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# Iron fists in velvet gloves: Exploring female leaders' experiences amid the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK

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## Conference paper

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## Summary

This study explored 40 female leaders' experiences in higher education institutions (HEIs) to unravel both barriers and facilitators they have faced. It also examined their leadership and crisis management principles amid the COVID-19 pandemic using semi-structured interviews and opportunity and snowball sampling. Drawing on diversity, gender, and upper echelon theories, we propose that the addition of unique female perspectives and leadership styles will afford gender-diverse senior leadership teams (SLTs) a leadership capability advantage over equally talented yet homogeneous male teams, particularly in times of crisis, such as the current pandemic. Our study suggests that increasing female representation in SLTs may have a substantial and direct impact on overall leadership capabilities and elicit positive performance effects during crises. Notably, and unique to this study, we show that feminine traits and inclusive leadership styles may be more effective in contemporary leadership contexts than generally believed. Despite limitations, the study highlights the facilitators of female leaders' advancement and indicates that redefining capabilities of successful leaders by taking into consideration the current pandemic and modern trends, such as reverse mentoring and gender-neutral recruitment, may assist to eliminate gender bias and highlight attractive traits that female leaders bring to the table.

## Background

The literature reveals that many organisations, which claim emancipatory promises in principle, ignore issues of gender which, in practice, are a distinctive and defining feature of our workplace contexts (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). Female leaders face multiple barriers to senior leadership positions (Redmond et al, 2017); gendered institutional cultures, formal and informal gendered practices, and caring responsibilities are only some of the obstacles that they may face. Major facilitators for female leaders are the provision of flexible work, mentoring/coaching schemes and equality training (Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), 2017).

The impact of gender diversity in the upper echelons has received a lot of attention recently (Moreno-Gómez et al, 2018). Social pressures and legal requirements have triggered a shift towards prioritising gender diversity on SLTs (WEF, 2018). A recent study found 38% of firms set targets for gender representation (Lean In and McKinsey & Company, 2018). Women's inclusive leadership style, combined with their stereotypically feminine traits, are seen as particularly apt in crisis (Ryan et al, 2011).

The current study addresses a 'gap' in the literature on female leadership in HEIs in the UK (Gedro et al, 2020). Only 22% of female academic staff, who comprise 45% of academic staff in HEIs, become senior educational leaders despite most higher education (HE) students (56%) and staff (54%) currently being women (ECU, 2017). HEIs are facing significant challenges requiring traditional leadership to be rethought and renewed. Only then can HEIs and other organisations move forward, attain sustainable aims, and guide the societies they live in into becoming more equitable and fairer. The current study aims to address the following research questions:

- Which are the main guiding leadership and crisis management principles of female leaders in HEIs in the UK amid the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the barriers and facilitators that female leaders face in their careers?

## Research methods

Using multiple theoretical perspectives – work–family conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985), gender inequality (Pradhan, 2016), and positioning theory (Vanassche and Kelchtermans, 2014) – this research examined the narratives from 40 female educational leaders who shared insights of the challenges they faced regarding their work–life prioritisations and career advancement and their experiences of leadership and crisis management at four HEIs in London amid the COVID-19 crisis. I used a qualitative semi-structured interviewing data collection method which is more suitable for exploratory multiple case studies that implement interpretivist philosophy (King et al, 2018) – focusing on meaning, since reality is socially constructed, and employing multiple methods in order to reflect different aspects of the issue – and opportunity and snowball sampling processes due to time, money, and access limitations. Case studies undoubtedly carry interviewer and participant bias, and have low reliability, validity, and replicability (Cohen et al, 2017). While this study was meticulous, its research findings will likely not be generalisable. Participants had to sign an informed consent form and their anonymity was guaranteed. All interviews were recorded, and data was analysed using thematic analysis (Neuendorf, 2018).

## Research findings

The female leaders of this study illustrated their passion for inclusivity and ethical leadership and stressed their reliance on collaboration, compassion, and authenticity as their guiding leadership and crisis management principles. They also expressed their strong belief in transparency as they tried to be open to their team members. They relied on their family and a trusted circle of friends when they had caring responsibilities, and were facilitated by collaborative female and male colleagues, short-term mentoring, and informal coaching. They were respectful, discrete, and inclusive towards their staff as they provided coaching and mentoring. They were fair and transparent to their team members, giving them credit and encouraging them to apply for promotions. Surprisingly enough, they indicated that they felt uncomfortable about receiving feedback and opted for constructive criticism instead.

However, participants also had to undertake ‘academic housework’ and complained about their work–life balance and the so-called ‘boys’ club’ which posed barriers in their progression to senior leadership. The sexist environment and the lack of long-term mentoring and formal coaching were some additional barriers they faced. Female leaders clearly indicated ways in which organisational systems, habits and beliefs treated women unfairly while they tried to progress in their careers – for example, unfair practices on women coming back from leave and prejudice against female employees in selection and advancement by favouring ‘people like us’ (Pollock, 2015).

These leaders had established guidelines to follow and often worked through crisis planning steps as part of their regular planning cycles (Zdziarski, 2006). They believed that organisations needed to adapt to different changes to ensure they supported staff, especially in terms of mental health. They believed that dealing with the crisis was a shared responsibility, so they involved all members of staff in the decision-making and ensured everyone’s opinion was heard and valued. Finally, they were also ready to make tough decisions to ensure sustainability for the organisation and wellbeing for various stakeholders.

