drasgow 2001) and the Glass Ceiling Concept (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986).*

The theory of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) underlies the aspects of leadership that are measured. This theory focuses on the importance of developing and empowering followers to function independently. Women are more likely to show the characteristics of transformational leaders than men (Eagly et.al, 2003). In addition, the theory of transformational leadership applied in this research is to examine the extent to which transformational leadership is applied in the daily work process of a female leader in a public university. The level of research is also focused on the extent to which transformational leadership is best explained by female leaders. The MTL theory, an exploration of the motivational factors that encourage female academic leaders in leadership can be explained because not all women have aspirations and passion to hold leadership positions. Hymowitz and Schellhardt first introduced the idea of the glass ceiling in 1986. This concept is a metaphor to explain the hidden obstacles in terms of obstacles to aspiration, progress, and the improvement of women to achieve key leadership positions or policymakers. For the purposes of this study, the glass ceiling refers to obstacles faced by women and whether the obstacles can block or not for a woman to advance to the next level. In fact, this concept is also used to clarify the challenges faced by women when leading at the middle or grassroots level.

Methodology

This qualitative study uses semi-structured interviews and sampling methods to collect data. These techniques and methods are considered the best and allow a deeper understanding of the research topic. This study uses purposive sampling, which involves the selection of study participants from a specific group, and in the context of this study, female academic leaders. This semi-structured interview involved eight research participants, consisting of female lecturers who held administrative duties at a Malaysian public university. Among the selection criteria of the study participants are (i) mid-level female academic leaders who hold various administrative positions; (ii) hold a position for one year and above for the current position because the academic administrator position can be terminated at any time, and there are positions that are offered for a minimum of one year of appointment; and (iii) have a permanent position status and have more than 10 years of experience as a female academic member of a public university. Study participants with less than a year of leadership experience and contract positions were not invited to participate in this research. Data

analysis involves a systematic process such as the preparation of field notes and transcripts, coding, detecting, and building main themes, as well as building sub-themes and sub-sub-themes (Mitchell, 2005). The data obtained was then transcribed verbatim. Atlas Ti Version 23 software was used to display themes based on thematic analysis.

Findings and Discussion

A total of eight study participants were involved in this study. All of these participants are female lecturers with permanent positions who serve in public universities, hold administrative positions, and are academically qualified. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), confidentiality is a strategy in the ethics of qualitative research regarding risk, norms, culture, and the freedom of the personality of research participants at all times that must be respected. Therefore, the summary display of the study participants is as in Table 1 to preserve the confidentiality of the study participants:

Table 1

Summary of Study Participants

Study Participants	Position	Grade	Education	P. (Academic)	P. (Administration)	Work
P1	Head of Study Center	54	PhD	23	10	
P2	Professional Program Coordinator	52	Masters	13	3	
P3	Deputy dean (Graduate Program)	54	PhD	18	7	
P4	Course Coordinator	45	Masters	10	5	
P5	Course Coordinator	52	Masters	13	7	
P6	Deputy Dean (Academic)	52	PhD	17	6	
P7	Head of Study Center	52	Masters	20	14	
P8	Head of Study Center	52	PhD	13	7	

Table 1 shows that the highest grade of the study participants is grade 54, while the lowest grade is grade 45. The longest leadership experience among the participants is 14 years, followed by 10 years of experience. Positions such as program coordinator and course coordinator act as facilitators, coordinate and provide advisory services, and plan program requirements. Therefore, they need to always be creative and innovate to ensure that the academic program runs smoothly. In fact, coordinators also need to convey information clearly to their academic colleagues through effective leadership communication when it involves change. The majority of informants were also found to hold various types of positions in academic leadership and alternate positions such as coordinator, head of unit, head of program, head of study center, and so on. Academic qualifications are a factor to consider before being appointed. However, there are academic leadership positions that do not

require an academic qualification, such as a PhD, to carry out assignments and lead units in the department. Academic leadership in universities is complex, and it depends on the function and role of the establishment of the unit, department, faculty/branch/college of study. The findings of the study on women's leadership as a whole are divided into three main discussion categories: (i) views related to transformational leadership style; (ii) views related to challenges and obstacles faced; and (iii) views related to motivation to lead.

