

## Transforming Leadership Practices of Deans in Higher Academics: Asian Women’s Perspective

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### Abstract

Much research has been done in the genre of academics and leadership; however, the ongoing process of changing leadership roles, transforming higher education structures, shifting cultural dynamics and challenging internal and external matters trigger the researchers to continuously explore the relationship of faculty and administration. Serving in universities as effective deans is challenging at the current time as resources are few but population, expectations and targets are high (Wepner et al., 2008). Different statistical reports reveal still after all these years, women’s representation as leaders is not more than 30% worldwide while women were found with more effective leadership skills than men. Asian regions like India and Pakistan are progressing countries where the representation of women in leadership is considered perceptible and appreciable as compared to the previous years. Therefore, the current research aims to investigate the Asian Women’s perspective on leadership practices, deans’ struggles and challenges, and institutional strategies and policies; how do women as deans perceive leadership practices in higher education? and to what extent do deans transform their organizational culture by practicing leadership? The data was collected from women at dean positions in two Pakistani and two Indian universities; Online survey and semi-structured interviews were used to ensure triangulation of the data. Analyzing statistically and discussing results under the theoretical frameworks of transformational leadership theory (Kouzes and Posner, 2017) and organizational culture theory (Cooke and Szumal, 1993), the mixed-method research presents the leadership practices of deans of women in universities. They enjoy transforming major leadership practices by involving and setting sub-skills. However, developing resources for educational institutes is challenging; they, being energetic and optimistic, set goals, targets, plans, vision and workable strategies. Moreover, Asian women as deans identified the clear impact of technology on education, administration and culture; handling social media influence on students and faculty tactfully and peacefully requires effective leadership practices. The present research provides the opportunity to represent the

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unheard voices from which future research and policies can be drawn.

**Keywords:** Asian Women, Dean, Higher Academics, Organizational Culture Theory, Transformational Leadership theory,

### **Introduction**

Research (Towni et al., 2021) shows more representation of men at educational leadership positions as compared to women. There are no benchmark differences for the concepts of leadership skills in the last four decades. All around the world, women are taking positions and jobs at the top ranks (Drange et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the representation is repressed and the transforming process is slow; Even in 2024, "various internal and external factors are responsible for the underrepresentation of women at top positions" (Galsanjimed and Sekiguchi, 2023: 366). Research is available on practicing leadership skills (Çakır and Adıgüzel, 2020), barriers to women's leadership (Maheshwari et al., 2023), challenges of women's leadership (Gandhi and Sen, 2020), and place of women in leadership posts (Kulkarni and Mishra, 2021). Although leadership posts are not offered because of gender, still men are preferred to be in leadership posts (Radu et al., 2017).

Organizational and business research identifies women as the better managers, leaders and principals (Pounder and Coleman, 2002). The curb rent research is not to talk about the differences, advantages and disadvantages of men and women as leaders in higher educational institutes. It is to hear the unvoiced for performing their leadership practices in their periphery.

Asia is the most populated content of the world where females are 48.36% of the total population. Women in South Asia are usually oppressed by the patriarchal society; the social constructionist view of gender roles is stereotypical. However, recent Global gender gap reports identify empowerment of women in this region, especially India and Pakistan. Both countries share almost similar societal patterns and norms. The matter of concern is to highlight the Global Gender Gap report of 2023 where India and Pakistan have been ranked at 127 and 145 out of 146 countries respectively. Indian women are privileged to exhibit some leadership practices (table 5); the literacy ratio, gender gap, oldest structural organizations, and educational policies are the external factors to create the difference.

Previous research concerning women's leadership in higher education institutes in India and Pakistan (Wilson and Clerkin, 2017; Malik, 2011) discusses gender roles, challenges, barriers and opportunities. The study keeps a split focus: first to represent the perspective of female Indian and Pakistani deans regarding their leadership practices in higher education institutes (HEIs) and second to observe the transfigured practices performed by them at leadership positions. The significance of the study is in the representation of periphery voices, triangulation of instruments, theories and research approaches and bridging up Asian research with global research.

