Leadership Development and Emergence of Leadership Traits in Female Leaders in Nepal: A Narrative Analysis of Female Leaders of Private Organisations

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ABSTRACT

Female leaders practice a transformational leadership style which has been regarded and proved to be an effective approach in organizational settings. Despite several research findings adhering to the effective leadership approach adopted by female leaders, men still outnumber women in leadership positions. This research study delves into the leadership identity of Nepali female leaders, their effective leadership practice in organisations, and their leadership styles and traits. The research used a narrative identity framework, analysing the narratives of seven prominent female leaders in private organisations in Nepal. The result indicated that the leadership identity of these leaders was shaped by social (gender, corporate outlook) and family factors. Contrary to popular belief, these female leaders received strong support from their families and colleagues. These leaders demonstrated high emotional intelligence, were observant, cordial with colleagues, served as mentors, and had an ever-learning attitude that continuously enhanced their professional efficiency in a self-regulatory way. The combined effect of these interrelated attributes helped form six major leadership traits – empathetic, loyal and committed, adaptive, intuitive, team player, and resilient. These traits had a common foundation of being resolute and ethical and were strongly embedded in how they led and how they perceived their role as leaders in their organisations.

Keywords: Leadership style, leadership traits, female leaders, leadership development, leadership in Nepal, barriers in female leadership

Introduction

The concept of leadership has been a topic of research for both theorists and practitioners for many decades, probably due to its consequential effect on organisational performance and development. True leadership only exists when people follow when they would otherwise have the freedom to not follow (Collins, 2001), which raises the question of how a person can become such an effective leader.

In the fast-growing corporate and industrial world, the rise of female leaders is also continuously taking an upward trajectory. The tendency of females to exceed males on the components of leadership style that relate positively to effectiveness attests to females' abilities (Eagly & Carli, 2003). The efficiency factor of leadership style of female leaders is also found to be higher than that of male leaders (Kuchynková, 2015). However, female leaders are significantly outnumbered by males in senior-level positions in most of the countries. For the first time – after being stuck at around the 8% mark – 10.4% of Fortune 500 CEOs are female, which is still not a commendable share of female participation in top-level management (Hinchliffe, 2023).

In Nepal, the sociocultural context does not favour females in an influential role. Women are considered most responsible for household chores, raising children, and caring for elderly people in the family (Bhushal, 2008). Despite the unfavourable environment, women are still making significant difference in the professional world. Studies show that female leaders make better decisions because they conduct several rounds of consultations before making a decision (Bhattarai & Maharjan, 2016). Though many studies have been done on leadership styles and traits worldwide, there is a dearth of leadership studies on female leaders in Nepal and specific data is unavailable. This study aimed to analyse how female leaders approach leadership roles and tackle the adversities they face in private organisations in Nepal. It addressed the following research questions:

a) How do Nepali female leaders understand their identity as leaders? b) How do Nepali female leaders effectively carry out their leadership roles in organisations? c) What are the leadership styles and traits of female leaders in Nepal?

Literature Review

Relevance of trait in leadership

McCrae and Costa (1990) defined *traits* as 'dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions'. Thomas Carlyle's (1841) 'Great Man' theory represents the first of many theories that focused on the personality traits of leaders as predictors of leadership and organisational success. Despite the attention given to these early theories, Stogdill's (1948) review of the research concluded that no one set of traits successfully and consistently distinguished between people with versus those without leadership positions.

It has been revealed that socially desirable or 'bright' traits will likely be valuable for leader emergence and leadership effectiveness in many circumstances. However, these same traits could be counterproductive in particular contexts. Similarly, socially undesirable or 'dark' traits might compromise leader effectiveness in general but enhance group survival and fitness in others (Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009). A research was carried out as a part of the International Sexuality Description Project (ISDP), one of the most extensive cross-cultural studies of personality ever conducted, which revealed that females reported significantly higher Big Five Indicator levels of neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness than males but lower in the traits of openness (Schmitt, Realo, Voracek, & Allik, 2008).

Traits like dominance and cooperation are commonly associated with leadership. Research conducted on 195 leaders, including males and females aged 18 to 81, concluded that as leadership experience increased, the desirability of dominance-related traits decreased for females and remained unchanged for males. However, the experience did not affect the views of cooperativeness in both males and females. Leadership experience creates changes in the desirability of different leadership traits. Males and females may have different leadership experiences (Nichols, 2016).

