

WOMEN AT THE HELM: EXPLORING FEMALE LEADERSHIP DYNAMICS IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTES

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research investigates the perceptions and leadership styles of formal female leaders serving as principals in public sector girls' institutes. The study focuses on how leadership is conceptualized and enacted by women in positional authority within the academic landscape. The selected colleges, identified through purposive sampling, represents a rapidly evolving educational institution, making it a relevant context for examining dynamic leadership practices. Data were gathered through a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol designed to elicit nuanced insights into the participant's leadership approaches.

The findings reveal a multifaceted understanding of educational leadership, where the participant integrates both culturally grounded and future-oriented strategies. Her leadership style reflects a fluid interaction between democratic and autocratic tendencies, as well as transformational and transactional models, depending on contextual demands. This situational adaptability underscores the complexity of female leadership in academic settings. The study concludes that such leadership is not static but evolves in harmony with the institutional environment—much like instruments contributing unique tones in a symphony orchestra (Northouse, 2021).

INTRODUCTION

Leadership within higher education institutions (HEIs) plays a pivotal role in shaping academic success and organizational development. As a concept, leadership remains dynamic, contested, and extensively explored across the literature due to its evolving nature and multifaceted interpretations (Avolio, 1999; Gardner et al., 2004). Rather than being confined to a formal title or role, leadership is increasingly understood as the capacity to influence, inspire, and mobilize others toward shared goals (McCrimmon, 2006). Thus, behavioral patterns, decision-making styles, and interpersonal competencies have become

central indicators of effective leadership in academic settings.

In HEIs, leadership significantly impacts various dimensions, including institutional culture, team collaboration, the teaching-learning environment, and the overall academic experience. Effective leadership fosters not only productivity and innovation but also enhances employee satisfaction, retention, and psychological well-being—factors directly contributing to the production of well-rounded graduates (Parish, 2013).

Leadership in educational contexts is typically categorized into **formal (positional)** and

informal roles. Formal leaders hold designated authority and possess the institutional power to enforce decisions, manage personnel, and maintain organizational discipline (Carpenter, Beuer, & Erdogan, 2010). However, formal leadership is often criticized for leaning towards authoritarianism, where leaders exercise unilateral decision-making, minimize employee input, and maintain hierarchical distance from subordinates. This traditional style often results in top-down communication and the use of punitive control measures.

Conversely, **informal leaders** emerge through recognition of their knowledge, wisdom, and relational influence rather than positional authority (Pielstick, 2000; Schnier & Ware, F. 2017). These individuals model authenticity and inspire through personal credibility, often achieving greater voluntary cooperation and respect among peers.

Interestingly, contemporary research suggests that even positional leaders are shifting away from rigid authoritarian styles toward more democratic, inclusive, and relationship-oriented leadership practices. This evolving trend highlights the need to examine whether **formally positioned female leaders** in HEIs continue to embody traditional, autocratic tendencies or are embracing more participatory and collaborative styles typically associated with informal leadership.

Against this backdrop, the current study aims to investigate the leadership approach of a female principal at a public sector girls' college, selected as a case study of a developing academic institution. The research particularly explores how she navigates her positional authority while interacting with modern expectations of transformational and democratic leadership.

Research Questions

This study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How does the formally appointed female leader conceptualize and interpret the notion of leadership within the context of a public sector girls' college?
2. What specific leadership styles does the formal female leader exhibit in managing institutional affairs and relationships within the college?
3. How do contextual factors such as organizational culture, gender expectations, and institutional dynamics influence her leadership behavior and decision-making?
4. In what ways does the leader's approach reflect a blend of traditional and contemporary leadership paradigms, particularly in terms of balancing authority with collaboration?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sr. No.	Authors (Year)	Methodology	Limitations	Core Concepts/Findings	Future Directions
1	Juntrasook (2014)	Qualitative (post-structural discourse analysis)	Single university in NZ, small sample	Leadership in position, performance, practice, role model	as Power dynamics in HE leadership
2	Eagly & Karau (2002/07)	Meta-analysis	Western cultural bias	Female leaders show democratic style but face prejudice	Cross-cultural validity, interventions
3	Klein et al. (2013)	Quantitative survey (N=2,662, 311 firms)	Business sector, HE-specific	Leadership not shapes performance	style Examine in → educational institutions