To sum up, the current study indicated that even in female-dominated contexts, where women should be able to thrive, female leaders face various obstacles which impede their

career advancement. What this paper contributes to the literature is a depiction of the kind of support that these women received from male colleagues who advised them when they felt uncertain or emotionally challenged amid the COVID-19 crisis, clearly indicating that attitudes in the workplace are changing. Moreover, very few studies have explored female educational leaders' experiences during a major crisis such as the current pandemic. Thinking long term was one of the priorities of our participants, as they were worried about the impact of the pandemic on the plans of their organisation and wanted to include this parameter in all conversations they had with their colleagues. Our sample experienced many challenges during the pandemic, in both their personal and professional lives. However, as selfless leaders, they were present in their teams, managed to support their families and team members in every possible way, putting their personal and professional plans on hold until the pandemic was over. Our findings revealed that despite the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, these female leaders were able to lead through the crisis while also managing the response.

## Implications for practice

Our study makes significant theoretical and practical contributions to extant diversity, gender, and leadership literature. First, we extend group heterogeneity research by indicating that interaction between women and the wider SLT has meaningful implications for organisations, inferring that in addition to cognitive diversity, women's distinct and non-traditional leadership styles also advance intrapersonal functional diversity. Our research diverges from role incongruity claims that women lag behind men in the skills and experience necessary for effective leadership. Rather, it bolsters the literature on the bottom-line influence of women in leadership and suggests that feminine traits and inclusive leadership styles appear to be more effective in contemporary leadership contexts than generally thought. In addition to contributing to crisis management learning, our findings align with existing research on gender effects in crisis (Ahern and Dittmar, 2012) and highlight the importance of gender-diverse leadership teams over homogeneous male teams. Our study supports the increase of female representation in top leadership as standard business practice, particularly as part of a crisis management strategy.

In addition, the current study offers insights into women's experiences amid the pandemic. Such knowledge is very important to build gender equity in the workplace. Female leaders have faced a lot of challenges amid the COVID-19 crisis, but there are ways in which HR departments can support them. Explicit, clear hiring and advancement criteria can assist to eliminate the impact of the 'old boys' networks.

To address gender prejudice in managers' assessments, managers and administrators who participate in the hiring, selection, and advancement processes of organisations should be trained in diversity management. To change this status quo, HR managers with similar problems could use certain policy measures, for example, gender-neutral recruitment, transparent gender practices and selection processes, and preferential treatment of women. Sponsoring, coaching and reverse mentoring could also help senior male leaders get to know young, talented female colleagues and hopefully take their perspectives on issues affecting organisations specifically and the society at large into consideration.

In the current study, female leaders appear to be predominantly inclusive leaders and are thus able to significantly influence the formation of a climate for inclusion. Inclusive leaders can help their group members understand the value of diversity by using their elevated status to look for opportunities to support and encourage employees to apply their individual differences to improve work processes. Finally, HR departments should promote awareness

of gender equity, assistance for women's formal and informal networks, implementation of a gender equality policy and gender mainstreaming to inspire, attract, and retain female leaders, supporting them while they challenge the male-dominated status quo and stimulate cultural change. HR departments and SLTs should consider taking these recommendations into consideration and try to implement as many of them as possible to foster gender equity, inclusive leadership, and effective crisis management.

Moreover, advancements in gender equality internationally are being derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Senior leaders, adept at handling normal issues, are sometimes not as skilled and well prepared to handle crisis situations. Consequently, advocating for more women as leaders and decision-makers at all levels is important to adequately address the gendered complexities of pandemics and better support vulnerable group members. An inclusive environment, where leaders are open and accessible, promotes psychological safety among followers. This in turn makes the employees more proactive, sharing, and helpful. Knowing that their leaders will support and actively listen to them in times of need helps reduce work-related stress. The psychological wellbeing of employees brings about benefits for the organisation because it reduces adverse events. Finally, psychologically safe employees are less likely to make mistakes.

Organisations should therefore promote inclusion and diversity in response to crises, maximising employee performance while also fostering pandemic preparedness. The current COVID-19 pandemic helped us realise that cultivating and harnessing the advancements of female leadership internationally, and implementing a gender-inclusive lens in pandemic preparedness responses by taking into consideration the experiences and voices of female leaders, is necessary. Human resource development efforts should support leadership development and the creation of a proactive, crisis-prepared organisational culture.

Organisations also need to develop their own gender strategy that will describe their core values and objectives on gender issues in a way that ensures all people involved, that is, staff and experts, are familiar with this common vision and ready to apply it. They need to increase the number of women in leadership positions in innovative ways. They could use gender head-hunters in their HR departments to trace the right posts and connect them with the right applicants. They could also develop family support for their female leaders. Gender facilitators could also be appointed to enable the different perspective's appearance in the trainings they will prepare for staff and SLTs. Moreover, organisations should be committed to promoting research that will explore, highlight, and acknowledge the benefits of gender in leadership and crisis management, thus increasing the commitment to gender equality.

To sum up, our findings suggest that female leaders demonstrate core characteristics of inclusive educational leadership and have good crisis management skills. The current study clearly indicates that they tend to reap the benefits of their diverse team members' contributions by including them in decision-making to overcome challenges amid unprecedented crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Our results clearly highlight the need to discuss how female leaders can be supported to enhance their crisis management skills and possibly provide an example to their male counterparts of using inclusive leadership to unlock employees' potential, especially at the outbreak of a crisis that may threaten the very nature of an organisation and the health and wellbeing of its staff. Inclusive leadership should therefore be considered a central pillar of the global response to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and female leaders should be allowed to shatter the 'glass ceiling' and support the SLTs of various organisations as they strive to overcome such challenges.

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