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Sustainability Leadership Strategies: A Woman from the Global South Navigating Barriers

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Abstract

This study explores the author's journey as she navigates the complexities of sustainable leadership within the intersecting challenges of gender inequality, resource constraints, and political adversity in the Global South. Drawing on personal experience and theoretical frameworks, the article examines strategies for overcoming significant barriers, including technological limitations, economic sanctions, and deeply ingrained gender norms. The narrative highlights a sustainability-oriented leadership approach grounded in collective leadership, systems thinking, and innovation in the face of adversity. By integrating local knowledge, empowering marginalized groups, and building resilience in response to external pressures, the study shows how sustainable leadership can appear and flourish even in contexts characterized by limited resources and persistent systemic inequalities. Central to the discussion is the role of women and culture in shaping leadership practices and strategies, with particular attention to how women leaders from the Global South can challenge established norms and contribute to meaningful social and environmental change. The study underscores the importance of diverse and inclusive leadership in advancing a more sustainable and fair future by connecting personal experience with global sustainability agendas, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This narrative provides insights for women leaders confronting similar challenges and offers practical strategies for navigating the intersecting barriers of culture, gender, resource constraints, and geopolitics in the pursuit of sustainability.

Introduction

In the face of global climate emergencies, persistent inequalities, and rapid technological change, sustainable leadership has appeared as a critical paradigm for guiding societies toward inclusive and long-term development (Prabhakar, 2025; Thelma & Chitondo, 2024; Brundenius, 2017). At the core of this leadership model lies an emphasis on systems thinking, ethical decision-making, and a commitment to the

well-being of people and the planet (Lapatoura, 2025). However, the practice of sustainability leadership is not uniform across contexts; socio-political environments, cultural norms, and individual identities deeply shape it. It is shaped by context, culture, and lived experience. Women leaders from the Global South often find themselves at the nexus of multiple challenges (Donkor & Mazumder, 2021; Shinbrot et al., 2019; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Operating in settings marked by limited resources, entrenched patriarchal systems, and geopolitical marginalization, they must navigate a complex web of technical, institutional, and cultural barriers (Lashkari, 2022). These conditions actively shape leadership choices. They restrict formal authority and demand adaptive responses. Despite these constraints, many leaders are pioneering innovative strategies that not only confront local challenges but also align with global sustainability goals, including the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Shahizan et al., 2021; The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) & World Health Organization, 2019; Shinbrot et al., 2019; Faugoo, 2024; Moallemi et al., 2020).

This article examines the lived experience of a woman library leader from the Global South working in Iranian higher education. It traces a leadership journey over time. It highlights moments of change, resistance, and adaptation. It interrogates the structural and normative obstacles met and highlights the adaptive leadership strategies employed to overcome them. By weaving together personal narrative and theoretical insight, this study aims to illuminate the unique contributions of female leadership in contexts often overlooked in mainstream sustainability literature.

The central questions guiding this inquiry are:

- How can sustainability leadership flourish under resource constraints and cultural resistance?
- In what ways do gender and geopolitical positioning influence leadership strategies?
- What lessons can be drawn for empowering marginalized leaders in the pursuit of global sustainability?

Through this examination, the article contributes to research on inclusive leadership. It offers grounded insights rather than universal claims. The study positions lived experience as a source of knowledge. It argues that leadership narratives from the Global South are essential for sustainable futures in library and information institutions.

Literature Review

Foundations of Sustainability Leadership

Sustainability leadership has been conceptualized as a transformative approach that integrates ecological responsibility, social equity, and long-term economic viability into leadership practice (Wiek et al., 2011; Visser & Courtice, 2011). Sustainability

leadership is increasingly viewed as a multidimensional practice involving ethical, systemic, and stakeholder-focused leadership aimed at addressing environmental, economic, and social challenges. Boeske (2023) conducted a comparative analysis of sustainable, sustainability, and environmental leadership frameworks and proposed an integrated behavioral model to guide organizational transitions toward sustainability. This approach aligns with Sajjad et al. (2024), who developed a multilevel sustainability leadership framework connecting individual traits, organizational strategies, and societal impact through the lens of systems theory. Piwowar-Sulej and Iqbal (2023) provided a systematic review showing strong links between sustainability-oriented leadership styles and sustainable performance metrics, although empirical consensus is still lacking. Their work highlights the importance of leadership agility in navigating environmental and ethical complexity.

Higher Education and the SDG Agenda

Leadership within higher education institutions play a crucial role in advancing the SDGs. Ghasemy et al. (2023) highlights that faculty leadership and institutional transparency are key determinants in how sustainability is embedded across curricula and campus operations. Their comparative study spanning Japan, Malaysia, and global institutions emphasizes the importance of context-specific leadership development and gender-responsive frameworks. Supporting this view, Abo-Khalil (2024) shows how universities in the United Arab Emirates have strategically aligned their educational practices with the SDGs. Utilizing tools such as the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings, institutions have successfully integrated sustainability values into both faculty initiatives and student engagement. His findings reinforce the necessity of interdisciplinary collaboration and active faculty involvement in promoting transformative, SDG-aligned education.

Despite a growing rhetorical commitment to sustainability, university leaders lack the training and institutional support needed to implement these goals effectively. Wright and Horst (2013), along with Aung and Hallinger (2022), underscore this gap between conceptual endorsement and practical implementation. Their research points to the urgent need for capacity-building at multiple levels of university governance.

Expanding on this, Aung and Hallinger (2023) propose a comprehensive model of sustainability leadership in higher education. This model illustrates how reorienting institutional missions and strengthening stakeholder engagement can transform university practices. Sustainability leadership, as they argue, not only enhances performance indicators but also contributes to long-term institutional and societal resilience.