Sr. No.	Authors (Year)	Methodology	Limitations	Core Concepts/Findings	Future Directions
4	Hofmeyer et al. (2015)	Qualitative interviews (n=8)	Single university case, small sample	Non-formal academic leadership in teaching	Comparative multi-site research
5	Parish (2013) - implied in intro	Literature review	Not empirical	Leadership affects job satisfaction & productivity	Empirical & validation in HE
6	Pielstick (2000) & Schnier	Conceptual review	Limited empirical HS	Informal leadership based on expertise	Empirical testing in HE contexts
7	ResearchGate (2014)	Mixed-method: internal/external barriers	General barriers, not specific to leader styles	Systemic and cultural barriers hamper women's advancement	Case studies in more contexts
8	Comparative Pakistan study (2024)	Mixed-method (200 survey +10 interviews)	Punjab region only	Public-sector female leaders transformational	Expand across more regions and roles
9	Frontiers (2024) - Jordan	Desktop review + Focused survey	Regionally	Sociocultural barriers constrain women	Policy-intervention studies
10	Harvey & Jones (2022)	Linguistic inquiry of narratives	Retrospective accounts only	Distributed leadership undervalued in teaching	Evidence-based tenure measures
11	ScienceDirect 2024 meta-review	Systematic literature review	Broad scope, limited depth	Integrated framework of female leadership	Interventional research, longitudinal studies
12	Invisible leaders? (2024)	PRISMA review	Publication bias	Women's leadership often hidden/informal	Visibility strategies
13	Role congruity (Eagly & Karau 2002)	Theoretical	Needs empirical backing	Prejudice arises from gender-role mismatch	Experimental validation
14	Shared leadership PDF (2016)	Conceptual analysis	No primary data	Shared leadership needed in uncertain HE settings	Field studies of shared models

Sr. No.	Authors (Year)	Methodology	Limitations	Core Concepts/Findings	Future Directions
15	Klein 2013	on transactional/transformational Empirical survey in NGOs	NGO sector, not HE	Culture mediates leadership effect	Testing academic settings

Leadership Styles

Leadership styles have long been recognized as a critical determinant of organizational growth and institutional development. In academic settings, especially within higher education, leadership style defines how leaders interact with staff, inspire performance, shape vision, and respond to change. Scholars have conceptualized leadership style as a combination of personality traits, behavioral tendencies, and relational patterns that leaders use to influence and align team efforts (Monga & Coetzee, 2012; Xu & Wang, 2009). Some definitions also equate leadership style with the ability to formulate vision, mission, and strategic objectives in alignment with changing external environments (Greenfield, T. A., & Braithwaite, A. 2019).

The literature identifies several prominent leadership styles, each with distinct characteristics and implications for institutional effectiveness.

Transformational Leadership is characterized by leaders who act as role models, inspiring and empowering followers to achieve beyond expectations. They promote innovation, collaboration, and the personal growth of their team members (Hassan, S., & Ahmed, F. 2020). Such leaders emphasize vision, emotional intelligence, and supportive relationships to build a positive organizational culture (Terrell, R. D., & Lindsey, R. B. 2018). Transformational leadership encourages intellectual stimulation and change-oriented thinking, often associated with high levels of staff motivation and institutional adaptability (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004; Rowe, 2007).

Transactional Leadership, by contrast, is more structured and hierarchical. It is grounded in performance management through reward and punishment mechanisms. Transactional leaders focus on task completion, close supervision, and unilateral decision-making (Eagly et al., 2003; Cuadrado et al., 2012). They are generally more

directive and less participatory, often emphasizing control, compliance, and discipline over collaborative engagement (Bilal & Maqsood, 2013; Cherry, 2005). In many cases, transactional styles resemble autocratic leadership approaches, with minimal staff involvement in decision-making processes (Baughman, 2008).