### **Literature Review**

The practices of women's leadership for the current study were based on the leadership model of Kouzes and Posner who considered leadership to be of particular behaviors and practices. These behaviors and practices guide the leaders "to achieve set targets in contextual situations" (Kouzes and Posner, 2017: 137). The literature using the mentioned

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theory supported the leadership model over the decades. “Kouzes and Posner’s leadership model provided Jordanian principals guidance to lead and reform the agendas at leadership posts” (Abu-Tineh et al., 2008: 648). Deeb (2023: 346) identified this leadership model as helpful in developing leadership skills to perform “as an exemplary leader”. Emmanuel and Emma met the same results through qualitative research conducted in the United States, Virgin Islands. Along with leadership skills, the culture of the organization can be a game changer.

The work environment and organizational culture has strong impact on leadership styles and practices. Akanji et al. (2019) identified the impact of organizational culture on leadership style in Nigerian universities. Demissie and Egziabher (2022) studied the case of Hawassa University by correlating the types of organizational culture and higher education institutes. In recent years especially after COVID-19, the penetration of technology and the rise of the online work environment made the practice of leadership skills challenging. Online pedagogical activities, meetings, webinars, conferences and trainings demand more professional powers of the leaders. The organizational cultural theory of Cooke and Szumal (1993) illustrated the transformed leadership skills of women deans in techno-oriented higher educational institutes of Southern Asia.

The previous research and theoretical backgrounds provided the construct validity of the current study and a framework for the researcher to explore the Asian women’s perspective on transforming leadership practices by women deans at Women's universities. To meet the results, the following research questions were set for the study;

1. How do Asian women deans perceive leadership practices in higher education?
2. To what extent do Asian women deans transform their organizational culture by practicing leadership practices?

### **Research Methodology**

The current study adopted an interpretive phenomenological research design (Lopez & Willis, 2004) under a mixed-method research approach. Initially, phenomenological research was considered a form of qualitative research (Dawadi et al., 2021). Martiny et al., (2021) framed such research in mixed-method research; shared repression of qualitative (first person) and quantitative (third person) approaches provides the concept of phenomenological mixed method approach for studying the experiences and consciousness of the respondents. For the current study, the researcher used three folded patterns of phenomenological frame, phenomenological qualitative and quantitative data and phenomenological analysis and interpretation of the data. The research instruments, including online surveys and semi-structured interviews, were used to ensure the triangulation of the collected data. The participants of the study were female deans at women’s universities. Two Pakistani and two Indian women’s universities were selected to conduct the research. Five deans from each university were selected randomly and an online survey questionnaire was shared with them. Out of twenty respondents, eighteen responded; therefore, the response rate was 90 %.

**Table 1:** Representation of Institute and number of Respondents

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Name of Institute	Country	Number of Selected Members	Number of Respondents for Questionnaire	Number of Respondents for Interview
Fatima Jinnah Women University (FJWU)	Pakistan	5	5	3
Lahore College for Women University (LCWU)	Pakistan	5	5	3
Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalayam Women University (SPMVV)	Indian	5	5	4
Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey (SNDT)	Indian	5	3	2

To maintain the reliability and validity of research instruments, the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) questionnaire was selected which can be accessed through the given link (<https://www.statisticssolutions.com/free-resources/directory-of-survey-instruments/leadership-practices-inventory-lpi/>). This questionnaire contains two versions, self and observer. For the said research, only the questionnaire related to self was adopted as the objective was to observe the practices of the deans. The five subscales of the questionnaire provided 30 statements with a Likert response scale; each subscale carries six questions. The reliability of the questionnaire was 0.78 under Cronbach's Alpha. The subscales of the questionnaire follow the pattern of the Exemplary Leadership Model of Kouzes & Posner (2017). Furthermore, these subscales and five practices collectively were modified in themes to get the outcome of the research.

