



Exploring Transformative Dimensions of Leadership and Life Skills Initiatives among Female Students in Higher Education Institution: A Qualitative Inquiry

Lalita Vatta¹, Sabina Bano², Pratibha Rai³, Jagriti Jaiswal⁴ and Shikha Panwar^{5*}

¹Professor, Department of Home Science (Extension & Communication), MMV, BHU, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, BHU, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

³Assistant Professor, Department of Cardiology, IMS, BHU, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

⁴Department of Home Science (Extension & Communication), MMV, BHU, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

⁵Research Scholar, Department of Home Science (Food & Nutrition), MMV, BHU, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

*Corresponding author email id: shikha1414@bhu.ac.in

HIGHLIGHTS

- Female students perceived leadership as influencing, guiding, and empowering others through teamwork and effective decision-making.
- Themes from this study align with national higher education priorities established in the NEP 2020.
- Participants showed a preference for interactive and hands-on approaches, emphasizing the importance of active engagement in learning.

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Reviewed by: Dr. Husain Abdulhay (husainabdolhay@yahoo.com); Dr. Mijda Bahzad Mohammad Alsinayi (mijda.alsinayi@uod.ac); Soonmin HO (soonmin.ho@newinti.edu.my)

ABSTRACT

Leadership and life skills development programs play an important role in sculpting empowered, confident, and socially responsible women leaders in higher education. This qualitative study investigated how female undergraduate and postgraduate students at MMV, BHU, perceive these initiatives, examining program choices, information sources, motivational factors, perceived benefits, and barriers to participation. The study was conducted between February 2023 and July 2025. Using a purposive sampling approach, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted across two phases. Braun and Clarke's theme framework was used in the data analysis, supported by NVivo. The analysis revealed six prominent themes: interpretations of leadership, information sources, workshop types, motivation determinants, perceived benefits, and perceived barriers, each encompassing multiple subthemes. Findings demonstrate that leadership and life skills initiatives exert a significant and positive influence on students' personal growth, self-confidence, communication abilities, and leadership orientation. Participants highlighted enhanced self-awareness, goal clarity, and preparedness for professional and community engagement, while also identifying structural and personal constraints that limited full participation. Findings underscore the critical need for flexible, inclusive, and student-centred leadership development programs within women's colleges to effectively nurture future leaders capable of driving meaningful social and professional change.

INTRODUCTION

As the world continues to change rapidly, it is increasingly important that the younger generation be outfitted with necessary life skills (Haerani & Sari, 2024). In the 21st century interconnected

and ever-changing world, universities' traditional knowledge is no longer enough (Haerani & Sari, 2024) but is expected to do more than just teach students about their fields of study. It should also help them grow as people by teaching them leadership skills and important life skills (Tawil & Locatelli, 2015; Yadav & Vatta, 2026).

Education is crucial to developing the information, skills, attitudes, and values needed to contribute to and benefit from an inclusive and sustainable future (Incirci et al., 2018).

A key aspect of higher education is student leadership, which emphasizes the growth of students' capacity to interact, influence, and make constructive contributions to their communities and institutions (Komives et al., 2009). Leadership is now considered as a relational and dynamic process that all students, regardless of their roles, may acquire and practice rather than just as a formal position of power (Fletcher, 2012).

In the Indian context, higher education plays a crucial role in molding socially responsible and competent citizens capable of contributing to national development (Tilak, 2015). However, challenges related to holistic development remain particularly significant for female students. In India, the changes in National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) and curriculum have focused on adding life skills and leadership training to college programs (Pathak, 2023). The University Grants Commission (UGC) has launched the Life Skills 2.0 (Jeevan Kaushal) Curriculum and Guidelines (Pathak, 2023). This curriculum has been crafted with NEP 2020 accordance and is intended to be flexible enough to suit the specific needs of various institutions. It sets forth goals, learning outcomes, and hands-on learning activities aimed at equipping students with skills such as effective communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership capabilities (UGC, 2023). The Government of India's youth development programs, like Mera Yuva Bharat (MY Bharat) and the National Service Scheme (NSS), help young people aged 18 to 29 years become better leaders, get involved in their communities, and learn through experience outside of school (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 2025).

