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## Transitioning to the Top: Learnings from Success Stories of Indian Women Leaders in Academia

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## **Transitioning to the Top: Learnings from Success Stories of Indian Women Leaders in Academia**

By Hemlata Vivek Gaikwad<sup>1</sup> and Suruchi Pandey<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

Women leaders in Indian organizations experience several challenges and obstacles that affect their career progression as well as performance. The study was premised on the under-representation of women in leadership positions across organizations. The challenges and barriers faced by Indian women leaders have been well documented, but very little research has been conducted on the experiences of women who aspired and achieved the top positions. The study intended to explore and develop a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of women leaders so as to define pathways for future leaders to come. The study through the prism of intersectionality theory presented constructs of successful leadership of seven women in Indian higher education. We used semi-structured interviews to record their experiences of organizational context, gender, and socio-cultural factors in enabling their leadership success. Our analysis revealed various enablers and few deterrents experienced by them. The women leaders encountered unprecedented challenges in earning respect from their male colleagues and superiors and in proving their leadership competency. Familial support and upbringing acted as the most important enablers. Successful implementation of various strategies to overcome barriers and challenges such as training, mentorship, keeping their self-confidence high, and believing in themselves helped them to reach the desired leadership positions. The study provided valuable insights into the factors and strategies contributing to the professional advancement of women leaders in Indian academia and established a discourse of intersectional identities associated with leadership experiences.

*Keywords:* Women, Indian Higher Education, Intersectionality, Leadership, Qualitative Research

### **Introduction**

Women leadership and empowerment in general and in academics specifically have witnessed a plethora of research, bringing out varying constraints of career progression and recognition such as cultural barriers (Toh & Leonardelli, 2012), lack of fit perception (Heilman & Martell, 1986; Horvath & Sczesny, 2016), backlash effect (Rudman, 1998), glass ceiling (Cotter et al, 2001; Sharma & Kaur, 2019) male-dominated networks (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016), traditional gender roles and lack of influential mentors (Yedidia & Bickel, 2001), gender stereotyping or orthodoxy (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Senior, Howard, & Senior, 2014) and domestic responsibilities (Dominici, Fried, & Zeger, 2009). Leadership studies on

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Indian women have also reflected on the above constraints apart from consideration of the prevalence of stereotyped notion of women roles, preference towards masculine hegemony, and patriarchal attitudes in Indian society (Bhattacharya et al, 2018; Gandhi & Sen, 2020; Mythili, 2017). Gender roles and hierarchy-based power structures are constructed socially and reinforced by social interactions (Eagly et al, 2003).

Indian society continues to maintain masculine hegemony in society and therefore, organisations—including academic institutions—show a preference towards and reinforcement of masculine stereotypes while under-estimating the significance of feminine values (Vasavada, 2012).<sup>3</sup> Put merely, women leaders, in most organisations, are expected to show masculine attributes instead of feminine attributes concerning ethics of care and nurturance and leadership and communication styles (Gupta & Saran, 2013; Vasavada, 2012). Besides, optimal characteristics of women to achieve leadership roles such as personal traits and skills, male ego hindering their acceptance of female boss, deferential treatment of women in the selection of leadership roles, organisational structure hindering career development of women and socio-cultural factors, further act as constraints for Indian women leaders (Bhattacharya et al., 2018; Bilimoria & Piderit, 2007).

In leadership positions, women are under-represented in 62% of states—as Principals of primary, secondary and high schools, cumulatively. However, there is a higher representation of women vice-principals in 60.6% of states. On the other hand, only 10.3% of states have an equal representation of women and men in leadership positions (Mythili, 2017). At the same time, female academic leaders in the Indian higher education system<sup>4</sup>, as reported by the Edushine Advisory Group, dropped to 6.25% in 2018—from 6.67% in 2015, lagging far behind South Africa (19.2%), Australia (32%) and the United Kingdom (29%) (ET Bureau, 2018; Hindustan Times, 2015).

This research posits that the lack of women leadership in academic fields in India, including both school and higher education, cannot be understood without considering the complex social structure of the country—an amalgamation of castes, race, ethnic groups, languages, religion, and cultures—which defines and develops the identities of its women. Even the definition of leadership emphasises interpersonal influence in the use of power and authority for encouraging others to act towards goal achievement (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Yukl, 2009). Therefore, an understanding of the success stories of the women leaders in Indian academics requires an analysis of complex social structures developing the identities of these women—who are not ‘stable’ or ‘homogenous’ beings (Menon, 2015)—through the application of intersectionality theory. The theory emphasises the ideas and social practices of ‘gender, race, multiple identities and the intersection of multiple identities’ (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; p.171). Studies on women’s leadership in the Indian academic field are not only limited (two studies exist, by Gandhi & Sen, (2020) and Mythili, (2017), respectively), they lack the application of intersectionality theory in explaining the discourses of opportunity, privilege, and identity. Generic studies on Indian women leaders, too, lack the application of intersectionality in analysing their performance, perceptions, challenges, and strategies (Bhattacharya et al., 2018; Gupta & Saran, 2013; Vasavada, 2012). The theory is still at its nascent stage primarily applied in building gender and feminist narrative, which were, until now, majorly understood as homogenous accounts (see, e.g. studies of Mirza (2018), Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, (2010), Mangubhai & Capraro, (2015), Menon (2015) and Raman, (2020)).

