# Career Pathways Of Indian Women In Senior Leadership Roles In Higher Education

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| | Indian women in higher education have complex paths to senior leadership roles. Barriers include gender bias, limited support, inequitable access to networks and work-family conflict. These challenges stall progress and restrict visibility in leadership spaces. Despite high qualification and experience many women experience blocked promotion paths or are displaced in roles with limited decision power. Some institutions these days provide support for women in careers. Mentorship, leadership training and peer groups develop skills and confidence. Clear promotion rules and gender audits also enhance access to leadership tracks. Role models - women leaders in top roles motivate others to reach for the stars and stay in the field longer. Digital platforms have opened learning, research and collaboration to build stronger profiles of women. Nevertheless, social norms and uneven workload distribution remain major obstacles. Some women carry on more domestic work and lack time for research or administration. Institutions need to act on three fronts to increase female leaders. First, they must create fair systems that encourage growth without bias. Second, they should invest in long term development via support and coaching. Third, they must encourage flexible work structures that place output above time. The road to leadership for Indian women in higher education is guided by each support and system. Institutions can develop more balanced teams with the appropriate programs and adjustments and allow for diverse, skilled leadership at the top.

**Keywords:** Women Leadership, Higher Education India, Career Advancement, Gender Equity, Academic Administration |

## Introduction

Indian higher education has grown in scale and worldwide recognition, but its leadership landscape remains uneven. Women comprise a substantial proportion of the teaching and administrative workforce in universities and colleges. However, they remain under-represented in senior posts (academies, registrars, heads and deans of departments). Long careers layered demands and sluggish gains in gender parity foreclose the route to these roles. For many women, the journey extends beyond academic merit to navigating social rules, role strain and structural blocks to equal rise. Gender inclusion in leadership is a policy and public discussion. National frameworks call for more women in decision spaces. Yet the actual steps between junior faculty to senior leader contain numerous stops. They include role mismatch, unequal workload, slow promotions, insufficient mentorship and limited peer networks. Some females have dual roles at work and home. The overlap frequently leaves very little time for research, publishing or seminar work - all markers of leadership rise. This discrepancy between everyday task and strategic output impacts long-term career progression *as observed by Chanana (2022)*

Higher education firms currently have twin objectives: build leadership and balance roles. This need prompted some to test new steps - peer support groups, gender-based audits, coaching tracks and electronic training. These tools are intended to assist women in all ranks and to develop space and skill. Nevertheless, numerous

gaps persist. Although junior roles have high female share, senior posts don't. Numbers fall as ranks increase. This pattern indicates the issue isn't entry but rise. Now firms must move from access to outcome, from presence to power. Rising staff churn, digital shift and new policy targets mean clear career paths are becoming more vital. The new model of higher education brings global goals to local actions. It wants teams reflecting student groups, research aims and public trust. In this framework gender-balanced leadership is far more than a commodity - it's a necessity. A team of varied voices makes better rules, prevents blind spots and builds deeper peer links.

However, this shift cannot be affected by broad plans alone. It needs steps informed by field data, lived roles and clear growth paths. Career pathways must articulate where an individual stands, what is next and what supports can be found. Rise is guesswork without this map. Women may remain long in middle roles, do excess admin work or even miss crucial leadership windows. Firms that track such patterns might fix them. Individuals who wait risk talent loss. One change is mentorship. Not many senior role models are female in many Indian colleges. This impacts hope and plan. Whenever few ladies make it to the top, other people view the path as closed. Better rise for firms with mentor loops throughout ranks. Senior staff lead juniors, flag gaps and support goal plans. This flow generates hope and skill. Additionally, it helps firms spot leaders early and track their rise. A second core factor is how leadership is scored. Several institutions still rate staff using old steps - years served, number of papers or admin positions held. Such rules frequently miss invisible work. Women frequently offer team care; student help or crisis fix roles. These are key tasks but do not add to score. A fair rise plan must include formal and informal labour. Score sheets must change for genuine impact.

As per Bhatti and Ali (2021), mentoring and networking are critical pathways for women aspiring to leadership roles in academia. Work culture also determines career paths. Environments that value long hours, continual presence or late-night events might exclude most women. Firms need to check their rules match staff roles. Fair ground is built on flexibility in time, hybrid steps and output-based goals. This doesn't mean lower bar, fit steps. Teams that match role with method achieve better work and reduced drop rates. Digital platforms make available talks, boards and research meets more broadly. These tools might help women who don't travel much. Tech helps reduce location gaps when utilized properly. But it must come with training. Digital-only rules may also exempt those with poor access. Therefore, digital steps require support. This helps more staff take part and remain on track. And policy plays a role. Some state and central schemes permit leadership rise for women. Those consist of funding lines, skill hubs and rank-linked objectives. However, their use is dependent upon local will. A scheme on paper cannot move ground unless firms track uptake, check fit and act on blocks. Local heads should lead by converting policy into steps.