Empirical research suggests that life skills training plays a crucial role in enhancing leadership potential by improving one's ability to solve problems, adapt to new situations, and interact effectively with others (Karagianni & Montgomery, 2018). Women are the essential other half, and their empowerment is crucial to the advancement of society as a whole (Yadav et al., 2023). The leadership and life skills should be integrated as complementary elements of a student's holistic development rather than being treated as distinct and separate areas. Studies have indicated that participating in project-based learning and leadership workshops can substantially boost women's leadership skills (Dasgupta & Stout, 2014; Coluccio et al., 2024). In recent years, Banaras Hindu University (BHU) introduced structured initiatives, including workshops, mentorship programs, interactive sessions, and counseling support systems, aimed at strengthening student leadership and life skills. (Varanasi: Bid to develop leadership qualities in Mahila Mahavidyalaya students, 2022; Banaras Hindu University: Better life skills help remain balanced, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The investigation used a qualitative research design that was guided by the social constructivist paradigm (Sandelowski, 2000; Creswell, 2021). Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory serves as the foundation for this qualitative research (Mezirow, 1991). All aspects of the research protocol were comprehensively reported in accordance with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative

Research (COREQ) guidelines (Tong et al., 2007) (Supplementary file S1). The study was conducted at Mahila Mahavidyalaya (MMV), BHU, Varanasi. This setting offered a relevant and informative context for investigating the effects on female students. The sample comprised female students enrolled at MMV, BHU, Varanasi, who had participated in student leadership and life skills initiatives (workshops). The sample included students from 2 academic sessions (2023-2024 & 2024-2025) with different programs and years of study.

Purposive sampling strategies were employed to recruit the study sample, who have completed any workshop that is implemented under the umbrella of 'Student Leadership & Life Skill Initiatives.' Subsequently, a clear language statement describing the research guidelines along with the consent form was delivered to all the interested participants in person. An in-depth, semi-structured interview guide comprising seven open-ended questions (Supplementary file S2) was developed to gather data, which was pilot tested with five students for refinement. No revisions were needed in the interview guide, as the respondent was able to answer. Apart from the open-ended question, some socio-demographic information was also obtained from the participants, which included age, course & employment status. The interviews were carried out in two phases: the first phase took place from February 29 to April 25, 2024, and the second phase occurred between March 29 and July 4, 2025, as two sessions were deemed necessary to assess the transformative outcomes.

Data were obtained from 48 students in a closed classroom environment, ensuring that no faculty members or familiar batchmates were present during the interview recording process. All interviews were face-to-face and audio recorded., in either Hindi or English, according to the interviewee's preference, till the 48th interview, as saturation was reached at this number. The first 38 interviews were conducted in phase I of the study, and the other 10 were conducted in phase II. The average duration of the interviews was 15 min 20 sec.

Using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006), an inductive thematic analysis was carried out simultaneously with the interviews to ensure a balanced approach to data collection and analysis (Sandelowski, 2000). The coding process utilized NVivo (Version 15, Lumivero 2024) software. These codes were further categorized into potential themes, which were thoroughly reviewed and refined, and in the final phase, each theme was clearly defined and described in detail.

Program description

In pursuance of the vision of holistic student development and in alignment with the university's broader objectives, the Leadership and Life Skills Development Initiative was launched in July 2022 on a pilot basis, which was further extended into other departments and faculties of the university, witnessing the successful implementation of the initiative in MMV (Varanasi: Bid to develop leadership qualities in Mahila Mahavidyalaya students, 2022; Banaras Hindu University: Better life skills help remain balanced, 2023). The initiative was conceived with the objective of nurturing leadership qualities and essential life skills among students, enabling them to become confident, self-aware, socially responsible, and

