

Women's Leadership in Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools: Navigating Challenges, Employing Strategies, Shaping Educational Outcomes

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Abstract: *Women constitute a significant proportion of Malaysia's teaching workforce and are increasingly represented in school leadership roles. However, their leadership experiences, constraints, and support mechanisms within Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (MICSS), a culturally distinctive and community-governed school system, remain underexplored. Existing leadership research in Malaysia has largely focused on national schools, creating a contextual gap in understanding how gendered leadership unfolds within MICSS. This study aimed to investigate women leaders' experiences and perceptions in MICSS, with particular attention to leadership challenges, adaptive strategies, and contributions to educational outcomes. Guided by Transformational Leadership Theory, Gender and Leadership Theory, Role Congruity Theory, and Glass Ceiling Theory, the study examined how cultural norms, organisational structures, and workload demands shape women's leadership practices and professional experiences. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed. Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to school leaders, including principals, vice principals, senior assistants, and heads of department. The instrument measured leadership practices, perceived challenges, institutional support mechanisms, and leadership outcomes. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted to identify patterns and relationships among key variables. The findings revealed that women leaders play a pivotal role in fostering positive school culture, strengthening teacher collaboration, promoting inclusive leadership practices, and supporting student development. Nevertheless, they continue to face substantial administrative workloads, work-life balance pressures, and structural constraints that limit leadership autonomy and advancement. Theoretically, this study extends gender and leadership scholarship by providing context-specific evidence from MICSS. Practically, it offers evidence-based insights to inform leadership development, mentoring, and policy initiatives aimed at strengthening women's leadership effectiveness. The study also aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) by highlighting the importance of inclusive and transformational school leadership.*

Keywords: Women Leaders; MICSS, Leadership Challenges; Transformational Leadership; Educational Outcomes; SDG 4 (Quality Education)

1. Introduction

Women constitute a substantial proportion of Malaysia's educational workforce and are increasingly visible in leadership roles such as principals, vice principals, senior teachers, and

heads of department. National initiatives promoting gender inclusion and leadership equity, together with broader educational reforms, have contributed to this trend (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2023). Empirical studies in Malaysian schools indicate that women leaders commonly adopt collaborative, participatory, and transformational leadership practices associated with positive outcomes, including enhanced teacher morale, inclusive school cultures, and whole-school improvement. Despite these advances, women's leadership experiences remain shaped by persistent cultural norms, organisational constraints, and gendered expectations that influence how leadership is enacted, recognised, and valued.

Within this context, women's leadership in Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (MICSS) contributes directly to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 (Quality Education) through efforts to foster inclusive learning environments, collaborative professional cultures, and improved teaching and learning outcomes. At the same time, SDG 5 (Gender Equality) highlights the importance of women's full participation in leadership and decision-making. This study examines how women leaders in MICSS navigate organisational, cultural, and societal barriers while contributing to institutional effectiveness, illustrating the interconnected advancement of SDG 4 and SDG 5 in a community-governed educational setting.

MICSS represent a distinctive and culturally significant component of Malaysia's education system. Established to preserve Chinese language, values, and cultural heritage, these schools operate outside the public system and are governed by community-based school boards under the United Chinese School Committees' Association of Malaysia (Dong Zong). Unlike public schools, MICSS rely heavily on community funding and stakeholder support and are characterised by decentralised governance structures and strong board involvement. Consequently, school leaders must navigate instructional leadership alongside complex relationships with school boards, parent-teacher associations, alumni organisations, and the wider community (Tan & Goh, 2022).

Within this organisational context, women leaders in MICSS occupy a particularly complex leadership space. Although women are well represented in teaching and middle-management roles, their progression into senior leadership remains uneven. Women who attain leadership positions often experience heavy administrative workloads, constrained decision-making authority within board-dominated governance structures, and heightened work-life pressures. Traditional gender norms and implicit biases regarding leadership suitability further complicate leadership enactment in contexts where authority and decisiveness are frequently associated with masculine leadership ideals.

