

Women's Leadership in Malaysian Research Universities: An Integrated Review of Leadership Styles, Gender and Capability Development

Latifah Abdul Latif¹, Mohamad Shaharudin Samsurijan^{1*} & Paramjit Singh Jamir Singh^{1*}

¹School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Penang, Malaysia

*Corresponding authors: Mohamad Shaharudin Samsurijan (msdin@usm.my) & Paramjit Singh Jamir Singh (paramjit@usm.my)

Abstract

Women remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions in higher education despite their growing participation in academic and professional roles. This conceptual paper examines women's leadership in Malaysian research universities by integrating leadership-style theories, gender and leadership scholarship and the Capability Approach. The discussion considers transformational, democratic, transactional, directive and laissez-faire leadership and evaluates their relevance to the complex institutional demands of higher education. The review indicates that effective women's leadership should not be reduced to a single or inherently feminine style. Transformational and democratic practices can strengthen participation, trust, professional development and shared governance, while transactional and directive practices remain important for accountability, performance management and crisis response. Selective use of laissez-faire leadership may also support professional autonomy among experienced academic and administrative staff. The Capability Approach extends the assessment of leadership beyond institutional performance by emphasising agency, opportunity, participation and human development. The paper argues that leadership effectiveness in Malaysian research universities depends on the adaptive integration of these approaches in response to organisational circumstances. It highlights the need for mentoring, inclusive decision-making, professional networks, leadership development and gender-equitable institutional structures that enable women leaders and their staff to develop their capabilities and contribute meaningfully to institutional goals.

Keywords: women's leadership; higher education; Malaysian research universities; leadership styles; Capability Approach; gender

1. Introduction

The role of leadership in higher education institutions has become more significant in the context of the challenges that universities are facing in the areas of globalisation, technological development, research output, institutional accountability and stakeholder engagement. The modern university is no longer a place for teaching and learning but has become a multifaceted institution that demands effective leadership to achieve quality teaching and learning, innovation, governance and institutional sustainability. In this increasingly dynamic context, leadership effectiveness is a key factor in shaping the performance of the organisation, employee engagement, institutional culture and long-term development (Northouse, 2021).

Although women are increasingly entering higher education as students and professionals, they are underrepresented in senior leadership roles in many countries. While women have made great strides in education and academic careers over the last few decades, they still face numerous hurdles in reaching the highest levels of leadership. Previous studies have shown that women are significantly underrepresented in senior leadership positions, such as vice-chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors, deans and other executive administrative roles, despite having the same qualifications and professional achievements as their male counterparts (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Powell, 2018).

This leadership deficit, often dubbed the leadership gap, has been widely reported in higher education systems throughout the world. Structural and cultural barriers such as gender stereotypes, organisational norms, restricted access to influential professional networks, lack of mentoring opportunities and societal norms about family and caring roles are common obstacles faced by women seeking leadership roles. All these factors are responsible for slower promotion and fewer women involved in institutional decision-making processes. UNESCO (2019) takes note of ongoing inequalities and sees gender equality in leadership of higher education institutions as an important issue for institutions that want to contribute to inclusive governance, promote institutional effectiveness and ensure sustainable development. The presence of women in the academic workforce in Malaysia has been growing. However, public universities continue to be dominated by male leaders. Previous research shows that gender gaps persist in the governance and executive management of universities despite efforts to promote gender equality (Thien, 2021; Ng & Rumaya, 2022). Thus, it is important to develop an understanding of the nature of women's leadership in higher education institutions and the perception of women's leadership among those who are under their leadership.

Studies on women leaders have questioned the notion that leadership is inherently masculine. Rather, it has been suggested that women tend to exhibit leadership styles that focus on collaboration, relationship-building, communication, participation and employee development. These leadership practices are closely related to the current requirements of higher education institutions, where success often relies on collaboration, knowledge sharing, innovation and stakeholder engagement (Gandhi & Sen, 2021).

2. Leadership Styles in Higher Education

Leadership styles refer to the ways in which leaders behave when interacting with followers and leading an organisation. Leadership theories have progressed over time from the early trait theories to behavioural, contingency and transformational theories. Research on leadership in the modern world has come to understand that there is no single leadership style that is effective in all organisations.