Table 1. THEME-1 Interpretations of Leadership

Sub-themes	Quotes
Leading Quality	“Leadership is... the ability to lead others...by guiding, managing, and directing people to effectively perform their duties.” (P2, 22 years, PG) “...It is about leading others, guiding them, and yes, of course, motivating them when they need support.” (P14, 21 years, UG) “Leadership means one person leading while others follow...” (P47, 23 years, PG)
Teamwork	“A leader is someone who moves ahead and takes others along... right... this quality can be referred to as leadership.” (P42, 24 years, PG) “Umm... It means taking initiative to guide a team clearly, stay focused on goals, and help others move forward.” (P43, 20 years, UG) “True leadership means moving forward together as a team.” (P47, 23 years, PG)
Leadership is taking initiative	“Leadership is... taking the initiative to bring the change we want to see in society.” (P39, 23 years, PG) “Leadership is not all about becoming a leader; it is about being able to take initiative, even in the small aspects of our lives.” (P8, 20 years, UG)

Table 2. THEME-2 Information Sources

Sub-themes	Quotes
WhatsApp Group	“There is a college WhatsApp group where information keeps coming in... that’s how we get to know about the workshop.” (P18, 20 years, UG) “We got the information through the WhatsApp group.” (P25, 25 years, PG) “Yeah... so, there is a common WhatsApp group; I joined it... and get all information from there only.” (P38, 19 years, UG)
Peer	“I received the information through my seniors and batchmates.” (P6, 18 years, UG) “I came to know about the workshop through my classmates.” (P9, 21 years, UG) “...I have friends, and they usually tell me about these workshops...” (P13, 20 years, UG)
Faculty	“...also, our professors keep telling us about these workshops.” (P39, 23 years, PG) “When I came to class, Ma’am used to tell me about it.” (P13, 20 years, UG)

Table 3. THEME-3 Workshop Type Preference

Sub-themes	Quotes
FLY (Finding the Leader in You)	“I chose the FLY workshop, um... there were many activities; we got to learn a lot of new things from it.” (P39, 23 years, PG) “I preferred FLY, because it was very practical...we had one-to-one interaction with professors and included interesting games, which made it more engaging and effective.” (P6, 18 years, UG) “I chose the Fly workshop because it improves personality and skills. I lacked confidence, and Fly helped me build it.” (P37, 25 years, PG)
Self-Defense	“Self-defense means... gaining confidence and... learning to handle situations, which is why I give more importance to the self-defense workshop.” (P7, 24 years, PG) “Because... it’s very relevant in today’s scenario. Everyone should learn it, regardless of gender.” (P13, 20 years, UG) “I found the self-defense part very useful, and that is the main reason I chose this workshop.” (P47, 23 years, PG) “Self-defense is crucial for girls so we can protect ourselves when no one else is around.” (P1, 19 years, UG)
Calligraphy	“I enjoyed the calligraphy workshop... because it helped me improve my handwriting and express my creativity in a calm and focused way.” (P18, 20 years, UG) “The calligraphy workshop was very productive for me, and it is something I can use in other areas as well.” (P43, 20 years, UG) “I took the calligraphy workshop because the timing was convenient, and I definitely found it interesting.” (P42, 24 years, PG)
Writing Skills Workshop	“...from all I enjoyed the Writing Skills workshop... umm, we learned prose on the first day, then poetry, and how to create short fiction on the final day... It was a great experience.” (P41, 21 years, UG) “I, uhh..., went for the Writing Skills workshop because... like self-defense matters, but my own interest is more towards writing.” (P48, 25 years, PG) “I chose it because, umm, it focuses on basics like essay writing and handwriting, which really help in academics. We did one, and it was really useful.” (P43, 20 years, UG) “I enjoyed the Writing Skills workshop the most. We learned poetry and jingles, and the mentor was really good.” (P46, 21 years, UG)