Peer links also matter. Women with strong peer groups remain longer, share more and rise much better. These groups offer much more than just help - they provide room to think, test and expand. In firms with weak peer links, staff might feel isolated or even stuck. Some networks run online cross-college groups. They share notes, call for assistance and plan rise. This cross-link lifts all. Leadership steps also are influenced by family roles. Many women do care work - child care, elder help or homework. Firms must know that and plan accordingly. Childcare support, calm leave rules and secure travel help staff give their best. Staff feel seen doing more when they feel seen. Firms that plan for role mix obtain long work and deep skill. Nonetheless, none of this works unless leadership will. Heads of colleges must need to find balance. They must speak it, plan it, and back it. Token steps breakfast. True gain requires steady change. This means naming gaps, establishing goals and analyzing whether the gap is shrinking. Data must lead. Reports must contain numbers among ranks. This shows if work is proceeding.

Career rise is about who is ready - and who is seen. Bias is involved. Some leaders might deem male staff better suited for control or women to care roles. These quiet tags impact where people are placed. Firms need to teach leaders .to spot this. Bias training, open checks & voice from all ranks fixes that. One that hears all is a rise plan that works for all. Academic output also forms rise. Some women have time blocks which restrict their research. Papers drop if time is lost in admin work/support roles. The firms must track this. Time for research, sharing admin work and guiding paper plans close this gap. Strong research contributes value and voice. Rise plans must also be clear. Some staff do not understand what helps them grow. This leads to guess work. Clear growth maps, fair reviews and open calls help. Staff must understand what's rated and when/how. Staff who see the steps climb better.

Maheshwari and Nayak (2022) identified both organizational and cultural barriers that hinder women's leadership progression Now Indian higher education is in shift. The space is growing, student needs are changing, and global ties are strengthening. This requires strong teams with diverse backgrounds. Females in senior roles add depth and skill. They lead with care, fix with speed and create trust. But their path should be open, fair, and clear. Firms that construct these paths will now lead the shift. Those that do will lose voices, time and edge. Work is slow but clear. Each step adds more to the base. Not more women in chairs - but more women with say, with plan and with space to grow. A true rise lasts. A strong firm is one which leads all. This isn't a goal - it's a need. It is time to shape the path now. Figure 1 presents the challenges and support for career pathways for women in academics.
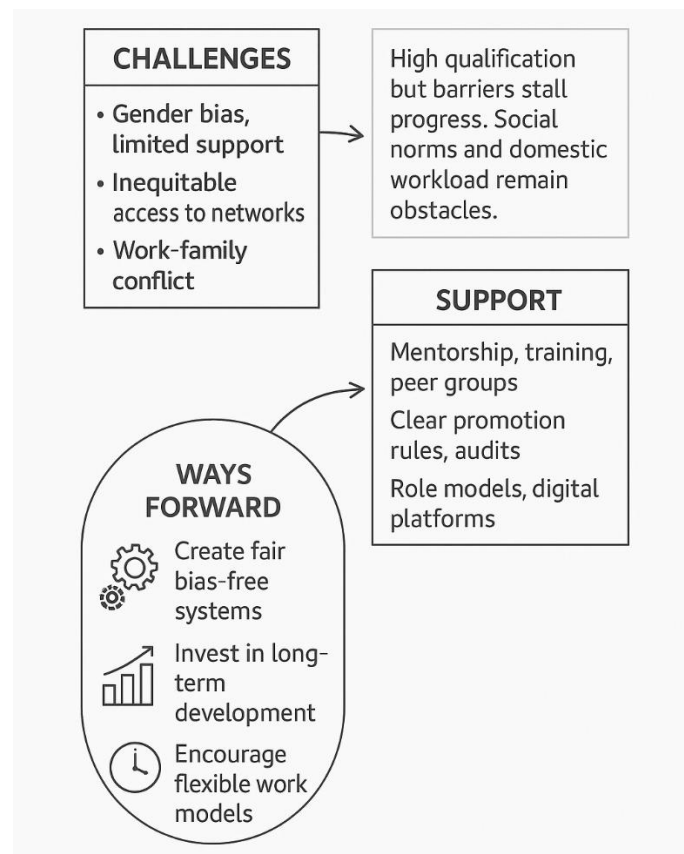
**Figure 1 Challenges and Support for Career Pathways for Women in Academics Literature review**

Indian females in senior leadership positions in higher education have varied academic backgrounds illustrating the breadth and breadth of the higher education system itself. They represent leaders in science, management, education, law, humanities, social work and engineering. This range is more than academic variety - it defines how women lead, resolve problems and respond to institutional requirements.

