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## THE DOMINANT TRAITS FOR WOMEN TO BECOME ACADEMIC LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A CONCEPT PAPER

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### ABSTRACT

*Gender equality is an issue that is currently being promoted at the workplace, but still, many women are underrepresented as leaders. To be a leader is not an easy task, nor is it a comfortable position as it comes with the stigma that this is meant for men because of patriarchal perception. This paper discusses the women academic leaders' experience in higher education institutions and how they are perceived, especially from their male counterparts. In addition, there are discussions on the missing parameters projected in this research area. Moreover, most of the past studies' population focused on the private sector and less on higher education institutions, specifically in public higher education institutions. Hence, this study discusses the women academics' dominant traits in public higher education institutions deemed suitable for leadership positions*

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## 1. Introduction

Since the first wave of feminism in 1848 by Elizabeth Cady and Lucretia Mott during the Seneca Falls Convention, women are constantly striving for equal rights (History.com Editors, 2021). However, women remain underrepresented at the top management level, and would be seen as an exception when contrasted to men in high-ranking roles, particularly in higher education institutions (Chin, 2011). Women are frequently assigned provisional or interim posts as they progress through the hierarchy (Steward, 2009). Apparently, despite the changing population trends, the percentage of women academic leaders is still considered low worldwide (Chin, 2011).

The gender inequality in higher education was very noticeable previously. The wealthy white men had upheld American higher education institutions up to the 19th century (The American Federation of Teachers, 2011). Women have embodied an exceedingly small percentage as professors in the U.S. in the early 1800s (Parker, 2015). In Ireland, for instance, the issue of gender disparity in the 19th century was visible where privileged middle-class men were the central stronghold. The higher education institutions there opposed women's presence even with the Irish Universities Act of 1908 (Harford, 2018). The Malaysian landscape was not anywhere different back then. There were many men in universities' top-level positions like Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Head of Department, Deputy Dean, and most of the time, the appointments were due to political influence (Omar, 1993). Also, the number of women lecturers in the early days of higher education in Malaysia was limited to the number of female students entering the higher education institutions to be in the said positions (Omar, 1993).

In today's world, women are progressing far in this field that men once dominated. Women empowerment following World War II began to overflow the system due to forced labour during the war (The American Federation of Teachers, 2011). Moreover, the increased feminism programs and household prosperity also led women to further gained momentum in higher education (The American Federation of Teachers, 2011). Deem et al. (2005) also pointed out that most of their respondents in the study said gender equality has already been achieved in higher positions placement. For example, although the percentage of women academic leaders are advancing at a slow rate, around 0.75 per cent per annum in the U.K. (Savigny, 2014), the number of women in American higher education institutions for managerial roles has increased to 62 per cent between 1999 to 2009 (Aud et al., 2013).

With this improvement, the question will be centred around the qualities and traits needed for women to make headway into the leadership ladder. What makes a woman capable of becoming a leader? Hence, this paper discusses the dominant traits of women leaders, specifically in higher education institutions.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Women Leaders in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions**

In Malaysia, the number of women as top leaders in higher education institutions is minimal. As of 2021, there are only two women as the Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Dato' Dr. Nor Aieni Mokhtar at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu and Prof. Dr. Raha Abdul Rahim at Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka. Previously, Datuk Rafiah Salim was the first woman in Malaysia history to be appointed as the Vice-Chancellor in Universiti Malaya in 2006 (The Star, 2006). On the other hand, Prof. Datin Paduka Dr. Aini Ideris, the first woman Vice-Chancellor at Universiti Putra Malaysia, just finished her term in August 2020 after being in the office since January 2016. In the interview by Sani (2018), she mentioned that "even if many women are competent and capable, there are still some limitations when it comes to climbing to higher positions. We do not shout loud enough about our accomplishments".

In Islamic societies, appointing women to lead is rare (Sharma, 2012). The former woman Vice-Chancellor at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Tan Sri Dato' Seri Prof. Emerita Dr. Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hasan Shahabudin, revealed that it was not an easy feat to be a female Vice-Chancellor,

especially when there is an Islamic Studies Department exists in the university (Sharma, 2012). In addition, she further added that:

*"I do not have any problem internationally with my achievements in United Nation bodies, World Health Organization, International Labour Organization, etc. However, locally, appointing women as Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and even as a Deputy Dean is deemed unfitting. Perhaps, the men do not like the assertive women in this culture; they do not like women who produce great outcomes or speak up. Therefore, they will not offer women's names as leaders or ensure that we are given the leadership positions."*

Moreover, Tan Sri Dato' Seri Prof. Emerita Dr. Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hasan Shahabudin said that she received the order from the government to quickly internationalise the university, which has a reputation for being nationalistic (Sharma, 2012). Also, it means the Vice-Chancellor position in Malaysia is a political appointment and being a Vice-Chancellor under this circumstance was not as simple as it might be seen. This is similar to the study by Omar (1993), where she mentioned that top-level positions in Malaysian higher education institutions are mainly due to political goals. The Prime Minister's Office appoints the Vice-Chancellor on the Minister of Education's suggestion, and among all the needed qualities to become one, this person also needs to understand and accept the current government's ideology and goals. (Omar, 1993).