Figure 1

Themes resulting from Atlas Ti for the dimensions of transformational leadership, leadership challenges & obstacles for female leaders and motivation to lead in female leadership of Malaysian public universities

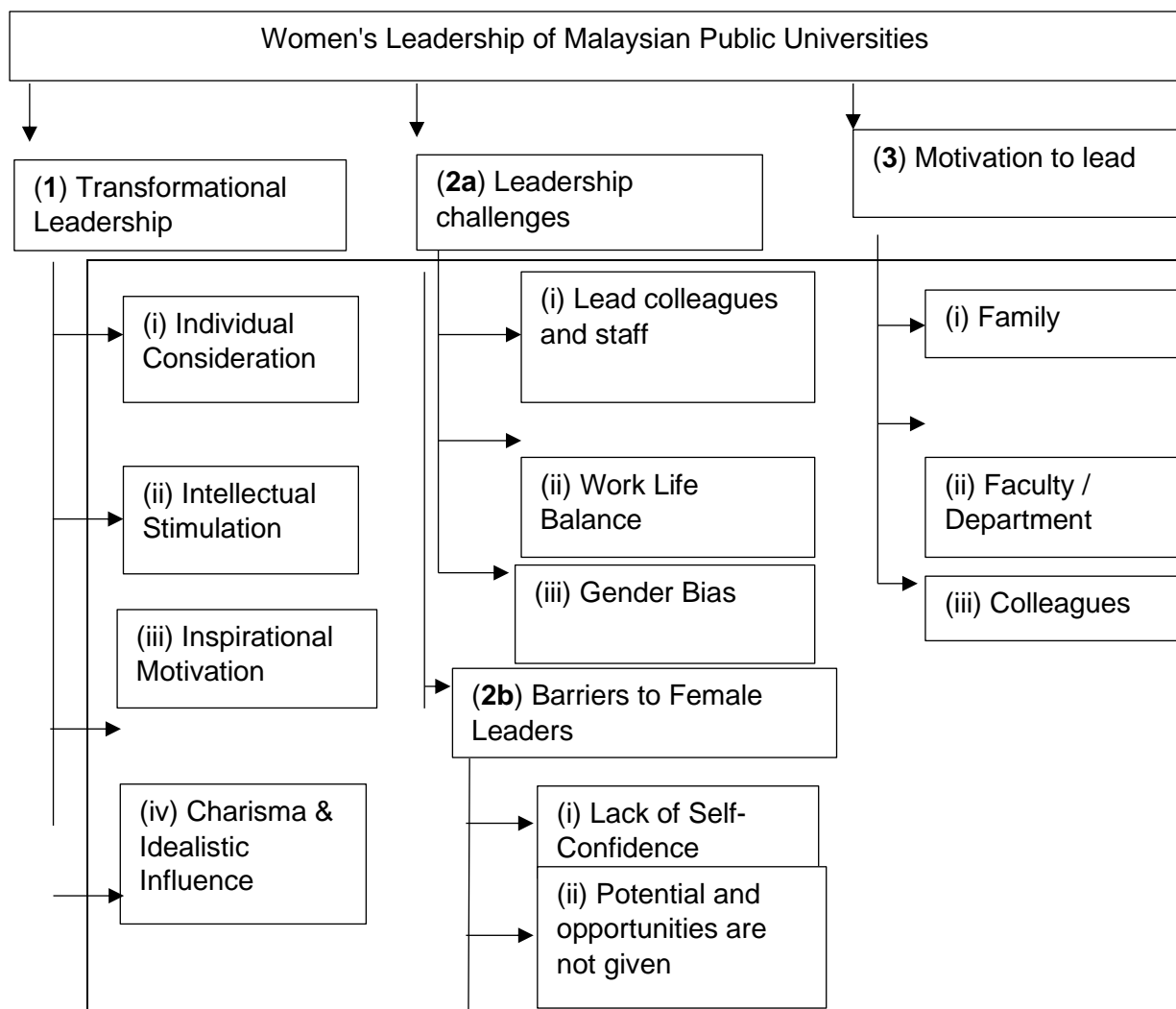


Figure 1 shows 12 themes in female leadership in Malaysian public universities. The themes are individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, charisma, and idealistic influence for the dimensions of transformational leadership. While the theme of leading colleagues and staff ,work life balance, gender bias is the theme of the leadership challenge dimension. The themes of lack of self-confidence and potential and opportunities not being given are dimensions of obstacles for women leaders. Qualitative data also show

the three main themes of the dimension of motivation to lead: family, faculty/department, and colleagues. Each of the identified dimensions is equally important and interrelated.

(1) Views on transformational leadership style

The findings of the study show that all the study participants expressed the view that they apply this transformational leadership style in leadership at the university. The use of transformational leadership in their work process, as long as they lead, is closely related to creativity and KPI implementation. The majority of study participants stated that they often use individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, as well as charisma and idealistic influence in leadership and work processes. However, inspirational motivation is also applied, but somewhat less because it leads university students who have high academic qualifications, extensive experience, and are highly motivated.

(i) Individual considerations