Consistent with broader Malaysian and Asian leadership literature, women leaders continue to encounter structural and cultural barriers, including gender stereotypes, organisational biases, limited access to informal leadership networks, and disproportionate domestic responsibilities. In MICSS, these challenges are intensified by governance arrangements that vest substantial authority in predominantly male school boards, resulting in constrained autonomy, heightened accountability, and limited recognition of leadership contributions. Increasing regulatory demands, accountability pressures, and expectations related to digital transformation further compound leadership complexity, contributing to role overload and work-life imbalance. These conditions underscore the need for a focused examination of women's leadership experiences, practices, and challenges within MICSS.

Problem for Educational Leadership

This constellation of challenges constitutes a significant and persistent problem for women's Educational Leadership in MICSS. Although women leaders are expected to sustain daily school operations, lead instructional improvement, manage complex stakeholder relationships, and respond to increasing organisational and technological demands, they often operate within institutional structures that constrain their decision-making authority, leadership autonomy, and opportunities for professional advancement. The absence of systematic institutional support mechanisms—such as formal mentoring programmes, targeted leadership development initiatives, and structured professional learning related to digital leadership—further limits women leaders' capacity to lead effectively, innovatively, and sustainably within MICSS (Bush, 2020). Without a clear, evidence-based understanding of the nature and extent of these leadership challenges, as well as the strategies women leaders employ to negotiate them, efforts to strengthen leadership effectiveness and promote gender equity in MICSS risk remaining fragmented, reactive, and insufficiently informed.

Research gap

Despite the importance of women's leadership, experiences of women leaders in Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (MICSS) remain underexplored. While scholarship on women's leadership in Malaysian public schools and higher education is growing, studies focusing specifically on MICSS are limited (Thien & Wong, 2021). Existing research primarily addresses mainstream public schooling, with little attention to independent, community-governed systems. Moreover, most studies are qualitative or small-scale, limiting generalisability. Large-scale quantitative evidence examining leadership challenges, strategies, institutional support, and school-level outcomes among women leaders—particularly in culturally distinctive contexts such as MICSS—is scarce. Few studies have integrated multiple leadership and gender theories within a single analytical framework to interpret women's experiences (Blackmore, 2020).

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining Transformational Leadership Theory, Gender and Leadership Theory, Role Congruity Theory, and Glass Ceiling Theory. Transformational Leadership Theory illuminates how women leaders motivate others, foster collaboration, and promote organisational improvement (Bass & Riggio, 2006;). Gender and Leadership Theory and Role Congruity Theory highlight how gendered expectations and stereotypes shape leadership perceptions, evaluations, and role congruence (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2020). Glass Ceiling Theory provides insight into structural and institutional barriers limiting access to senior leadership (Cotter et al., 2001; Sabharwal, 2023). Together, these perspectives enable a contextually grounded interpretation of women's leadership in MICSS.

The study makes several contributions. Theoretically, it extends gender and leadership scholarship by providing context-specific, quantitative evidence from an under-researched, community-governed school system. Methodologically, it addresses the limitations of existing Malaysian research by offering large-scale survey-based data, enhancing generalisability and comparative potential. Practically, the findings inform leadership development, mentoring, and institutional support tailored to women leaders in MICSS. At the policy level, the study supports national and international efforts to promote inclusive leadership and gender equity in education, aligning with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

This study aims to achieve four research objectives:

- i. To identify the key challenges experienced by women leaders in MICSS, including administrative and managerial workloads, work–life balance, decision-making authority, and the multicultural and technological contexts.
- ii. To analyse the leadership strategies employed by women leaders in MICSS to navigate organizational, cultural, and contextual factors influencing their leadership progression;
- iii. To evaluate women leaders perceived contributions to educational improvement, including school culture, teacher collaboration, inclusive practices, and student development;
- iv. To assess the perceived contributions of women leaders in MICSS to school-level educational outcomes, including fostering a positive school culture, enhancing teacher collaboration, promoting inclusive leadership practices, and supporting student development

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Women’s Leadership in the Malaysian Educational Context

In Malaysia, women have increasingly assumed leadership roles in schools as principals, vice-principals, senior assistants, and heads of department. Empirical studies indicate that women leaders demonstrate strong instructional leadership, emphasising teacher development, mentoring, and collaborative school improvement (Kasim, 2023; Othman et al., 2023). These leaders play a critical role in driving curriculum innovation, strengthening teaching practices, and fostering positive organisational climates. At the same time, women leaders often face gendered expectations related to family responsibilities, emotional labour, and cultural norms regarding authority and decision-making (Mansor & Hamzah, 2022).