Leadership style and effectiveness

According to Eagly and Carli (2003), transformational leadership and the contingent reward aspect of transactional leadership are the components of leadership that positively relate to effectiveness. The ineffective styles include the management-by-exception aspect of transactional leadership and laissez-faire leadership.

The alternative model of transformational leadership classifies leaders into four mutually exclusive categories based on their level of charisma (level of generalised influence) and their ability to generate visions (level of expertise and wisdom): visionary charismatic leaders (transformational), non-visionary charismatic leaders, non-charismatic visionary leaders, and non-visionary non-charismatic leaders (the last three categories of leaders are all non-transformational). By treating charisma and vision as independent constructs, the three leadership theories (charismatic, visionary, and transformational) can be organised into a more parsimonious framework with less overlap and ambiguity (Khatri, 2005).

Transformational leaders can transform crises into developmental challenges by presenting the crisis as intellectual stimulation to promote subordinates' thoughtful, creative, and adaptive capabilities, establish the vision and future direction of organisations, and their sound communication (Harwati, 2013). A study in the context of the educational sector showed a positive relationship between the transformational leadership style of the school principals and their effectiveness (Ibrahim & Al-Taneiji, 2013). The research on the relationship between transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership style and employee commitment in the corporate sector showed it to be strongly positive, weakly positive, and weakly negative, respectively (Silva & Mendis, 2017).

Leadership studies in the medical sector revealed that a transformational leadership style was necessary for motivating human resources and creating a

pleasant working environment (Maisi, Vlasiadis, Zyga, Argyriadis, & Patelarou, 2023). The result was consistent with other research based on the Indonesian context that revealed a positive relationship between transformational leadership style and employee performance (Rezeki, Mardiputera, & Wulandari, 2023). On the other hand, in the labour sector, the study revealed that organisations with low transactional leadership would fail to elevate employee commitment and performance because of the nature of work (Mahfouz, Halim, Alias, & Bahkia, 2022).

Leadership approach of female leaders

Traditionally, most leaders have been males. The well-known psychological phenomenon 'think manager, think male' associates the traits of a leader – forceful, dominant, strong, or competent – with males in a stereotypical way. It is challenging for females to reach top managerial jobs, and the 'glass ceiling' appears to be still intact, although females are gaining some 'middle' ground (Schein & Davidson, 1993).

Vroom and Jago's (1988) well-known normative model of leader decision-making suggests that depending on the situation, different behaviours are prescribed, with some situations requiring more autocratic behaviours and some more participative. What is more important is matching the style to the situation. Some work has found that females' choices tend to be more in line with prescriptions made by Vroom and Jago's model (1982); however, females who used autocratic styles were rated more harshly than males who used these styles, likely because autocratic behaviour is not viewed as favourably when enacted by females. Fewer female leaders who reach top-level management are more under the radar of transformational leadership, whereas males generally practice transactional leadership (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Engen, 2003). Furthermore, they also score higher than male leaders on the scale of effective leadership.

Zenger and Folkman (2012) conducted a 360-degree study of a pool of 7,280 leaders of some of the most successful and progressive organisations in the world, both public and private, government and commercial, domestic and international, through which they found out that while females consistently outscored their male counterparts in a majority of leadership traits, they were deemed by their male colleagues as lacking in strategic vision. This finding, consistent across several studies exploring differences in males' and females' leadership traits, may explain why females are underrepresented in executive positions.

Through a textual analysis of eight Chinese female leaders included in the Forbes list of 100 Most Powerful Women in the World 2015, the findings indicated a common use of the transformational leadership style by these leaders (Chao, 2017). A study on Catholic nuns in the United States revealed that these religious females when in leadership positions, practice a servant leadership style, which is transformational (Fiebig & Christopher, 2018). Female managers have more agile leadership qualities, which are of a transformational nature, and they value communication and social interaction more than males (Üstgörül & Akkaya, 2020). Another research on female principals revealed that they apply a democratic leadership style, prioritising teamwork in decision-making (Mulawarman, Komariyah, & Suryaningsi, 2021). All of these findings are consistent with Eagly & Carli's research that says female leaders practice a more transformational leadership style, considered a more effective one.