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<sup>3</sup> The country’s Gender Inequality Index (GII) at 0.563 is worse than the world average of 0.450 further affirms the societal discrimination towards gender-based leadership role.

<sup>4</sup> Comprising of Central University, State University, State Private University, Deemed University, Institute of National Importance and IIMs

Considering that the leadership experiences of women are positioned at the nexus of age, race/ethnicity, social class, and organisational contexts along with gender (Dill & Zambrana, 2009), the primary thrust of the study was to use an intersectional lens to throw light on the process which enabled the successful few moved up the ladder. The study argued that upbringing, exposures during early childhood years, and social background played a critical role in women's success as leaders.

### **Understanding the Place of Women Leaders in India**

Several studies in the past years have illustrated the plight of women professionals as well as leaders engaged with Indian academics. These studies highlighted the harassment, discrimination, and exclusion women occupying the administrative positions faced, consistently (Kumari, 2014; Yadav & Lata, 2018). Although the Indian education sector has substantial women participation, outnumbering their male counterparts, they are significantly underrepresented in the administrative positions, thereby limiting knowledge about the competencies, effectiveness, and nature of women leadership practices, as administrative leaders. Moreover, hegemonic masculinity influenced prevalent cultural perception in the country that considers women better suited in domestic roles or at the lower levels of administrative management. The Indian cultural perception and the stereotyped notion of gender roles have contributed to women going through more rigorous scrutiny in their daily job performance than their male counterparts do. Ramguttty-Wong (2000) shared a similar view that the chief executive officers reflected insensitivity towards the real problems which the women employees faced concerning work and family conflict or mentoring, to name a few, and therefore, offered no concrete actions to involve or promote them. A comparative study of Indian and Western (Australian) culture towards gender discrimination in academia by Thanacoody et al, (2006) highlighted the presence of gender stereotypes, prejudices, and sexism in both worlds. The socialisation process in skill development for successful career development is still dominated by men, where women are largely ignored and discouraged from seeking leadership roles in the universities since they continue to be considered having different and inferior qualities than the former.

On the personal front too, the majority of household responsibilities including child rearing lay with the women leaders in addition to their organizational responsibilities. Owing to the absence of appropriate organisational setup supporting the women employees, their skewed work-life balance influences their family negatively. Mentoring is another issue women leaders face, where even the women employees see the lack of female mentors in a majority of cases, as a standard norm instead of questioning the absence. Besides, there lay the issue of the reluctance of the male mentors in mentoring the female academics owing to their conservative perception towards working mothers and doubt in the role of women in management and decision-making (Sargam & Mahal, 2018; Thanacoody et al., 2006).

Although there are few positive cases where women leaders in the Indian academics have been successful in breaking the glass ceiling, still equal opportunities and exposure along with awareness about leadership rights and orientation are scarce for the majority of women educators to rise to leadership positions (Gandhi & Sen, 2020; Sargam & Mahal, 2018). At the same time, lack of sensitivity of the HEI management towards gender diversity in the leadership position, its benefits and pathways are significantly lacking, which is reflected through the absence of inclusive organisational culture fostering women leadership through effective policies and guidelines (Chanana, 2003; Gandhi & Sen, 2020). Another issue challenging the rise and sustenance of women academics is the socio-cultural mind-set of the family as well as management, including the women educators themselves (Sandberg, 2013). Although several women educators in the country are increasingly pursuing higher

studies as compared to their male counterparts, they lack leadership aspiration due to a lack of professional and personal support and mentorship. Often while prioritising familial responsibilities, they avoid professional socialising and networking, which is significant in not only providing resources but in introducing women to new contacts, knowledge, and opportunities for career progression (Gandhi & Sen, 2020).