Table 4. THEME-4 Motivation Determinants

Sub-themes	Quotes
Topic of Interest	"I already had an interest in writing...so I was curious to learn, which drew me to the creative writing workshop." (P41, 21 years, UG) "...motivation is...like I go for that workshop, which I found interesting, like...the calligraphy one." (P39, 23 years, PG)
Personality Development	"I felt that, umm... If I attended these workshops, some qualities would develop in me, which would, you know, really help my personality." (P8, 20 years, UG) "While attending the workshop, I didn't realize much, but afterwards I could see a positive change in myself." (P47, 23 years, PG) "I found leadership traits in myself through the FLY workshop, which improved my personality." (P28, 20 years, UG)
Life Skills	"I felt that, umm... doing these workshops would help me improve the qualities that I, you know, don't really have." (P21, 19 years, UG) "Because... these workshops teach skills that are really important for life." (P17, 22 years, PG) "I thought that, like... by joining these workshops, I would pick up some life skills and learn something new, something not part of my everyday routine." (P4, 21 years, UG)

Table 5. THEME-5 Benefits

Sub-themes	Quotes
Problem Solving	"Actually, umm... self-defense helps us to tackle difficult situations. Like, when we are outside and don't know what might happen, we have to think quickly and decide what to do on our own." (P18, 20 years, UG) "...workshops give girls a place to learn how to contribute to society, solve problems, and deal with their own issues." (P7, 24 years, PG) "Yeah, like... if in the future I go for a job interview and my communication isn't good, that becomes a problem. So, umm... workshops help us think, communicate, and solve real-life problems instead of just following book language." (P3, 20 years, UG)
Decision Making	"We gained real benefits from these workshops, like learning how to make decisions quickly. These decision-making skills are useful and can be applied in our day-to-day life." (P26, 18 years, UG) "Now I make decisions for my own happiness... my family's happiness, and my career, which makes these workshops very beneficial for my future..." (P6, 18 years, UG) "...these workshops helped us learn how to make decisions in life; this can be counted as a benefit..." (P33, 20 years, UG)
Taking Initiatives	"After attending the workshop... I felt motivated to take initiative and, yeahhh, face my fear of failure." (P33, 20 years, UG) "Through the FLY workshop, ... umm ... I learned about taking initiative, one of the five pillars, and ... yeahhh ... for me, it felt important and beneficial." (P39, 23 years, PG) "In the workshop, ... umm ... I heard about the importance of taking initiative, and it will help me in the future." (P14, 21 years, UG)
Cultivate New Skills	"We get chances to learn new skills, umm, like ... aaa ... the vertical gardening workshop, which I had never tried before..." (P41, 21 years, UG) "It helps us learn new skills, like writing and ... (thinking) ... clay modeling." (P48, 25 years, PG)
Being Innovative	"...I started trying different and innovative ways, and I feel it's becoming part of my daily life now." (P1, 19 years, UG) "I feel more open to experimenting and trying different ideas..." (P15, 23 years, PG) "In the future, umm, at work I feel these new ideas will help me, and, yeahhh, I can work in more innovative ways." (P36, 18 years, UG)
Boost Confidence	"The workshop helped me to feel more confident..." (P35, 22 years, PG) "It, umm...boosted my confidence; now I can handle tough situations too." (P38, 19 years, UG)

program's results also align with the Government of India's overarching youth-development strategy, which emphasizes the importance of life skills, civic participation, leadership, and motivation in enabling young adults to make significant contributions to society (Verma & Chauhan, 2022).

The study further stated that faculty, peers, and social media platforms (WhatsApp) served as key sources of information

regarding leadership and life skills workshops. The significance of institutional channels supports the findings of Dugan and Komives (2010), who underlined the crucial role of higher education institutions in building leadership awareness and participation among students. Young adults' growing use of social media reflects changing information transmission patterns, requiring program organizers to use both traditional and digital methods. These findings

