Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling: Leadership Practices of Women Leaders in Higher Education

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Abstract The study aimed to investigate the proficiency of women academic leaders in public universities, Pakistan. The transformational leadership approach was used to conduct this study. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to collect data. A convenient sampling technique was applied to collect data from twenty women leaders from the three public universities of Punjab. The interview questions were based on the six-dimensions of transformational leadership. The deductive method was applied to reach conclusions. The results identified that women academic leaders were not that proficient in their transformational leadership practices since four out of six TL-dimensions emerged crucial in all the three public universities.

Key Words: Transformational Leadership; Women Leaders; Public Universities; Leadership Practices.

Introduction

The President of the World Bank pointed out that "the empowerment of women is smart economics" (Zoellick 2014, p.2). The western world is increasingly adopting gender balance policies in almost all walks of life, a few examples are from Europe and America. But the other side of the picture is different where developing countries are still living in a patriarchal society, for instance, Mali, Syria, Chad, Yemen and Pakistan (World Economic Forum's report, 2014). Nevertheless, women are struggling to prove their identities as powerful leaders and to get required gratification through their matchless contribution, motivation and talents.

In their research, Roomi and Rehman (2012) pointed out that in a patriarchal society like Pakistan, women are striving to acquire leadership positions in their institutes. Interestingly, in Pakistan, universities are leading by men with a few notable exceptions. Generally, it is considered that males have strong leadership traits as compared to their women counterparts (Lombard, 2018). Meanwhile, during the last two decades, remarkable changes have emerged in the academic landscape in the country by establishing women universities. Moreover, a substantial increase in female faculty with strong academic background has also been observed in Pakistani universities (Batool, Sajid, & Shaheen, 2013).

A number of women colleges have been upgraded to universities and this up-gradation provided opportunities to female faculty to serve on leadership positions. On the other hand in co-education public universities, we hardly find women on leadership positions especially serving as vice-chancellors and deans. Certainly, there are a number of females working as chairperson of the departments. But, leaders at the department level rarely get a chance to contribute to institutional policy and decision-making (Sarwar & Abbasi, 2013). Anyhow, questions arise in relation to these leadership positions; are women's academic leaders prepared for such leadership roles? Because leadership is a different role in contrast to teaching (Morris, 2008). Another important concern occurs while studying leadership practices that how academic leaders lead their teachers, how do they work together and to what extent they give autonomy and motivation to each other?

It is understood that a leader cannot work without his/her team and this conviction launches the concept of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders help and support their followers to set high standards in

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their organizations (Burns, 1978). Taking into account the increase in women academic leaders, this research paper discussed the experiences of women academic leaders in public universities by using the lens of transformational leadership.

Theoretical Background

Over the years the glass ceiling metaphor prevalent in organizations obstructing women to participate in leadership roles. Although, this stance has been changing over the period of time due to the fast-changing trends in societies but it is still there (see, Fernandez & Campero, 2017). The under-representation of women is prevailing even across the developed countries from Europe, the UK, the USA, and New Zealand (Morley, 2014).

Thus, gender disparity in higher education and moreover in academic leadership continues in the twenty-first century (Collings et al., 2011). Various factors explain this less representation in higher education e.g., career mobility, responsibilities, recruitment and promotion processes and organizational culture, etc. Next, the contextual factor is also another key element in the under-representation of women in academic leadership (see, Machado-Taylor & White, 2014). In a patriarchal society, women have fewer opportunities to get leadership positions and run leadership positions effectively. The case is not different in developing countries, especially in South Asia – Nepal, Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan and also in Pakistan, women are facing the identical issues as to their leadership positions (Morley & Crossouard, 2015).

To meet up international commitments, Pakistan is trying hard to meet international commitments e.g., women empowerment. Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan is continuously trying to empower women through higher education. Since its inception, establishing women universities is part of its reform agenda. Resultantly, five women colleges are now functioning as independent universities in Punjab and additionally, a Women University established for the purpose (Batool et al., 2013). These universities are independent in their policies and legislation. This is a successful initiative towards increasing women enrollment in higher education in general and to empower women in higher education in particular (Sarwar & Abbasi, 2013).