Similarly, Malay women in higher education face a confusing range of social pressures that they must understand significantly to train themselves to lead in everyday life immediately. The reason of it is because women in Malaysia were enslaved to a socially constructed motherhood role, and socio-cultural customs, such as family obligations, which were frequently viewed as primarily the duty of women, therefore, hinder them from climbing into top-level roles (Morley, Berma, & Abdul Hamid, 2017). Moreover, the socio-power culture has been a major point of debate, in which many Malaysian women had a severe problem in their socially reproductive responsibilities that become normalised and naturalised, giving them with trim options for diverse abilities in universities' leadership positions (Morley, Berma, & Abdul Hamid, 2017).

## **2.2 The Theoretical Perspectives**

Many past and recent studies used social, psychological, and feminist theories to explain the gender's leadership gap. For instance, many studies used social role theory, social identity theory, role congruence theory, human capital, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, expectation states theory, and lack of fit theory to identify the leadership gap between genders (Madsen & Scribner, 2017). Furthermore, Gipson et al. (2017) highlighted that many researchers centred their studies on the gap of gender leadership based on stereotyping and discrimination theories, with 165,000 articles of leadership emerge from the Web of Science. In addition, many researchers who wrote about a gender-centred approach, which implies that women's attributes and behaviour are "unsuitable" for top leadership roles, have ignored organisational and cultural aspects in their studies (Akpinar-Sposito, 2013).

Moreover, the gender-centred perspective relies on sex-role features in "identifying" proper managerial practices is a significant flaw as the gender roles are thought to be unchangeable (Akpinar-Sposito, 2013). Definitively, 21 empirical types of research from this discovery had not provided any theoretical framework's names; thus, it will be difficult for future researchers to find their ground on women leadership (Madsen and Scribner, 2017). Thus, gender differences in leadership have no indicated theory specifically for women leaders, and the listed framework was usually outside of management and leadership studies (Madsen & Scribner, 2017).

Nevertheless, leadership theories have been long proposed in order to recognise the diversity of efficient leaders. As a result, the Trait Approach, Transformational Leadership and Skills Approach

are essential in understanding how women lead (BlackChen, 2015). Furthermore, several transformational leadership characteristics are linked with views on feminism's leadership; this alignment represents the beliefs and practices of the women's rights movement and women's rising in politics (Wakefield, 2017). With this, it can be expected that feminist leadership and transformational theory integrate one another on the nature of power, psychological and personal aspect of women leadership (Wakefield, 2017). On top of that, transformational leadership offers an alternative to the standard leadership approach that has predominated women's study for the past 75 years (Phillips, 1995).

At the same time, the combination of qualities and characteristics can be seen to predict leadership as well (Zaccaro, 2007). However, the trait theory was dominant in predicting the masculine (men) leadership instead of feminine (women) leadership because of its central belief that the characteristics to be a leader is being born with and that usually was projected to the male gender (Jogulu & Wood, 2006). Additionally, many influential studies defined the "think manager-think male" phenomena reaffirmed the value placed on masculine attributes or traits in leadership (Schein, 1973).

The leadership traits approach can be used as the management selection strategies to identify the emerging leaders regardless of gender (Ng, Ang & Chan, 2008). In support of that, with proper policies by the management, they would be able to find promising leaders as there is no universal list to categorise emergent and excellent leaders' personalities (Ng, Ang & Chan, 2008; Cherry, 2018). Also, the appropriate way of exploring personality traits in leadership styles such as democratic, participatory, autocratic, or directive can determine the women's leadership and not just for the men (Abdallah & Jibai, 2020).

Since this paper aims to explore what type of traits to be possessed by women academics to be leaders, it will use the leadership traits approach as it is deemed suitable to identify the emerging leaders regardless of genders (Robbins & Judge, 2019). Therefore, this study next discusses the dominant traits for women to become academic leaders in higher education institutions. In this discussion, the dominant traits of successful women leaders are the foundation to identify potential leadership attributes for the other women who wish to become leaders.