Table 6. THEME-6 Perceived Barriers

Sub-themes	Quotes
Time Management	“...time...due to exams, managing time for workshops becomes difficult.” (P10, 22 years, PG) “One thing I dislike is...the timing...uhhh...which often becomes a challenge to all of us.” (P43, 20 years, UG) “For us...balancing workshops with regular classes becomes difficult when both are scheduled at the same time.” (P13, 20 years, UG) “Barrier...(thinking)...missing our class... When workshops are at different hours, we end up missing classes.” (P42, 24 years, PG)
Dialect	“I remember in some workshops...language was a barrier; it was in English only.” (P39, 23 years, PG) “In the last workshop... the instructor spoke in a Bengali accent, and even though I understood it, I couldn’t interact much.” (P42, 24 years, PG) “...Since many students weren’t from an English background and the sir wasn’t comfortable in Hindi, it became difficult for both ends.” (P20, 24 years, PG)
Lack of Resources	“Yes, limited space, I think, ... you know ... sitting comfortably was difficult in a few workshops.” (P39, 23 years, PG) “During the calligraphy workshop, there were not enough tools for all the students. It should be an appropriate quantity...” (P21, 19 years, UG).
Duration of Workshops	“Like the recent five-day workshop, umm, it was hard to attend all the days.” (P48, 25 years, PG) “Yeah...Workshops are scheduled back-to-back for months, and then there are very few in other months...which makes the schedule uneven.” (P47, 23 years, PG) “In the calligraphy workshop... I felt that the time was too short, as we learned only basic letters and wanted to explore more styles...” (P39, 23 years, PG)

coincide with Pandey et al. (2020), who reported that college students utilized social media significantly, notably WhatsApp and Facebook, and spent plenty of time on such platforms (Gupta & Vatta, 2025). Moreover, participants also demonstrated a preference for an interactive and hands-on approach, underscoring the relevance of active engagement in learning. This finding is similar to Jenkins and Owen (2016), who highlighted that experiential and high-impact educational techniques play a significant role in supporting students’ leadership development. Students preferred FLY, self-defense, calligraphy, and writing skills workshops over others, which clearly shows their interest in programs that help them with both personal growth and leadership development, which was also mentioned by another study (Caza et al., 2010).

Another significant discovery has to do with identity formation and empowerment. This study corresponds with Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 2000), which indicates that critical reflection can lead to important adjustments in views, attitudes, and actions. Gray et al. (2019) observed that training improved women’s self-efficacy and self-confidence, and Ferrari (2022) identified a significant but minor improvement in confidence after training. Despite these advantages, female students identified challenges such as time constraints, academic loads, lack of resources, and language. Rosch and Stephens identified similar issues, indicating that barriers frequently limit students’ engagement in leadership development activities (Rosch & Stephens, 2017). Overall, our findings emphasize the need for developing accessible, adaptable, and student-centered leadership programs that may effectively support female students’ personal and professional development.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that the Leadership and Life Skills Development workshops at MMV, BHU, effectively foster essential leadership qualities and life skills among students. The

programs strengthened critical thinking, communication, decision-making, innovation, and self-confidence while encouraging students to view leadership as a quality-driven, participatory process rather than a position of authority. By motivating students to step beyond their comfort zones, the workshops promoted academic, personal, and social development, resulting in more confident, responsible, and socially aware individuals. The findings highlight the importance of mentorship, aptitude development, and structured student leadership roles in enhancing ownership, peer learning, and the long-term sustainability of such initiatives. Establishing dedicated spaces for leadership activities and clearly defining student responsibilities can further improve engagement and implementation. The study advocates for flexible, inclusive, and student-centred leadership development frameworks in higher education to nurture adaptable, socially responsible leaders capable of driving positive change in their professions and communities.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical approval: The research protocol for this inquiry was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Medical Science, Banaras Hindu University (IMS/IEC/November/2025/30).

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authors’ contribution: Five investigators were involved in implementing this qualitative inquiry. The study was conceptualized by senior female author LV having expertise in extension & communication, and the methodology was cooperatively designed by all authors. Two authors SP (a female doctoral scholar of food & nutrition) and JJ (pursuing a postgraduate degree in extension and communication), did the review of literature, gathered the data, and carried out the data analysis. Before data collection, the postgraduate student (JJ) as well as the doctoral scholar (SP) received formal training in conducting in-depth qualitative interviews and coding. The manuscript was prepared, edited, and structured

collaboratively by LV, SB (a senior female author having expertise in geography & gender studies), and SP. Three authors, LV, SB, and PR (a mid-career female researcher and pediatric cardiologist), offered guidance throughout the research process, validated the methodology, interpreted the findings, and critically reviewed the manuscript. All authors involved with the discussion of the results, contributed to the revision of the manuscript, and approved the final version for submission.

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