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Gender and leadership in public higher education in South Asia: examining the individual, socio-cultural and organizational barriers to female inclusion

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the personal, social, and organizational barriers facing women in university leadership positions in South Asia, building on the cases of Malaysia and Bangladesh. We discussed the topic through the lens of interactionist feminist theory. Semi-structured interviews with 20 female deans from 12 public universities in Malaysia and Bangladesh were conducted, followed by two focus group discussions with eight female deans. The results reveal that personal barriers such as family duties, lack of technological knowledge, interest in taking leadership positions, spousal support and poor time management, and lack of spousal support represented the major barriers for female deans in Bangladesh. Lack of interest in deanship was found to compound the underrepresentation of women in dean roles. The participants identified fewer socio-cultural barriers faced by Malaysian female deans, while Bangladeshi participants met major issues. The organizational barriers for female deans in public universities were reported. The findings hold significant organizational and policy implications.

Introduction

Women's position in the workplace has undergone significant improvements in the past five decades, with more representation of women overall (Kirton and Greene 2015; Saeed, Riaz, and Baloch 2022). However, for major roles in organizations, the glass ceiling remains problematic. The United Nations (2018) stated there would be positive results (e.g. wise decision-making, financial, organizational culture, and relational reasons, among others) (Madsen 2015) by recruiting more women into leadership positions in universities' higher hierarchies and supporting them to remain long term. This view is prevalent in recent research findings where it was found that women in leadership positions in many industries performed as well as their male counterparts (Brandt and Laiho 2013; Fanta, Kemal, and Waka 2013; Mori and Towo 2017; Valcour 2012). Interestingly, some studies found that women in managerial positions across different industries perform better than males (Abdullah, Ismail, and Nachum 2012; Chapple and Humphrey 2014; Shepherd

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2017). However, even though the presence of female leaders in the workplace is on the rise, thereby promoting their significant influence, they are still facing obstacles and difficulties in taking up leadership positions across various industries (Baker and Cangemi 2016; Geiger and Kent 2017; Paoloni et al. 2021).

Leadership roles within industries and institutions vary according to culture, government, investors, and shareholders. Numerous factors make it difficult for women to advance their careers in organizations. Women may not be promoted within a business due to cultural and traditional standards, for example, surrounding women's duties (Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb 2013). The unconscious bias against women and the belief that women must deal with family issues can also have an impact on a woman's ability to advance in her career (Dal Mas and Paoloni 2020; Francesca Dal Mas, Paoloni, and Lombardi 2019; Ellemers 2014). Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) argue that this may possibly be because there are not enough role models for women in leadership positions, and there are not enough mentors, networks, or resources available to them. Additionally, the societal expectations placed on women don't pertain to their employment (Yonjoo Cho et al. 2019).

Women's underrepresentation is an issue that also involves academic positions. Academic institutions all over the world are still unsure of the best ways to address the gender imbalance, although it has been decades since the issue was first brought to light. Many departments particularly those in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, appear to have seen no improvement in the representation of women due to policies and processes that were put in place for that purpose (Bystydzienski et al. 2017).

The situation in Asian universities doesn't differ (Louise Morley and Crossouard 2016). Indeed, these roles within the universities in countries like Bangladesh and Malaysia are still fulfilled mainly by men, particularly that of vice-chancellor, pro- or deputy-vice-chancellor, treasurer, registrar, dean and deputy dean (Bothwell 2017; Dhir 2015; Ethier 2016; Ngang, Prachak, and Saowanee 2013; Towni et al. 2021). Bothwell's study (2017) claimed that only 18% of the working female population were appointed to leadership roles in the 200 highest-ranking universities in 2016–2017, including the roles of chief executive, vice-chancellors or presidents. This state of affairs can be identified globally. For example, only 2.3% of Japan's vice-chancellors are women, followed by 3% in both Kuwait and India, Turkey with 7%, 15% in Malaysia, and 29% in the UK, while Hong Kong doesn't have any female vice-chancellors (Forestier 2013; QS 2015). This situation has been identified as being similar to other leadership positions in universities, such as the deputy vice-chancellor, the registrar, the dean and the deputy dean; the number of women holding these positions is much lower compared to the men. The significant shortage of women is also often encountered in the leadership positions of universities in many other Asian countries, particularly India, Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Morley and Crossouard 2015; Louise Morley and Crossouard 2016). The literature has called for more research as well as concrete policies on this matter (Bystydzienski et al. 2017; Louise Morley and Crossouard 2016)

Starting from this research gap, our study focuses on the public universities in Bangladesh and Malaysia, where the number of women in leadership roles is a fraction of that of men (Ahad and Gunter 2017; Sani 2018). Although more women are being promoted to leadership roles in many other industries or private or public sectors of these countries, public universities continue to have fewer women in leadership positions, particularly those of dean, deputy dean, vice chancellor and deputy vice-chancellor (Ahad and Gunter 2017; Sirat, Ahmad, and Azman 2012). To date, in 2020, only three women across twenty public universities in Malaysia are vice-chancellors, while only one vice-chancellor and one pro-vice-chancellor among 46 public universities in Bangladesh so far (Sani 2018). A similar situation can be identified in the case of other leadership positions in public universities in both countries (Ahad and Gunter 2017; Hera 2020; Louise Morley, Berma, and Abdul Hamid 2017; Sani 2018).