Above all, challenges concerning women leadership not only from organisational but socio-cultural and identity perspectives are significantly under-researched. Although studies, albeit limited, have emphasised the various organisational and personal challenges women academics face while striving for leadership positions or in sustaining them, these studies have not reflected on the influence of intersectional identities of women in the struggle. Instead, they have considered women of Indian culture in general, thereby ignoring the caste, region, race, and linguistic identities moulding the gender perception and personal belief towards leadership role among both men and women. Consequently, there is a lack of adequate theoretical resolution, let alone organisational—in the form of policy formulations, training and mentorship approach, and academic governance mechanisms addressing the varied and complex obstacles women face in their rise to leadership positions.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

As stated in the introduction, the study applied the theory of intersectionality for analysing the success of the selected women leaders. A term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, (1991), intersectionality is rooted in the discrimination faced by black women in the United States. Crenshaw argued that black women are marginalised not because they are black or they are women but because they are black women. Intersectionality refers to the collective effect of different identity dimensions—race, sex, gender, class, position, sexuality or age—on the way women experience the world. The intersection of these dimensions leads to distinct obstacles and privileges experienced by women whose identities have been affected by some of these dimensions, if not all. In its multi-layered analysis of marginality, the theory of intersectionality moves beyond the debates of additive or single-lens perspectives to provide causal explanatory accounts of social discrimination or privileges (Martinez-Dy, Martin, & Marlow, 2014). (Richardson & Loubier, 2008) emphasised intersectionality as an explanation of the simultaneous experiences of oppressions and privileges by different social class groups. Although under their position and power, women leaders are privileged, still, they experience marginalisation (Poltera & Schreiner, 2019).

The basic premise of intersectionality emphasises reflexivity in social characteristics without substituting ‘one marginality by the other’ or generalisability of lived experiences of different individuals (Banerjee & Ghosh, 2018; 3). Considering so, the westernised parameters of applying intersectionality in understanding the success stories and constraints faced by Indian women is problematic, due to the ‘potential and actual interrelationships of historically and geographically specific’ notions of gender oppression (Patil, 2013; 848). Each country has its notions of gender oppression and gender power relationship between man and women, essentially based on the local dynamics, instead of being homogenous and monolithic accounts. Indian culture—heavily influenced by “Buddhist, Vedantic and Yogic psychology, as well as derivative epic and Pauranic literature,” possess both individualist and collectivist traits. Therefore, Indian culture stresses family and authoritarian values in guiding an individual’s approach towards work, where women essentially have two primary roles—a devoted, dutiful, obedient, and subordinate wife and nurturing and loving mother acting as a powerful protector of her children as well (Nath, 2000).

These dichotomies in gender roles are deeply ingrained in the psyche of Indians, both male, and female, contributing to a culture where women are rendered inferior and of lesser worth (Nath, 2000), even by women. Further, this perception towards gender roles and

stereotyping differ across caste, linguistic culture, and region of belonging in the country. Often women belonging to the lower stratification of the social structure—the ‘low born’ face greater oppression than their ‘higher caste’ women counterparts do. However, an in-depth understanding of the differences in women's oppression across caste and region is still absent in Indian feminist literature (Chakravarti, 2018). Present-day India has witnessed the emergence of the nationalist narrative of gender oppression, deeply embedded in nationalist narratives of culture, tradition, and history—a shift from prevailing socialist and Marxist narrative based on racial (skin colour) and social inequalities involving caste, class, gender, and language (see, e.g. Kumar, (2010) and Menon, (2015)). The nationalist narrative of gender emphasises the construction of the self (the women belonging to the native or majority population) against the immigrant (or minority women) other. The narrative constructs a monolithic account of gender oppression, ignoring the intersectional gender identities involving inter- and multicultural aspects as well (Abdou, 2017; Sayigh, 1998). Moreover, the narrative also uses women and their bodies as the agency (or symbol) through which debates of Indian culture (traditional/modern, authentic/modern, spiritual/material religious/secular, feminine/masculine) are contested and resolved, without actual concern on the women’s struggle and resolution of these issues of struggle (Rao, 1999).

Therefore, understanding the role of local dynamics of the development of Indian women, both as individuals and leaders were needed, along with considering the global parameters of intersectionality. The Indian education sector has long witnessed the presence of wage discrimination not only based on the only gender but caste and region (referring to urban and rural areas) as well. Agrawal (2014) presented substantial wage differences between gender groups as well as different social groups comprising of non-scheduled castes and scheduled castes/scheduled tribes. Moreover, the study showed rural areas having a more pronounced wage gap among social groups than urban areas along with pre-labour market discrimination concerning education, health, and nutrition. Sabharwal, Henderson, & Joseph, (2020) further projected that participation in conferences—women and scheduled caste academics in comparison to men and upper-caste academics underrepresent a significant aspect of broader professional development within academics—. The study, further emphasised the process of access to conference in the Indian academics being ‘embroiled in relational processes of social exclusion based on gendered and caste-based micro politics, despite there are formal policies in place (Sabharwal et al., 2020; p.12).