2.1. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is one of the most influential theories of leadership in organisational research. Transformational leadership is a leadership style that emphasises the ability of the leader to inspire, motivate and empower followers to do more than is expected. It was first introduced by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass and Avolio (1994).

Transformational leadership is different from traditional leadership styles that focus mainly on authority and formal power; it is based on vision, inspiration, trust and shared commitment. Transformational leaders inspire followers to transcend their own self-interest and collaborate in achieving the larger goals of the organisation. Transformational leadership is widely accepted as an effective leadership style that positively impacts employee satisfaction, organisational commitment, innovation and organisational performance. There are many empirical studies that have shown that transformational leaders inspire higher levels of employee engagement and create an organisational culture that supports continuous improvement, adaptability and high performance.

One of the hallmarks of transformational leadership is its capacity to communicate a vision that motivates staff to buy into the organisation's vision. Transformational leaders set a clear vision and show the importance of employees' work, which promotes motivation, optimism and commitment to organisational success. This type of leadership is especially important in today's organisations where staff are required to deal with the rapid changes in their environment, accept innovations and take an active role in the ongoing development of the organisation.

Intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration are other hallmarks of transformational leadership. Leaders challenge conventional thinking, are creative and try to find innovative solutions to organisational problems, encouraging staff to do the same. At the same time, they recognise the individual needs, strengths and aspirations of every employee and offer mentoring, coaching and developmental opportunities which enable them to grow personally and professionally. These leadership behaviours help to build a positive organisational culture, which fosters learning, teamwork, creativity and empowerment.

Transformational leadership has frequently been associated with women's leadership. Past studies have found that women are more likely to engage in leadership behaviours that focus on communication, collaboration, empowerment, mentoring and employee development than traditional command and control leadership behaviours (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). These attributes are like the key aspects of transformational leadership, making it a relevant framework for studying the effectiveness of women's leadership in higher education institutions. These attributes are closely related to the four key aspects of transformational leadership and have been associated with positive organisational outcomes. Women leaders are seen as creating supportive workplaces that promote participation, trust and mutual respect, allowing employees to work more effectively to achieve organisational goals.

The importance of transformational leadership is especially apparent in higher education institutions, where intellectual engagement, knowledge creation and collaborative problem-solving are essential to the success of the organisation. Leaders are needed at universities to inspire academic and administrative staff, promote innovation and create a culture of lifelong learning. Transformational leadership is a helpful lens through which to view how leaders inspire their staff, how they gain commitment in their organisations and how they manage the complexities of today's higher education landscape. This leadership style has therefore gained more significance in the study of leadership effectiveness in universities and other knowledge-intensive organisations.

2.2. Democratic Leadership

Democratic leadership involves participation, consultation and shared decision-making. Democratic leadership is not the same as autocratic leadership because it does not centralise authority in the hands of a leader, but rather allows employees to voice their opinions, ideas and actively engage in organisational processes. While leaders have the final say in decision-making, they are proactive in asking followers for their input and take into account different points of view before deciding what is best to do. The principles of democratic leadership are based on the idea that when employees are engaged in decision-making within the organisation, it leads to increased commitment, morale and productivity, as well as a greater sense of ownership and responsibility among team members (Kundu & Lata, 2022; Tuffour et al., 2022).

Consultation and collaboration are hallmarks of democratic leadership. Democratic leaders involve employees in discussion, feedback and decision-making within the organisation. This is because it acknowledges that employees have knowledge, experiences and perspectives that can enhance the quality of decisions and organisational outcomes. Democratic leaders foster an environment of open communication and collaborative problem-solving, which helps employees feel valued and respected. These practices foster trust between leaders and followers and help to create a more positive work environment (Avey & O'Reilly, 2022; Usman et al., 2021).