**Table 2:** *Division of Subscales of questionnaire as per Five Leadership Practices and themes*

Subscales/Five Practices	Themes
Model the Way	Personal Values Values of others (Colleagues, peers) Shared Values Development of Milestones
Inspire a Shared Vision	Setting goals Devising strategies

	Signing MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) Keeping Motivation for new Projects Expecting for Improvements
Challenge the Process	Facing Challenges Demanding more results Seeking diverse perspectives Thinking out of the box Stepping out of the comfort zone
Enable Others to Act	Creating team work Joining peers, colleagues Appreciating others' success
Encourage the Heart	Shortening the distance between you and others Celebrating the victories Arranging Social sittings Switching Distance zones

After getting the data through a questionnaire, consent was taken from the respondents for online semi-structured interviews and twelve respondents agreed to the interview. The response rate for the interview was 60 %. This took ample time because of the busy schedule of the participants. During six months, the online semi-structured interviews were recorded. The names of the participants were kept anonymous and fictitious names were assigned to them to keep their records. The semi-structured interview consisted of eight open-ended questions (family and social support, self and others commitment, concerns for the future, organizational culture, individual and team work, linguistic and paralinguistic responses, achievements and challenges, and reservations and intensions) to get in-depth responses from the participants; these open-ended questions were the source to provide the contextual contingencies and further detail of subscales of the online survey.

### **Data Analysis**

To ensure quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics was applied to online survey responses through SPSS version 26. Because of the small sample size, the Mann-Whitney U-test was carried out to determine the differences between the perceptions of the deans of two different countries. Thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019) was applied under qualitative analysis. Initially, the researcher made the transcription of the recordings of the interview and assigned codes to the transcribed talk. Extensive reading was done to assign the themes. The co-researcher and researcher reviewed the codes, avoided the repetitions, classified themes and sub-themes, and grouped them according to the five practices of the leadership model. To create harmonization among qualitative analysis of the recorded semi-structured interviews of different respondents, a cross-case analysis was performed. Cross-case analysis is a way to study similarities and differences among different cases at the same time (Ryan, 2012). The following steps were made during cross-case analysis;

1. Analyzed individual responses
2. Devised codes, themes and sub-themes

3. Compared individual responses across themes and subthemes Through qualitative and quantitative analysis, it came out that the women as leaders are excited, energetic and ready to accept the challenges. They identified their personal position and societal responsibilities, especially of motherhood. It is clear that the women leaders in educational institutes give credit to their supporting families to make them stand out but they consider university and policy-making bodies responsible for not providing a growth environment for women leaders. The participants mentioned that they are performing leadership skills well inside women universities otherwise they do not find such privilege in heterogeneous HEIs; the institutional leadership roles are mostly fulfilled by the men in mixed-gender universities. The same observation of gender imbalance, cultural and organizational barriers to female inclusion for leadership positions in Asian universities was made by Islam et al. (2023). Morley and Crossouard (2016) pointed out shortage of women in leadership positions in South Asian universities. The deans of women of both countries represented almost the same perspective towards leadership practices; somewhere, the differences in social norms, culture, religion and individuality can be reasons of divergence.

### Results

For the questionnaire, twenty deans of women were selected and approached but only eighteen responded. The summary of the demographics of the participants is given in table 3.

**Table 3: Demographics of Participants**

Age	Gender	Location	Marital Status	Work Experience
30-40: 0	Females: 18	India: 08	Single: 01	35 years: 0
40-50: 13	Males: 0	Pakistan: 10	Married: 15	45 years: 4
50-60:05			Widow/Divorce: 02	Above 45 years: 14
			Other: 0	

The demographic details of the participants supported the interpretation of the results; the deans of both countries shared similarities in age, work experience and societal status. Table 4 highlighted the descriptive statistics of the subscales (five practices of leadership) of the questionnaire.

