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Let their voices be heard: Exploring female educational leaders' crisis management skills and reliance on inclusive leadership amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in Higher Education Institutions in the UK

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Summary: (150 words)
The current study explores the concepts and enactment of leadership and crisis management from the female leader's perspective since very few studies, if any, have explored whether inclusive leadership can help educational institutions when they must face unprecedented challenges in terms of crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Through assisted thematic analyses of 40 female educational leaders' oral responses to questions regarding how they have led during the Covid-19 crisis, the current study investigates whether they relied on inclusive leadership to help their universities exit this unprecedented crisis. The study revealed that these women exercised inclusive transformational leadership and provided considerable support to their followers during the Covid-19 crisis leading them through the crisis as well as managing the response. The study provides recommendations for Higher Education Institutions, HR professionals and leadership teams to support female educational leaders and foster diversity and inclusion.

Key words: female educational leaders, crisis management, Covid-19, Higher Education, diversity, inclusion

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Introduction

Aspiring female educational leaders' career advancement has been slow despite support provided by programmes, such as the Athena Swan Charter, enhancing women marginalization (Carnes et al., 2008). Male-friendly organizational practices still dominate Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and women are not supported due to lack of programmes which aim to develop their leadership skills (Correll, 2017).

Although there is ample research focusing on gendered barriers for women in the academy, relatively little attention has been paid to whether women academics are inclusive leaders amidst a major crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Stefani and Blessinger, 2017). This article contributes to the debate on how IL can help organisations face crises effectively by shedding light on how inclusive female leaders, who act as role-models (in line with the social information processing theory developed by Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), may improve organisational performance and increase employees' positive response when faced with crisis-induced challenges. From a Human Resource Development (HRD) perspective, there are many issues that remain unanswered and are worth exploring in the crisis literature. Some of these issues, that are highlighted in this article, focus on how to minimize the negative impact of crisis by leveraging it to the organisation's advantage through consistent involvement of all stakeholders (e.g., leaders and followers) at each stage of the crisis (Bhaduri, 2019).

According to Garikipati and Kambhampati (2021), Covid-19 outcomes are systematically better in countries led by women due to the proactive and coordinated policy responses they adopt. Zenger and Folkman (2020) report that according to an analysis of 360-degree assessments, women were rated by their colleagues as more effective. Previous research indicates that female leaders tend to perform better in a crisis in terms of overall leadership effectiveness because employees need leaders who are honest, truthful, and mindful of their colleagues' feelings and frustration (Branson et al., 2016), can pivot new skills and focus on employee development even during major crises (Dirani et al., 2020).

By adopting critical gender theory as my theoretical framework, I regard gender as socially constructed (Kolb, 2000) acknowledging that it is reproduced regularly in daily negotiation sustaining structured inequalities between men and women and leading to the existing gender discrimination in their employment status (Morley 2013) highlighting a favouritism towards men within the academy (Knights and Richards, 2003). Savigny (2014) reports that female educational leaders feel as the 'other' not belonging within the academy. This leads to marginalisation of women, their contributions, and ideas (Savigny 2014).

To sum up, the current study reports on how female educational leaders in HEI in the UK perceive themselves as leaders during major crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. It aims to explore whether they confirm previous studies claiming that women are effective leaders in crises (Aldrich and Lotito, 2020; Soares and Sidun, 2021) and unfold how female educational leaders in HEI in the UK are facing the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the findings of this study, recommendations will be provided as to how all relevant stakeholders in HEI can promote gender equity, help female (and male) educational leaders enhance their crisis management (CM) skills and become more inclusive leaders responding to challenges associated with IL, i.e., leaders' anxiety (Choi et al., 2015).

Research Focus, Rationale and Questions

The current study reports on how female educational leaders in HEI in the UK perceive themselves as leaders during major crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. It aims to explore whether they confirm previous studies claiming that women are effective leaders in crises and unfold how female educational leaders in HEI in the UK have faced the Covid-19 pandemic. It also examines whether they are inclusive leaders, as very few studies have explored female educational leaders' crisis management and leadership skills in HEI (Stefani and Blessinger, 2017). Based on the findings of this study, significant recommendations will be provided as to how all relevant stakeholders can promote gender equity, help female educational leaders enhance their crisis management skills and become more inclusive leaders.