**According to Gandhi and Sen (2021),** the lack of structural support remains one of the main reasons for the underrepresentation of women in science and engineering, women leaders often rise through research roles, grant-based projects and lab management. Their careers can include publication, supervision and technical skill. These fields require long working hours, funding for research and upgrades. Women who lead in these fields frequently combine lab work with institutional tasks, showing high planning and output levels. In social sciences and the humanities, the rise usually involves education, policy engagement and community links. Women in these positions contribute to curriculum design, student mentorship and public discussion. They frequently bring people skills, narrative thinking and policy insight to leadership spaces.

Another layer are legal and management backgrounds. Women with law degrees or management training bring rule-based thinking and systems planning to academic leadership. They frequently play leading roles in governance, compliance and reform responsibilities. This skill mix is valued in regulatory roles or quality boards. The various academic fields also present diverse ways of working. Some women lead with data and targets, others with debate and dialog. This variety strengthens institutions and allows mixed responses to tough tasks. Teams with leaders across fields can plan, teach and grow together. Nevertheless, cross field leadership has gaps too. Some disciplines retain gender tags - engineering and law typically have fewer females in senior ranks. Institutional support, peer groups and mentorship fill these gaps. To sum up, the academic diversity of women leaders is a strength. It brings voice, skill and method from across fields making leadership more responsive, balanced, and complete.

Gaikwad and Pandey (2022) found that for most Indian females in senior leadership roles in higher education, the professional life starts with research and teaching. Many begin as lecturers, assistant professors or research fellows and establish themselves via classroom teaching, paper writing or student mentorship. This traditional path is slow but structured and provides markers of progression with years served academic contribution and research output. The very first part of that path entails teaching. Women run core papers, student projects and examination and syllabus duties. Over time they mentor, shape curriculum reviews and support junior staff. These roles, although perceived as routine, establish institutional knowledge and student interactions. Research is also critical alongside teaching. Publishing in journals, presenting at conferences and guiding PhD work are essential steps in academic growth. Women in this path might have multiple roles - classroom hours,

home work, and research planning. Despite these demands, many produce robust research profiles which support their leadership rise.

This steady progression comes with service roles - departmental meetings, committee work and event planning. Women frequently assume admin roles early, handling admissions, examination control or outreach. These roles develop planning skill and readiness for bigger posts. Some staff eventually turn into Head of Department, Dean or Director. This particular path has depth and that's its value. Leaders promoted through academic ranks understand student needs, peer pressure, and system flaws. They carry lived knowledge of how the university works from inside. But the path has limits too. Slow promotions, bias in research grants and scant time to network can stall leadership rise.

Short, most women leaders in Indian higher education don't enter via lateral or political routes. They rise through years of teaching, steady research and trusted service. This gives them leadership grounded in academic life, looked after, and tested in time. Mentorship and peer networks have altered the career pathways of Indian females in senior leadership roles within higher education. These informal and formal support systems help women navigate the intersection of academic demands, institutional politics, and personal obligations which frequently determine leadership progress.

Haile et al. (2016) emphasized that persistent societal and organizational biases challenge women's rise to top management positions. Mentorship offers direction, feedback and visibility. Senior academics (female and male) who act as mentors offer invaluable information regarding career planning, research approach and leadership readiness. For women, mentors are also role models who model how career growth is possible despite systemic obstacles. Mentors identify growth areas, review promotion applications, suggest leadership classes and flag opportunities. In a field where unspoken rules frequently establish progress, this direct guidance is crucial. Peer networks are equally important. They offer a venue for joint learning, emotional support and strategic collaboration. Women share advice on working workloads, balancing teaching and research, applying for fellowships or addressing team conflicts in peer groups. These networks frequently cross departments and institutions. Members of peer networks also author papers, organize seminars and nominate others for academic roles or boards.

Professional bodies and academic associations reinforce these ties. Groups like university teachers' associations, research collectives and female's leadership forums offer spaces for women to speak, lead and connect. Participation in these bodies builds recognition and pathways to improved roles in academic policy and governance. However access to mentorship and networks isn't equally distributed. Some institutions have few female senior leaders, and that restricts role models. Some face gatekeeping or exclusion from influential circles. Overcoming this calls for institutional support via leadership programs, peer learning models and inclusive event planning.