Studies undertaken by Fagenson (1990), Morley (2013), Akpinar-Sposito (2013a), and Shepherd (2017) ground that the lack of women holding leadership roles in public universities is due to individual, cultural i.e. social, and organizational barriers they face in the leadership positions. However,

specific obstacles under these domains could be different in different countries. Thus, this study aims to identify potential specific barriers across different settings. Given that women constitute half of the population, building employee relationships and teamwork, the view is that their presence in leadership should be increased (Gipson et al. 2017; Morley and Crossouard 2015). In this respect, identifying and presenting the specific barriers faced by women leaders would be valuable for policy makers to take initiatives for the minimization of such barriers. Therefore, investigating personal, social, and organizational barriers is theoretically and practically significant (Ahad and Gunter 2017; Bagilhole and White 2008; Doherty and Manfredi 2006; Ngang, Prachak, and Saowanee 2013; Nguyen 2013). The study's key research question is therefore framed as follows: what specific barriers do women in dean positions face in academia in Malaysia and Bangladesh? To what extent are these barriers linked to individual perspectives and the institutional and cultural domains?

Literature review

Interactionist feminist theory

Feminist symbolic interactionists view gender inequality as socially constructed (Jackson and Scott 2010). It is a product of the socialization process, which can be further exacerbated within specific cultures. Through the process of socialization, gender roles and perceptions are crystalized, and individuals are expected to perform the function that society has ascribed them. In the context of gender perception in South Asia, women are often molded in subaltern roles (Lewis 2005), which suggests that they are aids to men as opposed to responsible independent social and psychological actors. In this perspective, women who become assertive in society or are perceived to take this direction are stigmatized and labeled as deviant. Examining the issues faced by South Asian women access to leadership positions from the interactionist lens is appropriate because the often deployed theoretical framework of the conflict model has significant shortcomings in this context. In fact, the conflict model suggests a binary view of gender discrimination (men vs. women). Such a view places much of women's woes within the narrative of the persecution of women by men, ignoring the multifaceted and complex dynamic of gender discrimination. For example, other women could be as much responsible for the marginalization of women who are perceived to be deviant. The interactionist perspective looks to the core of socialization and social identity to find an explanation for gender discrimination (Jackson and Scott 2010).

Barriers faced by women

Socio-cultural barriers

It is widely argued that the disadvantage faced by women derives primarily from the socio-cultural system in most national contexts. According to Zahidi and Ibarra (2010), there is a strong cultural prejudice for men to seek promotion as they are considered 'natural' leaders (Rapoport et al. 2001), an experience which is not often shared by women. Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) found that women in society are discouraged to learn about the leadership processes which would develop their leadership potential in organizations. Therefore, the social context creates barriers for women in accessing these leadership positions. This view is also supported in the study of Morley and Crossouard (2015), who found that, in several countries, social structures were not favorable and often not even available to women wishing to access leadership positions. Abidin, Rashid, and Jusoff (2009) found that social forces, for example, men's attitudes, had a negative impact on women accessing leadership positions in organizations. However, Abidin, Rashid, and Jusoff (2009) found that only 8.52% of the 100 respondents in their study believed social factors had a negative impact on women accessing leadership roles. Yet, Akpinar-Sposito (2013a) argued that social contexts, such as religion, secularism, and political opinions have an impact on women taking up leadership positions. This can be placed in the context of the gendering of leadership

positions, whereby societal gender conventions are reflected within structural conditions for women in professional leadership roles (Højgaard 2002).

Indeed, Peus, Braun, and Knipfer (2015) argued that among the different countries and cultures, social barriers such as religion, local beliefs, attitudes of people, politics, and other social elements, all had a negative impact on female leadership access. Similarly, Al-Kayed (2015), Almaki et al. (2016), and Al-Asfour et al. (2017) also acknowledged that social barriers enforced negative attitudes of men towards female leaders, as well as gender role stereotypes, along with political and local norms having a negative impact on women accessing leadership roles in organizations around the world, especially in Muslim countries. These findings are also consistent with Nguyen (2013) and Ponnuswamy and Manohar (2014) who found largely similar results when it came to social barriers. The negative perceptions about female leadership amongst people at different socio-political levels has also been a crucial barrier to the lack of representation in the leading roles (Akpinar-Sposito 2013a; Cubillo and Brown 2003; Nguyen 2013; Ponnuswamy and Manohar 2014; Unin 2014).

Cubillo and Brown (2003) found that male dominance in society has had a negative impact on women accessing leadership positions within organizations. Almaki et al. (2016) also argue that male dominance in society has had a significant negative impact on women who aspire to access leadership positions because most of the males don't like or agree with females in leadership positions. The same authors found that many women in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia consider that society is still male-dominated and men are resistant to women leaders. In addition, Chiloane-Tsoka (2012) also observed that male domination in society favors males taking leadership positions in various organizations, which either diminishes the contribution of female leaders or largely limits their contribution, as underlined by Almutairi. On the other hand, Vecchio (2002) argues that claims of 'gender advantage' in leadership positions are overstated and can be the result of long-held gender stereotypes driving reasoning and perceptions of others. He highlights the need to acknowledge context and demographic differences and their impact on sex differences in leadership.

In this vein, Fouad et al. (2010) acknowledged that the educational environment within a society has an impact on female leadership. In this respect, Mbepera (2017) has also acknowledged that a lack of educational opportunities in societies can have a negative impact on female leadership development from both social and organizational perspectives. This lack of educational support for women creates obstacles for them in accessing leadership positions in organizations (Darkwah 2010), which is also supported in the research findings of Mittal and Dutta (2019). A lack of education makes a person less aware of the processes of accessing leadership positions. This is also consistent with the results of Morley (2013), who found that better education contributed to a rise in women attaining leadership positions in different organizational contexts. In addition, the economic context and status of countries and societies has also impacted women's progress, particularly those that limit the level of female representation in leadership roles, for example, in higher educational institutions (Nazemi, Mortazavi, and Borjalilou 2012).