## **2.3 The Dominant Traits for Women to Become Leaders in Higher Education Institutions**

According to popular belief, men may be promoted to higher leadership positions quicker than women because their qualities are attributed more to management and leadership concepts (Abdallah & Jibai, 2020). However, theoretically, women leaders have been proven to acquire diverse leadership skills as good leaders, and higher education institutions must analyse the value they placed on women leaders (BlackChen, 2015). Moreover, in a meta-analysis of gender comparisons of changing group agency, women have an upbeat leadership style in higher education institutions (Reis, 2015). Furthermore, women were primarily commended for having outstanding leadership abilities in the United States of America, and more women than men display great personality traits linked with successful leadership (Eagly, 2007). Next, let us look into several most common dominant traits of women leaders in higher education institutions. The list of dominant/leadership traits women must have to become leaders in higher education institutions discussed in the following subsections is adopted from Northouse (2009) and BlackChen (2015). They are intellectual trait, self-confidence trait, determination trait, integrity trait, sociable trait and other noteworthy traits.

### **2.3.1 Intellectual Trait**

Macfarlane (2011) defined an intellectual leader as someone who has the power to influence and motivate others via the force of their beliefs rather than power influence. The

intelligent trait in women academics can also be defined as getting themselves credentialed well to progress up the academic hierarchy (BlackChen, 2015). This leadership trait is considered the most suitable way to train the next wave of academic leaders (Ryan & Peters, 2015). Moreover, women intellectuals tend to associate more closely with the role of academic engagement than their male colleagues, particularly in terms of mentorship, committee work, and administrative tasks inside the higher education institutions (Macfarlane, 2018).

However, higher abilities do not guarantee they will communicate with their subordinates easily because their ideas are too fixated or innovative for their followers (Northouse, 2009). Therefore, they also need to have perceptual skills, solid verbal proficiency, and reasoning ability to be good leaders (Jacquart & Antonakis, 2015). Having all the skills combined with the intelligence trait can improve their professionalism and confidence level in leading the higher education institutions, and having intellectual traits correlates positively to leadership (Northouse, 2009; BlackChen, 2015).

### **2.3.2 Self-confidence Trait**

Self-confidence is the capacity to have faith in one's abilities as it involves self-assurance and self-esteem and the feeling that one can change things (Northouse, 2009). Having a high degree of confidence in a higher education institution will indicate to everyone that women academics can compete in the so-called masculine domain (BlackChen, 2015). Also, to be promoted in the leadership capacity, women academics need without a doubt to have not just experience in leading, problem-solving and communication skills, but also to be self-confident (Segovia-Pérez, Laguna-Sánchez, & de la Fuente-Cabrero, 2019).

Thus, for women academics to gain self-confidence, they must develop a symbiotic relationship with senior women professors to be groomed as leaders (BlackChen, 2015). These senior women professors must also put great effort into networking and supporting the younger women academics to generate confidence in them to lead successfully in the future (BlackChen, 2015). In addition, self-confidence should be a critical factor in the women academics' personality because this self-assurance will provide the motivation and energy needed to succeed in leadership (BlackChen, 2015).

### **2.3.3 Determination Trait**

Although women have self-determination and autonomy, the option to be a decision-maker is hindered by pervasive stereotypes primarily held by their male colleagues in academics (Al Ghamdi, 2016). However, to be successful leaders in higher education, women academics must be determined by any possible means (BlackChen, 2015). Determined people are willing to prove themselves, take the initiative, and endure adversity because a part of being determined is exhibiting power at times (Northouse, 2009). Therefore, senior women academics can mentor and coach their fellow women academics on how much determination they need to demonstrate to be good leaders (BlackChen, 2015).

### **2.3.4 Integrity Trait**

The research area in leaders' personalities, such as charisma, humility, optimism, and integrity, is renewed and recently distinguished leadership traits (Dinh et al., 2014 as cited in Hopkins & O'Neil, 2015). For example, integrity is demonstrated by those who follow a clear set of beliefs and act appropriately. People have faith in integrity leaders since they can be relied on to do what they say they will do (Northouse, 2009). Hence, women academics who display integrity automatically demonstrate that they can be dependable by their followers (BlackChen, 2015). In



addition, integrity is one of the specified leadership skills that may be more relevant in leadership roles for women (Eagly, Gartzia, & Carli, 2014).

### **2.3.5 Sociable Trait**

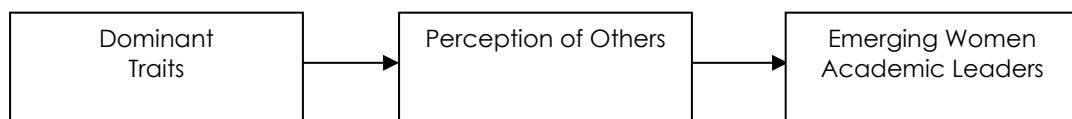
Leaders must be responsive to followers' demands and care about their wellbeing by showing sociability attributes like being friendly, polite, extroverted, diplomatic, and tactful (Northouse, 2009; BlackChen, 2015). In any career, displaying concern for others' well-being is vital, and once this impression is established, the majority of society will perceive women leaders as competent leaders (BlackChen, 2015). The team members will sacrifice to be part of the institution under women leaders who demonstrate appreciation, tact, diplomacy, consideration, understanding, and discretion (Dea & Shibeshi, 2015). The sociability attributes can also foster a link with other female colleagues, who will carry on these qualities to everybody they interact with (BlackChen, 2015).