This study, through the application of the intersectionality theory, therefore, attempts to study the lived experiences of women leaders in academics who could rise to higher leadership positions, while others with similar educational qualifications, culture, class or age could not, through the Indian notion of patriarchy. Thus, a single lens of gender discrimination or gender inequality, as well as international parameters of intersectionality, was not sufficient to provide an answer to how these leaders being women, could succeed and reach top positions in Universities and institutes of higher education.

## Methods

As this study examined the key competencies and strategies that helped women to advance in their careers using intersectionality as the theoretical perspective, the application of a qualitative approach was necessary (Weick, 2007). B.A. Cole (2009) recommended using narratives in intersectional work for illuminating hidden complexities. We used a descriptive phenomenological approach to conduct in-depth interviews using semi-structured and open-ended research instruments and understand their experiences independently instead of comparing them with experiences of male counterparts thereby avoiding impacting their perceptions negatively (García-González, Forcén, & Jimenez-Sanchez, 2019). The interview questions were kept open-ended to capture maximum possible unexpected themes to emerge.

A protocol was prepared to guide the interview (Yin, 2013)—focussing on only the psychosocial and demographic factors and organisational contexts to have a deeper understanding of the constraints and opportunities faced, contributing altogether to their success as leaders.

### Settings and Sample

There are very few women in academics occupying positions as Directors, Vice-Chancellor and Pro Chancellors at various higher education institutions, involving the Central University, State University, State Private University, Deemed University, Institute of National Importance, and IIMs (Edushine Advisory Group, 2017). Therefore, purposive sampling (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) was used in selecting the participants of the study, and the inclusion criteria were a minimum of five years' experience in the current top leadership role and overall experience above 15 years. Besides, we gathered insights on success stories and associated constraints experienced by women leaders from different intersections of the country. Therefore, care was taken to select the sampled population as representatives of caste (backwards and general caste), race (tribal and non-tribal), region (rural and urban areas of South and North India<sup>5</sup>), language and class (lower, middle and upper-income group). Eighteen women belonging to the top leadership positions were invited for the study, but only seven agreed to participate. The participants were from various universities and autonomous institutions of India, holding top leadership positions like Vice-Chancellor, Director, or Member of Governing Body of Indian universities and higher educational institutes of repute. We engaged with the participants using various types of 'self-disclosure (Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2002) before the interviews, which enabled an environment of trust resulting in a frank and open exchange of information and honesty in data revelation (Shenton, 2004).

Besides, considering the cultural dimensions associated with the participants, we tested our questions with experienced peers and shared an interview guide with the participants before conducting the actual interview. While the testing of the questionnaire enabled us to take cognisance of the difficult questions which might affect the intersectional sensitivity (primarily cultural), the interview guide enabled the participants to be prepared with the nature of questions to be asked in the interview (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Moreover, considering the nuances of intersectional identities of the participants and maintaining the trustworthiness of the data, we collected the participants' validation of the data by debriefing the analytical results with them for agreement (J. W. Creswell, 2013; McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2019).

Each interview session, on average, lasted between 60 to 75 minutes, with additional sessions wherever required, dealing with topics of childhood trivia like school education, parental role and role of friends and society in developing their leadership skills, familial support—both of parents and in-laws towards the educational aspiration and skill-related efficacies. The further discussion involved their perception of successful leadership, ambition, role model, attitude towards society and social norms, discrimination, and emotional stability. The last part of the discussion involved areas of organisational facilitators in career development and leadership success, the attitude of co-workers and mentors, and growth opportunities.

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<sup>5</sup> While South India here meant the four southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka, North India was represented by the rest of the Indian states, including the Deccan and North-Eastern States.

**Table 1: Participant's Socio-Economic and Demographic Background depicting intersectional identities (region, culture, and economic identities)**

Family Income (INR p.a.)	> 50,000,000	> 70,000,000	> 40,000,000	> 70,000,000	> 50,000,000	> 50,000,000	> 70,000,000
Parental Background	Government Service	Private Service	Business	Business	Government Service	Government Service	Private Service
Full-time Helping Hand	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of Dependents (Parents/Parents-in-law)	2	3	1	2	4	4	2
Number of Children	1	2	1	2	1	2	2
Marital Status	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married
Position achieved using performance-based evaluations and promotions	Evaluation	Promotion	Evaluation	Director Selection	Promotion	Evaluation	Evaluation
Highest Qualification	PhD	PhD	PhD	PhD	PhD	PhD	PhD