Democratic leadership also contributes to improving employee engagement and commitment to the organisation. Those who participate in decision-making are more likely to feel a sense of belonging to the organisation and are more committed to its goals. When employees are involved in organisational decision-making, they feel like they are part of the decision-making process and are not just receiving the decision, so this means that they feel more involved, responsible and committed to the decision. Democratic leadership values employee input fosters open communication and welcome diverse perspectives, which helps to encourage this participatory approach. Democracy has been shown to have positive effects on employee morale, job satisfaction, organisational commitment and productivity, as well as building a culture of cooperation, respect and trust among employees (Kundu & Lata, 2022; Tuffour et al., 2022).

In the context of higher education institutions, democratic leadership has particular significance, as universities have traditionally been guided by collegial governance which values academic freedom, intellectual exchange, shared governance and professional autonomy. Academic staff have special skills and expect substantive involvement in decisions that impact upon their department, faculty and institution. These expectations are like the values of democratic leadership which include participation, shared responsibility and incorporating a variety of opinions into organisational decision-making. Collaborative leadership practices promote consensus building, improve stakeholder engagement and increase institutional governance (Ruben et al., 2023).

It has also been argued that there is a strong linkage between democratic leadership and women leaders. Women are often stereotyped as leaders who use participative leadership styles, which focus on communication, collaboration, inclusiveness and empathy (Rosener, 2022). Such

leadership practices foster greater engagement from a wider range of stakeholders, build relationships and contribute to the creation of more inclusive organisational cultures. Therefore, democratic leadership is a suitable theoretical framework to consider the role of women leaders in fostering collaboration and shared governance in higher education institutions. Moura et al. (2021) also state that women leaders often incorporate democratic leadership principles in their leadership styles, such as teamwork, empowerment and shared responsibility. In the context of higher education, these leadership behaviours have been associated with increased team cohesion, communication and institutional effectiveness. Democratic leadership also helps to make an organisation adaptable and innovative. Democratic leaders provide opportunities for creative problem-solving and sharing of knowledge by incorporating a variety of viewpoints and actively involving participants. This is especially relevant in the modern university where the leadership must deal with the rapidly changing technology, changing educational needs and growing pressure for research excellence and international competitiveness. Democratic leadership helps institutions to harness the collective wisdom of academic and administrative staff, which improves the responsiveness and innovativeness of the institutions (Chellappan & Muthuveloo, 2022).

Democratic leadership has its drawbacks. Decision-making processes can be lengthy if leaders consult widely with many stakeholders. In large and highly bureaucratic organisations, consensus can slow down organisational action and decrease decision-making efficiency (Olowe et al., 2022). In addition, democratic leadership can be less effective in crisis situations or when a quick response is needed, as more directive leadership styles are required to ensure timely action (Ahmed & Zafar, 2021; Brown & Davis, 2022). However, if used correctly, democratic leadership is one of the best ways to encourage employee engagement, collaboration and organisational effectiveness. In higher education institutions, their focus on participation, inclusiveness and shared responsibility remains a very relevant leadership style to manage complex academic organisations.

2.3. Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is a relationship between leader and follower that is based on an exchange of performance, compliance and achievement through clear expectations, monitoring, rewards and corrective actions. While transformational leadership is about inspiring and motivating followers beyond their own self-interest, transactional leadership is about stability, accountability and the attainment of set goals within the organisation. Leaders who do this set clear roles and responsibilities and monitor performance to ensure that organisational goals are met in an efficient manner. Bass and Avolio (1994) define transactional leadership as a leadership process that focuses on contingent rewards, performance management and corrective intervention when standards are not being met.

One of the important aspects of transactional leadership is the creation of formal systems that direct employee performance. Leaders set expectations, articulate standards of performance and assess performance against set targets. Rewards are given when targets are met and corrective measures are taken when targets are not met. This leadership style fosters uniformity, responsibility and efficiency in the operation by setting clear expectations, outlining roles and responsibilities and keeping members of the organisation focused on the institutional

objectives. Avey and O'Reilly (2022) state that transactional leadership is still a significant managerial mechanism as it offers clarity, structure and performance accountability within organisations. In the context of higher education institutions, the role of transactional leadership is significant, as universities are highly regulated and performance-driven environments. Academic leaders are expected to oversee research productivity, quality of teaching, accreditation requirements, budget allocation, key performance indicators and institutional rankings. These goals can be accomplished through clear expectations of performance and systematic monitoring of results. Therefore, transactional leadership behaviours might be required to achieve institutional goals and make effective use of institutional resources. Academic freedom and collegiality are essential values within the university, but there is also a growing demand for universities to show measurable outcomes and accountability to stakeholders (Ruben et al., 2023).