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Five Leadership Practices of Respondents**

Subscales/Five Practices	No. of items	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Model the Way	06	06	30	18.760	7.810
Inspire a Shared Vision	06	06	30	23.673	5.538
Challenge the Process	06	06	30	24.729	7.532
Enable Others to Act	06	06	30	19.862	8.812
Encourage the Heart	06	06	30	24.218	7.504

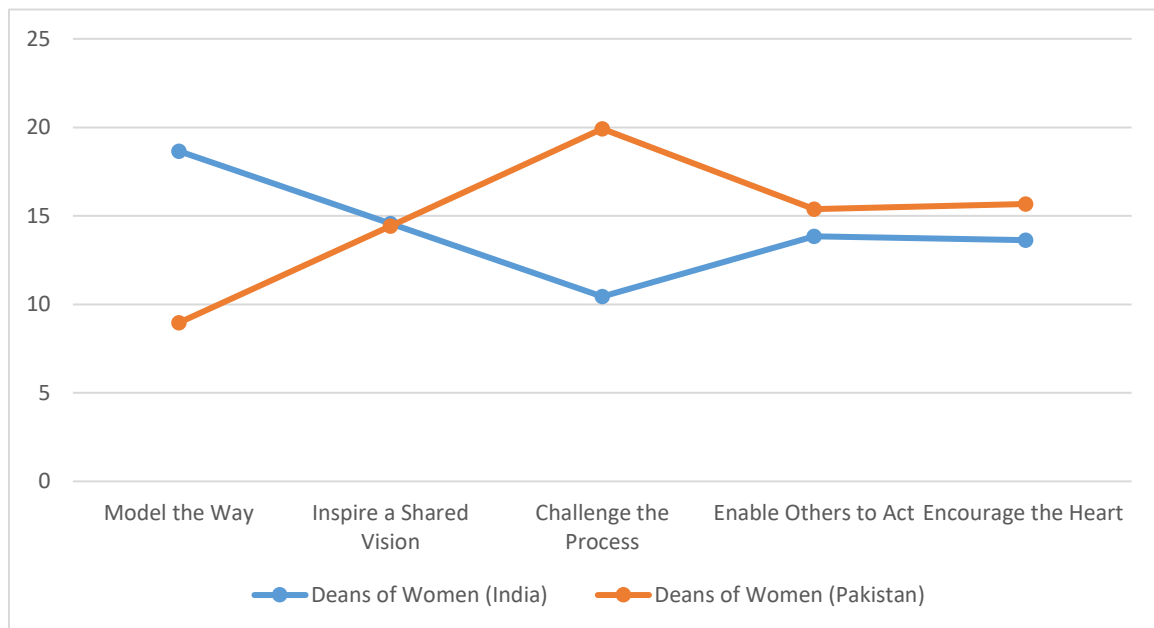
The mean and SD values helped to interpret that the deans of women were aware of their capabilities and the nature of the challenges of the post. By creating a friendly environment, they were ready to progress, to help others and to prosper as well. Further analysis was done to observe the statistical differences between the perceptions of the women from both countries. To know the differences between the two groups, the Mann-Whitney U-test was

carried out. The reason to use this test is the small sample size.

**Table 5:** Result of Mann-Whitney U-test

Subscales/Five Practices	Deans (India)	Deans (Pakistan)	U	P
	Mean Rank	Mean Rank		
Model the Way	18.66	8.96	29.500	.002
Inspire a Shared Vision	14.56	14.42	95.000	.963
Challenge the Process	19.92	10.44	31.000	.003
Enable Others to Act	13.84	15.38	85.500	.625
Encourage the Heart	13.63	15.67	82.000	.516

All the mentioned subscales/five practices provided separate statistical information for the identified themes which were further incorporated in the mean ranks. The detail of the five practices and themes is given in table 2. Women leadership in the higher educational context of both countries shared similar scores in ‘inspire a shared vision’; Despite the cultural differences, deans from both countries practice almost the same strategies, plans and goals for improving educational standards. However, figure 1 represents minor differences for practicing the same. The deans from India exercised ‘model the way and challenge the process’ louder than the deans of Pakistani HEIs. Mann-Whitney U-test indicated the significant differences ( $p = .002$ ,  $p = .003$ ). Moreover, Pakistani women leadership was more clear about two practices ‘enable others to act and encourage the heart.’



