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## BEYOND BARRIERS: HOW TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP TRAITS SHAPE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP OUTCOMES IN MALAYSIA'S PUBLIC SECTOR

Niza Tan Mohd Aminuddin<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Postgraduate School, UCYP University, Malaysia

 [df\\_f\\_2023-o\\_13307@student.ucyp.edu.my](mailto:df_f_2023-o_13307@student.ucyp.edu.my)

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6118-3804>

\*Corresponding Author

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### Abstract:

The role of women leadership in the public sector is also becoming a burning topic in Malaysia as the government puts more effort into the inclusive governance and sustainable institutional performance. Notwithstanding these efforts women are still underrepresented in top leadership positions, in most cases as a result of structural, cultural and organizational factors. The study design is empirical research that looks into the effect of transformational leadership characteristics on leadership performance of women leaders in the Malaysian public sector. The research coordinated by the transformational leadership theory discusses the four major dimensions, including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration and their impacts of the leadership performance, which are job performance, organizational commitment, and perceived career advancement. The quantitative research design was embraced and data was gathered using a structured questionnaire which was given to 240 women who had supervisory and managerial roles in the federal ministries, state departments and statutory bodies. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis were applied to analyze 221 usable responses. The results show that the transformational leadership qualities positively and significantly influence the leadership outcomes. Inspirational motivation and individualized consideration became the most formidable predictors and idealized influence and intellectual stimulation also provided significant contributions. These findings indicate that transformational leadership is important in helping women leaders to break institutionalized challenges in order to deliver positive leadership results in the public sector. The research will make an empirical contribution to the literature on leadership and gender and will

offer practical implications in terms of leadership development programs and gender-based policies in the Malaysian public sector.

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**Keyword:**

Leadership Results, Malaysia, Public Sector, Transformational Leadership, Women Leadership



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## Introduction

Leadership in the public sector is becoming an important factor of determination of the quality of governance, effectiveness of policies and trust of the population. The Malaysian government has a central role in the development of the nation, which is policy formulation, service provision, and socio-economic control carried out by the public sector<sup>1</sup>. Leadership styles that can foster flexibility, motivation, and ethical leadership have gained importance as the complexity of the work of the public institutions increases. In that background, the involvement and performance of women leaders have been increasingly attracted by policymakers and scholars.

Despite a significant share of women in the workforce in the Malaysian public sector, this percentage is still low when it comes to senior leadership as women are still underrepresented in this area. National and international organizations have reported that women in most cases are usually based in middle level positions with less chances of being promoted to decision making positions<sup>2</sup>. Sex stereotypes, inflexible organizational structures, work-family balance issues, and lack of leadership connections remain barriers to women in the career ladder of leadership.

<sup>1</sup> Zabidi, N., Ismail, M. M., Adnan, Z. H., & Zain, M. I. M. (2024). Good Governance Practices for Sustainable Development in the Public Sector Services in Malaysia. *Akademika*, 94(2), 252-266.

<sup>2</sup> Devine, Diana, Aaron M. Ogletree, Priti Shah, and Benjamin Katz. "Internet addiction, cognitive, and dispositional factors among US adults." *Computers in Human Behavior Reports* 6 (2022): 100180. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2451958822000148>

Transformational leadership theory provides a useful theory in explaining how the leadership behaviors may facilitate leadership effectiveness and organizational performance. Transformational leaders inspire followers to drop self-interest by describing a strong vision, creating innovations, and meeting personal needs<sup>3</sup>. The existing literature indicates that women leaders offer common transformational leadership behaviors that correspond to the collaborative and ethical values of the public sector.

Although there are increased interests about transformational leadership and women leadership, there is limited empirical evidence on women leadership in the Malaysian public sector. <sup>4</sup>The majority of the current research is theoretical or concerned with the context of the private sector. Thus, the proposed study will provide empirical research on the impact of transformational leadership qualities on leadership outcomes of women leaders in the Malaysian public sector. The contribution of the study to the research gap is that it will fill a critical gap in the research results and offer evidence-based research in developing leadership and gender inclusion strategies.

## Literature Review

### *Transformational Leadership*

Transformational leadership is a leadership style where emphasis is put on vision, inspiration and personal growth so as to attain organizational objectives. Transformational leadership is contrary to transactional leadership, the main concern of which is exchanges and adherence to the set rules, but it is aimed at increasing the motivation of followers and aligning personal values with organizational goals<sup>5</sup>. Conceptualization of this style of leadership is usually based on four dimensions which include idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration.