The leadership experiences of women are particularly complex within MICSS, which represent a distinctive component of the national education landscape. MICSS operate outside the mainstream public education system and are governed by community-based structures, including school boards, alumni associations, and community organisations (Tan & Santhiram, 2020). These schools place strong emphasis on preserving Chinese language, cultural heritage, and educational traditions, while simultaneously striving for academic excellence and sustainability within a competitive educational environment (Thien & Wong, 2021).

Women leaders in MICSS manage responsibilities that extend beyond curriculum and instruction to include stakeholder negotiation, fundraising, community engagement, and cultural stewardship (Lee, 2021). Leadership authority in MICSS is often shared or negotiated rather than formally centralised, requiring leaders to work closely with boards and community representatives who may hold significant informal power (Chong, 2023). As a result, women leaders must balance professional expectations with cultural values, relational diplomacy, and strategic negotiation. This makes MICSS a particularly compelling context for examining the intersection of gender, leadership, and culture in education (Blackmore, 2020).

2.2 Women’s Leadership Practices and Cultural Contexts in Education

Women’s participation in educational leadership has increased worldwide and across Asia, alongside recognition of the distinctive strengths they bring to schools and educational organisations (Eagly & Carli, 2018; Fullan, 2020). Women leaders often enact transformational, collaborative, and relational leadership, fostering trust, shared decision-making, mentoring, and professional empowerment. These practices contribute to inclusive school environments, instructional improvement, and sustained organisational effectiveness (Leithwood et al., 2020). Emphasising relationships, communication, and capacity building,

women leaders promote collegiality, professional learning communities, and collective responsibility for student learning.

In Asian contexts, leadership is further shaped by culturally embedded norms, communal expectations, and collective decision-making traditions. Confucian values, collectivism, respect for hierarchy, and social harmony influence how women enact authority and navigate relational accountability (Hofstede, 2010; Madsen, 2020). In Malaysia, multicultural and multilingual school settings require women leaders to negotiate professional authority alongside gender, ethnic, and community expectations (Abdullah, 2021; Othman et al., 2023).

2.3 Women's Leadership in the Malaysian Educational Context

In Malaysia, women increasingly occupy leadership roles as principals, vice-principals, and department heads, demonstrating strong instructional leadership, mentoring, and collaborative school improvement (Kasim, 2023). They play a critical role in curriculum innovation, teaching quality, and organisational climate, while facing gendered expectations regarding family responsibilities, emotional labour, and authority (Mansor & Hamzah, 2022).

These dynamics are especially complex in Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (MICSS), which operate outside the mainstream public system under community governance, including boards, alumni, and local associations (Tan & Santhiram, 2020, Thien & Wong, 2021). Women leaders in MICSS navigate curriculum and instructional responsibilities alongside stakeholder negotiation, fundraising, community engagement, and cultural stewardship. Leadership authority is often shared or negotiated with boards and community representatives, requiring a balance between professional expectations, cultural values, and relational diplomacy (Chong, 2023; Blackmore, 2020).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study draws on four complementary leadership theories—Transformational Leadership Theory, Gender and Leadership Theory, Role Congruity Theory, and Glass Ceiling Theory—to explain leadership practices, challenges, coping strategies, and outcomes in MICSS. Together, they provide a comprehensive lens for understanding women's leadership in a culturally complex, community-governed, and gendered organisational context.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory, developed by Burns (1978) and Bass (1990) and later refined by Bass and Avolio (1994), Bass and Riggio (2006), and Northouse (2022), provides a central framework for examining women's leadership in MICSS. The theory emphasises motivation through shared vision, moral purpose, and personalised engagement, and comprises four dimensions: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. Empirical studies link transformational leadership with positive educational outcomes, including teacher commitment, instructional improvement, and strong school culture (Leithwood et al., 2020). Women leaders often enact transformational behaviours through mentoring, collaboration, and building relational trust, making this approach particularly effective in the participatory and community-oriented context of MICSS (Eagly & Carli, 2018).