A recent study conducted by Shepherd (2017) in respect of women leadership in higher education revealed that a massive amount of literature is available stressing on leadership but less is known about women academic leadership. Generally, it is believed that women's leadership based on traditionally feminine traits. Such as being intuitive, collaborative and empathetic (Peterson, 2016) often referred to as transformational leadership style (Post & Byron, 2015). Attaining leadership positions, women leaders in higher education have to learn how to position themselves in the organization. This provides the basis of adopting a transformational leadership style as Eagly and Carli (2007) identified that transformational leaders work as role models for their followers to develop trust and confidence, envision future and giving them autonomy.

Transformational Leadership

Organizations are increasingly adopting a horizontal leadership style (Bacon, 2014). Such leadership theories allow leaders to work together with their followers. Many leadership theories centered on this approach, but transformational leadership is the most researched theory in literature (Lai, 2014; Nordin, 2012). Initially, Burns (1978) presented the concept of transformational leadership. Over a period of time, this concept has been taken considerable attention from the researchers. The transformational theory has been evolving over time and many underpinned dimensions have been explored by researchers.

The transformational leadership theory has been widely used in all types of organizations including academic organizations. However, after twenty years, Ramsden (1998) presented the concept of academic leadership. He elaborated that a transformational leader positively shares the vision and related goals of the organization to their followers to get the work done. Transformational leaders set high expectations and fostering an environment where staff can share the organizational goals and work together to achieve these goals. Moreover, Ramsden points to transformational leadership as "an excellent opportunity to gain trust and support from followers" (p.66).

As to the theoretical construct of transformational leadership, there is an ongoing debate about the dimensions of transformational leadership. Originally Burns (1978) identified the four dimensions of

transformational leadership; leader's charisma or idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. After several modifications and elaborations, researchers explored the new dimensions of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2008; Bass, 1985).

These modifications mapping the new transformational leadership models as explored by different authors (Bass, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1987). For example, Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moormanand Fetter (1990) identified six dimensions of transformational leadership: articulating a vision; providing an appropriate role model; fostering the acceptance of goals; setting high-performance expectations; providing individualized support; and providing intellectual stimulation. The reviews of the transformational leadership dimensions across the world show that the approach of Podsakoff et al. (1990) can be considered as the full transformational leadership model integrating the variety of behaviors identified by different authors. We will focus on these six dimensions in our study.

Research Question

The following research questions will drive this study:

To what extent women academic leaders are proficient in their leadership practices by adopting a transformational leadership style and how do they deal with their faculty?

Methodology

Procedure

The present qualitative research aimed to study the women leadership practices in public sector universities. A semi-structured interview questionnaire was designed to collect data from women's academic leaders. The interview protocol was developed after a thorough literature review based on transformational leadership. Two general and the six specific questions in relation to transformational leadership were designed to collect data from women academic leaders. The general questions were comprising their introduction. Next, the six interview questions reflected the six dimensions of transformational leadership presented by Podsakoff et al. (1990). Informed consent was obtained from all the women academic leaders. Appointments were scheduled with all individual participants to conduct interviews. The names of the universities and respondents were coded to ensure the anonymity of the data.

Sample

There are 34 public universities in Punjab. The convenient sampling technique was applied to collect data from the three universities of Punjab province. A women university from Lahore and the two co-education universities from southern Punjab were involved in this study. Since the faculties/departments are considered as a main operational unit in the universities (Branson, Franken, & Penney 2015). All the available women academic leaders (chairpersons of the departments) were invited to take part in this study. In total, 20 women academic leaders participated in this research. Women academic leaders were working as chairpersons of the departments. Their age ranged between 35 to 55 years and their working experience was ranging between 2 to 20 years. The names of the universities and respondents were concealed to ensure anonymity.

Data Analysis

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim in view of analysis. WeftQDA (2006) was used to manage and analyze the data. Deductive method was applied for data reduction. First, all the interviews loaded in WedfQDA software to manage and highlights the reiterated ideas in relation to each interview questionnaire. Secondly, all the reiterated responses sorted out and linked to each interview question in relation to transformational leadership. Responses were presented in the form of quotes. These responses explain the practices and approaches of women academic leaders. In order to ensure inter-rater reliability, five interviews were coded independently by the first author and a researcher not familiar with the study. The inter-coder reliability was .86 which is in line with the benchmark of 80 % suggested by Matthew et al. (1994).