Organizational challenges

According to organizations and even industries, the challenges for women employees can vary (Almaki et al. 2016; M. A. Islam and Jantan 2017). Biased procedures for appointing and promoting employees in universities are a significant barrier for women professors or other qualified females in obtaining leadership positions, even though they have the qualifications to undertake the roles (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull 2016; Northouse 2018; Sanderson and Whitehead 2016; Tate and Yang 2015). Furthermore, in some cultural contexts, such as Malaysia and Bangladesh, men have a propensity to prefer to take directions from other men rather than women, which is a crucial barrier for women to assuming leadership positions (Akpinar-Sposito 2013b; Bardy, Rubens, and Massaro 2015; Bassett 2009; Sanderson and Whitehead 2016).

Importantly, Sanderson and Whitehead (2016) underlined that internal recruitment and promotional processes are normally created by men and made applicable to men, thus recreating the structural disadvantages women face in gaining more senior roles. This may be further

compounded by the lack of organizational support such as strict rules and regulations, complicated organizational promotional process, lack of training facilities, lack of female supportive policies, lack of flexibility, and lack of career development opportunities (Catalyst 2002; Chabaya, Rembe, and Wadesango 2009; Fuller, Fondeville-Gaoui, and Haagdorens 2010; Sanderson and Whitehead 2016).

Negative preconceptions about the abilities and attributes of females by both men and women represent one more significant barrier preventing women from holding leadership positions in organizations (Heywood 2018). According to Ellemers (2014), such stereotyping is harmful as it limits women's capacity to develop their personal abilities, and pursue professional careers. The lack of role models (successful women leaders) amongst females working in organizations may demotivate women from attempting to take on leadership roles (Catalyst 2002; Fuller, Fondeville-Gaoui, and Haagdorens 2010; Sanderson and Whitehead 2016).

Furthermore, Al-Kayed (2015) reported that the inappropriate deployment of women in menial (or insignificant) leadership roles creates challenges for women as they are not given meaningful leadership positions in universities. This is also acknowledged by Almaki et al. (2016), who reported the administrative burden for holders of leadership positions in universities creates barriers for the women in those positions. Furthermore, Sirat, Ahmad, and Azman (2012) indicated that high workloads create challenges to creating a balance between family and the workplace for women. Sexual harassment by colleagues is another common barrier faced women in different organization that also discourage women from taking leadership roles (Bell, Mclaughlin, and Sequeira 2002; Fuller, Fondeville-Gaoui, and Haagdorens 2010).

Individual challenges

There are some individual challenges that women face in taking up and working in leadership positions across the different industries. Bubshait (2012) found that lack of confidence – due to the inability of the system to empower them through role modeling and equitable promotion – has been identified as a key barrier for women taking up leadership positions, particularly in the universities of Saudi Arabia. This is also similar in the country of Uganda where Chabaya, Rembe, and Wadesango (2009) found that the challenges, for example, in the case of appointment or promotion into the leadership positions, women considered themselves as unsuitable for the position because they lacked confidence (Sanderson and Whitehead 2016). Similarly, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) discovered that the lack of confidence among women in the educational institutions is one of the key challenges for women in taking up leadership roles. Consequently, having a poor self-image and lack of confidence among potential female leaders are also major individual challenges that prevent them in taking up leadership positions (Johns 2013; Moorosi 2010; Louise Morley 2013). Furthermore, in most cases, lack of motivation and interest has caused women to refuse to take up leadership roles, for example, in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and South Korea (Ahad and Gunter 2017; Al-Jaradat 2014; Almaki et al. 2016).

In a developing world cultural context, some women reject leadership positions due to their responsibilities towards their families (Bubshait 2012; Derks, Van Laar, and Ellemers 2016). The adoption of this attitude is occasioned by cultural stereotypes which assume that regardless of working in organizational leadership as men, women still retain a significant proportion of household duties (Kelleher et al. 2011; Phillion 2003). Some women fear is that their work will be viewed by others as denying their traditionally ascribed roles as a mother and therefore create work-family conflicts (Kim and Kim 2018; Moreau, Osgood, and Halsall 2005; Nazemi, Mortazavi, and Borjalilou 2012). In the Asian cultural context, some women negatively believe that taking up leadership roles would consume more of their time, resulting in reduced time to be spent with the family (Kelleher et al. 2011; Kim and Kim 2018; Phillion 2003), which may jeopardize conjugal and family relationships (Chabaya, Rembe, and Wadesango 2009; Diehl 2014; Howe-Walsh and Turnbull 2016; Nazemi, Mortazavi, and Borjalilou 2012).

Furthermore, women are also influenced by the negative perception of low benefits in leadership positions, such as incentives and rewards, which has also been identified as a barrier (Akpinar-

Sposito 2013a; Alzaidi 2008). Generally, employees expect to gain both financial and non-financial benefits when they are appointed into leading roles because there is inevitably an increase in responsibilities, duties and challenges. Hence, the difference in salary scales and the other benefits between male and female leaders could be an issue and demotivate women's access to leadership positions in organizations (Akpinar-Sposito 2013a; Alzaidi 2008; Qian 2016). Thus, such individual dissatisfaction amongst female employees could detract them from taking leadership positions in the organizations. The individual challenges which have been identified could differ from one female employee to another, depending on organizational enablers, industry, and country.