Barriers faced by female leaders in leadership positions

According to social role theory (Eagly, 1987), the differences in the behaviours of females and males result from the different roles the two genders play based on the expectations held by their society. The theory states that males are agentic and females are communal. Males are believed to be controlling, forceful, assertive, aggressive, direct, ambitious, and independent from other people whereas females are believed to be helpful, emotional, kind, affectionate, sympathetic, and concerned with the welfare of others.

Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) proposes that female leaders face two types of prejudice because of the incongruity of the expected

leadership role and females' gender role: (a) perceiving females less favourably than males as potential occupants of leadership roles and (b) evaluating behaviour that fulfils the prescriptions of a leader role less favourably when it is enacted by a female. Females are expected to be feminine, and those who show toughness, decisiveness, and assertiveness (all 'male' traits) are not well accepted by their peers (Broughton & Miller, 2009). When females are not in the role they are expected to be, they are generally cold-shouldered by society, which blocks their growth ladder.

Though studies show that females practice effective leadership styles, they are still outnumbered by males in the top-level management in almost every organisation, irrespective of whether in the commercial, industrial, military, or public sector, and it appears to be a worldwide phenomenon (Alimo-Metcalfe, 2010). Their representation is low because of the opinion that females are not worthy of being leaders and that only males best fit the role. The patriarchal culture still strongly influences people's perspectives. Balancing work and family responsibilities is among the most challenging obstacles for females seeking leadership positions (Sandberg, 2013). Females are not only denied top leadership opportunities at the culmination of a long career, but those opportunities disappear at various points along the way.

It is concluded that the transformational leadership style of female leaders itself is difficult to implement. There is a difference between the existence of a transformational leader and the implementation of this kind of leadership. It takes time to create the required work environment or workplace before the transformational leadership style becomes a commonplace deed (Khan, Idris, & Mehmud, 2021).

Relevance of the study

In Nepal, for every 100 males in the working-age population, there are 125 females, but for every 100 employed males, there are only 59 employed females (Report on the Nepal labour force survey, 2017). The lower number of females employed ultimately leads to their lower representation in leadership positions. When it comes to incentives, research has revealed that male faculty members earn 20.7% more than comparable female colleagues (Sigelman, Milward, & Shepard, 1982).

Several studies have been carried out on the topics of effective leadership styles, the leadership approach of male and female leaders, the perspective of the followers, and the gender gap in leadership positions in different sectors of different countries. However, there is a dearth of research on female leadership in Nepal. The reasons could be inadequate resources, poor academic and research environment, and overt political influence (Acharya, Phuyal, Chand, & Kaphle, 2021).

In an attempt to shed light on female leadership and the effective traits of female leaders in Nepal, this research intends to identify the leadership styles and traits and the adversities faced in Nepal's private organisations by conducting a narrative analysis of experienced female leaders.

Theoretical framework: Narrative identity

The conceptualisation of identity involves three levels: personal, relational, and collective. The leader internalises the leader's identity to understand oneself. At the relational level, a leader's identity is tied to the role he or she performs in a social or organisational framework. At the collective level of identity, the leader represents a particular social group within larger multi-social groups (Derue & Ashford, 2010). The present study analyses the internal dynamics emerging in the autobiographical narratives of a person's leadership journey.

Through a narrative approach, this paper analyses the sense-making process of leadership identity and leadership style and traits in light of the identity construction of female leaders and the barriers they face in their roles as leaders. McAdams and McLean (2013) explain the function of narrative identity as a means of reconstructing the autobiographical past of a person and giving purpose and meaning to the future. It helps the researcher understand how the narrator came to be the person she is today. Narrative identity relies on autobiographical memory rather than an objective form of story in choosing key scenes, characters, plots, and themes and weaving a

coherent narrative (McAdams, 2018).

Within the psychological sciences, the concept of narrative identity allows researchers to analyse autobiographical stories and identify the internal dynamics of personal life and the external factors that influence public life (Stephens & Breheny, 2013). The derived meaning of their life experiences frames their understanding of themselves and their identity in relation to the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts of their life (McAdams et al., 2008). Based on the studies conducted on narrative identity in different countries, it was concluded that different cultures express different lists of images, themes, and plots when they construct their own identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Studies in different cultural contexts help expound on leadership styles and traits that are unique to a culture.