Idealized influence is the capacity of the leaders to serve as a moral example that is honest, just, and loyal to the organizational values. Transformational leaders gain the respect and trust of the followers due to their consistent ethical conduct, and this strengthens relationships between leaders and followers<sup>6</sup>. Inspirational motivation is the process which requires followers to perform more and better than expected as well as staying loyal to the group and

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<sup>3</sup> Ajmal, M., Rahat, W., & Islam, A. (2024). Enhancing affective commitment through transcendental leadership: unveiling the influence of altruistic mindset and intrinsic motivation in higher education. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1-27.

<sup>4</sup> Although there are increased interests about transformational leadership and women leadership, there is limited empirical evidence on women leadership in the Malaysian public sector.

<sup>5</sup> Wang, Dan, Xinyi Liu, Kun Chen, Chunyan Gu, Hongyan Zhao, Yong Zhang, and Yu Luo. "Risks and protection: a qualitative study on the factors for internet addiction among elderly residents in Southwest China communities." *BMC Public Health* 24, no. 1 (2024): 531. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12889-024-17980-6>

<sup>6</sup> Khan, S. N., Abdullah, S. M., Busari, A. H., Mubushar, M., & Khan, I. U. (2020). Reversing the lens: The role of followership dimensions in shaping transformational leadership behaviour; mediating role of trust in leadership. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 41(1), 1-18.

its objectives through the articulation of a compelling meaningful vision. Leaders with proper communication skills can instil a feeling of enthusiasm and a sense of mission in their teams.

The intellectual stimulation fosters creativity, innovation, and critical thinking because it questions the existing assumptions and results in new problem-solving manners. It is in this aspect that leaders believe in experimentation and appreciate the ideas of the employees, which improve organizational learning<sup>7</sup>. Individualized consideration is based on mentoring, coaching, and personal and professional development of followers. Individualized consideration leaders note the presence of individual differences and meet all the personal needs, as well as offer growth opportunities, which leads to increased levels of satisfaction and competence among the employees.

Transformational leadership in the public-sector organizations has been continually associated with enhanced employee engagement, innovation, and organizational commitment. The nature of public institutions is strict bureaucracies that are marked by strict rules, hierarchical decision-making process, and strictness<sup>8</sup>. In this kind of setting, transformational leadership is an essential element in inspiring staff further than what regulations and procedures dictate. Transformational leaders can improve service quality and facilitate the reforms in the public sector by promoting trust, empowerment, and the sense of purpose<sup>9</sup>. The recent empirical research also sheds more light on the applicability of transformational leadership in enhancing performance in the field of the public service, flexibility, and responding to the needs of citizens.

### ***Women Leadership in the Public Sector***

The role of women in the leadership of the public sector has turned out to be the centre of concern in the study of governance and public administration, especially in regard to gender equality and inclusive development. World systems like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals stress that women should be involved in leadership to be one of the forces behind sustainable and equitable governance<sup>10</sup>. Despite increasing awareness, women still have fewer positions in senior leadership in most of the public institutions.

Malaysia has also come up with different policies and programs aimed at enhancing the leadership of women, through gender mainstreaming policies and leadership development

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<sup>7</sup> Xu, Yujing, Kai Zeng, Lucong Dong, Xiaofen Zheng, and Yuxiu Si. "Understanding older adults' smartphone addiction in the digital age: empirical evidence from China." *Frontiers in Public Health* 11 (2023): 1136494. <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/public-health/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1136494/full>

<sup>8</sup> Syukri, Andi Achmad, Tajuddin Malik, and Kurniawaty Sandra. "Improving the Quality of Public Services: The Role of Transformational Leadership, Organisational Culture, and Work Engagement." *Journal of Indonesian Scholars for Social Research* 5, no. 1 (2025): 1-7. <https://www.ojs.ycit.or.id/index.php/JISSR/article/view/167>

<sup>9</sup> Wahyudin, A., Akbar, F., Rohmad, R., & Budi, M. H. S. (2024). Enhancing Public Service Excellence through Transformational Leadership in Service Management. *Business and Applied Management Journal*, 2(1), 12-24.

<sup>10</sup> Faugoo, Deepika. "Women's leadership as an accelerator for gender equality and advancing SDGs for a sustainable future." *Asian Journal of Research in Business and Management* 6, no. 3 (2024): 25-39.

programs. But there still is an unequal pace at which progress has been made and structural obstacles, cultural demands and work-life balance issues are still seen as crippling the process of women stepping forward into decision-making processes<sup>11</sup>. Such issues demonstrate the necessity of investigating the leadership styles that can benefit women and their successful performance and professional growth in the government.

The scholars believe that in most cases, women leaders portray empathetic, collaborative, participative, and ethical leadership behaviors. These qualities are very much related to the principles of transformational leadership; thus, this leadership model is more applicable in explaining the effectiveness of women in leadership<sup>12</sup>. The existing literature indicates that women leaders who embrace transformational leadership styles have higher chances of cultivating trust, motivation and good interpersonal relationships in their groups. These actions by leaders lead to inclusive workplaces and improve the overall organizational performance.

