



IMPACT OF CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD) ON PROMOTION AND LEADERSHIP ASPIRATIONS OF WOMEN TEACHERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

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Abstract

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) has emerged as a cornerstone of faculty development in higher education, equipping teachers with the pedagogical, technological, research, and leadership competencies required to address the rapidly evolving demands of academia. Despite the increasing representation of women in higher education worldwide, they continue to encounter systemic barriers to promotion and leadership positions, including gender stereotypes, work–family conflict, limited mentoring opportunities, unequal access to professional networks, and institutional biases. This conceptual review synthesizes contemporary national and international literature to examine the relationship between CPD and the promotion and leadership aspirations of women teachers in higher education. Drawing upon Human Capital Theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory, Adult Learning Theory, and Transformational Leadership Theory, the paper critically analyses how structured professional learning opportunities influence women's career trajectories. It further discusses the role of institutional support, mentoring, faculty development programmes, and digital competence, artificial intelligence (AI) literacy, and policy initiatives such as India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in creating enabling environments for women's professional advancement.

Keywords: *Continuous Professional Development, Women Teachers, Higher Education, Leadership Aspirations, Career Advancement, Faculty Development, Promotion, NEP 2020*

Introduction

Higher education institutions across the world are undergoing unprecedented transformation driven by globalization, technological advancement, artificial intelligence, interdisciplinary research, internationalization, and evolving quality assurance mechanisms. Universities increasingly expect faculty members not only to excel in teaching but also to demonstrate research excellence, innovation, academic leadership, institutional engagement,

and societal contribution. Consequently, continuous learning has become an essential component of academic careers, making Continuous Professional Development (CPD) one of the most significant determinants of faculty effectiveness and career progression (OECD, 2023). Professional development has gradually shifted from being an optional institutional activity to becoming a strategic requirement for career sustainability. Contemporary CPD encompasses a broad range of structured learning opportunities, including faculty development programmes (FDPs), leadership development initiatives, mentoring, digital competency training, research methodology workshops, international collaborations, artificial intelligence literacy programmes, pedagogical innovation, and reflective professional practice. These activities collectively strengthen teachers' professional competence while preparing them for leadership responsibilities within higher education institutions.

For women teachers, however, the significance of CPD extends beyond skill enhancement. Across diverse educational systems, women continue to experience slower career advancement despite constituting a substantial proportion of the academic workforce. Although female participation in higher education has increased considerably during the past two decades, their representation in senior academic administration, university governance, professorial appointments, and executive leadership remains disproportionately low. UNESCO's recent global analyses highlight the persistence of a "glass ceiling" in educational leadership despite women's numerical dominance in teaching professions.

The disparity between participation and leadership reflects a complex interaction of structural, organizational, cultural, and psychological factors. Numerous studies identify gender bias, unequal access to mentoring, limited networking opportunities, family responsibilities, workload imbalance, reduced research opportunities, and institutional cultures as barriers affecting women's career progression (Eagly & Carli, 2007; UNESCO, 2025). These challenges often influence women's confidence in pursuing administrative responsibilities and leadership positions even when they possess comparable qualifications and experience.

Recent scholarship suggests that CPD may function as a powerful mechanism for addressing many of these barriers. Structured professional learning enables women teachers to acquire leadership competencies, expand professional networks, improve research productivity, strengthen digital literacy, and enhance their visibility within academic institutions. Participation in leadership-oriented professional development has also been associated with increased organizational commitment, higher leadership self-efficacy, and stronger aspirations for administrative positions. Bellibaş et al. (2026), demonstrated that supportive institutional relationships, resilience, and self-efficacy significantly strengthen female teachers' leadership aspirations.

The emergence of artificial intelligence has further expanded the scope of CPD. Faculty members are increasingly expected to develop competencies in AI-assisted teaching, digital assessment, learning analytics, curriculum innovation, ethical technology use, and personalized learning. Consequently, professional development now encompasses technological readiness alongside traditional pedagogical competencies. Women teachers who actively participate in technology-oriented CPD often demonstrate greater confidence in adopting innovative instructional practices and are better positioned for leadership roles in digitally transforming institutions.

In India, these developments have acquired additional significance following the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes continuous professional learning, multidisciplinary education, institutional autonomy, innovation, research excellence, and leadership development. NEP 2020 recognizes teachers as the central agents of educational transformation and advocates continuous capacity building through Faculty Development Programmes, Human Resource Development Centres (HRDCs), online learning platforms, research collaborations, and institutional mentoring systems. These initiatives aim not only to improve teaching quality but also to nurture academic leadership and promote equitable career opportunities.