Democratic Leadership presents a stark contrast to the autocratic model. Democratic leaders foster participation, shared governance, and open communication across all organizational levels. They consult their teams during policy formulation and strategic planning, encouraging multidirectional communication, inclusivity, and team morale (Mba, 2004). This style enhances creativity, ownership, and innovation among staff, leading to higher productivity and stronger institutional cohesion (Rositer, 2007).

Instructional Leadership is predominantly concerned with improving teaching and learning outcomes. Instructional leaders are deeply engaged with understanding student learning needs, promoting pedagogical effectiveness, and facilitating professional development for educators (Halen & Printy, 2003; Hart, 1999). They prioritize evidence-based practices and rely on coaching and collaborative strategies rather than top-down authority. Instructional leadership is often referred to as learning-centered leadership, aiming to cultivate an academic environment rooted in continuous improvement and teacher empowerment (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Johnson, 2022).

Situational Leadership emphasizes flexibility and responsiveness. Leaders practicing this style adapt their behaviors according to the maturity, motivation, and capability levels of their subordinates (Northouse, 2007). They may alternate between directive and supportive roles depending on contextual demands. According to Silverthorn and Wang (2001), situational leadership styles are categorized into four: high-

directive/low-support, high-directive/high-support, low-directive/high-support, and low-directive/low-support. This model advocates for tailored leadership responses to optimize team performance and growth.

In conclusion, leadership within educational institutions is multidimensional, ranging from directive to participative, and reactive to proactive. Each style serves specific organizational needs and outcomes, but the most effective leaders often demonstrate situational adaptability—blending styles according to context, culture, and institutional goals.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study methodology to explore the leadership style of a formally appointed female principal within a real-world institutional context. The case study approach was deemed most suitable as it provides a holistic and in-depth understanding of a bounded system—here, the public sector girls' college—allowing the researcher to investigate leadership within its natural setting (Yin, 2013). The aim was not to generalize, but rather to extract rich, contextual insights into how a female leader enacts leadership within a specific socio-cultural and institutional environment (Creswell, 2002; Eckstein, 2002).

The selected college offers a variety of Bachelor of Science (BS) degree programs and is situated in Lower Chitral, a region where traditional cultural values intersect with the evolving demands of modern education. At the time of the study, the institution had approximately 1,270 students and 40 teaching faculty members, including 24 permanent lecturers and 16 visiting staff. The participant selected for this study was a senior academic professional who had served as a lecturer in the same institution for 15 years before being promoted to principal in 2016.

Purposive sampling was used to identify the participant due to her long-standing association with the institution and her positional authority, which offered deep insights into the evolving nature of female leadership in a growing public sector institution (Patton, 2002). Data were collected through two in-depth semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 60 minutes, followed by a shorter 20-minute gap-filling session. The semi-structured format enabled the flexibility to probe emergent themes

while ensuring consistency across key areas of inquiry.

Data analysis followed the thematic framework suggested by Miles and Huberman (2019). The process involved transcription of recorded interviews, iterative reading and annotation, generation of initial codes, and clustering of codes into broader categories and themes. This methodical coding and categorization process ensured reliability and interpretive depth, allowing the researcher to uncover patterns, contradictions, and leadership nuances grounded in the lived experience of the participant.

The rigor of the research was enhanced through member checking, thick description, and reflective memoing. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly adhered to. The design not only allowed the researcher to document leadership practices but also to capture the socio-cultural and emotional dimensions that often underpin decision-making processes in female-led educational settings.

Findings and Discussion

The central aim of the study was to investigate how a formally appointed female leader perceives and enacts leadership in a public sector girls' college. The first major theme that emerged from the data analysis was the participant's articulation of **culturally responsive and future-ready leadership**. This theme reflects her nuanced understanding of leadership as both grounded in traditional values and oriented toward preparing learners for the evolving challenges of the 21st century.