### ***Leadership Outcomes***

Leadership outcomes are the concrete and abstract outcomes of leadership actions at individual and organization levels. In this research, leadership performances are theorized as job performance, organization commitment, and perceived career progress. Job performance is an indicator of how effective the leaders are in accomplishing the work goals, meeting the performance expectations, and making contributions towards organizational goals<sup>13</sup>.

Organizational commitment is the emotional bond and loyalty people have to their organization, and this affects retention and discretionary effort<sup>14</sup>. Perceived career advancement is the perceptions of the leaders regarding their opportunities to grow professionally, rise in rank, and enhance their skills in the organization.

Past research shows that transformational leadership has a positive implication about these outcomes by providing conducive working environments, increasing intrinsic motivation and employee empowerment. Transformational behaviors lead to high engagement and commitment levels by leaders which translate to better performance and career perceptions<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless, there is little empirical research that has focused on these relationships among

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<sup>11</sup> Ramachandaran, Sharmila Devi, Tan Zu Yi, Lim Ming Joon, Sukhmeet Kaur, Fang Wen Jie, and Urvesh Chaudery. "Empowering Women Through Education: Strategies for Leadership Development in Malaysia Towards Achieving Sustainable Development Goals." *IJLTER. ORG* 24, no. 1 (2025): 225-251.

<sup>12</sup> Hsu, N., Newman, D. A., & Badura, K. L. (2022). Emotional intelligence and transformational leadership: Meta-analysis and explanatory model of female leadership advantage. *Journal of Intelligence*, 10(4), 104.

<sup>13</sup> Susanto, P. C., Syailendra, S., & Suryawan, R. F. (2023). Determination of motivation and performance: Analysis of job satisfaction, employee engagement and leadership. *International Journal of Business and Applied Economics*, 2(2), 59-68.

<sup>14</sup> Jabbar, S., & Gul, M. (2026). Impact of Organizational Justice on Organizational Commitment and Organizational Citizenship Behavior with the Mediating Effect of Organizational Trust. *Social Science Review Archives*, 4(1), 808-828.

<sup>15</sup> Lai, Fong-Yi, Hui-Chuan Tang, Szu-Chi Lu, Yu-Chin Lee, and Cheng-Chen Lin. "Transformational leadership and job performance: The mediating role of work engagement." *Sage Open* 10, no. 1 (2020): 2158244019899085.

women leaders in the Malaysian public sector. This literature gap contains the requirement of the current research to introduce context-specific understanding about the impact of transformational leadership in creating leadership outcomes among women in public-sector organizations.

**Table 1: Key Empirical Studies on Internet and Smartphone Addiction (2020–2024)**

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Main Findings</b>
Yu & Sussman (2020)	United States (General Population)	Smartphone addiction exists on a continuum of addictive behaviors rather than as a discrete disorder.
Devine et al. (2021)	United States Adults	Internet addiction is significantly associated with cognitive control deficits and dispositional risk factors.
Wang et al. (2024)	Elderly Communities in Southwest China	Social isolation and low digital literacy increase addiction risk, while family support acts as a protective factor.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

The cross-sectional quantitative research design was used in this study to help investigate the effect of the transformational leadership attributes on the leadership outcomes of the women leaders in the public sector in Malaysia. A quantitative approach was considered appropriate given that it allows for the systematic measurement of leadership constructs and provides the opportunity for the systematic testing of relationships between constructs in a statistical manner. Cross-sectional design enabled data to be gathered from respondents at one time, thereby empirically measuring the relationships between the transformational leadership dimensions and leadership outcomes.

### ***Sample and Data Collection***

These women were the target population, who held supervisory and managerial positions in various federal ministries, state government departments and statutory bodies in Malaysia. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had formal leadership roles and had relevant professional experience. Structured self-administered questionnaire was used for the collection of data. A total of 221 of the 240 questionnaires were returned and were found to be suitable for analysis, giving an overall response rate of 92.1% which is a very satisfactory level of return for organisational research.