Research Methods

To explore female educational leaders' crisis management skills and reactions to the Covid-19 crisis and examine how inclusive leaders they were, 40 leaders from 4 publicly funded HEI in London, UK were interviewed. Using opportunity and snowball sampling methods (Sharma, 2017), a small sample was deemed as sufficient for the current qualitative study (Vasileiou et al, 2018). Interviewees were found by tapping into the researcher's professional network.

The collection of data started as soon as the Covid-19 crisis emerged. Using a qualitative research design, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with educational leaders (senior lecturers, heads of division, Vice-chancellors, and Chancellors) through MS Teams. Each interview lasted approximately fifty minutes. The aim of the current study was to address the following research questions:

- How inclusive leaders are female educational leader in HEI in the UK?

- How have female educational leaders in HEI in the UK reacted to the Covid-19 crisis?

Preliminary Analysis and Initial Results from First Phase

Qualitative research data was collected from non-standardised interviews and was analysed using a prominent approach, thematic content analysis (King and Brooks, 2018). The themes that the researcher tried to identify during data analysis were closely linked to the theoretical background of inclusive leadership (IL) and crisis-management (CM) and were reflected in the questionnaire she used to interview the participants. The aim was to determine whether the participants in the current study perceived that they were inclusive leaders and explore their Covid-19 CM skills.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interview data were inductively analysed using thematic analysis (King and Brooks, 2018). In terms of inter-coder reliability, two independent raters coded interviews into themes and subthemes. The level of agreement was calculated between raters using Cohen's Kappa (K). The value of Cohen's Kappa ranged from 0.18 to 0.86 (Landis and Koch, 1977). Interview instances on which coders did not agree were discussed until an agreement was reached, though sometimes some instances were omitted from the coding process.

The findings of this study revealed that most female educational leaders emphasized the importance of having a personal relationship with their followers showing respect and

consideration which aligns perfectly with the core characteristics of inclusive leaders as these were described in the literature (Gartzia et al., 2012; Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006). They offered support during the crisis when needed, as they were facing similar challenges, i.e., caring responsibilities. This confirms previous research findings and supports the critical gender theory which discusses the gendered inequalities women often face (Cundiflr and Stockdale, 2013; Kolb, 2000).

Some leaders also referred to the sensitive issue of showing appreciation and recognition and being fair at the same time (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006). Their aim was to encourage their followers to continue contributing to the university goals in their own unique way fostering a positive and supportive organisational culture in which they felt they belonged in line with the theories of human motivation (Maslow, 1943), optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991), social comparison (Festinger, 1954), social exchange (Blau, 1964), the rules of reciprocity theory (Gouldner, 1960) and the belongingness hypothesis (Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

The participants seemed to be inclusive leaders as they ensured that their employees were overall satisfied with their working conditions in line with the theory of work adjustment (Dawis and Lofquist, 1984) which claims that inclusive leaders develop an ideal working environment in which employees feel supported and therefore formulate suitable coping strategies when faced with a crisis (Heatherton and Wyland, 2003). Aspiring female leaders also turned to them for advice, were available and approachable, and always managed to find time for everyone. This aligns perfectly with the core characteristics of IL as these were described in the literature (Carmeli et al., 2010; Choi et al., 2016).

The findings in terms of CM revealed that female educational leaders' response to the Covid-19 pandemic was dual since leaders were asked to manage and lead simultaneously. They had to change the mode of delivery at a very short notice promoting a proactive, crisis-prepared organizational culture (Elsubbaugh et al., 2004). They also supported their members of staff, especially those who had caring responsibilities minimizing the side-effects of the Covid-19 trauma (see theory of shattered assumptions - Janoff-Bulman, 2010). Other leaders stressed the fact that they tried to find alternative ways to protect and support their team members although some of them were particularly difficult to manage at times (DuBrin, 2013), increasing their anxiety as leaders (Choi et al., 2015).

Thinking long-term was one of the priorities for some of the leaders who were worried about the impact of the pandemic on the long-term plans of their department and wanted to include this parameter in all conversations that they had with their colleagues (Lockwood, 2005). As true selfless leaders (Glass and Cook, 2016), they wanted to be present during the crisis and support their university and colleagues in every possible way putting their personal and professional plans on hold until the pandemic was over.