### **2.3.6 Other Perceived Leadership Traits Based on Female Gender**

Women have been compared with men so often when they lead their subordinates as people perceived to be good leaders, and they must exhibit male traits instead (Reis, 2015). However, for women to be successful in academic leadership positions, they need to have traits that always support others while excelling academically at the same time (Mayer & Barnard, 2014). For instance, the first woman of "Professor Ulung" in Malaysia, Prof. Looi Lai-Meng, mentioned the hunger for knowledge implanted by her parents at a young age made her who she was (Sidek et al., 2013). She further emphasised that she was successful in her career is her deep interest in knowledge, especially in her fields. Similarly, Zeldin and Pajares (2000) advocate that women must have academic and interpersonal self-efficacy beliefs to succeed in leadership. Higher self-efficacy will make women more resilient towards the negative impact of stereotyping threats in leadership positions (Hoyt, 2005; Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007).

## **3. Conceptual Model Development**

This conceptual paper attempts to identify the dominant traits of women to become academic leaders in higher education institutions. The leadership trait approach will be the underpinning theory for this paper as it wants to pinpoint the emerging leaders among women in the higher education institutions. As mentioned by many past works in the literature, even though the leadership trait theories are unable to determine effective leaders, it can help to find potential leaders as part of the organisation's strategies to coach and mentor the prospective employees (Robbins & Judge, 2019). At the same time, based on the discussion above (in 2.2 and 2.3), one of the reasons women academics are reluctant to go for leadership is because of the perceptions they received from other people, where leadership positions are meant for men, not women. Therefore, this conceptual model (Figure 1) suggests what type of leadership traits women academics should possess to be leaders and whether perceptions from others can influence their ability to become leaders in higher education institutions.



*Figure 1. Conceptual Model of The Dominant Traits for Women to Become Academic Leaders in Higher Education Institutions*

#### **4. The Missing Parameters**

The existing body of knowledge is discussed plentifully on women in the corporate world but not as much in the non-profit and higher education environment. The studies on gender inequality in higher education have made little progress in many countries because of organisational and individual barriers and socio-cultural challenges (Mohajeri, Mokhtar & Balash, 2015). Also, scholars have address gender leadership inequality in higher education many times in Eastern, African, and Western cultures (Moody and Toni, 2015). However, many papers did not cover women leaders in Southeast Asia's higher education context (Nguyen, 2013). In addition, Malaysia is rarely mentioned in global research on women and leadership (Morley, Berma, & Abdul Hamid, 2017).

Next, a significant drawback for the research area in women leadership is that most results from other studies cannot be generalised due to sampling difficulties and diversities (Alomair, 2015). Some of the factors contributing to the drawback include the researcher's lack of expertise and possible prejudices, a lack of interest in intersectionality (e.g. focus more on Caucasian women), budgetary and time constraints, demographic accessibility (e.g. small sample size), and participant bias (Sweat, 2020). This paper also finds that most leadership evaluations were qualitative and lacked a unified organisational structure (Northouse, 2009). Nevertheless, an advanced quantitative method should investigate gender stereotypes and their consequences for women's success in the workplace because of its precise measurement of the phenomenon under consideration (Dea & Shibeshi, 2015). Hence, it is hoped that many research in Malaysia can continue to pursue study in Malaysian higher education institutions with expanding sampling size.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The study is set out because even though women occupy most academic positions in public higher education institutions, climbing into leadership positions is still challenging. Since most public higher education institutions are strongly bonded to government policies, women must be very hardworking to be vice-chancellor, deputy vice-chancellor, dean or any other top management position. Since patriarchal feeling is still strong in Malaysia, especially in the government sector, women are seen as physically, psychologically, and emotionally incapable of leading. This article discovered that, despite their limitations, the literature reviews associated to them can still serve as the foundation knowledge for the Malaysian context. To have a better understanding of the existing situation, new findings and concepts will be developed. It is believed that the research findings can help organisations seeking gender equality in leadership in this field.

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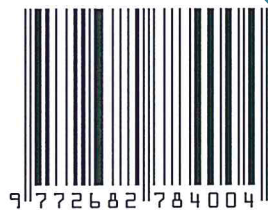
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