Individual consideration allows transformational leaders to focus on and pay attention to specific needs and potentials in developing their supervisory staff. Transformational leaders treat each of their supervisors as an individual who needs to be respected. Leaders like this will create a very comfortable climate among their supervisory staff by always giving them encouragement and support. Any differences that exist will be respected.

(P4) expressed the view:

"Women leaders need to have a good relationship between the staff under us and need to cooperate with our subordinates and the soft approach needs to be taken into account. I have to remind myself that I am leading my own academic colleagues".

(ii) Intellectual Stimulation

Intellectual stimulation refers to a leader who always encourages staff to use their creativity and innovation in solving a problem by using a new approach. When this interview session took place, public universities experienced major changes in teaching and learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked about intellectual stimulation:

(P1) states:

"The aspect of innovation needs to be emphasized because when we are in the academic sector, we need to have added value in developing more innovative academic programs. Then, in the situation of the Covid-19 pandemic, women leaders also need to be creative in dealing with the problems faced, for example the ODL online learning situation that is taking place in universities. We need to give guidance and help to our academic colleagues under our supervision to be creative in implementing the ODL".

(iii) Charisma & Idealistic Influence

Charisma and idealistic influence are the behaviors of a leader who has his own abilities and becomes a model among his staff, which increase feelings of respect, trust, and loyalty.