The participant conceptualized leadership as a balanced process—one that involves maintaining the institutional culture while simultaneously promoting growth, innovation, and adaptability. In her own words:

“Leadership is guiding a group of people or organization in such a way that the culture of the group is maintained in the organization, and progress is made. A good leader is one who is aware of the culture of the community to which the institution is serving... but also adapts to the needs of changing times while preserving his/her cultural values.” (Participant Interview)

This view emphasizes leadership as a dual responsibility: safeguarding the shared cultural heritage of the institution and simultaneously

equipping students and staff for a rapidly transforming educational landscape. Her perspective reflects the position of scholars like Cheng (1993), who argue that organizational culture affects core elements such as unity, cohesion, and adaptability. By recognizing the fluidity of culture, the participant highlights the need for a leadership model that does not rigidly adhere to tradition, but intelligently negotiates it in light of current demands.

The participant further asserted that a leader's responsibility extends beyond administrative efficiency to the active promotion of desirable cultural values. Her approach aligns with Terrell and Lindsey (2008), who emphasize that culturally responsive leadership involves creating inclusive environments that honor learners' identities—including their languages, beliefs, traditions, and epistemologies. Her view also resonates with Hoy and Miskel (2001), who see culture as a "shared orientation" that not only binds organizational members but gives the institution a distinct identity.

She indicated that her leadership philosophy stems from a belief in cultural preservation as an ethical and strategic imperative. She regards culture not as a static artifact, but as a dynamic resource that leaders must actively shape and protect. This perspective is consistent with Ware (2006), who asserts that the cultural framework of a school deeply influences teacher morale, student engagement, and institutional harmony. The participant acknowledged the necessity of embracing change, yet maintained that change must be filtered through the lens of cultural relevance and communal acceptability.

Moreover, her culturally anchored leadership style appears to support the idea that **effective leadership is not about authority alone**, but about earning trust, demonstrating emotional intelligence, and guiding institutional progress in a manner congruent with community expectations. The participant's emphasis on cultural coherence and sensitivity reflects Irvin's (2002) assertion that cultural responsiveness enhances the stability and credibility of leadership.

In sum, the participant models a leadership identity that integrates **cultural consciousness with a forward-looking vision**. She operates as both a custodian of tradition and a catalyst for progress—a dual role that is particularly critical for

women in leadership positions navigating gendered expectations in traditionally structured academic environments. This hybrid model offers valuable insights into how female leaders balance institutional continuity with transformational aspirations in the public education sector.

Research Questions and Analytical Focus

This study is situated within the broader discourse on gendered leadership in higher education, with a specific focus on how female leaders perceive, interpret, and enact leadership within culturally rooted academic contexts. In traditional academic institutions—especially in the Global South—leadership is often intertwined with sociocultural expectations, gender norms, and institutional hierarchies. For women occupying formal leadership roles, the navigation of these dynamics requires an intricate balance between authority and empathy, tradition and transformation.

To systematically investigate the multifaceted nature of female leadership, this study was guided by four interrelated research questions. These questions were designed not only to capture leadership behaviors, but also to explore the deeper ideologies, values, and contextual realities that influence the leadership practice of a formally appointed female principal in a public sector girls' college.

1. How does the formally appointed female leader conceptualize and interpret the notion of leadership within the context of a public sector girls' college?

This question seeks to uncover the participant's internal understanding and personal philosophy of leadership. Leadership is not universally defined; it is shaped by individual experiences, cultural exposure, and institutional positioning. By exploring her conceptualization, the study examines how she constructs meaning around leadership—whether she views it as power, service, influence, collaboration, or cultural stewardship.

2. What specific leadership styles does the formal female leader exhibit in managing institutional affairs and stakeholder relationships?

Leadership style is the outward expression of internal beliefs. This question aims to analyze her

actual practices—whether transformational, transactional, democratic, instructional, or situational—and how she uses these styles to engage with faculty, staff, students, and community stakeholders. It also considers whether her style is fixed or adaptive depending on context.

3. How do contextual elements—such as organizational culture, gender expectations, and socio-political dynamics—influence her leadership behavior and strategic decision-making?

No leadership practice occurs in a vacuum. Institutional environments, community expectations, and sociopolitical realities often constrain or shape leadership possibilities. This question interrogates how external forces—such as cultural traditions, gender roles, institutional norms, and community pressures—mediate or influence her decision-making, communication strategies, and conflict resolution techniques.