Women in leadership positions in education industry

In the international workplace context, women participating as leaders firstly started in the Western region of the world. It has spread widely to Asian, African and South American countries. However, representation of women in leadership positions is still limited even in western countries.

Generally, women are under-represented globally in leadership positions in the higher education sector as well as other sectors, including corporate ones (Burkinshaw and White 2017; Elliot 2011; Louise Morley 2013; Rosin 2001; Seltzer 2020). According to the European Union Commission, women who are appointed to the executive boards of the largest companies registered in the twenty-eight European countries reached 23.3% in April 2016, a rise of 6% from October 2015. Furthermore, three-quarters of European countries have failed to meet the European Judicial diversity target, where 50% of judges or legal practitioners should be women (King 2017). On the other hand, in the USA, 51.5% women hold management-related occupations. However, only 44% of women have the sub-category management and financial operations occupations (Catalyst, 2002; Bureau of Labour Statistics 2017, USA). According to Catalyst (2002), in Standard & Poor's (S&P) 500 Companies, proving women in leadership or higher positions are not few. However, in Australia, where 42% of workforces are women, only 10% of them are appointed as CEOs in the larger profit-making companies, while among the key management positions, only 24% are made up of female employees (Cermak et al. 2018).

In the education industry of Australia, the proportion of female employees is 71%, however, only 34% of them are appointed as CEOs (Liddy and Hanrahan 2017). A similar picture has been identified in the other industries in Australia regarding the existence of women in leadership positions (Liddy and Hanrahan 2017). In the UK, the percentage of female academic staff is 45.3%, but their representation within the leadership management levels is only 27.5% (ECU 2018). Throughout 130 universities in UK, only 24.6% of the professors are female (Baker 2018). In 2016, only 29% of the vice-chancellors of the UK universities were women; although there was a significant increase from the previous three years of 2012–2015. During that period, there were only a total of nineteen women who were appointed as university vice-chancellors in 130 universities in the UK. A similar trend is identified in universities across the world. The female leadership positions in higher educational institutions, especially in universities, are outnumbered by the men in leadership positions (Forestier 2013; Nguyen 2013; QS 2015). For instance, in India, only 3% of the vice-chancellors are women, 25% in Australia (it was 28% in 2004), 2.3% in Japan, 3% in Kuwait, 7% in Turkey and none in Hong Kong (Forestier 2013; Jarboe 2018; QS 2015)

Similarly, in other positions, for example, in the case of the dean, there are only 14.6% female deans appointed in Pakistan, 6.5% in Kuwait, 19.7% in India, 5.6% in Bangladesh, 8.9% in Sri Lanka, and 22% in Vietnam (Al-Mughni 1996; Batool, Sajid, and Rehman 2013). Since there is a limited number of females appointed to take up leadership roles, e.g. deanship; previous studies have recommended further research to be conducted so that the current challenges can be explored and presented and thus, essential actions could be taken to improve equality in public universities (Al-Mughni 1996; Morley and Crossouard 2015; Nguyen 2013; Shepherd 2017). However, all of them acknowledged that the challenges could vary in nature between the countries and their industries and even within individual organizations. Therefore, scholars studying women leadership have

recommended conducting more studies to explore barriers in relation to different countries. In this respect, exploring personal or individual, organizational and social barriers faced by women leaders in public universities in the selected countries would give us updated information regarding these barriers. As a result, the current lack of understanding regarding the nature of the obstacles faced by women in leadership positions of higher educational institutions would be fulfilled.

Women in educational leadership positions in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the gender ratio is almost equal, with women representing 49.93% of the population. The bulk of the population is in the youth group, with 47.17% of people belonging to the age group of 15–44 years (Towni et al. 2021). Although the Bangladeshi Constitution claims that women and men are equal, the literature depicts a different reality (Hossain and Rokis 2014; Islam 2006). From a gender perspective, Bangladesh stands as a traditional country, which sees the expectation that women should concentrate more on their family and caregiving responsibilities rather than their professional careers. Family and workplace discrimination against women is pervasive (Miaji 2010), affecting women's rights to food, education, employment, property, decision-making, and independent thought (Hossain and Rokis 2014; Islam 2006).

Bangladesh is a patriarchal society that upholds a strong division of labor, restricts the movement of women, and encourages them to undertake domestic duties for their families. Educated women who got a university degree tend to go work for companies than stay at home or start their micro businesses (Md Asadul Islam et al. 2019).

Still, higher education and university teaching is considered one of the most respectable and prestigious jobs. In Bangladesh's cultural and social traditions, university lecturers are greatly respected (Hossain and Rokis 2014).

The analysis run by Towni et al. (2021) using faculty gender distribution data of top tertiary educational institutes of Bangladesh highlights factually the lack of women with the highest responsibility roles with almost no presence at the top rungs of the ladder. This happens in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields but also in non-STEM departments. Although the latest data underline a substantial gender parity at the bottom and entry-level of the faculty career ladder, women rarely reach the top of the pyramid.

A study conducted by Hossain and Rokis (2014) stated how highly educated women working as university lecturers choose their families over their careers more often. They do so to adhere to the social norm that women should prioritize household duties than career progressions. They frequently abandon their professional goals in favor of the welfare of their families due to social pressure. Even with a full-time job, they still find ways to devote more time to family matters. They maximize a few informal and adaptable institutional processes and spend more time at home as a result.