Transactional leadership is sometimes compared to transformational leadership, as the latter is more about inspiring and developing, whereas the former is more about managing performance. Current leadership research indicates that these three leadership approaches are not mutually exclusive. The research of contemporary leadership suggests that transformative, transactional and democratic leadership styles are not mutually exclusive. Instead, good leaders flex their leadership practices to meet the needs of the organisation and the demands of a particular situation, using a combination of leadership styles. Transformational leadership inspires innovation, employee motivation and professional growth, whereas transactional leadership gives the structure, accountability and monitoring to reach organisational goals. Bass and Riggio (2006) state that when transformational and transactional leadership behaviours are combined, they can lead to better organisational outcomes than either leadership approach alone.

Research on women's leadership also shows that women are often linked to the transformational and democratic leadership styles but are also capable of exhibiting transactional leadership behaviours when there is a need for organisational accountability, performance management and policy compliance. In higher education institutions, women leaders tend to implement supportive, participative and collaborative leadership styles while having clear expectations, systematic performance monitoring and accountability procedures. This flexibility of leadership helps them build positive working relationships and to ensure that the institutional goals, quality standards and performance expectations are met at all times. This balanced approach is in line with the growing complexity of leadership in today's university, where leaders are expected to foster collaboration, innovation and organisational effectiveness (Moura et al., 2021; Sanderson et al., 2022).

Although transformational leadership is gaining more and more importance, transactional leadership is still a crucial aspect of effective organisational leadership. While it may not be as effective as transformational leadership in inducing employee engagement and organisational commitment, it is very important in ensuring organisational stability, operational efficiency, accountability and attainment of goals. Transactional leadership is a useful tool for managing performance and good governance in HEIs where the leaders have to maintain a balance between academic values and institutional expectations. Therefore, the integration of

transactional leadership with the transformational and democratic leadership behaviours could be a key leadership competency for women leadership in Malaysian research universities.

2.4. Directive Leadership

Directive leadership, also called autocratic leadership, is a pattern in which the leader makes decisions, gives instructions and exercises a high degree of control over organisational processes. This style involves making key decisions and providing clear instructions about what should be done, how it should be done and for what purpose. Directive leadership focuses on efficiency, control and quick decision-making, whereas democratic leadership involves participation and consultation. Traditional literature on leadership has often been negative about autocratic leadership because it is so low on employee involvement and shared decision-making. But, modern leadership studies indicate that the effectiveness of directive leadership is more related to the organisational context and situational demands than to the leadership style (Northouse, 2021).

One characteristic of directive leadership is the leader's ability to provide clear guidance and direction during periods of uncertainty. Although consultation may be valuable, extensive consultation when urgent action is required may reduce the effectiveness of the operational response. Directive leaders reduce ambiguity through clear expectations, clear tasks and clear actions and deadlines. This is especially useful in emergency scenarios where swift coordination and action is required. According to Ahmed and Zafar (2021), directive leadership instills less uncertainty in an organisation to help make decisions in a timely fashion during critical situations.

Directive leadership may appear less compatible with the traditional collegial governance of higher education institutions, which supports shared decision-making, participation and consultation. However, many colleges and universities must deal with situations that demand fast and effective leadership action. Leadership styles that focus on ensuring the stability of the system, prompt decision-making and the working together of a range of systems to address a crisis are often required in cases of institutional crises, financial pressures, policy reform, accreditation standards, technological disruptions and emergencies. Such a time calls for additional challenging judgments, requires weighing the needs of different groups of stakeholders, ensures continuity of institutions and the continued effectiveness of the organisation (Ruben et al., 2023).