Results & Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the proficiency of women academicians as leaders in public universities. A semi-structured interview protocol helped to collect data. The collected data sorted out on the basis of each transformational leadership dimension. We will present the results concerning to each transformational leadership dimension. Since there is a lack of research-based on women academic leadership, we corroborated our findings with the general transformational leadership literature.

Articulating a Vision

Women academic leaders were asked about 'articulating a vision'. The majority of the women leaders were not sure in defining the vision of their departments. They were mostly talking about the university's vision or suggesting some steps to set up a vision. Many of the leaders were not clear about the institutional vision too. As one of the leaders stated:

"In my opinion vision is something to plan the future and setting up goals Thus, for me the first goal was, all the faculty should get their Ph.D. degrees......We have upgraded our courses to integrate into programs...... What I think, the vision is seeing your university and departments..... How it would be after 10 or 15 years whether I am around or not."

Another leader stated her opinion about articulating a vision:

"Vision is based on your experience. It is multidimensional and with your multidimensional experience you become a visionary person. It is a continuous process. Every day you have several questions and different solutions."

This was the most reiterated response from the leaders in relation to this TL-dimension. It was observed that women academic leaders were ambitious about their academic positions, and they were planning to set up some goals to excel in their departments. Nevertheless, you need a lot of skills and training to set up such initiatives for your organization since there is always an option of failure. The literature on leadership research suggested that academic leaders who spend most of their time in teaching and learning, they are not prepared for leadership positions. Leadership is a full-time job where you require leadership and management skill to handle the matters effectively (Morris, 2008). Our findings are not in line with earlier leadership research. However, earlier findings and literature suggested that leaders should be equipped with leadership skills for the smooth functioning of their organizations (Gmelch, 2013).

Providing an Appropriate Role Model

As to this dimension, all women academic leaders were very much clear in their answers. Their responses were evident in their practices since they were asked to quote some examples. One of the leaders explains in the following way:

"Whatever, I think needs-to-be-done by others, I have to do it first..... If you think you are a boss, and you have to be respected, it does not work anymore. Your work earns you respect."

Another leader stated her opinion in the following way:

"Being a leader you have to walk your talk then people will follow you....whatever you suggest for others you have to do it first then people will follow you. I always initiate and then I asked my faculty to follow me and I am always there wherever they need my help."

To sum up this TL-dimension, all women academic leaders were very much clear that how a leader can be a role model for his team. But almost half of the leaders just speculating about being a role model as identified through their conversation, however, realities might be different. Nevertheless, our findings are corroborating with the earlier literature where Fullwood, Rowley and Delbridge (2013) identified the structure of the academic organizations, which clearly set up the tradition of following their leaders.

Fostering the Acceptance of Group Goals

The next interview question was based on the TL-dimension "fostering the acceptance of group goals." Women leaders were asked how they foster collaboration among faculty members, interesting and diverse responses were identified. Some of the responses were quite severe that show non-cooperation and conflicts among faculty

members. However, a few responses certain on the fact that a leader cannot run his department without the help of his colleagues. A leader presented the example of collaboration in the following manner:

"I will give you an example of conducting research…. we plan research together, work together and publish together….this earn me a lot of respect from my colleagues. They feel delighted and motivated."

But another leader responded in the following way:

"The culture of collaboration is diminishing….people prefer working in isolation. They hardly share their ideas…..and ready to work with someone….I usually assign them individual tasks….and they do it happily."

Another stated more specifically:

"(…) to some extent, they do have collaboration….you cannot put constraints on the staff members particularly in science subject. Everybody is having his own area of specialization."

These findings were quite unexpected and challenging since higher education is changing a lot and universities cannot progress without working together. Collaboration helps in many ways to handle tough situations, winning research grants, handling students' matters etc.

Thus, our findings are to some extent in line with available research. We can link this response to cultural factors which usually play their role to determine the organizational environment. Aktas, Gelfand and Hanges (2015) conducted his research about the culture tightness and looseness in view of leadership. They identified in their research, the organizational culture is entirely depending on leaders' perception that how he / she wants his /her organization to work. Since successful organizations are rapidly moving towards collegial culture, it is the responsibility of the academic leaders to develop the culture of collaboration and sharing.