Region (Before marriage)	Rural	Urban	Urban	Urban	Rural	Urban	Urban
Location	Western Maharashtra	Pune	Mumbai	Chennai	Uttar Pradesh	Punjab	Chandigarh
Total Experience (in years)	14	15	30	10	15	10	5
Position Held	Vice Chancellor	Director	Vice Chancellor	Member of Governing Body	Director	Vice Chancellor	Vice Chancellor
Pseudo Name	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Case Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

**Source: Compiled by the authors**

### Findings & Discussion

The thematic analytical method of Braun & Clarke, (2006) was used for analysing the data with an inductive approach. Coding was completed in four phases. Initial codes were developed by identifying fascinating features across the entire dataset. The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used wherein a new dataset was compared with previous data and coded. Potential themes were developed by collating codes and collecting all data relevant to each potential theme. The entire dataset and themes were then reviewed to confirm that themes reflect the richness of data address the research question accurately (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The cross-analysis of each of the seven women leaders in the Indian higher education institutions revealed particular individual and organisational factors primarily playing a role in advancing them towards success in achieving the leadership position as well as maintaining it. The descriptive analyses of each of these seven cases to conclude if they followed parallel developments led to abstracting sub-themes, which were further classified into broader themes (Table 2).

**Table 2: Themes and Sub-Themes Identified from the Data Analysis**

Themes	Subthemes*
Fostering confidence since childhood	Familial Support Family Education Gender Perception Childhood role model
Personality	Optimistic Attitude Emotional Stability Interpersonal Skills Self-aspiration and efficacy
Social Facilitators	Familial Support Educational aspirations/ambition
Organisational Facilitators	Mentorship Growth Opportunities
Barriers & Challenges	Gender stereotyping- Male leaders are better performers than female leaders Lack of gender-specific facilitators and recognition- preferential treatment towards male as female, will take more career leaves than the former Family's stereotyped attitude towards women's responsibilities- Child's responsibility is only the mother's Guilt Feeling- the inherent idea of being well-balanced identities of a wife, DIL, mother, professional and others.
Strategies adopted for overcoming barriers	Developing support systems Training and Retraining Networking Expressing opinions overtly Mentoring Persistence and self-commitment

**Source: Compiled by the researchers**

**\*Normal Font: Individual Factors; Bold Font: Organisational Factors**

Five themes (three completely and two partially) reflected 14 sub-themes associated with the individual factors and three themes (one completely and two partially) reflected seven sub-themes associated with organisational factors. Further out of these, twelve individual sub-themes acted as enablers and two as deterrents; on the other hand, there were five enablers and two deterrents belonging to the organisational sub-themes, influencing the leadership success of the case participants. Although the participants belonged to heterogeneous backgrounds, including culture, socio-economic conditions, rural-urban areas, and languages, the experience overall showed similar patterns across the six themes and their respective sub-themes.

### Individual Factors

Social and developmental theories like Eccles' (1991) Expectancy-Value Theory emphasise the role of family, parental socialisation, and childhood experiences in shaping women's leadership aspirations and success (Patridge, Brustad, & Stellino, 2008; Wojtalik, 2006). From a sociological point of view, elements such as upbringing, early-life experiences, and environment play the role of motivational drivers in developing leadership values and responsibilities and personality traits to become successful leaders. Data analysis of the seven cases reflected the same while revealing that childhood and upbringing played an essential role in developing confidence and leadership qualities in them. Women are more likely to choose higher education and aspire for leadership when parental expectations include the same, as reflected from the perception of the women leaders. Familial support, their education, and gender perception were primary factors influencing the participants' outlook towards their career since early childhood, aspirations towards leadership roles as well as in becoming responsible leaders. Though the participants belonged to diverse regions (rural/urban) and cultures (Deccan, South and North India), there was a similarity in the perception and attitude of each of their families. Concerning education, the participants were the third generation to receive so, and they seldom witnessed any gender-based discrimination in their families. Although the participants faced gender discrimination and stereotyped notions on gender roles from society and relatives, their parents safeguarded them from similar incidents increased their confidence level. As Participant D described,

“My upbringing was like a girl, and I always supported and helped my mother in household work like cooking, cleaning, etc.” On the other hand, the father “used to involve me in repairing mixer, scooter, etc. at home. At the same time, my parents were very supportive of higher education, and they very well realized that education can make a difference in our lives.”

The above quote, therefore, made the inherent gender roles of the mother and father, apparent, even if the same was not practised with the offspring. Participant C reflected on a different experience, which had infused the leadership element of conflict resolution and team-building/teamwork by stating that:

“My parents always encouraged me to play outdoor games. I used to play basketball with my brother and his friends. I feel that was the time qualities like team building and conflict handling started developing in me.”