In the current research, analysing the narratives of leadership experiences of the female leaders helped in identifying the leadership style and traits exercised and barriers faced by them in the context of Nepal.

Methodology

The qualitative method was employed to identify patterns and meanings from the data that had not been specified in advance (Willig, 2008). Through

the lens of narrative identity, the study analysed the narratives of seven selected female leaders with at least six years of experience at the managerial level (Table 1). The sample is limited to the leaders in private organisations because the dynamics of leadership in public and private organisations are different, and the focus of this study is to capture the leadership traits of female leaders, specifically in private organisations.

The research maintained the standard ethical concerns of anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent. Before the interview, the participants signed an informed consent form, which included a provision that the participant was not only free to participate but also at liberty to discontinue at any point of the research. In addition, the names of the participants in Table 1 have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and privacy. The questionnaire was designed to be approximately 45 minutes long and was conducted in August 2023. As the participants were well-versed in English and Nepali, the interviews were conducted in both languages according to the participants' preference. The Nepali transcripts were then translated into English. Data analysis included the following steps: 1) transcribing the interviews, 2) coding of data, 3) identifying the themes, and 4) drafting the analysis.

Through semi-structured in-depth interviews, this study aimed to identify the leadership development

Table 1. Participants' demographics[1]

Name	Age	Position	Experience	Qualification
Sanjana	55	Vice Principal: Higher Education Institution	15 years	Master's in Zoology
Priya	56	Asst. General Manager: Insurance Company	27 years	Master's in Economics and Math
Sneha	65	Sr. General Manager: Insurance Company	19 years	Master's in Economics
Suhana	51	CEO: Internet and TV Service Provider	16 years	Chartered Accountant
Reeva	55	HR Manager, Consultant	17 years	Master's in Business Administration
Diva	50	Manager: Bank	20 years	Master's in Botany
Aarati	40	Managing Director: e-Commerce Platform	6.5 years	Master's in Business Administration

1   The names of the participants in Table 1 have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and privacy.

styles and traits they used to practice their leadership roles effectively. There were four primary and some probing questions directly connected to the research questions. The questions were designed to explore three areas of their leadership journey, namely, (a) the impact of leadership experiences as they perceived them, (b) how they dealt with the challenges and dilemmas they faced, and (c) the prominent traits that emerged from their leadership experiences.

Findings

This research examined the leadership narratives of seven female leaders, focusing on the employment of leadership traits in the workplace and the impact of family and society on their leadership journeys.

A. Contextual factors

The social and family factors have significantly influenced the establishment of the broader framework of this research.

1. Social factors

The narratives of the female leaders reflect the complex interplay between gender-related challenges and the strong corporate outlook.

i. Gender: Gender was a significant factor affecting most females' leadership ladder. Reeva highlighted the stereotypical societal expectations that position males as more suitable for leadership roles. She said, 'People used to come looking for the Human Resources (HR) Head and ask where HR Head was. I used to say I was the HR Head, and they would not be convinced.' Diva mentioned the dual burden many females face, juggling household responsibilities before and after work, which may limit their networking and relationship-building opportunities compared to their male counterparts.

ii. Corporate Outlook: All the female leaders were highly supported by their seniors, establishing clear boundaries at work. Reeva recounted how senior-level management and directors advocated for her retention as the department head during a bank merger. Suhana emphasised

the importance of maintaining a professional relationship when working with her husband in the same organisation, ensuring emotional entanglement did not interfere with their roles. She stated, 'When we are here [in the office], we become the role; when we are at home, we close the office door [and our roles become those of husband and wife].' Her dedication to leaving a meaningful impact within the organisation was evident when she expressed, 'I just want the legacy of my work to speak for itself rather than the title.'

2. Family factors

All the leaders were grateful to their families, who were their ultimate support. Being a working female and wearing many hats of household and corporation duties was bearable only because of their supportive families.