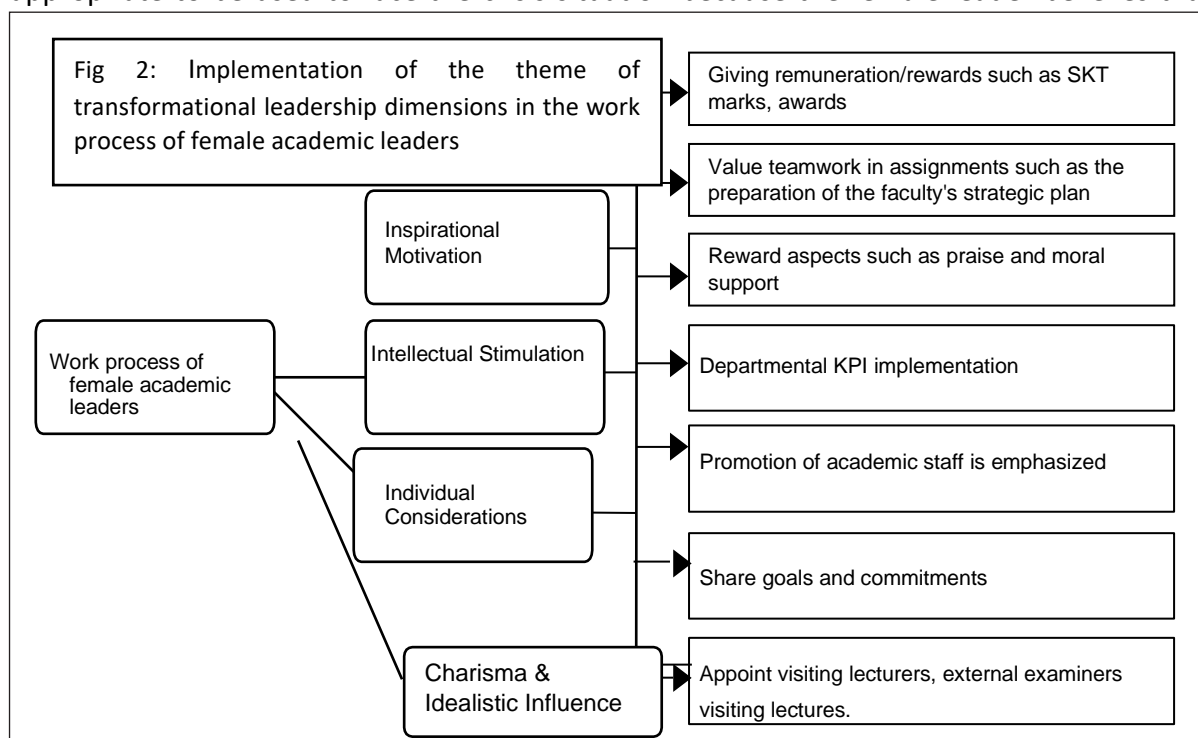
(P6) states that:

"Women leaders need visionary leadership. We have to be a good role model as ourselves and to others. There are things that you have but no one else has. So we have to strive to have a leadership style that has a vision and gives aspirations to the staff we lead, colleagues and customers who deal with us. I have several role models that I emulate and follow at university who help me in my academic work. Therefore, I try to help colleagues and staff if they need help".

(iv) Inspirational motivation

Inspirational motivation occurs when a leader inspires and encourages his staff regarding goals that may seem unattainable and unrealistic. Based on the findings of the thematic analysis and the statements of the study participants, this element is used in leadership but is relatively less practiced. The findings in Table 1 show that none of the study participants held the position of dean or director. Therefore, it is likely that this theme is less used in their leadership because they still have a higher leader in the department or faculty.

The findings of the study also show that the study participants apply transformational leadership. This is explained in their daily work process at the university, as shown in Figure 2. However, not all of the themes are fully applied to their daily tasks as leaders. However, when the female leader is in a crisis, transformational leadership is considered appropriate to be used to face the crisis situation because the female leader believes that



transformational leadership matches her characteristics (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022). The results of research by Surahman & Munadi (2022) found that women who hold leadership positions generally have a feminine leadership style and transformation; that is, transformational leadership is a solution to the dilemma of women's leadership because it prioritizes the process of change. Figure 2, which shows that female leaders always attach importance to teamwork and provide moral support because women are said to have high educational skills, such as their role at home. Earlier, Kouzes & Posner (1990) used the transformational leadership model and found that female leaders were more inclined to apply the concept of 'walk the talk'. This is clearly displayed in the excerpt of the statement related to intellectual stimulation that emphasizes the aspect of creativity in solving problems that arise as well as the importance of cooperation in the team to achieve the department's KPI

(2) Views on leadership challenges and obstacles

This study found that (i) leading colleagues, (ii) work life balance, and (iii) gender bias are the three dimensions of leadership challenges for women. While (i) lack of self-confidence and (ii) potential and opportunities are not given are the themes of the obstacle dimensions to lead.

In the aspect of leadership, there are various challenges and obstacles that will be faced by all individuals with the title of leader, but for female leaders, there may be differences that require detailed research.