**Banker and Banker (2017)** noted that mentoring and peer networks are ladders to leadership. They offer knowledge, community and access. For Indian women in higher education they give support - and the structure to indicate their place in senior roles. A keen social impact orientation is commonly a hallmark of the leadership strategy of Indian women in the senior levels of higher education. Several women leaders recognize fundamental inadequacies in access, equity and inclusion rooted in their own experiences in academic and social settings. The awareness at times manifests as attempts to create much more inclusive institutions where underrepresented individuals are seen, heard, and also defended. Women leaders frequently lead in designing and supporting programs to close opportunity gaps. Those include scholarships for first generation learners, mentorship schemes for females and marginalised pupils and policies to combat racial discrimination both both in the classroom and workplace. Some also offer outreach outside campus - whether through rural schools, literacy drives or young women getting into higher study. Such work mirrors a wider conception of education as a site of social change as opposed to credential gaining.

**As per Peterson (2016),** women in academic leadership In the institutions, this commitment shapes hiring, curriculum and student life. Women leaders frequently push for fairer recruitment, gender balance in leadership and much more room for social justice in academic material. They promote safe campus spaces, gender sensitivity training and procedures to avoid bias and harassment. Their leadership style is generally more democratic, with listening forums, open feedback loops and inclusive planning. This attention to social impact isn't linked with academic or administrative rigor. Instead it makes it deeper. Institutions led by women with increased equity values demonstrate increased student involvement, much better grievance redressal, and better community partnerships. Their leadership aligns results with relationships, numbers with voices. That is to say that for many Indian females in higher education the leadership journey isn't about reaching the top but about transforming the ground. Their dedication to accessibility, equity and inclusion place them as agents of transformation who shape how the system serves the public.

International exposure has helped in leadership development of Indian women in higher education. Such options as academic fellowships, global conferences, research collaborations and educational programs with foreign institutions have helped females diversify their knowledge base, professional networks and styles of leadership. Such experiences support individual as well as institutional growth. Several women leaders have participated in worldwide faculty exchange programs, visiting scholar roles or postdoctoral fellowships. These experiences expose them to numerous academic systems, pedagogical techniques and governance models. They return with new concepts for curriculum design and student assessment, interdisciplinary research, along with

administrative improvement. This cross border learning helps them adapt best practices to the Indian context and produce a global outlook.

**Aithal and Aithal (2019)** highlighted that the Participation in international conferences increases credibility and visibility. Women who post work on global platforms frequently become recognized in their field, leading to increased publication, funding and leadership appointments. These events offer opportunities to meet students, policy experts and institutional heads directly, creating networks which promote long-term career advancement. Collaborations with world institutions strengthen leadership skills. Joint research projects, co-authored articles and multinational grants require skills of negotiation, strategic planning and coordination. These projects give women leaders with experience of managing large teams, international relations and diverse funding models - skills needed for senior leadership roles in Indian universities. Exposure to foreign environments also affects how women see their very own roles. It creates confidence, promotes innovation and also improves awareness of inclusivity and responsibility. It benchmarks their work and institutional practice against global standards and also seeks improvement at home.

International exposure adds strategic, visibility, and skills links to the leadership pathways of Indian women. It fosters their capacity beyond the local bounds and positions them as leaders capable of leading their institutions through national reform and global engagement.

According to Hill et al. (2016), Policy reforms in Indian higher education have affected the framework, goals and expectations of academic institutions and created new leadership areas which many women have entered. In recent decades, national reforms in institutional autonomy, accreditation requirements and global ranking frameworks have created a need for leaders able to blend academic strength, administrative skill and strategic thinking. These changes have produced conditions where women with diverse experience and solid institutional knowledge are increasingly expected to lead. Pushing autonomy under frameworks such as University Grants Commission's graded autonomy scheme has moved crucial decisions to the institutional level. Now leaders have more accountability for curriculum design, financial planning, research emphasis and staff appointments. Women that have served in several academic and administrative capacities are well placed to accomplish this work with hands on inclusive leadership styles and insight.