Sanjana credited her parents for instilling in her an openness to change, fostering her ability to adapt and innovate professionally. Diva acknowledged her father-in-law's support, which allowed her to navigate the challenges of balancing work, marriage, and motherhood in a cultural context where it can be challenging for women to continue working after marriage and having children. She stated, 'My father-in-law supported me. Otherwise, it is hard for a Nepali woman to work after getting married and having children.' Despite the responsibilities of motherhood, Reeva found it equally rewarding to know that her children eagerly awaited her return from work.

B. Leadership development attributes

Leadership development attributes refer to specific qualities, characteristics, or skills considered essential or beneficial for individuals looking to develop their leadership abilities. These attributes are the building blocks of effective leadership and are crucial in a leader's ability to inspire, influence, and guide others.

After careful analysis of the narratives provided by female leaders, three sets of interconnected attributes were identified. The cumulative effect of these three sets contributed to the shaping and enhancement of

leadership traits of these leaders. Each factor is elaborated below.

1. Fostering emotional quotient (EQ) and being observant

By being observant, all of the female leaders gained insights into the feelings and perspectives of their staff, were able to resolve conflicts, and developed empathy. Simultaneously, the emotional intelligence honed their observational skills by increasing their sensitivity, curiosity, interest, and communication skills. These two attributes share a symbiotic relationship, reinforcing and complementing the other.

When two banks underwent a merger, Reeva, the HR Head, ensured that she 'never closed her office door' and aligned the organisational culture and systems with an emphasis on incorporating a 'human touch' in the workplace. Similarly, Aarati actively put herself 'in others' shoes' to consider the impact of decisions on the stakeholders. Through keen observation and understanding of the workplace culture among new staff, she fostered a bias-free and healthy work environment.

2. Cordiality with colleagues and mentoring

The interplay between cordiality and mentoring is evident in the perspectives of all of the female leaders. They believed that cultivating cordiality fosters an environment conducive to mentoring, where establishing trust, open communication, and a sense of safety is important. Conversely, the practice of mentoring enhanced cordiality with colleagues by fostering empathy, encouraging a feedback culture, expanding professional networks, and promoting personal growth.

Sneha emphasised the importance of helping colleagues learn and grow, stressing that teaching benefits everyone involved. She said, 'People think they may be overshadowed if they teach things to other people, but it is not true.' Suhana acknowledged her challenging and demanding nature but highlighted her commitment to pushing her team to excel. She said, 'Maybe they [colleagues] say I push them to their limits, somebody who pushes them out of their comfort zones.' Her leadership approach included giving everyone equal hearing and respecting diverse points of view, creating an environment where colleagues feel heard and valued.

3. Ever-learning attitude and professional efficiency

The ever-learning attitude of most of the leaders positively influenced their professional efficiency, equipping them with the necessary tools, knowledge, and skills to excel in their roles. This proactive approach to personal and professional development not only benefitted them but also contributed to the success and competitiveness of the organisations they worked for. Continual learning and growth enabled the leaders to become more efficient, adaptable, and innovative, ultimately fostering higher levels of productivity and success in their careers.

Sanjana described herself as being in a continuous learning phase. She said, 'I try to take opinions from people around me, which gives me areas for improvement and lessons for the future.' Similarly, Priya acknowledged that mistakes are inherent in the learning process and emphasised the importance of 'knowing when to step back and let others lead when you are wrong.' Suhana, coming from an Accounts background, shared her initial experiences upon joining the IT company. She highlighted her fearless approach to asking questions and seeking explanations, saying, 'I had no knowledge about technical things when I joined the company, but I was not scared of being the stupidest person at the table.' Her transformation from overcoming the fear of appearing 'stupid' underscores her commitment to lifelong learning and professional efficiency.

C. Leadership traits

Contextual factors and attributes in leadership development actively contributed to shaping and refining the leadership traits exhibited by the participants. These traits played a pivotal role in dictating the leaders' approach to leadership. The narratives revealed six predominant traits that underpinned their leadership styles, standing on the foundation of resolute and ethical leadership. Each trait is discussed further in the next section.

1. Empathetic

All female leaders showcased a remarkable ability to connect with others, comprehend their emotions, and respond with compassion and support. Their willingness to listen, understand, and assist others underscored their capacity for empathy, fostering positive relationships, trust, and a conducive work environment.