Increasingly, contemporary leadership scholarships acknowledge that effective leaders are able to adapt their leadership styles to the context. In this context, directive leadership is not necessarily bad or ineffective. Rather, it will be effective if it is used correctly and strategically. Situational leadership theories indicate that in uncertain, complex or unstable organisational environments, leaders might need to be more directive. After stability is achieved, leaders can shift to more participative and collaborative styles. This flexibility allows leaders to adapt to the changing conditions in the organisation and ensure that employees remain confident and the organisation is performing well (Northouse, 2021).

Studies on women leaders have questioned the notion that women are less likely to exhibit directive leadership behaviours. While women leaders are stereotyped as transformational and democratic leaders, research shows that women can be as authoritative, decision-making and directive as men when the situation calls for it (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Powell, 2018). Women leaders often have to work in complex organisational settings where they are expected to be collaborative and inclusive, while also being held accountable and decisive. They can respond to directive leadership, when required, demonstrating leadership versatility and questioning entrenched beliefs that leadership is male dominated. In complex and rapidly changing organisational environments, directive leadership is still an important element of good leadership. In normal times, collaborative and participatory processes might be desired, but in some cases, leaders need to make decisions and give directions. Directive leadership can contribute to organisational resilience, crisis management and strategic decision making in higher education institutions when being used appropriately. This combination of directive, transformational, democratic and transactional leadership styles indicate a wider adaptive leadership ability, which allows leaders to respond to a variety of challenges in the organisation, while keeping the institution stable and effective.

2.5. Laissez-Faire Leadership

Laissez-faire leadership is defined as having little or no leader involvement and a high level of employee autonomy. Leaders who use this approach give general guidance and direction and give followers a lot of freedom in how they do things and how they reach goals. Laissez-faire leadership is different from transactional and directive leadership because it is based on the professional competence, self-motivation and self-regulation of employees. Laissez-faire leadership is a passive style of leadership in which the leader does not exert too much control and gives followers a lot of freedom in how they do their jobs (Bass and Avolio, 1994).

A fundamental principle of laissez-faire leadership is trust. This is a way that leaders show confidence in the knowledge, expertise and professional judgment of their employees. They are not always involved in every aspect of the work; rather they give opportunities for people to be creative, to make decisions and to take responsibility for their work. Such autonomy can develop staff members' self-confidence and encourage greater responsibility for outcomes. When employees feel that their leaders trust them, they tend to develop a stronger sense of responsibility and commitment towards their work. Laissez-faire leadership may be particularly relevant in the case of HEIs given that they are inhabited by highly trained and specialised professionals. Academic staff are expected to work with a high level of autonomy in research, student supervision, curriculum development and participation in institutional activities. Likewise, professional and administrative personnel with experience may have specific skills that allow them to work with little supervision. Leadership styles that encourage autonomy, therefore, might be appropriate for academic settings where creativity, innovation and intellectual freedom are prized.

Laissez-faire leadership can have positive effects such as increased creativity, innovation and professional self-management. Giving employees the freedom to explore ideas and decide on the best way to do things can lead to a greater willingness to try new things and come up with innovative solutions to organisational problems. Autonomy is thought to have a positive impact

on intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction as people feel they have more control over their work activities. In the academic world, this kind of freedom can help to promote research innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration and independent scholarly work. However, overemphasis on laissez-faire leadership can lead to serious problems. Less supervision and less leader involvement may lead to unclear expectations, poor coordination and inconsistent performance between organisational units. Those who need guidance, support or direction may feel unsure about priorities and responsibilities. Past research has shown that the laissez-faire leadership style is linked to reduced organisational effectiveness when leaders lack support, communication and strategic direction (Skogstad et al., 2022). In large organisations, a lack of leadership involvement can make it difficult to work together and can lead to a lack of cohesion.

Thus, it is suggested that laissez-faire leadership should be used selectively and strategically and not as a dominant leadership style. Good leaders know when to give autonomy and when to increase involvement. In higher education institutions, a few aspects of laissez-faire leadership might be suitable for highly experienced and self-directed staff, especially in research and academic work. However, a balance between autonomy, support, accountability and coordination is essential to organisational effectiveness. Therefore, laissez-faire leadership is best used in combination with other leadership styles that offer guidance and direction but allow for professional autonomy.