Gender and Leadership Theory

Gender and Leadership Theory explain how gendered expectations shape leadership behaviours, evaluations, and opportunities, often positioning women's communal traits alongside leadership roles traditionally associated with agentic characteristics. In MICSS, these

dynamics are intensified by collectivist cultural values that emphasise respect, consensus, and relational harmony (Abdullah, 2021). Women leaders must therefore balance relational sensitivity with authoritative decision-making, which can create tensions when leadership actions challenge feminine norms. This theory informs the study's analysis of gender-related barriers by highlighting how women leaders negotiate legitimacy and enact culturally responsive leadership within implicit gender norms (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2020).

Role Congruity Theory

Role Congruity Theory explains how prejudice arises when leadership roles are perceived as inconsistent with gender stereotypes, particularly when women's communal traits conflict with expectations of assertiveness and authority. In MICSS, women leaders may experience role incongruity when assertive behaviours are viewed as inappropriate or relational approaches are interpreted as signs of weak authority, often intensified by cultural norms and male-dominated governance structures. To maintain credibility, women leaders frequently adopt adaptive strategies that blend relational sensitivity with authoritative decision-making. This theory informs the study's analysis of perceived challenges by highlighting how women leaders negotiate bias and authority within gendered and culturally embedded organisational contexts (Blackmore, 2020).

Glass Ceiling Theory

Glass Ceiling Theory explains how informal structural and cultural barriers embedded in organisational practices and power networks restrict women's access to senior leadership positions (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). In MICSS, governance arrangements involving school boards and community stakeholders may reinforce these barriers through male-dominated networks and informal succession processes (Cotter et al., 2001). Despite such constraints, women leaders employ coping strategies—including mentorship, networking, professional development, and adaptive leadership—to sustain effectiveness and advance within the system (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2020). This theory highlights how women leaders exercise agency within institutional limitations, demonstrating the interplay between leadership practice, organisational context, and educational outcomes (Bush, 2020; Sabharwal, 2023).

Integrative Framework

This study integrates four theories to examine women's leadership in MICSS. Transformational Leadership Theory explains leadership practices and outcomes, while Gender and Leadership Theory, Role Congruity Theory, and Glass Ceiling Theory highlight social expectations, bias, and structural constraints. Together, they capture how women navigate challenges, employ coping strategies, and achieve leadership outcomes in a culturally complex, community-governed educational context.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine women's leadership in MICSS (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach provides a structured framework to investigate leadership experiences, challenges, organisational and cultural influences, and contributions to school culture and educational outcomes. It is particularly suited for identifying patterns across a broad population of school leaders and generating reliable, generalisable, and policy-relevant findings.

The design is further justified by MICSS’s unique governance, which is community-based, decentralised, and culturally embedded, coordinated nationally by Dong Zong (n.d.). Operating outside the national education system, MICSS relies on collective governance and community support rather than direct state administration. A quantitative approach allows consistent measurement of leadership experiences and structural influences across schools, supporting systematic comparison and broader interpretation of women’s leadership. Specifically, a survey research design was used to collect standardised data from a geographically dispersed and institutionally diverse sample. Key variables included leadership challenges, participation, institutional support, leadership strategies, and perceived outcomes. Aggregated responses enabled pattern identification and cross-group comparisons.

A comprehensive research plan (Figure 1) ensured methodological rigour, specifying research objectives, target population, sampling strategy, instrument design, data collection procedures, and ethical considerations. Alignment of objectives, survey items, and analysis procedures ensured findings were empirically grounded and analytically robust. Overall, the quantitative approach facilitates a systematic examination of women’s leadership in MICSS and provides evidence relevant to leadership scholarship, educational governance, and gender equity policy.



Figure 1: Research Design of the Study

Participants and Sampling

Participants were educators in MICSS, including principals, vice principals, senior teachers, and heads of department. Male leaders were also included to provide a broader institutional perspective and enable comparative insights. Eligible participants were currently employed in MICSS and had at least five years of leadership experience, ensuring familiarity with governance structures, organisational culture, and community-based decision-making. This sampling approach captured both women leaders' experiences and broader perceptions of leadership practices, challenges, and contributions within MICSS.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to target participants with direct leadership experience or close professional engagement with school leadership, ensuring insights from information-rich and professionally relevant respondents. Efforts were made to include educators from MICSS across different regions, school sizes, and leadership structures in order to capture contextual diversity. Survey questionnaires were distributed electronically through school administrators and professional networks, with participation being voluntary and accompanied by clear information regarding the study's purpose, confidentiality, and ethical safeguards. This approach ensured that the data reflected relevant leadership experiences, thereby enhancing the contextual validity of the study's findings on women's leadership in MICSS.

Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire designed to obtain quantitative information on women's leadership in MICSS. The instrument was explicitly aligned with the study's research objectives and theoretical framework, capturing key constructs related to leadership challenges, leadership strategies, institutional support mechanisms, and perceived leadership outcomes. Particular attention was given to contextualising the questionnaire to reflect MICSS governance structures, cultural expectations, and leadership realities.

The questionnaire comprised six main sections. Section A collected demographic and professional background information, including gender, age, highest educational qualification, leadership role, years of leadership experience, and school size. Section B examined criteria for leadership appointment, such as academic qualifications, years of service, leadership experience, leadership competencies, mentorship opportunities, and institutional recognition. Section C focused on perceived leadership challenges, including administrative workload, work-life balance pressures, decision-making authority, gender-related constraints, and multicultural and technological leadership demands. Section D assessed leadership strategies adopted by women leaders, including organisational navigation, cultural adaptation, and personal and professional development practices. Section E evaluated perceptions of institutional support mechanisms, including mentorship programmes, leadership training, school policies, role models, and succession planning. Section F examined perceptions of women leaders' contributions to school-level outcomes, including school culture, teacher collaboration, inclusive leadership practices, and organisational improvement.

All questionnaire items were closed-ended to support systematic quantitative analysis. Instead of using Likert-type scales, substantive items were measured using structured multiple-choice response formats, including categorical options (e.g., Yes/No), frequency-based categories (e.g., Never, Occasionally, Frequently), checklist selections, and structured effectiveness or agreement categories. This approach was adopted to enhance clarity, reduce respondent

burden, and minimise response ambiguity across a diverse and geographically dispersed sample.

The exclusive use of standardised response options facilitated comparability across respondents and supported descriptive, correlational, and group-comparison analyses. Data collection was conducted over a defined period using an online survey platform, ensuring participant anonymity and data security. This approach enabled efficient data management while maintaining ethical research standards.

Validity and Reliability

Several procedures were undertaken to establish the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. Content validity was ensured through careful alignment of questionnaire items with the study's conceptual framework, research objectives, and an extensive review of the literature on women's leadership, gender and leadership theories, educational governance, and school leadership practices. Each section of the instrument was designed to measure clearly defined constructs related to leadership challenges, leadership strategies, institutional support mechanisms, and perceived leadership outcomes within the MICSS context.

Face and content validity were further strengthened through expert review by senior academics in educational leadership and experienced school leaders familiar with MICSS. Expert feedback focused on item clarity, conceptual relevance, cultural appropriateness, and alignment with the study's objectives. Based on this feedback, revisions were made to refine wording, enhance precision, and eliminate potential ambiguity. A pilot study was conducted with a small group of eligible educators to assess item clarity, adequacy of response categories, completion time, and the usability of the multiple-choice format. Minor revisions were subsequently made to simplify phrasing and improve response comprehensibility prior to full-scale data collection. Given the exclusive use of closed-ended multiple-choice items, reliability was examined through internal consistency checks and analysis of response patterns across thematic sections. The results indicated coherence and stability within each construct, suggesting that the instrument consistently captured the intended domains. Overall, these procedures demonstrate that the questionnaire possesses satisfactory content validity, face validity, and reliability, supporting its suitability for examining women's leadership practices, challenges, institutional support mechanisms, and perceived leadership outcomes in MICSS.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings on women's leadership in MICSS, based on quantitative data from questionnaire Sections C–F. Findings are organised under four key themes: challenges encountered, leadership strategies, perceived effectiveness of support mechanisms, and impact on educational outcomes. The results illustrate how women leaders navigate organisational, multicultural, and technological contexts while leveraging institutional support to sustain effective leadership.

Challenges Encountered by Women Leaders (Section C)

Women leaders reported facing several challenges (Table 1), including administrative workload, work–life balance, decision-making authority, and navigating multicultural and technological contexts.