Despite increasing investments in CPD, relatively few conceptual studies have examined how professional development influences promotion opportunities and leadership aspirations specifically among women teachers in higher education. Much of the existing literature focuses either on instructional effectiveness or on gender disparities in leadership without adequately integrating the role of continuous professional learning as a connecting mechanism. Moreover, recent discussions increasingly emphasize that effective CPD should include mentoring, psychological empowerment, resilience building, leadership identity development, and institutional support rather than merely technical skill acquisition. Emerging conceptual analyses also argue that gender-responsive CPD models should integrate pedagogical excellence, digital competence, leadership preparation, and well-being to facilitate sustainable career advancement among women educators.

Furthermore, contemporary research on female leadership in higher education has shifted from identifying barriers toward examining enabling conditions that encourage women to aspire to leadership roles (Sims et.al. 2020). Systematic reviews published during 2025–2026 indicate that collaborative leadership cultures, mentoring, inclusive institutional policies, and structured professional development significantly contribute to women's advancement into academic leadership while simultaneously improving educational quality and institutional effectiveness.

Against this backdrop, the present conceptual review aims to critically examine the role of Continuous Professional Development in shaping promotion opportunities and leadership aspirations among women teachers in higher education. By synthesizing contemporary evidence from international and Indian contexts, this review contributes to the growing discourse on gender equity, faculty development, and educational leadership. It argues that CPD should be viewed not merely as an instrument for improving teaching effectiveness but as a comprehensive strategy for empowering women academics, strengthening institutional leadership pipelines, and promoting inclusive excellence in higher education.

Theoretical Foundations

Understanding the influence of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) on promotion and leadership aspirations among women teachers requires a multidisciplinary theoretical perspective. Career advancement in higher education is shaped not only by individual competencies but also by institutional culture, professional identity, leadership opportunities, organizational support, and social expectations. Four complementary theoretical frameworks provide a strong foundation for explaining these relationships.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, developed by Becker (1964), proposes that investments in education, knowledge, and professional skills enhance individual productivity and increase opportunities for career advancement. Within higher education, CPD represents an investment in academic human capital by strengthening pedagogical expertise, research competence, digital literacy, leadership capabilities, and professional networks.

For women teachers, CPD contributes to career advancement by improving measurable indicators commonly considered during promotion processes, including research publications, funded projects, curriculum innovation, academic administration, and professional recognition. Faculty members who continually update their competencies become more competitive for senior academic and administrative positions.

Recent reviews of higher education emphasize that professional learning increasingly extends beyond classroom competence to include innovation, institutional leadership, curriculum development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and educational quality enhancement. Teacher agency and continuous professional learning have therefore become central components of academic career development (Cong-Lem, 2026).

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) explains career development through the interaction of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, personal goals, and environmental supports. According to SCCT, women are more likely to aspire toward leadership positions when they believe they possess the competencies required to perform leadership roles successfully. Professional development programmes strengthen leadership self-efficacy by providing opportunities for mastery experiences, mentoring, networking, collaborative learning, and professional recognition. Institutional barriers—including gender stereotypes, lack of mentoring, limited access to influential networks, and implicit bias—may weaken leadership aspirations despite high competence. Conversely, supportive organizational environments increase confidence and encourage women to pursue senior positions.

A recent empirical study in the European Journal of Education found that principal–teacher relationships, resilience, and leadership self-efficacy significantly predict leadership aspirations among female teachers, highlighting the importance of supportive professional environments in nurturing future women leaders (Bellibaş et al., 2026)

Adult Learning Theory

Knowles' theory of Adult Learning (Kearsley, 2010; Knowles et.al, 2015) suggests that adults learn most effectively when learning experiences are relevant, self-directed, problem-centred, and immediately applicable to professional practice. This perspective aligns closely with CPD because faculty members generally participate in professional learning to improve their teaching, research, leadership, and career prospects rather than merely acquiring theoretical knowledge. Effective CPD therefore incorporates skills like reflective practices, mentoring, peer coaching etc. Rather than functioning as isolated workshops, contemporary CPD increasingly promotes sustained professional learning communities that facilitate continuous reflection and professional growth.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) explains leadership as the ability to inspire, motivate, mentor, and facilitate organizational change. Leadership-oriented CPD develops competencies such as strategic thinking, decision-making, collaborative leadership

Women who participate in leadership-focused faculty development programmes often demonstrate greater confidence in assuming administrative responsibilities because these programmes help transform professional identity from "teacher" to "academic leader."