(i) Leading colleagues

Dynamic academic leadership focuses on the development of human resources. This leadership requires self-centered intellectuality, scholarship, high knowledge, high skills, commendable character, and practicing value management. Therefore, female academic leaders who have been given the responsibility to lead in the university will definitely feel difficult when the one being led is their own colleague. In fact, handling colleagues of the opposite sex may be a little difficult if the colleagues are older and have higher ranks and grades. This is undeniable because male colleagues are considered overconfident compared to women in the workplace (Ludwig et.al, 2017). This can be seen in the following interview excerpt

(P3) states

"Women struggle a bit when we need to give instructions, especially to our own friends, especially men, because men are more forward-looking in all things. I always question myself when giving instructions, which is how far we can direct with a little firmness."

(ii) Work-life balance

Aspects related to work-life balance are unavoidable issues in leadership involving women. The following is an interview excerpt that shows the balance of housework among the study participants

(P4) and (P1) stated

"I have a family, when I was young I was certainly busy managing the family and this caused me to think twice about continuing the leadership assignment period." (P4)

"Staff need to have a work life balance and sometimes the management doesn't understand." (P1).

Women have various roles in their lives, whether as mothers, children, wives, or even leaders. Research by Nehemia & Lenkoe (2023) found that female leaders experience challenges and difficulties in balancing work and life and suggested human resource strategies that harmonize the work-life balance of female employees. In fact, Beaupre (2022) found that the decline of women in leadership is because when women hold a leadership position, they think that the excess of tasks results in a less satisfying personal life.

(iii) Gender Bias

Women leaders around the world experience gender bias, which challenges their advancement in leadership at political, social, and organizational levels. Here is an excerpt of the interview.

(P5) also views:

"If there are many men on staff, there will be a perception of the woman's ability and this gender bias does happen if the university has never had a female VC."

The findings of the study show that the study participants are more likely to discuss the gender bias they face in leadership than gender stereotypes. This is likely because they were given the opportunity to hold mid-level leadership positions; however, none of the study

participants held higher positions such as dean, assistant vice chancellor, or director. The experience of the study participants clearly does not show the challenge of gender stereotypes against them, and this is contrary to previous research. Even so, the findings of this study can be supported by the findings of a study by Ozer (2023), who identified seven factors that cause women to face gender bias, namely caring nature, work-life balance, competence, wages, emotions, culture, and physical appearance or clothing. In addition, gender bias also often occurs consciously or unconsciously. It doesn't matter whether women are leaders or not; women have to overcome various challenges when assuming leadership roles (Galsanjimed et.al, 2023)

(2b) Barriers to Leadership

The study also found that (i) lack of self-confidence and (ii) potential or opportunities not being given are themes in women's leadership for the dimension of leadership obstacles. Many women have ambitions to hold leadership positions, especially in the main management of universities, but have not yet been given the opportunity. However, there is no denying that hindering factors make women leaders withdraw and not want to pursue these ideals.

(i) Lack of Self-Confidence

Women's leadership in public universities lacks mentors or role models among women Vice Chancellors to seek guidance and references. Dealing with human nature in the world of education is not an easy matter. Therefore, it should be studied. The views of the study participants are as follows:

"The main obstacle is yourself because you lack confidence."(Q6)

"The form of obstacle is oneself who sometimes does not feel confident to hold the position."(P7)

In the context of this study, the findings show that the study participants are still sceptical and less confident when given higher responsibilities than the position they hold. Although there is academic leadership development training offered at universities, it is not enough to raise the self-confidence of women leaders. Young women need to work on self-improvement to increase self-confidence and be ready to lead (Olsen et.al, 2023).

(ii) Potential and opportunities are not given

Universities need to create a more systematic succession plan, taking into account the potential of women leaders in the organization. There is no doubt that this group of women in academia is often given positions in the middle ranks (Terzi, G., & Deniz, 2022). The positions that are often given are as coordinator, head of unit or even assistant director or deputy dean. Based on the interview findings, the study informants informed me that they have held various types of leadership positions in various units, departments, and faculties. However, to hold a higher position is difficult, and the university management should examine and give opportunities to women. Women at the grassroots level are enthusiastic and ready to assume higher positions if the organizational environment allows the ability, development, and growth of women in leadership (Costa et.al, 2021). Therefore, the findings of this study reveal that women are less given the opportunity to assume higher leadership positions and are only able to be in the middle ranks. Universities need to create more opportunities for women to hold leadership roles and facilitate leadership paths for women (Polson et.al, 2022).