In the majority of the cases, the mother's sacrifices towards the family contributed the participants to consider them as their role models. As Participant B and F reminisced—

“I got my independent streak from my mother. The spirit of self-reliance always drove her. She is the one from whom I learned decision-making.”

“My mother is a pillar of my success. I still remember how hard she worked for bringing up my brother and me. Therefore, I had decided that I will not let her efforts go waste, and one day I will reach a position which will make her feel proud of me.”

Nonetheless, for Participants D and A, their fathers played the role of their role models by instilling within them the belief that girls can do everything. Consequently, they never felt that gender limited work roles, game playing or should not pursue a profession just because it is male dominated. Such revelation is consistent with the findings of Murphy and Reichard (2011)

that successful leaders credit their upbringing, especially parental influence behind the development of their value system. Besides, as Budhwar, Reeves, & Farrell, (2000) observed, children whose mothers prefer child-independence concerning knowledge of the city, self-reliant, active and energetic and sociable and competitive scored high in the sub-scale of leadership, self-expression, and independence. Besides, parental education, their view towards women's education and social environment are directly proportional to children's futuristic orientation. Familial support also provided a strong backbone to the participants as social facilitators in achieving the leadership positions. For instance, the spousal understanding and support of parents-in-law in carrying household chores and looking after kids, as well as educating kids to be self-reliant have enabled the participants to obtain the space for work, as and when needed. As Participant P3 stated,

“My mother-in-law always offered to stay with us whenever I had to go out for some conference or institutional assignments.”

Research has shown a positive impact of dependent children on increased productivity of women academics (Bellas & Toutkoushian, 1999), and multiple roles played by both the spouses are beneficial in enriching the lives of individuals (Ruderman et al, 2002). However, their family also posed specific problems in their career progression during their marriage and childbirth—two most crucial aspects considered in the life of women, in Indian culture, though for men professionals, the same thinking does not hold much ground. Participants emphatically mentioned that even though the life goals are similar to both genders, the impact of the same on the career progression of women is higher. Participant F further make it evident by sharing:

“I had to take a career break during the first child as there was no one at home to take care of the child. In metro cities like ours, one cannot trust the maids also. Though the break was of one year, my career went back quite more than that.”

The above experience of F illuminated two substantial aspects—the responsibility of child-rearing essentially lay with the mother and lack of organisational machinery to support the biological and social differences of women employees (Ismail et al, 2004).

Societal norms in India dictate that women should get married at an early age—a substantial portion (50-70%) of women get married by age 18-20 years—the majority of whom occur in rural areas (Singh & Samara, 1996). However, increasing job awareness and access to higher education contribute to these women not getting married or have children and instead focus on their career progression (Jensen, 2012). As Participant E reminisced,

“I got married at an early age. I had completed my post-graduate and doctorate degrees after that. Completion of these degrees paved the way for my career growth.”

Despite their higher education and consistent pursuing of career progression, the participants bowed down to the familial and societal expectations of their responsibilities as a mother. They felt their familial and motherly responsibilities should be a priority over their career and hence felt guilt when they could not fulfil those responsibilities, which was consistent with the findings of Sargam & Mahal, (2018). Nonetheless, they adopted various strategies to overcome these familial barriers and challenges faced. For instance, they developed support systems like co-opting help from various sources like help from relatives and friends, appointing domestic help on a paid basis, sharing responsibilities with the partner, or opting for childcare facilities. Besides, perceived gender stereotypes often affect career development, especially that of women, thereby questioning the hierarchical relations between gender and organisations (Rose

and Larwood, 1988). Women are often discouraged from seeking senior managerial or leadership roles in academic institutions owing to their 'different and inferior qualities' referring to their leaves during childbirth (Thanacoody et al., 2006).

Role of family inclusive of early life, as well as post-marital experiences, have developed and honed the personal thinking of the participants and enabled them to build successful career and leadership strategies. This was evident from their attributes of optimistic attitudes, interpersonal skills, emotional stability, self-aspirations and efficacy, and ambitions. As concerning the optimistic attitude, Participant B observed that while she was performing well as a Principal of the institution, the management decided to obtain the private university status. She was a prospective candidate for the post of Vice-Chancellor. However, several of her male colleagues resisted the move only because of the gender issue, ignoring her contribution in developing the institution's brand name in the five years as the Principal. This negativity made her more determined and provided her confidence in getting the promotion. From the view of the Participant, it was evident that she was reluctant in linking the gender stereotype of her colleagues with her caste, socio-economic background, or physical appearance (skin colour), which are substantial aspects of discrimination in Indian culture (Chakravarti, 2018).