### ***Measurement Instruments and Data Analysis***

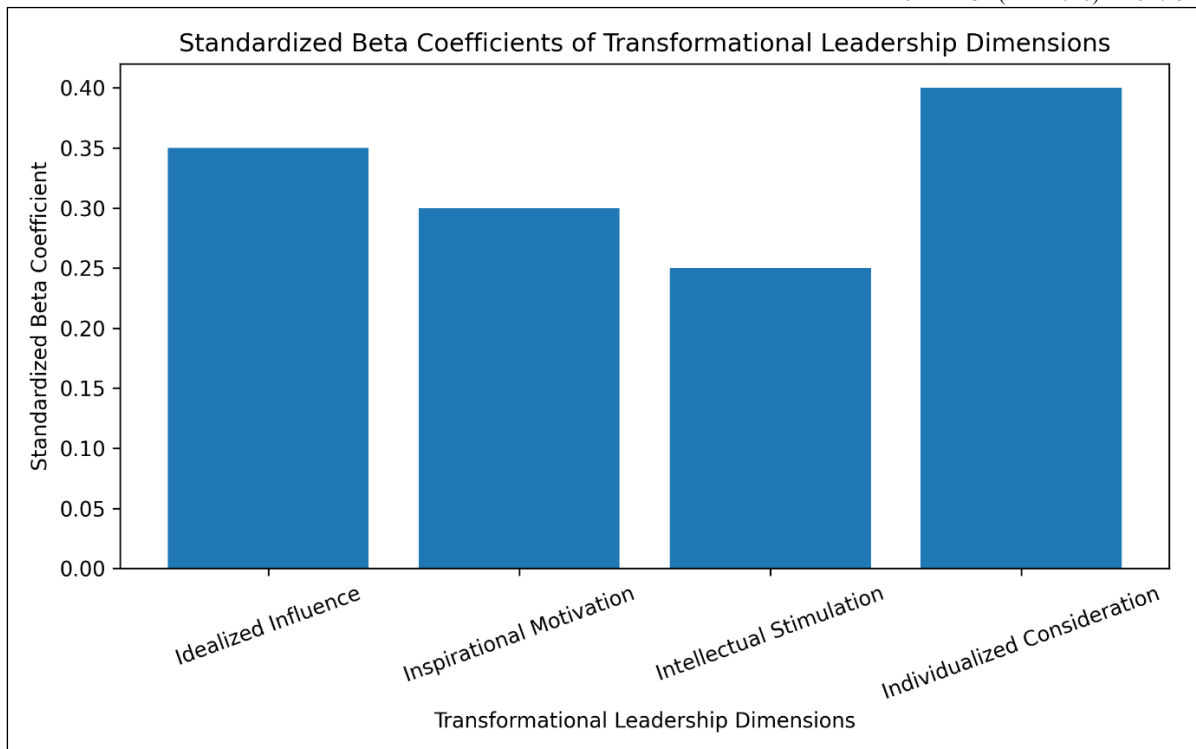
Transformational leadership was assessed through the use of an adapted version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), which covers the four facets of Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration. Leadership outcomes were measured by validated scale for job performance, organizational

commitment and perceived career advancement. The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Data was analysed with SPSS. The respondents' characteristics and the distribution of the variables were summarized using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis was used to investigate the relationship between the variables. Multiple regression analysis was then run to identify the predictive relationship between transformational leadership dimensions and the leadership outcomes.

## Results and Discussion

The descriptive analysis showed that the women leaders in Malaysian public sector had relatively high TLB behaviours. Inspirational motivation had the highest mean score of the four dimensions followed by individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation. Of the four dimensions, the highest mean score was for inspirational motivation, followed by individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation. This indicates that the behaviours that respondents reported were often behaviours that will inspire, support and motivate employees to meet the goals of the organization.

The results of correlation analysis showed significant positive correlations between each dimension of transformational leadership and leadership outcomes. The results show that there is a relationship between the higher level of the transformational leadership behaviors and the improvement of job performance, the increase of the organizational commitment and the perception of the job promotion. Moreover, the results of multiple regression analysis indicated that transformational leadership significantly predicted leadership outcomes, accounting for 54% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.54$ ). Inspirational motivation was the most important predictor, and individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation were also positive, while idealized influence was less. This study corroborates existing literature, which confirms the need to develop transformational leadership among women leaders in the public sector of Malaysia to improve their effectiveness and success.



**Figure 1: The influences of Transformational Leadership Traits on Leadership Results.**

(Bar graph of standardized beta coefficients of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration)

Source: Data Analysis by the authors.

## Conclusion

It was empirical research which explored the influence of transformational leadership qualities on the leadership performance of female leaders working in the Malaysian public sector. The results have clear empirical evidence that transformational leadership has a positive effect on job performance, organizational commitment and career advancement as perceived. The most powerful traits determined included inspirational motivation and individualized consideration. The research adds to the literature by providing empirical evidence based on a developing-country setting on the public-sector, which is a significant gap in the research. In practice, the results indicate that the development of leadership in the Malaysian public sector needs to focus on the transformational leadership skills, especially the ones concerning the vision-building and individual support. The policymakers also wish to take into account leadership style as a strategic tool to enhance gender equity and empower women leadership pipelines. Longitudinal or qualitative research can be used in the future to examine the interaction of organizational culture and policy environment with the women performances of leadership behaviors over a period.

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- Author Contribution Statement:** The author solely contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, investigation, interpretation of results, writing of the original draft, review and editing, and final approval of the manuscript.
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