Recent theoretical reviews also argue that teacher leadership within higher education should be understood as distributed, collaborative, and identity-driven rather than merely hierarchical. Leadership increasingly includes curriculum stewardship, quality enhancement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and institutional innovation (Visser, et.al. 2026).

Continuous Professional Development in Higher Education

Continuous Professional Development has evolved considerably over the last three decades. Traditionally viewed as occasional training workshops, CPD is now recognised as a lifelong, systematic process through which educators continually update their professional competencies. Modern CPD encompasses FIPs, FDPs, RCs, and CBPs etc.

OECD (2023) argues that lifelong professional learning enables educators to adapt successfully to changing educational demands while strengthening institutional effectiveness. Recent systematic reviews further indicate that effective CPD improves pedagogical innovation, research engagement, professional identity, teacher agency, curriculum reform, and institutional leadership (Cong-Lem, 2026).

Women Teachers and Career Advancement

Despite substantial increases in women's participation within higher education globally, advancement into senior academic leadership remains disproportionately low. International literature consistently identifies multiple barriers like gender stereotyping, limited mentoring, work–family conflict, underrepresentation in decision-making bodies etc.

These barriers collectively contribute to slower promotion trajectories and reduced leadership aspirations. Recent systematic reviews continue to demonstrate that female leadership contributes positively to institutional quality, innovation, inclusion, and organizational resilience while simultaneously highlighting persistent structural obstacles that limit women's progression into senior positions (Gallegos, et.al. 2026).

Leadership Aspirations among Women Teachers

Leadership aspiration refers to an individual's willingness and confidence to pursue formal leadership responsibilities. Women frequently underestimate their leadership readiness despite demonstrating comparable competence. Leadership-focused CPD helps address this challenge by providing ample opportunities to women teachers to interact with others and develop a sense of confidence, growth aspirations, networking benefits etc. Bellibaş et al. (2026) demonstrated that resilience, supportive leadership, and professional confidence significantly increase leadership aspirations among female educators. Their findings reinforce Social Cognitive Career Theory by showing that environmental support strengthens women's confidence to seek leadership positions.

Critical Discussion

The contemporary discourse on Continuous Professional Development (CPD) has evolved considerably from viewing it as a mechanism for improving instructional competence

to recognizing it as a strategic instrument for organizational transformation, faculty leadership, and career advancement. For women teachers in higher education, CPD represents not merely a process of acquiring professional knowledge but a pathway towards academic visibility, leadership preparedness, institutional recognition, and promotion. The literature reviewed in the previous sections consistently indicates that the effectiveness of CPD extends beyond improving classroom teaching; it significantly influences research productivity, leadership self-efficacy, decision-making capabilities, professional networking, and organizational commitment.

One of the most important observations emerging from the literature is that participation in CPD substantially enhances leadership self-efficacy, a construct referring to an individual's belief in their capability to successfully perform leadership responsibilities. According to Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), individuals who perceive themselves as competent are more likely to pursue challenging professional goals, including administrative leadership positions (Lent et al., 1994). Women teachers who regularly participate in leadership workshops, faculty development programmes, mentoring initiatives, and collaborative research activities gradually develop confidence in managing institutional responsibilities. Leadership competence acquired through CPD reduces the psychological barriers that often discourage women from seeking senior academic positions.

Another important contribution of CPD lies in enhancing professional identity. Professional identity develops through continuous interaction between personal experiences, institutional expectations, and opportunities for professional learning. Women faculty members who engage in sustained professional development often begin to perceive themselves not only as effective teachers but also as researchers, innovators, mentors, and institutional leaders. This transformation of identity is particularly significant because leadership aspirations are strongly influenced by how individuals define their professional roles. Faculty development programmes that incorporate reflective practice, collaborative learning, and leadership coaching enable women teachers to reconstruct their professional identities beyond traditional teaching responsibilities.

The literature further suggests that research productivity constitutes one of the strongest mediators between CPD and career promotion. Promotion policies in higher education increasingly emphasize scholarly publications, externally funded research projects, curriculum innovation, patents, interdisciplinary collaboration, and international academic engagement. CPD programmes focusing on research methodology, academic writing, grant proposal development, data analysis, publication ethics, and collaborative research significantly strengthen these competencies. Consequently, women teachers who actively participate in such programmes often demonstrate improved publication records and greater participation in funded research projects, thereby enhancing their eligibility for promotion.