(P5) states

"There may be obstacles in leadership but in fact women have no encouragement or motivation to be at the top. The potential and opportunity must be given even though sometimes we see that the opportunity is given equally but the selection to hold certain positions is more given to men. For example Academic Director or Deputy Vice Chancellor".

(3) Motivation to lead

The findings of the study found that (i) family, (ii) faculty, and (iii) colleagues are themes for the dimension of motivation to lead. This can be seen through a summary of the views of the study participants that have been recorded. The concept of the labyrinth has explored the individual situation of women who have to navigate winding and tangled constraints for high positions. However, it does not discourage women leaders from having the drive and passion to assume high leadership positions.

(i) Family

Women leaders are always concerned about their families in various aspects of life, including their careers as female academics. Through family support for work, the behavior of leaders who support the family also encourages the development of female leaders' progress in the workplace (Yang et.al, 2023). Without family support, women leaders could not go further in their careers.

Here are the views of the study participants

"Family support is important and also from friends."(P1)

"Family and self factors are the biggest motivational factors."(P3)

The findings of this study are similar to previous studies, which found that leadership style in the context of women's leadership can develop where family support is the key to success (Acevedo et.al, 2021). In fact, the findings of a study by Dhanial et.al (2022) revealed that the role of family support, especially emotional support from husbands, helps the growth of female leaders and is the real help needed in female leadership.

(ii) Faculty

The support of management and faculty leadership should be a factor that contributes to the motivation of women to hold positions in the university. Every position offered at the university requires the certification of the head of department. The study by C.Davis et.al (2022) urges the university administration to take proactive measures to support women in the faculty through major organizational changes and reforms. In the context of this study, if a woman does not get support from the faculty for her leadership, the woman in question will easily give up and will not have the motivation to perform the task well.

Among the views of the study participants are:

"Support from the management team, faculty leadership and Dean's support is necessary and two-way communication can increase motivation to lead."(P5)

"I stayed because I am the head of the department and I am responsible because the Dean asked me to hold this position."(P7)

(iii) Colleagues

Leading colleagues in academic leadership provides an expensive experience because it is necessary to deal with all problems and solve problems. Decision-making involving

colleagues, especially in the faculty, can cause conflict. However, support and trust from colleagues are among the motivational factors that give strength to women leaders to hold leadership roles. Jelešković & Mulalić (2022) revealed that the support of colleagues, especially women, towards female leaders produces positive changes that female leaders will bring. Therefore, colleagues in the department or faculty need to give full support to women leaders so that every planned initiative yields results that will be shared together. Among the statements of study participants are:

"The support of friends at least helps and supports me in leadership."(P7)

"The good friend factor is important to me for me to hold a position."(P3)

Conclusion

Women in higher education are becoming more dynamic and resilient, with a high fighting spirit. They can hold key positions in public universities, especially in leadership roles. Transformational leadership is a suitable leadership style for women, as it can be easily translated into the work process at the faculty and department level. The university management should take inclusive measures to ensure the composition of women in primary and middle management is not far from the gap. Stakeholders, such as the KPT, need to polish their potential and allocate wider opportunities to women to preserve equality and well-being. The support of faculty and colleagues is crucial for women to assume leadership positions. The glass ceiling phenomenon still exists in public universities, and policymakers should ensure a more significant system of space and opportunities for increasing the composition of women at the top management level. Human resource practitioners should explore work-life balance for female leaders in universities and offer appropriate policies and action plans for women's development. However, future studies should use a quantitative or mixed design and involve other higher education institutions, as women's leadership experiences vary and depend on cultural factors and organizational climate.

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