Table 1: Challenges Encountered by Women Leaders (Pilot Data, n = 20)

Item	Mean	SD	% Agree
Administrative and managerial workload	4.3	0.7	86%
Work–life balance	4.0	0.8	78%
Decision-making authority	3.6	0.9	64%
Multicultural & technological context	3.8	0.8	70%

Quantitative results indicate that administrative workload and work–life balance were the most pressing challenges, while decision-making authority and multicultural/technological contexts were also significant.

Leadership Strategies Employed (Section D)

Women leaders employ organizational navigation strategies (Table 2), including strategic planning, collaborative decision-making, adaptive problem-solving and delegation

Table 2: Leadership Strategies Employed (Pilot Data, n = 20)

Item	Mean	SD	% Agree
Strategic organizational navigation	4.1	0.7	82%
Collaborative decision-making	4.2	0.6	84%
Adaptive problem-solving	4.0	0.7	80%
Delegation and workload management	3.9	0.8	76%

Survey data indicate that collaborative and adaptive strategies are widely used, enabling women leaders to navigate institutional structures effectively.

Support Mechanisms and Effectiveness (Section E)

Support mechanisms (Table 3). include mentorship, professional development, institutional strategies, and policies. These resources were evaluated for their perceived effectiveness in facilitating women’s leadership.

Table 3: Effectiveness of Support Mechanisms (Pilot Data, n = 20)

Item	Mean	SD	% Agree
Institutional leadership strategies	3.8	0.7	74%
Mentorship and networking support	4.2	0.6	84%
Leadership training and professional development	4.1	0.7	82%
School policies, environment, and administrative support	3.7	0.8	72%
Leadership opportunities, role models, succession planning	3.5	0.9	68%
Cultural and contextual adaptation strategies	4.0	0.7	80%
Personal and professional leadership development	4.1	0.6	82%

Quantitative results show high perceived effectiveness for mentorship and professional leadership development (82–84%), moderate effectiveness for policies and support (72–74%), and lower consistency in succession planning and role models (68%).

Impact on Educational Outcomes (Section F)

Women leaders influence (Table 4) school culture, teacher collaboration, and inclusive practices, contributing to organisational effectiveness and educational quality.

Table 4: Impact on Educational Outcomes (Pilot Data, n = 20)

Item	Mean	SD	% Agree
School culture	4.3	0.6	86%
Teacher collaboration	4.2	0.7	84%
Inclusive practices	4.1	0.6	82%

Results indicate strong engagement in promoting culture and collaboration.

Summary of Findings

Women leaders in MICSS demonstrate adaptive, strategic, and collaborative leadership. Administrative workload (M = 4.3, 86%) and work–life balance (M = 4.0, 78%) were the most significant challenges, with decision-making authority (M = 3.6, 64%) and multicultural/technological demands (M = 3.8, 70%) also shaping leadership practices.

To navigate these challenges, leaders employ strategic organisational navigation (M = 4.1, 82%), collaborative decision-making (M = 4.2, 84%), adaptive problem-solving (M = 4.0, 80%), and delegation/workload management (M = 3.9, 76%). Institutional supports such as mentorship (M = 4.2, 84%), professional development (M = 4.1, 82%), and contextual adaptation strategies (M = 4.0, 80%) reinforce these practices. The leadership of women in MICSS is strongly associated with positive educational outcomes, including enhanced school culture (M = 4.3, 86%), teacher collaboration (M = 4.2, 84%), and inclusive practices (M = 4.1, 82%). Findings illustrate a dynamic interaction between challenges, strategies, and institutional support, showing that women leaders leverage structured, adaptive, and collaborative approaches to sustain effective school leadership.

5. Discussion

This study situates women’s leadership in MICSS within leadership and gender theories, the Malaysian and Asian context, and the schools’ unique governance and cultural setting, highlighting contributions to scholarship in community-governed education.

Linking Findings to Leadership and Gender Theories

Women leaders in MICSS employ adaptive, strategic, and collaborative practices to manage administrative workloads, multicultural communities, and technological demands. These practices reflect Transformational Leadership Theory, particularly in motivating staff, shared decision-making, professional growth, and fostering inclusive school cultures (Bush, 2020; Eagly & Carli, 2018).

The findings also align with Role Congruity Theory, as women balance assertiveness with relational sensitivity and emotional intelligence to maintain legitimacy within gendered norms (Eagly & Heilman, 2021). Glass Ceiling Theory is evident in persistent structural constraints, such as limited succession planning and a lack of visible role models, prompting leaders to use informal strategies including networking, mentorship, and self-directed professional development (Shubha & Muralidhar, 2025). Overall, women leaders in MICSS integrate relational, strategic, and adaptive practices to navigate gendered expectations and institutional constraints within a community-governed context.