However, CPD alone cannot guarantee equitable career advancement. The effectiveness of professional development is substantially influenced by institutional support systems. Universities that promote gender-inclusive policies, transparent promotion procedures, mentoring cultures, flexible work arrangements, and leadership succession planning create environments in which women can effectively utilize the competencies acquired through CPD. Conversely, institutions characterized by implicit gender bias, limited leadership opportunities, excessive administrative burdens, or inadequate recognition of

women's contributions may significantly reduce the impact of professional development initiatives.

Another critical issue concerns access to professional development opportunities. Although many universities organize faculty development programmes, participation is not always equitable. Women teachers frequently encounter constraints arising from family responsibilities, caregiving obligations, geographical limitations, heavy teaching workloads, and institutional scheduling practices. These factors may reduce their ability to attend residential workshops, international conferences, or long-duration leadership programmes. Therefore, the availability of flexible, hybrid, and online CPD opportunities has become increasingly important in promoting gender equity within higher education.

The rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into higher education has introduced new dimensions to professional development. Universities increasingly expect faculty members to utilize AI-supported teaching tools, adaptive learning systems, digital assessment platforms, learning analytics, academic integrity software, and research assistance technologies. Consequently, AI literacy has become an emerging component of faculty competence. Women teachers who participate in AI-oriented CPD programmes not only improve their instructional effectiveness but also acquire competencies required for digital leadership within modern universities. Such competencies enhance institutional visibility and position faculty members for leadership roles in technology-enabled educational environments.

The implementation of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has further reinforced the strategic importance of CPD. NEP 2020 advocates multidisciplinary education, research excellence, innovation, digital transformation, institutional autonomy, and continuous faculty development. It emphasizes that teachers should be lifelong learners capable of responding to emerging educational challenges through continuous upskilling and reflective professional practice. The policy also encourages universities to strengthen Faculty Development Programmes (FDPs), Human Resource Development Centres (HRDCs), digital learning platforms, research collaborations, and leadership development initiatives. These reforms provide significant opportunities for enhancing women's participation in academic leadership, provided that institutional implementation remains gender-sensitive and inclusive.

An equally significant finding emerging from recent scholarship is the importance of mentoring as a bridge between CPD and career advancement. Formal mentoring relationships provide guidance on promotion procedures, research planning, publication strategies, leadership opportunities, and work-life balance. Women teachers who receive sustained mentoring often demonstrate greater organizational commitment, stronger professional confidence, and increased readiness to assume leadership positions. Mentoring therefore complements structured professional development by translating newly acquired competencies into practical career outcomes.

The literature also highlights the role of professional networks in facilitating promotion and leadership aspirations. Participation in conferences, interdisciplinary collaborations, academic associations, editorial boards, and international research partnerships expands professional visibility and creates opportunities for career advancement. CPD programmes that encourage collaborative scholarship and networking contribute significantly to women's academic recognition, particularly in institutions where informal professional networks traditionally favour male faculty members.

Despite these positive outcomes, several challenges remain. Many CPD programmes continue to emphasize pedagogical training while giving insufficient attention to leadership preparation, negotiation skills, strategic management, financial administration, conflict resolution, policy analysis, and institutional governance. Leadership development should therefore become an integral component of faculty development rather than an optional activity offered only to individuals already occupying administrative positions.

Another concern relates to the evaluation of CPD effectiveness. Many institutions assess professional development primarily through participation certificates rather than long-term career outcomes. Future evaluation frameworks should examine indicators such as promotion rates, leadership appointments, research productivity, grant acquisition, leadership self-efficacy, professional identity development, and organizational influence. Such outcome-based evaluation would provide more meaningful evidence regarding the contribution of CPD to women's academic careers (Nanda et. al., 2025).

Collectively, the literature indicates that CPD operates through multiple interconnected mechanisms. It enhances knowledge and skills, strengthens professional confidence, expands research capacity, improves organizational visibility, develops leadership competencies, and creates opportunities for career progression. However, these outcomes are maximized only when professional development is supported by inclusive institutional cultures, equitable promotion systems, effective mentoring, and gender-responsive leadership policies.

Analytical review of related studies across a wide spectrum suggests that CPD does not influence promotion directly; rather, its impact is mediated by professional competence, leadership self-efficacy, research productivity, and professional identity while being moderated by institutional and socio-cultural factors. Universities aiming to improve women's representation in academic leadership should therefore adopt comprehensive CPD models that integrate leadership training, mentoring, digital competence, research development, and organizational support rather than focusing solely on pedagogical enhancement.