Similarly, their emotional stability owing to their strong family support and early-life experiences has helped them cope with the emotional challenges they faced at work. They developed it gradually as they felt it was necessary to enable them to balance work and life issues. Further, All the participants have emphasized the necessity of developing good interpersonal skills for becoming influential leaders. According to Khallad (2000) factors such as gender, socio-economic status, parents' occupation, level of education and expectations, and environment impact career aspirations. The participants also endorsed and reflected self-aspiration and belief in their competence proved to be the keys to success in achieving the leadership positions. As Participant F shared,

"I had a lot of respect for my class teacher. She always said that 'you are capable of leading this assignment and complete it successfully. This made me more confident in my capabilities as a leader, and the same has always helped me to prove myself as a successful leader until today."

The above quote makes the role of the socio-cultural settings of schools evident in shaping the minds of children, irrespective of its form (same-sex or co-educational). Their educational and self- aspirations and efficacy have further enabled them to achieve the desired qualifications and career progression.

### **Organisational Factors**

The organisational factors majorly acted either as the facilitators in the leadership achievement and success of the participants or as a hindrance to a recognition of their competence and contribution. Research has illustrated the presence of gender stereotyping and lack of gender-specific facilitators and recognition, the role of female mentorship and growth opportunities to be the most common impediments across organisations in India as well as worldwide (Kumari, 2014; Yadav & Lata, 2018). Although the participants echoed that the mentorship they received, along with the conducive growth opportunities acted as facilitators in their rise to the leadership position and honed their skills, still there was a stark absence of female mentors to look up to. Besides, the experiences shared had no mention of the role the intersectional identities played in their achievement of the leadership position or as hindrances to their sustenance. The participants identified at least one mentor in their lives, playing the pivotal role of influencing and shaping their personalities and even their leadership identity as

well. For Participant B, it was her Ph.D. guide, and for E, it was the Director of the institution. However, Participant A stressed the need for female role models and mentors in organisations to make the environment more inclusive and utilise the female leaders' competencies:

“To increase the number of women in leadership roles, mentoring and encouraging them is crucial. Women leaders are more beneficial to an organization as they are more hardworking and committed when compared to their male counterparts.”

The above shed no light on how the women leaders were nurtured or what they did as leaders to their women staff to ensure inclusivity. Concerning growth opportunities, the participants generally found that their organizations offered immense opportunities for their growth. They were encouraged to visit benchmarked universities abroad, attend national and international conferences and workshops. They strongly felt that such opportunities moulded them professionally as well as personally. However, there is little reflection on the equal provision of all women staff in the respective institutions, where career progression is solely based on competence and not on intersectional identities. There was no evidence to analyse if the case participants were benefitted due to their specific intersectional identities over their female colleagues.

Further, another interesting aspect that became known was to view the student-mentor relationship in an intricate and socially ‘wrong’ image. Participant E, belonging to rural India, emphasised that spending more time in her male mentor’s room for discussing important learning aspects created a ‘wrong image’ of her. However, other participants did not share such an experience; therefore, it cannot be said as a common issue. Nonetheless, the majority absence of similar experience does not negate the fact that in Indian society women’s dignity is associated mainly with their perceived behaviour, and little significance is given to the right to life, physical integrity, and privacy (Mishra, 2017).

Nonetheless, the case organisations were also not without gender-based discrimination practices and differential treatment of colleagues. Most primary of them was the frequent proving of their competency as an employee as well as a leader. The participants unanimously agreed that they had to work harder than their male colleagues to prove their capabilities did. They mentioned that gaining trust and respect from their superiors and male colleagues was never easy for them. At the same time, the participants complained of the preferential attitude towards the male gender while assigning responsibilities and awarding promotions, during various phases of their career. They described that as women, they were expected to behave in a certain way, in fulfilling their duties instead of letting them implement their strategy. Women are considered as subordinates in Indian society to their male counterparts because of their biological differences (Deshpande, 2010; Mosse, 2018). Male colleagues or superiors brought the same stereotype into the organization. They mentioned that it always proved difficult to break these stereotypes and to move up the career ladder. The reflections proved the lacunae of organisational facilities in recognising specific biological differences of women and often the phase of childbirth is seen as an impediment on their job capabilities thereby reducing them as sub-ordinates to their male colleagues. As Participant A added:

“...it proves that childcare is considered to be a mother’s responsibility in Indian society. We are still not ready to share the responsibilities or change attitudes.”

Nonetheless, the women leaders turned these environmental and attitude challenges in their institutions into opportunities by focussing on training and retraining to enhance their capabilities, strategic networking across organisational and functional boundaries, questioning the system by overt expression of their opinions and mentoring. Elvitigalage et al (2006), in

their study, concluded that the lack of training and development in the workplace is a significant factor affecting female career development. Concerning networking, studies revealed that networking is very crucial for a successful career as it helps in developing resources like strategic insight, technical knowledge, emotional support, and advice (Casciaro, Gino, & Kouchaki, 2014; Wolff & Klaus, 2009). On similar grounds, Participant F shared,

"One of the most important things I realized early in my career is that ability to network strategically makes you stand out and helps your development. Women usually focus on administrative tasks, as they believe doing is more important, whereas men counterparts spend more time on networking and skill upgrades. They do all the talk and women do a lot of walks."