Women in leadership positions in education industry in Malaysia

Malaysia is one of the fastest-growing southern Asian countries. In Malaysia, since 2011, national policies have aimed to have women holding at least 30% of decision-making roles by 2020. Such policies have been quite successful in increasing gender diversity. Malaysia's education system is gender blind (Tan, Chin, and Ratnavelu 2021). Still, women are under-represented in STEM fields and over-represented in non-STEM sectors as there is no gender quota imposed on higher learning institutions in Malaysia (Goy et al. 2018).

While choosing their university curricula, women seek competencies leading to potential jobs where they don't experience an inferior economic status. This aspect forces many women to avoid STEM degrees, as women would be less credible as, for instance, field engineers than men (Goy et al. 2018; Win and Win 2013).

In the Malaysian university sector, the introduction of international university rankings as a widely used measure of higher education excellence has increased the sensitivity towards ratios and numbers, which also includes female participation in faculties (Wan et al. 2017).

A recent study conducted by Islam et al. (2022) investigated the barriers faced by women in accessing and holding leadership positions in public universities in Malaysia by employing some semi-structured interviews with 12 deans from six public universities in Selangor. The most significant barriers identified were related to internal politics, male domination, lack of financial and non-financial benefits, biases of top management personnel, lack of colleague support, and poor childcare facilities (Ibrahim, Yussof, and Tibok 2016; Md Asadul Islam et al. 2022; Hack-Polay 2020).

Methodology

This paper is an exploratory piece of research which draws on data from a comparative study of barriers (individual, social and organizational) faced by women in public universities in Bangladesh and Malaysia. Hence, this qualitative approach was based on semi-interviews and focus group discussion (online focus group discussion). According to the nature and objectives of the research, this study used the purposive sampling strategy to include participants in the interviews and focus discussions. This is because the study only aims to include those who face challenges in leadership positions in public universities in Bangladesh and Malaysia (N. Cohen and Huffman 2007; Uwizeyimana and Mathevula 2018). Purposive sampling is suitable when the researcher needs to collect information from the respondents' perspectives based on the judgment of their possession or typicality of the certain characteristics being sought (L. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011; Hora 2014). This sampling technique is applied in this study because it has been the most significant non- probabilistic type of sampling that facilitates researchers in identifying the main participants. This sampling framework has been selected to include participants with in-depth information about a particular issue that is under research (Emmel 2013; Omona 2013; Unin 2018). Therefore, using this sampling strategy, the researchers only selected female deans so that the challenges faced by them in leadership positions can be effectively examined.

The 12 semi-interviews conducted with 12 participants in Malaysia were recorded with respondent consent. The interviews with eight Bangladeshi participants in both semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were not recorded as the participants did not grant permission. However, interviewers were allowed to take notes. Researchers carefully followed the ethical procedures by obtaining consent from all participants. Participants were requested to select suitable venues for interviews; however, the focus group discussions were performed through the Skype Conference. All the participants were sent objectives of the research with the information on the option of withdrawing from the interview at any time. For reasons of anonymity, participants' names were removed and number-coded.

All the transcripts and memos (Birks, Chapman, and Francis 2008) were printed out and coded through the thematic analysis to identify the main themes that best fit the research questions. Transcripts from interviews were sent to the participants to confirm or amend their responses where necessary. Moreover, the participants in the focus group discussions were told about the points mentioned in the memos to confirm their responses (Birks, Chapman, and Francis 2008) to gain confirmability (i.e. trustworthiness). The collected qualitative data were coded and analyzed thematically, aimed at making sense of the opinions of the participants regarding individual, organizational and social barriers by identifying the themes (Saldana 2015).

The framework for the study is summarized in Figure 1.

Manual analysis was applied due to the smaller size. Through manual coding, we have identified emerging themes and categories for the analysis and discussion, presented in the next section.

Results

The description of the main themes emerging from the data was compiled according to the key variables and is depicted in Table 1.

The themes outlined that female deans in Bangladesh face more barriers than Malaysian female deans in public universities. The most common and most mentioned barriers among female deans in
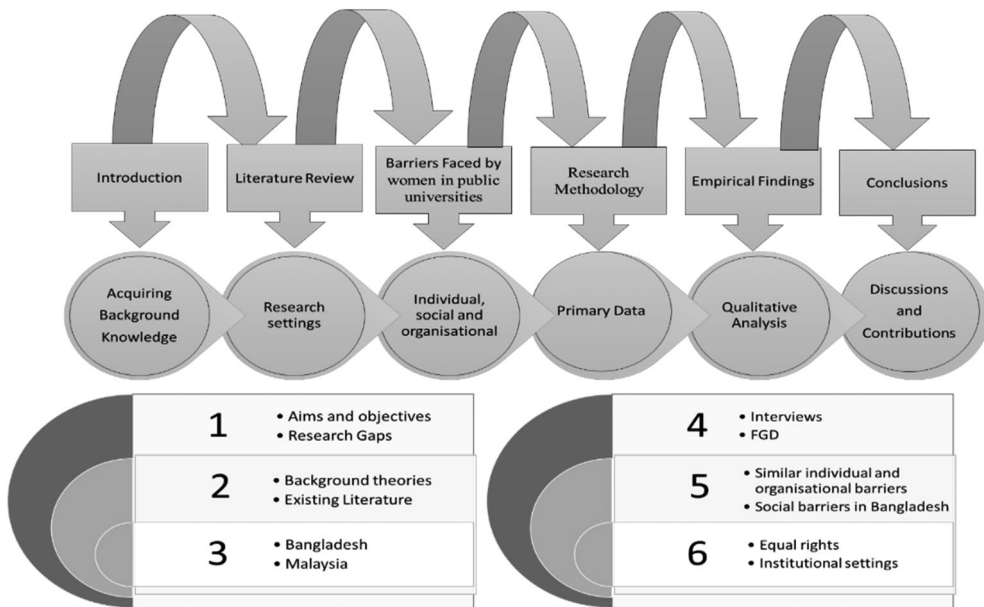
Figure 1. Research design.