*Figure 1. Representing Five Leadership Practices by Women Deans of India and Pakistan*

## **Discussion**

The detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis supports the effectiveness of the leadership model of Kouzes and Posner in the recent women HEIs. The high mean value for “challenge the process” reflected ambitious women for practicing leadership skills. Likewise, “encourage the heart” represented Asian women as kind-hearted and supportive enough to facilitate others. Overall, the prominent mean values indicated the strong practices of leadership by women deans of India and Pakistan. Somehow, they unfolded the truth of their effective leadership practices during interviews that in female organizational culture, it becomes easy for them to progress, otherwise, they can be suppressed in a mixed-working environment. One participant commented, “Males do not like to take orders from a female boss. Sometimes, it becomes difficult to understand their attitude at work place.” Another shared, “Usually the selection panel lacks females and men do not select females for major leadership positions like Vice-chancellor, registrar, treasurer, deans in academic institutions. Females are placed at leadership positions frequently in women’s HEIs.” To support this remark, they evidenced their tranquility during the gathering of all leadership folks. Therefore, women deans consider organizational culture for their improved leadership practices (Coman and Bonciu, 2016). Technology and social media are the sources to bring women leaders from walled offices to public spheres. This is another reason to practice “encourage the heart”. Moreover, the small differences between Indian and Pakistani women deans are result of the religious and cultural differences. The tables 4 and 5 reflect that Indian women deans are better at leadership roles as compared to Pakistani women deans; the two subskills “challenge the process” and “model the way” by Indian deans are prominent and loud enough. Jejeebhoy et al. (2001: 687) carried research of Women’s autonomy in India and Pakistan and mentioned “women in Pakistan have less autonomy or control over their lives than do Indian women”. On the basis of the findings, the current research recommends that the future women leaders should focus on the exemplary model of Kouzer and Posner by emphasizing *Model the way* and *Challenge the process* because these two have strong correlation to the effective leadership in HEIs. The study advocates gender-inclusive organizational culture and addresses gender bias in Leadership selection. The use of digital platforms for leaders in HEIs to share achievements, research, and leadership insights should be encouraged while moving beyond the limitations of “walled offices.” The Asian women leaders should be engaged in professional forums and academic groups on platforms like LinkedIn, twitter (X), ResearchGate and penprofile to enhance leadership influence and visibility. There is no other way to adapt leadership styles aligned with socio-cultural norms particularly in conservative contexts. Up to-date knowledge like emerging leadership models, gender studies, and global trends in HEIs should be exercised by the women leaders. Overall, the educationists and policy makers should incorporate for flexible work arrangements and family-friendly policies to support women leaders in balancing professional and personal responsibilities.

## **Conclusion**

Asian women deans have positive attitudes toward leadership practices and are friendly, supportive and affectionate, and exhibit a communal style of leadership. Through survey and interviews, the current study concluded that the fewer women are at leadership positions in

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HEIs. Previous researches (Ahad and Gunter, 2017; Sani, 2018; Shepherd, 2017) support the same idea. It becomes difficult for females to be at leadership positions in the presence of male competitors; participants of the study reasoned personal, social and organizational culture for this exclusion. Research (Player et al., 2019) proved that men are preferred for leadership roles. Organizational culture (Tsai, 2011) is an important factor to influence leadership style; women deans reflect their leadership competencies in female academic institution comfortably. *“I have worked in both environments, mixed-gendered university and women university. Men do not create trouble for female-workers unless the female worker arises as working competitor.”* For accepting the challenges and sharing the vision, women tend to adopt the authoritative tone of communication which is the symbol of authenticity for the leadership posts. The views of participants ensure the authoritative and transformative style of leadership by women deans in HEIs. The score of two subskills “encourage the heart” and “enable others to act” reflect communicative and team-work attitude of women deans. The women deans are empathetic, confident, courageous, and collaborative.

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