The participants highlighted their strong position of voicing out their opinions and raising issues unapologetically—be it in asking for promotions when they felt deserving or in building their career without depending on their mentors or bosses to do so. The involvement of the participants in positions of power and decision-making is evident from Participant D's experience:

"... when I joined this organisation, I was in middle management level. I used to be on the field with students for around 4 – 5 hours for their internship projects, and there was no women's washroom at that site. I talked to the management and made them understand this basic requisite and got the washroom constructed in the next three months!"

However, the quote also makes the silence of most of the women staff in voicing out their opinions also evident, along with the ignorance of the management towards women's essential requirement concerning health and hygiene.

Mentorship is still a male-dominated area in Indian academics despite there being a considerable female presence in the lower and middle management levels. However, the presence of female mentors in institutions is reported with greater 'empathy for the concerns and feelings discussed with than men' indicating the more significant role of psychosocial functions in the involvement of women mentors (Chandler, 1996; p.82). The presence of women mentors from different culture, caste, race, community, physical appearance, and language becomes all the more essential when understanding from an intersectional point of view as mentorship is about advocacy— active promotion of the protégé in diverse contexts (Inman, 2018) -a more significant concern in Indian academics considering the dropouts owing to marriage and other cultural restraints.

Access to education in India is very unevenly distributed across caste, religion, gender, and social classes. In addition, Indian families being patriarchal develop a female child in altruistic behaviour so that she can become a good daughter, wife, and daughter-in-law in the future. Using an intersectional lens; we found that the gender of women in academics, intersecting with other social aspects has resulted in various advantages or disadvantages. In particular, the data presented here has moved discussions of intersectionality beyond considerations of multiple sources of disadvantage, to consider how women in academics can draw upon gender as a source of confidence to break the status quo. The study participants, belonged to diverse regions, social class, and castes, but there was a similarity in their family backgrounds and upbringing. All of them could shatter the glass ceilings with high self-aspirations and determination proving that aspiring women can be helped in developing their leadership skills through various training programs and mentoring.

Conclusion

The study of lived experiences of successful women leaders in academia from India using intersectionality as a theoretical perspective identified factors that positively influenced the progression of the selected women. Although under their position and power, women leaders are privileged, still, they experience marginalisation (Poltera, 2019). Nonetheless, the majority of them talked about their upbringing during childhood years, and parental socialisation in the form of their involvement in decision-making played a significant role in developing their self-confidence, aspirations, and leadership qualities, which is lacking in the extant literature available. This phenomenological study with a specific focus on women leaders in Indian educational institutions contributed significantly to the existing literature available on women in leadership. The findings have implications for aspiring women in developing strategies to advance to leadership positions. The research provided valuable insights into Indian society as well where the girl child is generally neglected and gets deprived of education. Educational institutions, government, and apex bodies in education may benefit from a deeper understanding of the positive influences of female mentorship, competence-based growth opportunities, training and retraining, and involvement of women in decision-making and their specific leadership styles as well as challenges faced with lack of gender-specific facilities, inclusive environment, and gender-stereotype in job recognition. The study has implications for the concerned academic authority to create a conducive environment to encourage women's participation in leadership positions and voicing their opinions overtly, especially from the perspective of their intersectional identities. The study provided valuable insights into the factors and strategies contributing to the professional advancement of women leaders in Indian academia.

Nonetheless, from the intersectional perspective, not much data was available on the link between their respective caste, race, and physical appearance and the six themes and sub-themes incurred. This being the study's limitation also reflects the presence of discomfort on women leaders in openly sharing their experiences based on these intrinsic parameters. This necessitates further studies on similar issues to enable women leaders, despite their position of power and education, to become open about their most profound challenges faced and the role of the society in the same. Discrimination based on caste, region, language, and skin colour is still a significant problem for a woman from all aspects of life, even in the leadership position because of certain stereotyped notions being inherent in these aspects, which are hard to wipe off in a short time. The feminist narrative is still in its nascent stage in India, which, when linked with gender and leadership studies, will enable obtaining more enriched experiences of women, something which this study could not. Nonetheless, it paved the way for conducting similar studies by establishing a discourse of intersectional identities associated with leadership experiences.

### **Conflicts/Competing Interests**

The authors have no conflicts or competing interests to report.

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