**Bierema (2016)** Accreditation and quality assurance procedures like those under NAAC and NBA require careful planning, documentation and performance review. Numerous women leaders have experience managing internal quality assurance cells, curriculum committees or student assistance frameworks. These roles give the skills and visibility to assume higher office roles. Their ability to balance compliance with innovation makes them appropriate candidates for guiding institutions through accreditation cycles. The rise of ranking systems - global and national - has likewise changed what leadership demands. The institutions must demonstrate research output, faculty diversity, internationalisation and student results. Women leaders who established good teaching records, research projects or outreach programmes now are considered assets in meeting these metrics. Their focus on detail and inclusion align institutional objectives with wider reform agendas. In a nutshell, higher education reforms haven't only altered the framework of educational institutions - they've also transformed the profile of leadership. Women who have grown by teaching, research and service now are taking up these roles and guiding the next phase of institutional growth and transformation. In most Indian females in higher education, the combination of professional duties and domestic duties determines her career advancement and leadership path. Dual responsibilities - teaching, research and administrative work at work with caregiving, household work and family expectations at home - can slow progress. This balancing act, while common, influences the timing and nature of leadership roles females assume over time.

Unlike their male counterparts, many females perform more unpaid care work. This includes child rearing, elder care, emotional support and household management of family members. These tasks frequently occur outside regular work hours and require equal energy and planning. Accordingly, women might decline roles which require travel, late meetings or extra time. Some may take career breaks, switch to less demanding roles or postpone applying for promotion. This particular delay might alter how institutions perceive readiness. Though women have the abilities and experience, the timing gap might mean missed leadership opportunities or slower ascent to senior ranks. Performance metrics like continual research output, long service hours or uninterrupted careers disadvantage women who have held multiple roles. Institutions which don't account for these might unintentionally reinforce gender disparities in leadership.

Alfred et al. (2019) emphasized that, a lot of females demonstrate excellent time management, multitasking and resilience. Their leadership comes from years of balancing multiple duties and sometimes involves balance, empathy and problem solving at the workplace. Some institutions are starting to recognise this with flexible working hours, hybrid models and supportive leave policies. Systemic change is limited, though. To sum up, dual load of work and domestic roles continues to shape the leadership journey of Indian women in higher education. This requires policy reforms, flexible systems and cultural shifts which respect life paths. Only then can institutions unleash the potential of women leaders and create more inclusive academic environments. Indian women in higher education have gender based biases in accessing and experiencing leadership opportunities. These biases manifest in formal systems and informal cultures and impact recruitment, promotion, recognition and role assignment. Women seeking senior roles must meet academic standards and confront a landscape where gender roles are ingrained.

**As per Coate and Howson (2016),** Stereotypes of leadership characteristics continue to backfire against females. Male leadership characteristics of assertiveness, strategic thinking or authority are related to male

leadership traits, while females are expected to display support, cooperation, and care. This double standard usually means that females in leadership are deemed too firm or too soft. Consequently, women frequently have to adapt style and tone to accommodate these implicit demands - a time and emotional investment. Yet another barrier is unequal access to informal networks. Many important decisions, collaborations and leadership opportunities are shaped in peer groups and informal spaces. Women excluded from these circles enjoy slower visibility and a lesser amount of chances of being considered for strategic roles. Even in formal settings, women might be interrupted, dismissed for ideas and not recognized. These experiences accumulate over time and can discourage leadership aspirations. But women leaders have risen above these hurdles with resilience and strategic thinking. They establish credibility through consistent academic output, mentorship, committee participation and long-term institutional service. Others look for female or male allies who will support inclusive leadership. Others draw upon data, performance along with outcomes to argue for advancement.

Seo et al. (2017) found that gendered Institutions have started responding with bias training, transparent promotion procedures and diversity targets. But change requires much more than policy - it requires mindset, culture and practice modifications. In a nutshell, overcoming gender bias is a significant task in the leadership journey of countless Indian females in academic institutions. People who succeed do so not by ability but by creating strategies to overcome unequal systems. Their paths imply personal strength as well as institutional reform.

## Conclusion

Indian women in senior leadership roles in higher education articulate diverse career pathways that address ambition, resilience, systemic obstacles, and changing norms. Numerous women have attained significant positions of influence through perseverance, academic excellence and mentorship networks despite institutional and cultural hurdles. Their journeys point out the need for supportive policies, inclusive work environments and leadership development that considers female's experiences in academia. Nevertheless, gender sensitive approaches in recruiting, organizational culture and promotion suggest much more structural reforms and gender sensitive approaches to the job of women in top-tier positions. Identifying learnings from the trajectory of successful women leaders and addressing persistent obstacles can help institutions create much more equitable and powerful leadership environments. Encouraging far more females to assume senior positions contributes to the academic community and it is a catalyst for societal change and education improvement in India.

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