Implications for Higher Education Institutions

The findings of this conceptual review suggest that Continuous Professional Development (CPD) should be viewed as a strategic institutional investment rather than merely a mechanism for improving teaching competence. Universities operating in an increasingly competitive, technology-driven, and globally connected environment require faculty members who are not only competent educators but also researchers, innovators, mentors, and transformational leaders. For women teachers, CPD provides an important pathway for enhancing professional capabilities, expanding leadership opportunities, and strengthening promotion prospects. However, the effectiveness of CPD depends largely on institutional commitment to creating equitable and supportive academic environments.

Higher education institutions should therefore shift from a compliance-oriented approach to faculty development towards a career-development model that integrates teaching excellence, research productivity, leadership preparation, digital competence, and well-being. Such a model recognizes that professional development is a continuous process extending throughout an academic career rather than an isolated training event. Universities should adopt gender-responsive CPD policies. Women faculty often require targeted support in leadership preparation, strategic decision-making, research networking, grant writing, academic administration, and policy formulation. CPD initiatives should therefore be designed to address

these specific professional needs, developing institutional mentoring systems custom-made for women faculty members. Universities should establish structured mentoring programmes pairing early-career women faculty with experienced professors and academic leaders. Universities must also provide systematic opportunities for AI literacy and digital leadership training, ensuring that women teachers actively participate in institutional digital transformation rather than remaining passive users of technology.

Institutional leaders should also recognize that professional development cannot be separated from organizational culture. Inclusive leadership, transparent promotion policies, equitable workload distribution, recognition of academic contributions, and flexible working arrangements contribute significantly to the successful translation of CPD into career advancement. Gender-sensitive institutional cultures not only improve promotion outcomes but also strengthen faculty motivation, organizational commitment, and educational quality.

Policy Implications in the Context of NEP 2020

India's National Education Policy (NEP 2020) provides an enabling framework for strengthening CPD in higher education. The policy emphasizes teacher quality, multidisciplinary education, research excellence, innovation, digital transformation, and institutional autonomy. It identifies teachers as the central drivers of educational reform and advocates continuous professional learning throughout their careers. In alignment with NEP 2020, universities should expand the scope of Faculty Development Programmes beyond pedagogical training to include new aspects like leadership development, educational entrepreneurship, academic governance etc. The UGC–Malaviya Mission Teacher Training Programme (MMTTP) must design future programmes that incorporate dedicated modules on women's academic leadership, mentoring, career planning, grant acquisition, research leadership, and institutional governance.

Furthermore, policy-makers should encourage universities to develop Leadership Development Centres specifically aimed at preparing women faculty for administrative positions such as Heads of Departments, Deans, Directors, Registrars, Pro Vice-Chancellors, and Vice-Chancellors. Such centres can provide long-term coaching, mentoring, executive education, and experiential leadership learning.

Government agencies may also consider introducing career-linked CPD credit systems, wherein participation in high-quality professional development contributes meaningfully to promotion, leadership eligibility, and institutional recognition. Such systems would encourage continuous learning while strengthening accountability and quality assurance.

Conclusion

Continuous Professional Development has emerged as one of the most influential determinants of academic excellence, institutional effectiveness, and sustainable career development in higher education. This conceptual review demonstrates that CPD extends beyond improving pedagogical competence to encompass research capability, digital literacy, leadership preparation, professional identity formation, and organizational engagement. For women teachers, these dimensions collectively enhance promotion readiness and strengthen aspirations for academic leadership.

The review also highlights that the relationship between CPD and career advancement is neither automatic nor linear. Rather, it is mediated by factors such as leadership self-efficacy, professional competence, research productivity, psychological empowerment, and networking

opportunities, while institutional culture, mentoring, gender equity, and organizational support moderate the extent to which professional development translates into leadership outcomes. Universities that combine high-quality CPD with transparent promotion policies, inclusive leadership practices, and structured mentoring are more likely to develop a robust pipeline of women academic leaders.

Ultimately, promoting women's leadership through CPD is not solely a matter of individual career advancement; it is essential for fostering inclusive governance, academic innovation, organizational resilience, and educational excellence. Higher education institutions that invest in gender-responsive professional development are likely to benefit from more diverse leadership, enhanced institutional performance, and a stronger capacity to respond to the evolving demands of twenty-first-century education.

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