2.6. Gender and Leadership

Gender and leadership have been subjects of much debate in the leadership literature. Leadership theories for many years were based on the assumption that leadership was synonymous with masculinity, that is, with authority, competitiveness, assertiveness and control. Such assumptions led to the belief that men were more suited to leadership positions and women were less capable of holding positions of authority. Consequently, women have historically been underrepresented in leadership roles in organisational contexts, such as higher education institutions (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Powell, 2018). Much of the early research on leadership was influenced by the prevailing social and cultural norms about gender roles. Men were supposed to be dominant, independent and decisive, while women were supposed to be nurturing, cooperative and emotionally supportive. These assumptions influenced organisational practices and led to gender gaps in leadership representation. Women leaders may also face additional scrutiny, as they are expected to fulfil both leadership responsibilities and traditional gender roles. This phenomenon has been called a "double bind" because women may be criticised for being too assertive or not assertive enough to be the authority (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

However, research in the last few decades has raised several questions about these ideas. Contemporary scholars argue that gender differences alone do not explain leadership effectiveness. Leadership is more dynamic and complex, reflecting individual characteristics, work experience, organisational conditions and the challenge at hand. Meta-analytic research has found that gender differences in leadership are often less pronounced than is sometimes believed and that leadership effectiveness is more a function of leadership behaviours and organisational context than of gender (Koenig et al., 2011; Powell, 2018). A prominent model in the study of gender and leadership is the communal/agentic model. Communal traits are

empathy, cooperation, emotional intelligence, building relationships and caring for others. Agentic traits are confidence, assertiveness, independence, decisiveness and strategic orientation (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women have traditionally been linked to communal traits and men to agentic traits. But this distinction has been made by modern leadership research.

Recent research indicates that effective leaders often combine communal and agentic traits. Leaders need to be able to build relationships and support staff, as well as make strategic decisions, manage performance and react appropriately to organisational issues. Women leaders are now being acknowledged for their capacity to integrate these attributes in ways that improve the effectiveness of the organisation. Instead of seeing communal and agentic traits as mutually exclusive, scholars suggest that the effectiveness of leadership is dependent on the leader's ability to utilise both traits as needed by the situation (Ng & Rumaya, 2022; Thien, 2021). The combination of communal and agentic characteristics is especially relevant in the context of higher education institutions where leaders are required to manage people and perform strategic institutional duties. University leaders are expected to promote collaboration, support professional development and maintain positive workplace relationships and to address issues of research performance, financial sustainability, governance and institutional competitiveness. These roles demand a balance of empathy and inclusiveness, strategic thinking and decisiveness.

This view is an alternative to the simplistic gender stereotypes and sees leadership as a multi-faceted and adaptive process. The modern scholarship on leadership is increasingly recognising that leadership is not a gender issue but rather the capacity of a leader to respond appropriately to the situation in the organisation and the needs of the stakeholders. Thus, the research on women leaders has moved beyond the question of "can women lead" to "how does women's leadership practice help the organisation to be successful and help human development?".

2.7. Capability Approach and Leadership Development

The Capability Approach, as developed by Sen (1999, 2014) and further extended by Kabeer (1999, 2001), is a useful approach to understanding leadership from a developmental perspective. The Capability Approach is different from traditional approaches which focus mainly on outcomes and performance indicators, because it focuses on the freedoms, opportunities and capabilities of individuals to pursue valued ends. Human development is thus not only about outcomes, but about the development of people's capacities to make meaningful choices and engage in valued ways of living.

At its core, the Capability Approach highlights the importance of agency. Agency is the capacity of an individual to act independently, make decisions and influence outcomes that impact their lives. From this point of view, good leadership is more than just getting employees to do what is good for the organisation. Leadership involves more than guiding institutional work; it also creates opportunities for employees to participate, contribute, learn and grow. Leaders have a significant influence over organisational cultures which can either open or close opportunities for staff to develop personally and professionally. In higher education institutions, leaders play a distinctive role in creating supportive and enabling work environments in which employees can strengthen their capabilities, grow professionally and

realise their potential. Universities are not only performance-driven organisations, but also institutions of learning, knowledge creation and human development. Therefore, leadership should be assessed not only based on the results of the organisation but also based on its role in empowering employees, developing their skills and involving them in the process. Leaders who provide learning opportunities, promote collaboration and support professional development help to expand human capabilities in organisational contexts.