Some leaders' empathy is seen through their desire to be remembered as 'a good human being'. Priya recognised that, beneath their differences, people share a common humanity, emphasising her ability to connect with others on a deeper level. Sneha reflected on how being a female drove her maternal instinct to cover the mistakes of subordinates to save them from the fault-finding senior management. When encountering former colleagues, expressions like 'Ma'am, we missed you so much' showed how deeply interwoven the lives of these leaders were with those of their employees. The leaders were also careful not to hurt the feelings of others and apologised where necessary because otherwise, they could not 'rest in peace' with disturbing thoughts of guilt and regret.

2. Loyalty and commitment to organisation

All the female leaders showed an unwavering dedication to their roles and were willing to go above and beyond. Sanjana mentioned the deep sense of faith and support she received from her organisation as the driving force for her loyalty and dedication to her role. Similarly, Sneha showed her dedication to the organisation when she brought back an almost-lost business and stood by the policies of her company. She highlighted her commitment to her role even when working in the government office, as she mentioned she did not work the 'government way'. She prioritised the company's well-being over personal benefits, whether people around her were doing the same or not.

Suhana emphasised that, during work, she 'becomes the role and that role has certain responsibilities to fulfil.' The leaders did not take their position for granted. Diva reflected on instances when she demonstrated her long-standing commitment to the organisation, even when she was presented with opportunities for higher-level positions in new banks. She also acknowledged that she would not accept any higher positions solely for the associated benefits if she did not feel sufficiently committed to the additional responsibilities that accompanied the role. Aarati mentioned how she 'does not feel the need to be much involved in the finance department' because she 'will not be adding value to that team' as finance is not her strength. However, she recognised when to get more engaged in certain departments, aligning her efforts to help the team see the 'bigger picture'. Her commitment was rooted in her ability to add value and foster collaboration within the company.

3. Adaptive/ Contingent

All participants concurred adaptive characteristics that allowed them to respond effectively to diverse challenges and situations in their leadership roles. Sanjana recognised the need to switch between different leadership modes based on the situation. Likewise, Aarati mentioned transitioning from a role that was '50% strategic and 50% execution-focused to one that is primarily strategic' when she switched organisations. Likewise, Suhana was taken aback when one of her staff was electrocuted while working with the wires. The company faced another major data breach. To make the situation worse, both these events happened within a difference of a day during the pandemic. Those were the moments when she showcased her adaptability as she handled a diverse range of emotionally-depleting challenges, including those outside her technical expertise.

4. Intuitive

Most leaders recognised that intuition can be a valuable source of insight and guidance in decision-making. However, they also grasped the importance of combining intuition with rationality to make well-informed decisions, particularly in complex and risk-sensitive situations.

Sanjana mentioned relying on her 'gut feeling' and picking up 'vibes from people.' Similarly, Suhana acknowledged the value of intuition but emphasised the need to substantiate it with data and trends. She also said, 'If others cannot prove their idea, I will do

what my gut [feeling] says is the best because I am the one taking the maximum risk.'

5. Team player

There was consensus among the participants on the importance of collaborative and inclusive leadership. Priya mentioned how 'everybody has their pluses and minuses.' The key to getting the most from the staff was assigning the right people to the right team according to their strengths and weaknesses. She also pictured herself as taking the most risk because, being the leader, she was accountable for the organisation's fall. Likewise, Reeva highlighted the importance of self-motivation within a person and asserted that a leader should propel their team forward, ensuring constant engagement and productivity. Aarati acknowledged that, while at times she assumed the role of 'a fly on the wall,' her leadership impact amplified when she 'invested time in one-on-one interactions to ensure that their [employees'] voices were heard.' Her transparent and honest communication style promoted trust and collaboration within the organisation. She also recognised the ripple effect on middle and lower-level staff when leadership changes occur in the organisation.

6. Resilient

All the participants showcased their capacity to rebound from setbacks, adapt to change, and maintain a positive outlook. This resilience not only served as a personal strength but also propelled their success in overcoming barriers and achieving goals.

Sneha shared an episode about how she was resolute in regaining the lost business when a competitor unfairly tried to sway her client. She said, 'I taught the staff of that branch to talk and negotiate with the competitor and tell them how unfairly they had taken our business. The staff did well and recovered that lost business.' Similarly, Suhana's ability to remain calm and accept responsibility during difficult times of data breach and death of a staff showcased her emotional resilience. Additionally, her willingness to learn and ask questions until she was convinced reflected her intellectual resilience and growth mindset.