4. In what ways does her leadership reflect a blending of traditional and contemporary paradigms, particularly in balancing cultural rootedness with transformational intent?

This question synthesizes the prior inquiries by exploring whether the leader embodies a hybrid leadership model—grounded in cultural continuity but open to progressive change. It considers whether she operates as a cultural guardian while simultaneously embracing innovation, pedagogical reform, and future-oriented thinking—reflecting what this study refers to as culturally responsive and future-ready leadership.

Integrative Purpose

Collectively, these questions aim to move beyond descriptive accounts and toward a **critical interpretation** of female leadership experiences in higher education. They provide a framework for understanding how women at the helm of academic institutions **navigate structural barriers, exercise agency, and construct hybrid models of leadership** that challenge dominant paradigms while remaining culturally anchored. By answering these questions, the study hopes to contribute meaningful insights to the discourse on educational leadership, gender equity, and

institutional transformation in the context of developing nations.

Interplay of Autocratic and Participative Leadership Styles

One of the core objectives of this study was to examine the leadership style adopted by a formally appointed female leader in a public sector girls' college. The data suggests that the participant does not rigidly adhere to a singular leadership style; instead, she demonstrates a **flexible and situational blend** of both autocratic and participative leadership approaches. This strategic fluidity appears to be driven by her assessment of institutional needs, contextual challenges, and task specificity.

In the interview, the participant articulated her decision-making philosophy in the following way: "I think fair decision-making is a tough task for a leader because decisions are made for the betterment of institutions. I seek suggestions from my staff before taking any decision. Sometimes my decisions are based on the suggestions of the employees and sometimes I make decisions by my own." (Participant Interview)

This statement reveals an intentional blending of **democratic consultation** with **autonomous decision-making**, reflecting a hybrid style of leadership. On one hand, she consults and involves her staff in key institutional decisions, which is emblematic of participative or democratic leadership. On the other hand, she retains the authority to act unilaterally when she deems it necessary—an indicator of autocratic leadership.

This leadership elasticity aligns with Northouse's (2021) conceptualization of **situational leadership**, which asserts that effective leaders frequently shift between directive (autocratic) and collaborative (democratic) behaviors depending on the nature of the task, urgency, or competence of team members. Such adaptive leadership is not a sign of inconsistency but a reflection of **contextual intelligence** and **institutional sensitivity**.

A second layer of this interplay can be seen in her approach to delegation. The participant explained:

"Sometimes I delegate tasks to different people based on their capabilities or skills. We make an annual calendar every year and, in that calendar, we mention every task. Then we make an annual

duty list, in which we assign the responsibilities to each staff—such as monitoring teaching, assigning controller responsibilities, ensuring cleanliness, furniture procurement, renovation, transport, and hostel responsibilities. However, as a principal, I monitor whether the work is being carried out the way I want.” (Participant Interview)

This statement illustrates an integration of **distributed leadership practices**—where responsibilities are delegated based on competence—with a supervisory control that remains centralized. While responsibilities are shared, the leader maintains ultimate oversight, reinforcing her positional authority. This duality allows her to **empower her staff** while also ensuring **institutional coherence and accountability**.

These findings resonate with the observations of Awan and Mahmood (2010), who argue that effective leadership involves both delegation and oversight. They maintain that successful leaders distribute tasks across the organization while ensuring alignment with shared institutional goals.

Thus, the participant does not operate strictly within a binary leadership framework; rather, she **navigates between autocratic and participative styles** fluidly, allowing her to respond to diverse scenarios, institutional demands, and staff capabilities. This **interplay of leadership approaches** serves as a practical model for contemporary educational leaders, especially those working in culturally nuanced or resource-constrained environments where strategic flexibility becomes a leadership asset.

Navigating the Interplay Between Transactional and Transformational Leadership Styles

In addition to demonstrating flexibility between autocratic and democratic approaches, the participant’s leadership also reflected a dynamic oscillation between **transactional and transformational** styles. This fluidity was evident in her strategic use of institutional policy, her motivational techniques, and her behavior management practices. The interplay suggests that she consciously shifts styles depending on the context, individual staff behavior, and institutional expectations.