Women leaders who encourage mentorship, professional development, collaborative learning and inclusive decision-making play a key role in capability development of their subordinates. These practices provide employees with new opportunities, enhance their professional skills and boost their confidence in their ability to contribute to the organisation's goals. These leadership behaviours foster individual agency by providing settings in which employees are encouraged to be actively involved and to have a meaningful impact on their organisations. The Capability Approach also provides valuable insights into leadership development itself. Leadership effectiveness occurs not only because of the capabilities and skills of the leaders themselves, but also by the opportunities, institutional support, mentoring, professional network and organisational resources available to the leaders. During their leadership journey women are faced with a variety of personal, professional, organisational and socio-cultural challenges which affect their leadership development and effectiveness as a leader. The leadership potential of women can be affected by these enabling conditions and constraints and reflects the need for institutional structures and policies that facilitate women's leadership development, opportunities and gender equity.

Moreover, the Capability Approach provides a more comprehensive view of leadership competence by considering outcomes beyond measurable organisational performance. It focuses on the importance of empowerment, participation, inclusion and human flourishing and sees leadership success as being defined by the opportunities for individuals to develop their capabilities, contribute meaningfully to their organisations and experience personal and professional fulfilment. Leadership is seen as a process that empowers people to achieve their full potential and to contribute to the achievement of common objectives. This is especially applicable in the context of higher education institutions where the creation of knowledge, talent and human capabilities is a core part of the institutional mission.

The Capability Approach is a useful theoretical lens for the present study to understand the role of women leaders in organisational effectiveness and human development. Women leaders build the capacity of their subordinates by providing conducive environment, encouraging participation, promoting professional development and providing more opportunities for employees to achieve institutional goals. Thus, the Capability Approach provides a useful lens to explore the adaptive and inclusive leadership practices of women leaders in Malaysian research universities.

3. Conclusion

Women leaders can contribute to the effectiveness and human development missions of Malaysian research universities through adaptive, inclusive and context-sensitive leadership. Their effectiveness should not be assessed through gender stereotypes or association with a

single leadership style. Universities should strengthen mentoring, professional networks, inclusive decision-making and leadership-development opportunities, while addressing institutional conditions that restrict women's progression and agency. Future empirical research should examine how women leaders combine different leadership practices and how these practices influence staff capabilities and institutional outcomes across Malaysian universities.

The findings further indicate that sustainable institutional change depends not only on increasing the number of women in leadership positions but also on creating environments in which they can exercise authority meaningfully. Policies that promote equitable access to senior roles, transparent appointment processes and organisational support are therefore essential to strengthen women's leadership contributions and advance the broader goals of Malaysian research universities.

References

- Ahmed, M., & Zafar, S. (2021). The limitations of democratic leadership in high-pressure environments. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 45(4), 391-403.
- Avey, J. B., & O'Reilly, C. A. (2022). Inclusive leadership and employee productivity: Bridging commitment and collaboration. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 107(5), 745-760.
- Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1994). Improving organizational effectiveness: Through transformational leadership. In Zulkifly, N. A., Ismail, I. A., Rami, A. A. M., & Nawi, N. R. C. (2022). Leadership Styles among Faculty Academics in a Malaysian University: A Preliminary Insight. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 11(3), 725-736.
- Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). Transformational leadership. In Mwesigwa, R., Tusiime, I., & Ssekiziyivu, B. (2020). Leadership styles, job satisfaction and organizational commitment among academic staff in public universities. *Journal of Management development*, 39(2), 253-268.
- Brown, P., & Davis, J. (2022). Democratic leadership and crisis management: A mismatch? *International Journal of Crisis Management*, 19(1), 56-68.
- Burns, J. M. (1978). Leadership. In Qureshi, F. S., Noureen, G., & Noshaba, A. (2023). Belief and Practices of Women Leaders in Higher Education: A Myth of Transformational Leadership Style. *Archives of Educational Studies (ARES)*, 3(2), 221-241.
- Chellappan, Y., & Muthuveloo, R. (2022). Shaping the skills and styles of future innovative women leaders: the moderating roles of self-efficacy and personal initiative. *Journal of Entrepreneurship, Business and Economics*, 10(1), 177-211.
- Eagly, A. H. & Carli, L. L. (2007). Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders. In Hartman, R. L., & Barber, E. G. (2020). Women in the workforce: The effect of gender on occupational self-efficacy, work engagement and career aspirations. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 35(1), 92-118.
- Eagly, A. H., & Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C. (2001). The leadership styles of women and men. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 781-797. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00241>