High Performance Expectations

The forth TL-dimension is about setting up high-performance expectations. Women leaders were asked about setting up standards for their faculty members in relation to their performance. We got mix responses, the majority of the leaders were not clear about the performance standards. They were talking about routine matters. Some of them claim to follow university standards. Since the public universities have set the pattern of jobs. People have secure jobs so they pay less attention to standards, they just follow the routine.

"Everyone is fully aware of what they have to do in view of their promotion and career. I motivated them in terms of research to write more articles."

Another leader shared her practices in the following way:

(…) we did take feedback from students about their teachers. Time to time we discussed with the teachers about their classes and their courses…. and often I go to their classes as well.

A few leaders who were quite diligent about their performance they list down some standards for their faculty members. These findings are not in line with national and international research. Ullah, Ajmal and Rahman (2011) conducted research in Pakistani context based on quality indicators for higher education we can link these findings with our research results because maintaining the quality standards in the campus is the prime responsibility of leaders.

Providing Individualized Support

As to this fifth dimension in relation to providing support to the faculty members, women leaders were quite motivated sharing their responses. They were fully aware how to provide support to their colleagues. They quote many examples that how they have been helping their colleagues in personal and professional matters. A leader shared her experience in a following way:

Usually, I support them in their issues even in their problems…They do come up with their problems; they confide in me, and I confide in them…. It's a two-way process…I like being with them. There are moments when we have disagreements, but we sit down and reconcile…(….)

Another leader said:

"I provide a facilitative environment. I always welcome them to sort out their problems. We have continuous interaction with each other, we have been talking, discussing, solving out the problems. If there are deadlines, so I make sure that there are enough time to work on it."

Our findings are completely in line with the literature, the transformational leaders fully support their followers. Parrish (2015) concluded in his research that transformational leaders helped their colleagues in the time of trouble.

Intellectual Stimulation

Again interesting results were identified in relation to this TL-dimension. When leaders were asked what motivate your teachers for high quality work. They presented many examples, speculation and routines but overall, they were not clear how an academic leader can motivate his team members.

A leader shared her thoughts in a following way:

"When you have a lot of workload, several teaching hours, I don't think so there would be any motivation left in you. At the end of the day, you will just get exhausted."

Another said:

"It is so rewarding whatever efforts you put in and you equip the students and you see they are using knowledge….It is very rewarding and when you get appreciation and good remarks from your students."

These positive findings given intellectual stimulation is in line with the available research. Hicklin, Meier, & O'Toole (2009) academic leaders have job security and financial incentives which give them ultimate motivation to perform up to the mark. But this raised questions for leaders, they should learn the strategies beyond financial incentives to motivate their teachers to perform well in their fields.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although, this research paper tried to study the practices of women academic leaders in public universities which is indeed a great contribution to the existing pool of research especially in the Pakistani context. Nevertheless, our study is not without limitations, first, we only included academic leaders in our study. This limits our vision to see the other side of the picture. Future research can focus on inviting faculty/followers of these leaders to study their stance about their leaders. Second, qualitative data helped to explore the in-depth opinion of the respondents but was limited to certain questions and answers. Thus, next to interviews other research instruments, questionnaires or observation can be useful to study the leadership practices and to enrich the study results. Third, more universities can be included in the sample to get a bigger picture of the leadership practices of the women academic leaders.

Future research can also study the factors affecting leadership practices. These crucial results also call for leadership training for these women academicians. Since literature suggested that teaching and leading is a different phenomenon. A leadership position demands different traits as compare to professor or researcher (Morris, 2008). Academicians need to learn from the corporate sector. They should prepare themselves for such leadership positions. There should be pre-service and in-service training for academic leaders. Future research can focus on women leadership development. Next, the Higher Education Commission and Universities should plan some leadership development programs for these academic leaders to equip them with the required skills.

Conclusions

This research paper aimed to investigate the proficiency of women academic leaders in their leadership practices in the public universities of Punjab. Results identified that women academic leaders were not that proficient in the following transformational leadership dimensions: articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, high-performance expectations and intellectual stimulation. Women academic leaders just shared their routines and speculating the ideas, but actually, they were not capable of setting up the vision for their departments, fostering collaboration among faculty, setting up working standards and motivating their teachers. As to the next two TL-dimensions, leaders were quite clear in all the three universities, to be a role model for their teachers and providing them support in their personal and professional matters.

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