Table 1. Main themes deriving from the data analysis.

Barriers	Bangladesh (8 participants)	Malaysia (12 participants)
Individual barriers	- Family responsibilities (8/8) - Lack of Interest (8/8) - Lack of confident (5/8), - Lack of technological knowledge (3/8)	- Family responsibilities, (12/12) - Lack of Interest (12/12) - Lack of confidence (4/12) - Lack of technological Knowledge (4/12)
Social barriers	- Negative Attitude of People (8/8) - Male Domination (8/8) - Local culture (8/8), - Prejudice (7/8) - Lack of Security (5/8)	- Religion (lack of religious knowledge) (4/12) - Male Domination (2/12) - Negative Attitude of People (2/12)
Organizational barriers	- Internal Politics, (8/8) - Male Domination, (8/8) - Too many responsibilities, (8/8) - Negative Perception of Colleagues, (8/8) - Biasness of Top Management, (8/8) - Difficulty to Manage Colleagues, (8/8) - Lack of support from colleagues, (8/8) - Complicated Promotion Criteria, (8/8) - Sexual Harassment (5/8) - Lack of Benefits (Financial and Non-Financial), (3/8)	- Internal Politics, (12/12) - Too many responsibilities, (12/12) - Lack of support from colleagues, (12/12) - Negative Perception of Colleagues, (12/12) - Male Domination, (6/12) - Complicated Promotion Criteria, (5/12) - Difficulty to Manage Colleagues, (4/12) - Biasness of Top Management, (3/12) - Lack of Benefits (Financial and Non-Financial), (3/12)

the two countries are mostly similar. Therefore, more common and most mentioned barriers by participants have been analyzed below.

Individual barriers

Family responsibilities

Women always often perform dual duties originating from the family and workplace. Therefore, they face a considerable challenge in fulfilling the organizational duties, which require strong

commitment and dedication to overlooking family responsibilities. Hence, many potential women leave the position to concentrate on rearing children and performing other jobs in families. All the participants in this study unanimously agree that family responsibilities are the most challenging barriers for women in taking leadership positions in universities. Participant 1 (Bangladeshi) explained that:

> Every female regardless of organizational position and qualification performs family responsibilities due to social or cultural context but also due to the mental peace and commitment to family. As a result, many potential and current female leaders leave their positions.

Participant 8 outlined that:

> Making balance between the organizational and family responsibilities is very much difficult for females because they are more emotional than the males. Hence, most female colleagues don't want to take the leadership positions, although they have qualification, skills, and even political support.

Most opinions are found from the Malaysian female deans. Participant 2 (Malaysian), states that:

> As a leader, I face more challenges because I have to juggle with family; thus, I do a lot more than the norm that is expected of a female lecturer. Family responsibilities pressure me to step down earlier than the tenure due to peer pressure (a colleague stepped down from her position so that she can contribute more to her family). So, you understand how family responsibilities are dragging us.

Participant 9 (Malaysia) opined that family responsibilities are key challenges for women if they want to take leadership positions in universities. Participant 9 added that:

> We have responsibilities to children, parents and siblings that we cannot ignore while males can ignore easily. Therefore, many female colleagues don't take dean positions.

Lack of interest

Every participant in this study from two countries stated that the lack of motivation and intention among female lecturers or professors to take leadership positions in universities is a crucial challenge. Therefore, they don't want to take leadership positions.

Participant 3 (Bangladeshi) stated that:

> Some of my colleagues don't like to take leadership positions because they don't find any motivation to take these roles as these increase duties and obligations. This is a great challenge to increase the number of females in the leadership positions in this university. I think it's similar in other universities because I don't see many women are taking leadership roles.

The opinion stated by Participant 3 is similar to others. However, Participant 6 opined that:

> I understand there are barriers, but some responsibility lies with some of the women because of their self-satisfaction to stay where they are. For example after professorship one of my female colleagues was encouraged to contest for a deanship but she declined because she wasn't interested. So, the problem is very much related to us women as too.

On the other hand, Participant 2 (Malaysian) added that:

> I select the leaders for different projects but it's frustrating that some ladies don't want to take the leading position due to some excuses.

Participant 10 (Malaysian) outlines that:

> Some lecturers/professors (candidates), I see they are very good and can lead but if I inquire about their willingness to apply for positions in leadership, they aren't interested in holding the positions.

Apart from the above barriers, the participants in this study also identified lack of confidence and lack of technological knowledge are also major barriers for women to encounter in leadership positions in universities.

Social barriers

The social context of the two countries is mostly similar according to Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Moreover, the majority of the populations in the two countries are Muslims. However, the results show that Bangladeshi females face more social barriers than Malaysian females. It is because almost all the participants from the Bangladeshi universities in this study agree that there are some crucial social barriers that block women for taking and holding leadership positions. While the majority of the participants from Malaysian universities dismissed the claim by a few participants regarding social barriers, such as religion (lack of religious knowledge), male domination in society and negative attitudes of people. On the other hand, all the participants agree that the social barriers are severe in Bangladesh for women in leadership positions.

Negative popular attitude

All the participants from Bangladeshi universities reported that the negative attitudes of local people create barriers for women in leadership positions. However, several participants from Malaysian universities opined there are some people with negative attitudes towards female leadership but some participants dismissed this claim.