To sum up, the findings of the present study suggest that female educational leaders in the current study demonstrated core characteristics of inclusive educational leadership and had good CM skills. The current study clearly indicates that they reaped the benefits of their diverse group members' contributions as they included them in the decision making (Northouse, 2016) and ensured their participation in overcoming various challenges HEI face amidst unprecedented crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The results clearly highlight the need to discuss how female educational leaders can be supported to enhance their CM skills and possibly provide an example to their male counterparts in terms of how IL can be the key to unlocking their group members' potential at the outbreak of a crisis that may threaten the

viability of every learning organisation and their employees' health and well-being. IL in HEI should therefore be considered as a central pillar of the global response to crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Contribution of the Study

Drawing upon feminist ethics of care (Livnat & Braslavsky, 2020, p. 272), the current study wishes to extend the feminist crisis management theory (Branicki, 2020) and add a feminist critical perspective on educational leadership based on the findings of the current study. The outcomes related to the feminist crisis management theory contradict the rationalist crisis management approach which has predominantly been adopted during the Covid-19 crisis while those relevant to the feminist educational leadership theory (Strachan, 2009) contradict the traditional leadership theory which is conventionally male-centred (Blackmore, 2013).

Practical Importance and Implications
- ### Implications for research

Future studies should use a much larger sample of female leaders from various universities in the UK and possibly explore female educational leaders' post-Covid crisis management skills and reliance on inclusive leadership. They should also explore their followers' perceptions of them as leaders. Finally, their male counterparts' perceptions of female leaders as inclusive leaders and of their crisis management skills should also be examined to depict a complete picture of their contribution in HEI.

- ### Implications for practice

HR practitioners and senior leadership teams in HEI need to educate leaders on protocols for crisis response (Miser and Cherrey, 2009), promote gender awareness, fully grasp gender implications of crises, and take them into consideration while planning for the different stages of crisis management. They should also monitor gender bias and avoid assigning different roles to male and female leaders in crises and presenting them as adversarial. On the contrary, they should try to promote the advantages of female educational leaders' empowerment to male leaders and use inclusive gender-neutral approaches. Moreover, the reinforcement of perceptions of women's vulnerability and the creation of gender conflict and competition should be avoided. Finally, they should take advantage of and assist positive gender role changes in crises and ensure their long-term sustainability.

HEI should design a process to raise visibility of the path of aspiring educational leaders helping them to realise their full potential by eliminating job segregation, fostering visible commitment to diversity, humility and empathy, curiosity about others, and cultural and intercultural intelligence. Diversity in the senior management teams of HEI, reverse mentoring, sharing experience in terms of bias awareness and encouraging educational leaders to engage in perspective-taking should be promoted to foster inclusion and support female educational leaders who, according to the findings of the current study, tend to be inclusive transformational leaders.

Discussion Point and Further Development
Taking into consideration the limitations of this study, the researcher wishes to further explore female educational leaders' response to the Covid-19 crisis after the pandemic and examine the

lessons learnt and the ways forward. The second phase of this study will unveil the impact that the pandemic had on these female educational leaders' leadership and crisis management skills. The aim of the researcher is to analyse the interviews of 40 (hopefully the same) female educational leaders from these 4 HEI after the pandemic to compare these women's perceived crisis management skills and reliance to inclusive leadership during the crisis and after it and identify ways in which female educational leaders can be supported after the pandemic. A new theoretical framework will be proposed which will inform the design of training programmes which provide guidance to female leaders for future crises and train them to become more inclusive as leaders. In this article, we wish to argue that implementing a gender inclusive lens in pandemic preparedness responses by taking into consideration the experiences and voices of female leaders is necessary. The overall aim is to promote diversity and inclusion in HEI in response to crises maximising employee performance while also fostering pandemic preparedness. Human resource development efforts should support female leadership development and creation of a proactive, crisis-prepared organizational culture (Elsubbaugh et al., 2004). The literature clearly indicates that leadership, in times of organizational crisis, is imperative to organizational survival (Borodzicz and van Haperen, 2002). However, female educational leaders, adept at handling normal issues, are sometimes not as skilled and well-prepared to handle crisis situations while supporting their followers.

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