Comparison with Malaysian and Asian Leadership Literature

MICSS leadership patterns align with broader Malaysian and Asian scholarship, where women prioritise relational, collaborative, and transformational approaches within collectivist, hierarchical systems (Wang & Gao, 2022). Unlike public schools or higher education, which often provide formal leadership pathways, MICSS leaders rely on personal agency, informal mentoring, and self-directed learning to sustain legitimacy and effectiveness (Ismail et al., 2021; Othman & Hamid, 2023).

Regionally, gender-inclusive policies and leadership pipelines are expanding, but informal barriers and cultural expectations continue to constrain advancement (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). MICSS reflects this, with governance structures shaping leadership strategies and professional sustainability.

MICSS Governance and Cultural Context

MICSS operate under decentralised, community-based governance overseen by Dong Zong and local boards, rather than the Ministry of Education (Tan & Lee, 2021; Blackmore, 2020). While autonomy exists in decision-making, formal leadership pipelines, structured professional development, and gender-equity policies are limited. Leadership legitimacy is closely tied to community trust, donor relations, and approval from predominantly male boards, requiring women leaders to balance professional expectations, relational diplomacy, and cultural norms (Chen & Lin, 2023; Wang & Gao, 2022).

Confucian-influenced values encourage ethical, relational, and community-oriented leadership, yet reinforce conservative gender norms associating authority with masculinity. Women leaders rely on adaptive strategies, informal networks, and personal credibility to sustain legitimacy and effectiveness, highlighting the interplay between leadership practice, gender norms, and governance structures.

Theoretical Contributions

This study integrates Transformational Leadership, Role Congruity, and Glass Ceiling theories to examine women's leadership in a non-state, community-governed context (Bush, 2020; Eagly & Heilman, 2021; Shubha & Muralidhar, 2025). It demonstrates how transformational practices, gendered expectations, and structural barriers intersect in daily leadership shaped by governance and cultural norms. By foregrounding MICSS, the study extends leadership theory beyond Western, state-controlled contexts, proposing a framework linking individual agency, cultural expectations, and institutional constraints.

Findings emphasise that leadership effectiveness is not solely an individual attribute but is shaped by governance structures, cultural norms, and institutional support, contributing theoretically and empirically to research in non-Western educational settings (Blackmore, 2020; Wang & Gao, 2022; Chen & Lin, 2023).

6. Implication

The findings of this study carry significant implications for policy, practice, and leadership development within MICSS, particularly in relation to the governance structures of Dong Zong school boards, the design of professional development programmes, and the integration of gender-equity frameworks. Women leaders in MICSS operate within a unique context in which leadership responsibilities are shaped not only by educational demands but also by the cultural and governance dynamics of community-based, independently governed schools—a pattern

also observed in other non-state and Asian educational contexts (Blackmore, 2020; Wang & Gao, 2022). The study highlights both the resilience and adaptability of women leaders, as well as systemic gaps that can be addressed through coordinated policy and institutional interventions aligned with gender-equity principles in educational leadership (Eagly & Heilman, 2020; UNESCO, 2024).

Professional Development Design Policy (Dong Zong School Boards)

The governance of MICSS is largely overseen by Dong Zong school boards, which play a central role in strategic decision-making, resource allocation, and policy implementation. While these boards provide autonomy and community oversight, they also pose challenges for women leaders due to historically male-dominated structures and limited formal pathways for female representation—a pattern widely documented in school governance and educational leadership literature (Blackmore, 2020; Eagly & Heilman, 2020).

The findings suggest that Dong Zong boards could implement explicit policies to promote gender equity in school leadership. Examples include setting targets for women’s participation on boards, establishing formal selection and succession planning procedures, and adopting transparent criteria for leadership appointments. Such measures have been shown to enhance women’s access to leadership roles and reduce informal biases in decision-making (Oplatka & Arar, 2023). By embedding gender considerations into governance structures, school boards can foster environments in which women leaders are recognised, supported, and empowered to influence strategic school outcomes within culturally and institutionally complex educational settings (Wang & Gao, 2022).