Participant 5 (Bangladeshi) added that:

> There are both males and females in our society who show a negative attitude towards women leaders. I personally experienced that. While I don't care, others do. Therefore, many potentials tolerate these unexpected situations that I face from the people in my community.

Participant 7 (Bangladeshi) also opined that

> Some people without any knowledge of our capability speculate that we are going to fail. So, they show negative attitudes and undermine women. You can imagine how embarrassing for the women concerned.

Patriarchy

Bangladesh is a male-dominated country, while Malaysia is not much (doesn't mean a complete absence of patriarchy) that is already established. From this perspective, it has been right that Bangladeshi females face problems of male domination in every sector to strive for leadership positions. Participant 3 asserted that:

> Men like to work under men rather than women. Therefore, they create policies and rules so that males are preferred rather than females. Thus, they support men in taking leadership positions.

Participant 8 opined that:

> Normally all universities in Bangladesh appoint Deans through election or selection. Hence, if there are more men than women, then men are going to support men. So, many of us don't apply. I've taken the position here after a huge struggle that I took as a huge challenge and I don't believe many will go through this difficult challenge.

Local culture

Local culture is identified as one of the major barriers faced by women in leadership positions in Bangladeshi universities while no Malaysian female deans reported it as a problem. Participant 2 (Bangladeshi) outlined:

> We have a tendency to support the local people even if they don't have sufficient skills and qualification to take and lead the position. This tendency is a severe problem when the election is held for dean position. Women are therefore far behind the men.

Participant 6 (Bangladeshi) argued that:

> Our cultural context doesn't welcome women leaders although we have a female prime minister and opposition leaders in parliament. Local people either educated or illiterate, male or female have a negative idea regarding women in leadership. This demotivates women causing many to leave the role.

Prejudice

Prejudice about women leaders is a significant barrier for Bangladesh women contending for leadership positions. Participant 1 (Bangladeshi) outlined:

> Some people claiming to be religious or atheist hold prejudice about women. They think giving promoting women to leadership would be harmful for the organization or department. This is absurd to think in the context of universities, which are the highest place for education and aim to remove prejudice.

Participant 7 (Bangladeshi) expressed the same:

> In Bangladesh, many people don't have clear knowledge regarding religious issues. Sometimes they are given wrong ideas about women leadership by many preachers of different religions. Thus, from childhood, people think women cannot be leaders and if they take lead positions, they'll fail. Even some educated women have this misconception and don't apply for leadership positions.

Lack of security

Lack of security as a barrier for women leaders is reported by 7 participants out of 8 in Bangladesh. Participant 4 outlined that:

> Our society is not safe for a woman but as a dean I have to move around to perform different responsibilities or take part in seminars, symposiums or talk shows; but I cannot do this all the time because of security issues.

Participant 6 (Bangladeshi) reported that:

> When you take a position, some people who will be jealous and try to hurt you. In our society women's safety is taken sometimes lightly. It's more dangerous for women because they're more isolated.

Organizational barriers

Interestingly, this study identifies that organizational barriers faced by female deans in Bangladeshi and Malaysian public universities are more common than individual and social barriers. The main barriers mostly cited and common among participants from two countries have been analyzed below.

Internal politics

Every participant reported internal politics is a significant barrier for female deans in accessing and staying in the leadership positions for example dean positions in universities.
Participant 3 (Bangladeshi) explained that:

> It's easier for women to become deans when there's no election for deanship because there is dirty politics and women like to concentrate on other things rather than this. Thus, internal politics in our university is a strong barrier for women to be a dean when there's an election for the role.

The participants from Malaysia reported similar issues. Participant 10 (Malaysian) suggested that:

> Male lecturers and professors mostly don't like women in leadership; thus, they may create a blockade for the females. However, many of them leave their intention to be the leader. Therefore, it is a problem. However, many women overcome these hassles and become deans.

Male domination

The male domination in the universities is major in the leading positions. Therefore, it is a barrier for women in leadership positions. In this respect, Participant 6 (Bangladeshi) argued that:

> There are more male faculty members in universities. Therefore, they dominate in society.

Participant 6 (Malaysian) added that:

> My university is very male dominated. It's challenging for men to have the women as their bosses. So, they don't support women candidates to deanship.

Too many responsibilities

Too many responsibilities reported by all the participants as major barriers for women to be a dean and even to continue as a leader. Participant 8 opined that:

> Whenever you are a dean, you must do a lot of jobs that aren't similar when you are a professor. Therefore, many women cannot cope with these extra duties and they leave and others who are potential don't like to take the position. It is quite difficult for us in Bangladesh to achieve a balance between family and work when we take extra duties.

In this respect, the participants from Malaysian public universities also opine similar aspects. Participant 5 stated that:

> Some female friends in the university resent taking the dean position due to overburdening duties and poor pay for women compared to males.

Participants from both countries reported other organizational barriers that create challenges for women leaders in the organizations. These include negative perception of colleagues, top management biases, difficulty to manage colleagues, lack of support from colleagues, complicated promotion criteria and lack of benefits. Sexual harassment was also reported to be a barrier for women's progression to leadership. This was advocated by 5 of 8 participants Bangladeshi participants.

Discussion and implications

This study explored barriers under the three main categories from the female deans in public universities in Bangladesh and Malaysia. Several obstacles faced by female deans confirmed the findings from previous research. In terms of the individual and socio-cultural barriers, female deans from both countries in the current study face almost the same and common identified barriers in the current literature. For example, many family responsibilities, lack of interest, lack of confidence, and lack of technological knowledge are common among the females as well as deans. Many women are not much confident to take challenging jobs in Bangladesh with a lack of interest, while they are also not much technically savvy. Similar findings can be identified in the literature (Almaki et al. 2016; Alzaidi 2008; Bubshait 2012; Derks, Van Laar, and Ellemers 2016; Qian 2016).