Foundation of leadership traits: Resoluteness and ethics

Through the contextual analysis of leadership development attributes and traits, the narratives of female leaders led to the understanding that the foundation of the six major leadership traits were resoluteness and ethics.

1. Resoluteness

All the participants exemplify a common thread of resoluteness in the face of various challenges and obstacles within their personal and professional roles. Whether it be overcoming gender-related challenges, striving for success, upholding principles, or demonstrating ethical leadership, their stories serve as compelling examples of the power of resoluteness in achieving professional goals and facing adversity head-on.

The leaders did not step back when the social expectations confronted them. Their commitment to continuous learning empowered them to navigate demanding workplaces and handle uncooperative clients confidently. They were also adept at remaining calm and composed in emotionally challenging situations, demonstrating their ability to deal with discomfort and embrace provocations. Through resoluteness, these leaders became adaptive, team players, and resilient.

2. Ethics

The narratives of the participants collectively underscore the intrinsic connection between their actions and ethical practices in the workplace. Their commitment to principles, values, and a broader sense of responsibility exemplifies how ethical conduct permeates every facet of their professional lives, fostering a culture of integrity and ethical behaviour within the organisation.

They developed ethical values by observing their families and societal norms surrounding them. Coming from a communitarian background, the leaders had to undertake multiple roles and develop a deep sense of interwoven values that guide their actions in their organisations. By being ethical, the leaders also

became empathetic, loyal, and intuitive with their actions.

Discussion

The female leaders in this study recall understanding their leadership identities by narrating their leadership journey since joining the workforce. Their leadership identities emerged mainly from two contextual factors, namely, social and family factors (Figure 1), which when combined with the effects of leadership development attributes, developed and enhanced leadership traits. The female leaders were supported by their families. They were highly loved and respected by their staff, who trusted the competency and mentoring of these leaders, which contradicted to the findings of prior research (Broughton & Miller, 2009). However, the leaders did not deny the minor situations when they had to face subtle gender stereotypes, which was consistent with many other existing studies. This finding aligns with another research that revealed that female leaders use their competency and knowledge to face gender disparities (Kass, Souba, & Thorndyke, 2006). They also accepted that maintaining a work-life balance was challenging (Sandberg, 2013), but they managed with the help of their supportive family members and colleagues at work. The communitarian practice of living in South Asian countries aided these female leaders because the family members took care of the house when these female leaders went on with their professional careers (Cho et al., 2015). As a result, these social and family factors contributed to the development of leadership traits in these females.

Three sets of interrelated attributes were derived that were self-regulatory in nature and had a combined effect in forming the six major leadership traits – empathetic, loyal and committed, adaptive, intuitive, team player, and resilient. All the leaders had high emotional intelligence, were observant, cordial with the colleagues, served as mentors, and had an ever-learning attitude that continuously enhanced their professional efficiency. These leadership attributes helped them self-regulate in such a way that they were fully aware of and could manage their actions and behaviours. In the process of fostering their EQ and being observant, these leaders developed their ability to empathise with the staff, scan the business environment to make contingent strategies, make decisions balancing intuition and rationality, and stay resilient in challenging situations, which is conforming to Eagly's social role theory (1987). While they were friendly with their colleagues and mentored them whenever possible, they became empathetic and team players as they learned the strengths and weaknesses of their staff and prioritised teamwork in decision-making (Mulawarman, Komariyah, & Suryaningsi, 2021). This also enhanced their communication and social interaction capacity (Üstgörül & Akkaya, 2020). The ever-learning attitude that enhanced their professional efficiency was one of the major factors in making them loyal and committed to their organisation. They made decisions favourable to their organisation depending on the situation and adopted different behaviours in accordance with the normative model of leader decision-making given by Vroom and Jago (1988).