- Gandhi, M., & Sen, K. (2021). Missing women in Indian university leadership: Barriers and facilitators. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(2), 352-369.
- Kabeer, N. (2001). *Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment*. <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/53116/>
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435-464.
- Koenig, A. M., Eagly, A. H., Mitchell, A. A., & Ristikari, T. (2011). Are leader stereotypes masculine? A meta-analysis of three research paradigms. In Eagly, A. H., Nater, C., Miller, D. I., Kaufmann, M., & Sczesny, S. (2020). Gender stereotypes have changed: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of US public opinion polls from 1946 to 2018. *American Psychologist*, 75(3), 301.
- Kundu, S. C., & Lata, K. (2022). Democratic leadership style and organizational commitment: The mediating role of organizational trust. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 43(3), 223-241.
- Moura, I., Dominguez, C., & Varajão, J. (2021). Information systems project team members: Factors for high performance. *The TQM Journal*, 33(6), 1426-1446.
- Ng, C. & Rumaya, J. (2022). Gender equality in Malaysia: progress, challenges, and prospects. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 28(1), 1-16.
- Northouse, P. G. (2021). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (9th ed.). SAGE Publications. ISBN: 978-1-0718-2116-9
- Olowe, T., Hassan, M., & Bello, A. (2022). Challenges of democratic leadership in large organizations: Balancing inclusion and efficiency. *Journal of Business Research*, 78(2), 125-142.
- Powell, G. N. (2018). *Women and men in management* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications. <https://collegepublishing.sagepub.com/products/women-and-men-in-management-5-258520>
- Rosener, J. B. (2022). Gender and democratic leadership: A comparative analysis of male and female leadership styles. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 29(4), 350-367.
- Ruben, B. D., De Lisi, R., & Gigliotti, R. A. (2023). *A guide for leaders in higher education: Concepts, competencies, and tools*. Taylor & Francis. ISBN: 9781642672459
- Sanderson, J., Esfahbodi, A., & Lonsdale, C. (2022). The effect of team-member knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) and a common learning experience on sourcing teamwork effectiveness. *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management*, 52(5/6), 393-413.
- Sen, A. (2014). Development as freedom (1999). *The globalization and development reader: Perspectives on development and global change*, 525. <https://diarium.usal.es/agustinferraro/files/2020/01/Roberts-Hite-and-Chorev-2015-The-Globalization-and-Development-Reader.pdf#page=539>
- Sen, A. K. (1999). *Development as freedom* [eBook]. Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/development-as-freedom-9780192893307>
- Skogstad, A., Aasland, M. S., Nielsen, M. B., Hetland, J., Matthiesen, S. B., & Einarsen, S. (2022). The role of laissez-faire leadership in talent management: Evidence from the pharmaceutical industry of Bangladesh. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1077357.
- Thien, L. M. (2021). Women in academic leadership: Navigating gendered institutional landscapes in Malaysian public universities. *Gender and Education*, 33(7), 902-918. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2020.1755245>

- Tuffour, J. K., Gali, A. M., & Tuffour, M. K. (2022). Managerial leadership style and employee commitment: Evidence from the financial sector. *Global Business Review*, 23(3), 543-560.
- UNESCO. (2019). *Women in higher education: Has the female advantage put an end to gender inequalities?* Global Education Monitoring Report. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377182>
- Usman, M., Ghani, U., Cheng, J., Farid, T., & Iqbal, S. (2021). Does participative leadership matters in employees' outcomes during COVID-19? Role of leader behavioural integrity. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 646442.