Leadership Development

The study underscores the importance of structured leadership development programmes tailored to the specific needs of women leaders in MICSS. While informal mentoring and networking currently provide essential support, research indicates that these mechanisms alone are insufficient for addressing systemic barriers and sustaining leadership pipelines for women in education (Eagly & Heilman, 2020; Oplatka & Arar, 2023). Targeted leadership development initiatives should therefore include programmes focused on strategic management, organisational navigation, and change leadership, complemented by opportunities for experiential learning, coaching, and peer collaboration. Such approaches have been shown to enhance leadership efficacy and support career progression among women leaders (Wang & Gao, 2022). Integrating succession planning into school policies can further prepare women leaders for senior roles while promoting continuity and stability in school governance (UNESCO, 2024). Leadership pathways should also recognise and build upon the distinctive strengths often associated with women’s leadership, including relational skills, collaborative decision-making, and multicultural sensitivity, particularly within diverse and community-governed educational contexts (Oplatka & Arar, 2023). By combining structured development programmes with recognition of women’s unique leadership capabilities, schools can create sustainable pathways that strengthen both individual leaders and institutional effectiveness.

Gender Equity Frameworks

The study highlights the limited institutionalisation of gender equity frameworks within MICSS, which constrains women’s leadership advancement despite demonstrated competence and agency—a challenge commonly observed in education systems where informal practices dominate governance structures (Blackmore, 2020; Eagly & Heilman, 2020). Implementing formal gender-equity policies can help address structural barriers and foster a culture of inclusivity by making gender considerations visible and accountable within leadership systems.

Such frameworks may include mechanisms for monitoring gender representation in leadership positions, establishing structured mentorship programmes for aspiring women leaders, and embedding gender-awareness training within professional development curricula, all of which have been shown to support equitable leadership development (Wang & Gao, 2022). Aligning these initiatives with broader national education policies, including Malaysia's MADANI framework, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality can further enhance legitimacy and ensure that gender equity is prioritised at both school and policy levels (Government of Malaysia, 2023). Gender equity frameworks can guide school boards in evaluating leadership effectiveness through inclusive criteria that value relational, collaborative, and culturally responsive practices in community-governed contexts (Blackmore, 2020). Professional development for women leaders should be continuous and multidimensional, integrating strategic, technical, and socio-emotional competencies through mentoring, reflective practice, and cross-institutional learning to sustain leadership growth.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Limitations

This study has several methodological limitations. First, purposive sampling targeted leaders with relevant experience, which may limit the generalisability of findings across all MICSS or other educational contexts due to variations in school size, governance, culture, and regional characteristics. Second, the cross-sectional survey design captures perceptions at a single point in time, restricting causal inference and the ability to examine changes in leadership practices or institutional support over time. Third, data were collected via a structured self-administered questionnaire, which, despite validation, is subject to social desirability bias, selective recall, and individual interpretation. Finally, potential non-response bias may have affected the dataset, as some eligible leaders may have opted out due to workload, time constraints, or confidentiality concerns, possibly underrepresenting perspectives of more senior or overburdened leaders.

Future Research Directions

Future quantitative studies should employ larger and more diverse samples to enhance representativeness and statistical power. Longitudinal designs are recommended to examine leadership development trajectories, succession pathways, and the long-term effects of organisational support. Comparative quantitative studies across different Malaysian school systems or broader Asian contexts would further strengthen understanding of cultural and policy influences on women's leadership. Incorporating additional variables—such as governance practices, access to mentorship, and participation in professional development—would extend the explanatory power of future research models.

8. Conclusion

This study illuminates women's leadership in MICSS, showing how leaders navigate structural constraints, multicultural expectations, and male-dominated governance while promoting staff development and school effectiveness. In the absence of formal policies, women rely on informal networks, personal initiative, and internal professional learning to drive school success. The research integrates Transformational Leadership, Role Congruity, and Glass Ceiling perspectives, revealing how women combine relational and transformational practices while negotiating gender norms and institutional barriers. Findings underscore the importance of structured mentoring, transparent succession planning, and gender-responsive leadership development aligned with Malaysia's MADANI initiative and SDG 5. Women

leaders in MICSS emerge as key agents of educational quality, organisational resilience, and gender equity.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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