All the leadership traits stood on a common foundation of leaders being resolute and ethical in their actions. The assertiveness of these female leaders concurs with the traits of South Asian leaders (Lu, Nisbett, & Morris, 2020). They were consistent with ISDP's Big Five Indicator levels of neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness that were reported higher in women (Schmitt, Realo, Voracek, & Allik, 2008). The leaders' narratives were compatible with Harwati's (2013) results as they successfully transformed crises into developmental challenges by demonstrating their adaptive traits. More recent research on executive leaders has found that female leaders may be more likely to make ethical decisions and prioritise ethics than male leaders; hence, these females placed ethics as the guiding light in their actions (Isidro & Sobral, 2015).

Limitations and future scope

This study has served to establish that in the context of Nepal, the leadership traits of female leaders are shaped by the values they take on from their parents during their upbringing, their family members, including in-laws, and the culture of the society they live in. This qualitative study does not include a framework that can distinctly distinguish or measure the levels or degree
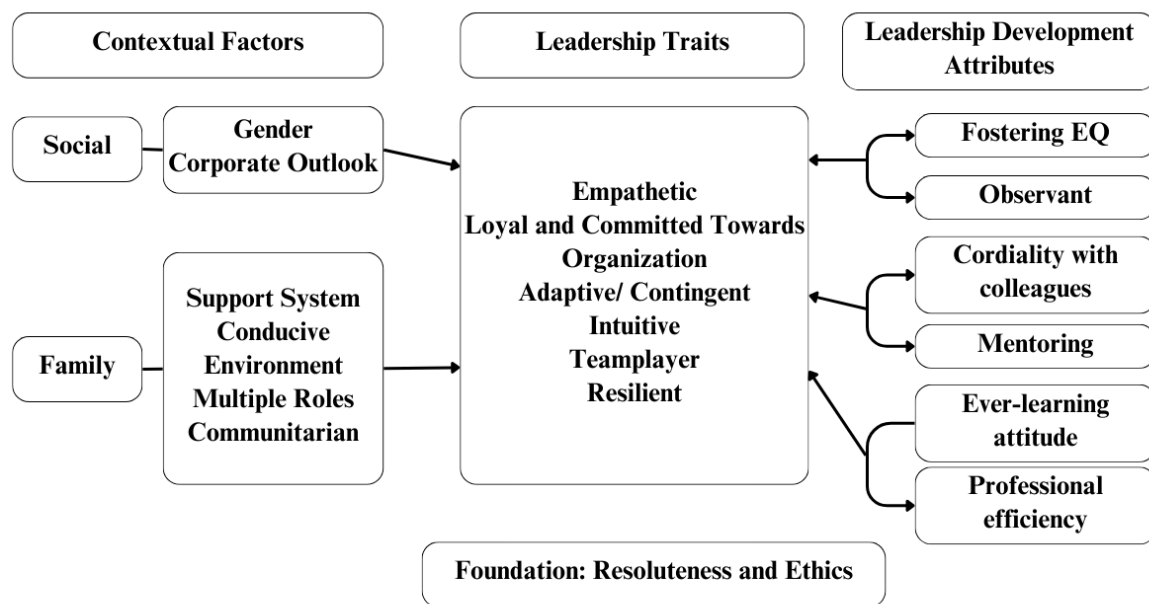
Figure 1. Leadership traits development framework

of contribution of family and societal culture. Although all of them are successful leaders in their business, there was no mechanism to determine how they were perceived by their own staff. As this research was done only on female leaders, the differences or similarities between the leadership traits of Nepali male leaders were not studied. Future research into this aspect would be something to consider.

Conclusion

This study delved into the nuanced narratives of female leaders in Nepal. The narratives, shaped by social and family factors, offered profound insights into their leadership journeys. The contextual analysis showcased a departure from conventional findings, as the female leaders not only navigated gender stereotypes with competence and knowledge but also enjoyed robust familial support and garnered trust from their colleagues. The blend of familial encouragement and professional respect emerged as a distinctive feature, contributing significantly to the development of leadership traits. Moreover, the study affirmed the foundational role of resoluteness and ethics in

shaping leadership traits, aligning with cultural norms and societal expectations in South Asia. The study serves as a foundation for further investigations into leadership dynamics, not only in the Nepali context but also in the broader cultural settings of South Asia. This research highlights the importance of female leadership and the need for more female representation in leadership positions. It underscores the fact that female leaders possess unique leadership traits that are critical for effective leadership and contribute immensely to organisational growth and success.

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