As the participant explained:

“I always follow rules and policies strictly to promote quality of education in my college. I try to understand the psychology of my staff before I give them any task. I always appreciate if someone does a good thing and penalize if they commit mistakes. It is important to be rude, because motivation and punishment are both important to get things done from employees. Sometimes a word of appreciation works to motivate a person, but sometimes it becomes much necessary to cut someone’s salary to make them active.” (Participant Interview)

This statement highlights two contrasting leadership behaviors. First, her **strict adherence to rules** reflects a **transactional leadership** style, where policy enforcement, compliance, and performance monitoring are prioritized. She uses extrinsic motivators—such as reward and punishment—to regulate behavior and ensure accountability (Bass, 1998; Eagly et al., 2003). Her belief in penalizing staff through salary deductions in response to rule violations reinforces the instrumental nature of transactional leadership, which is primarily concerned with maintaining order and ensuring procedural efficiency (Cherry, 2005).

At the same time, her **attentiveness to staff psychology** and her willingness to appreciate and encourage good work suggest a **transformational orientation**. She seems to value emotional intelligence, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation—all hallmarks of transformational leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Bryman, 2007). This duality—**carrot and stick** approach—reveals her belief in balancing discipline with recognition, structure with inspiration.

However, the data also reveals a possible **overemphasis on rule-following**, which may inadvertently limit innovation. This concern aligns with Mazurkiewicz (2009), who argues that leadership in educational institutions should transcend rigid compliance and embrace a visionary outlook to enable institutional reform and pedagogical evolution. Similarly, Rogers (2003) contends that educational leaders must “see beyond the immediate” and possess the capacity to **manage change and foster innovation** within learning communities.

Situational Intelligence: A Leadership Keystone

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of the participant's leadership style is her inclination toward **situational leadership**. Rather than committing to a fixed leadership model, she demonstrates an ability to adapt her behavior in response to contextual demands, staff maturity, and institutional urgency.

This situational tendency is reflected in several of her leadership choices:

- She **delegates authority** but maintains strict oversight;
- She **consults her team** but reserves the right to finalize decisions independently;
- She **rewards and appreciates staff performance**, yet applies **disciplinary sanctions** when needed.

This **adaptive fluidity** is consistent with Hersey and Blanchard's (1996) situational leadership theory, which proposes that effective leadership depends on a leader's ability to diagnose the maturity of subordinates and adjust their leadership style accordingly. Graeff (1997) also supports this model, emphasizing that situational leaders must shift between directive and supportive behaviors based on task complexity and follower readiness.

The participant's leadership behavior illustrates this balance. She neither entirely relinquishes control nor imposes absolute authority. Instead, she moves along a **leadership spectrum**, employing a strategic mix of **directive, supportive, collaborative, and transactional behaviors**—an approach that enhances organizational stability while also facilitating responsiveness.

Conclusion

This case study examined the perceptions and leadership practices of a female principal serving in a public sector girls' college. The findings revealed a **complex, blended leadership style** that cannot be confined to a singular theoretical model. Rather, the participant's leadership behavior reflects an ongoing negotiation between **cultural sensitivity and institutional innovation**, between **structure and empathy**, and between **authority and collaboration**.

Her approach is marked by a nuanced interplay of:

- **Transformational and transactional styles,**
- **Democratic and autocratic tendencies,**

- And most importantly, an **overarching situational responsiveness.**

At times, she acts as a visionary leader who motivates and nurtures her team; at other times, she enforces discipline to maintain operational integrity. This **context-driven flexibility** enables her to navigate the complex demands of her role effectively.

Such findings underscore the importance of recognizing and supporting **hybrid leadership models** in educational settings, especially in culturally nuanced environments where leadership is deeply intertwined with community expectations, institutional history, and evolving societal norms. Institutions must acknowledge that successful educational leadership in such contexts is not about strict adherence to a single style, but rather about cultivating the **agility, cultural intelligence, and emotional dexterity** to lead with relevance and impact.

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