This study found several socio-cultural barriers for women in Bangladeshi public universities while interestingly fewer substantial social barriers in Malaysia for women. This is a significant finding because both countries are largely Muslim, but the socio-cultural contexts have important differences. We could find in the literature that Bangladesh is more traditional in seeing women in leadership positions (Hossain and Rokis 2014; N. Islam 2006). Therefore, there are stronger barriers to be faced. Malaysia seems more progressive, given the presence of policies aiming at improving female presence in decision-making roles. While in Bangladesh, seeing women in certain decisive roles is still difficult, Malaysia is pushing women to lead STEM roles, especially in physics and engineering (Goy et al. 2018; Tan, Chin, and Ratnavelu 2021; Wan et al. 2017). Our study revealed socio-cultural barriers in Bangladesh, e.g. negative popular attitude, male-dominated culture, prejudice, and lack of security that are consistent with previous studies (Ahad and Gunter 2017; Morley and Crossouard 2015; Morley, Berma, and Abdul Hamid 2017). However, the findings regarding the non-social barriers in relation to Malaysian society are consistent with the literature (Abidin, Rashid, and Jusoff 2009; Almaki et al. 2016; Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb 2013; Zahidi and Ibarra 2010).

Hence, this study grounds a significant foundation for future research to validate the findings through the research, including more extensive while it also contributes to the current literature citing that there are few social barriers for women in leadership positions in Malaysia.

The organizational barriers found by examining the participants' experiences are quite similar in the contexts of Bangladeshi and Malaysian public universities. The findings are consistent with the extant literature (Al-Kayed 2015; Almaki et al. 2016; Burkinshaw and White 2017; Massaro, Bardy, and Pitts 2012; Sanderson and Whitehead 2016; Sirat, Ahmad, and Azman 2012).

Notwithstanding the barriers, the participants in this study feel successful in their career. Their determination has been found to be the prerequisite for success. However, if these barriers are minimized through effective policy frameworks, the number of women in leadership positions in universities could increase significantly. Hence, this study has significant implications for policymakers in Bangladesh and Malaysia – and by extension in South Asia. The study has unveiled key barriers that should be reduced to ease women's path to leadership, which can lead to greater organizational effectiveness.

Overall, our findings confirm that women's disadvantage in higher education leadership in Bangladesh and Malaysia is highly socially-constructed, being significantly influenced by culture and the institutional setup, thus confirming our theoretical framework of feminist interactionism (Jackson and Scott 2010). The study adds to the literature on barriers (individual, organizational and social) to female academicians' advancement in higher education. It illuminates the experiences of female academicians taking management positions in South Asian countries. Such specific knowledge is critical to develop gender equality initiatives, which must start from a deep examination of the socio-cultural context. Policies may include work-life balance support and aids like childcare, maternity permits, flexibility and smart or remote work. While these aids may be relevant to support female academics in overcoming the difficulties of balancing their role as mothers, wives, caregivers and female professionals, more is needed. Testimonials, mentoring, and leadership programs led by successful female managers and academics may promote a culture of female leadership in academia by inspiring young ladies and girls to not give up their dreams. Moreover, besides policies made at a national level, our study encourages initiatives made by single institutions to promote a more diverse and inclusive environment. Those institutions willing to take the lead in backing and suggesting dedicated policies will also likely be rewarded by results and ratios, even in the perspective of international certifications like it is currently happening in Malaysia (Wan et al. 2017).

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the existing knowledge of the barriers faced by women in the public universities of developing Asian countries like Bangladesh and Malaysia. In the absence of such research in a comparative form in the Bangladeshi and Malaysian contexts, this study helps to narrow the knowledge gap by providing barriers that hinder female faculty members' leadership and management aspiration. The conclusion can be made that there are some barriers in both countries, but if the respective policymakers reduce them, the number of women will increase, and their inclusion would be positive for institutional success.

However, the findings presented in this study cannot be generalized because of the small sample size and other limitations. For example, when the data was being obtained, the personal qualities and characteristics of the interviewer, such as age, body language, the time and location of the interview, together with the fact that the interviewees were extremely busy people, could have had some effect on the quality and fullness of the responses (Moloney et al. 2017). Moreover, since our study took place in developing countries where the wealth of the population is not equally distributed, results may have been biased by the background and personal situation of the female participants – namely, the family of origin, the place of residence (some crowded modern cities versus some remote and underdeveloped areas) the eventual overseas experiences in western countries, … While our results may represent one first milestone to foster more research and practical actions,

non-binary gender research is needed for a more in-depth understanding of the impact of gender and possible implications.

Another critical factor is that the content of the questions asked in the interviews and focus group discussions might have touched on sensitive personal issues. Moreover, answers may have been vague or not completely truthful due to concerns over their careers and safety, although the issue of confidentiality was confirmed and relayed to the participants clearly and regularly. Future research could be conducted quantitatively using the barriers identified in this study for generalization. Respondents in other leadership roles could be involved in future research to highlight issues faced by women when in management, such as executive and administrative barriers, as well as those of a personal nature, across other organizations or industry environments. Future studies could also ponder on how leadership styles may vary from one individual to another and catalogue successful leadership styles adopted by women in higher education, in order to formulate good practice models that could serve both aspiring women and men for leadership positions in universities (Jacobson, Palus, and Bowling 2010).

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