Gender and Leadership: Barriers and Transformations

Gender and cultural norms play a pivotal role in shaping how sustainability leadership is conceptualized and practiced. Leal Filho et al. (2020) highlight that, despite increasing global interest in sustainability, gender equity in leadership stays underdeveloped, with limited institutional mechanisms to support and advance women in sustainability-

focused roles. Burns et al. (2015) similarly emphasize the importance of leadership development grounded in identity, critical reflection, and collaborative engagement, particularly in environments where rigid hierarchies and entrenched gender norms persist.

In the Global South, leadership practices are often molded by the historical legacies of colonialism, economic dependency, and fragile institutional infrastructures (Wickramasinghe et al., 2023). Within these contexts, leaders are expected to achieve results amidst scarcity while simultaneously navigating complex social norms, bureaucratic inertia, and external geopolitical pressures such as international sanctions and aid conditionalities. Women leaders face challenges, especially in male-dominated sectors. They often meet a “double bind”, pressured to show both assertiveness and emotional sensitivity while being judged against dominant, masculine paradigms of leadership (Hermosura & Bourgeault, 2024; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). These tensions are often magnified in Global South contexts, where cultural and religious traditions reinforce gendered divisions of labor and decision-making authority (Nguyen et al., 2023; Jali et al., 2021).

Empirical research suggests that women leaders often emphasize sustainability, community well-being, and long-term resilience more than their male counterparts; however, such tendencies should be understood within context and not overgeneralized (Drolet et al., 2015). Despite these contributions, most empirical studies on gender and sustainability leadership focus predominantly on women in high-income countries, leaving the narratives, strategies, and agency of women in under-resourced and culturally complex environments underexplored.

Inclusive and Transformational Leadership Frameworks

Inclusive leadership centered on values of diversity, equity, and participation has been recognized as vital to sustainability outcomes (Jayashree et al., 2022; Fujimoto et al., 2024). Theoretical models such as transformational leadership (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004; Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016), adaptive leadership (DeRue, 2011), and distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011) offer useful tools for analyzing how change agents work across systems and hierarchies. These models are especially relevant in contexts where formal authority may be limited, but influence can be exercised through collaboration and vision. Still, their application in the Global South and particularly among women leaders requires contextual adaptation. Scholars call for a decolonization of leadership theory, advocating for frameworks that incorporate lived realities, hybrid identities, and power asymmetries (Bhattacharyya, 2020; Kolk, 2016).

Emerging Conceptual Syntheses and Future Pathways

Sustainability leadership continues to evolve as a field. Sajjad et al. (2024) proposed integrating paradox theory and systems thinking to resolve the tensions between micro-level leadership traits and macro-level societal outcomes. Meanwhile, Visser and Courtice (2011) emphasized the contextual, behavioral, and systems-based qualities

needed for sustainability leadership, offering one of the earliest models that blends corporate leadership with social transformation goals.

The need for future research to unify fragmented theories, expand gender-sensitive models, and increase empirical testing in non-Western contexts stays urgent. As Widmer et al. (2015) highlighted, cross-national collaboration and intercultural leadership learning are critical to overcoming the global leadership gap in sustainability. While existing literature offers valuable theoretical models and insights on sustainability, gender, and leadership, a notable gap persists in capturing the lived experiences of female leaders from the Global South. Few studies critically examine how such leaders navigate intersecting systems of oppression, draw upon local knowledge, and creatively respond to structural limitations. This article seeks to fill this gap by presenting an in-depth, context-rich account of one woman's leadership journey in a Global South setting, contributing both empirical evidence and theoretical reflection to the evolving discourse on inclusive sustainability leadership.

Methods

The study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in narrative inquiry and autoethnography (Trahar, 2009; Hamilton et al., 2008; Smith, 2017). These approaches are well-suited to exploring lived experiences within complex socio-political environments, particularly when the aim is to capture the subjective, situated, and relational aspects of leadership (Mythen, 2023). It prioritizes how leadership is practiced, not only how it is theorized. By weaving together personal narratives with broader theoretical and cultural insights, the study provides a rich, contextualized understanding of sustainability leadership from the perspective of a woman in the Global South (Balabantaray, 2023). Narrative inquiry allows for the exploration of meaning-making through storytelling, which is especially powerful in revealing how individuals construct their identities, strategize under constraints, and reflect on change. Autoethnography further emphasizes the reflexive role of the researcher-participant, acknowledging that personal experiences are embedded in broader systems of power, culture, and resistance (Willig et al., 2017).

The primary data for this study were derived from the author's own lived experience as a female sustainability leader operating in a resource-constrained, male-dominated context in the Global South. Other data sources included project records, reflective field notes, and records of collaborative meetings. These materials supported analytic depth and reduced reliance on memory alone. They also allowed closer examination of specific leadership interventions. The data were analyzed thematically using an intersectional feminist lens (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). and informed by systems thinking and transformational leadership theory (Ayoubi et al., 2015; Mugadza & Marcus, 2019). The analysis focused on naming recurring patterns related to:

- Structural and cultural barriers faced in leadership.

- Strategic adaptations and innovations in practice.
- Intersections of gender, culture, and geopolitics.
- Contributions to sustainability and social equity goals.

Key themes were iteratively developed through coding and critical reflection, ensuring alignment between personal experience and theoretical constructs. Reflexivity was supported throughout to critically assess the researcher’s positionality, privilege, and assumptions. As an autoethnographic study, ethical considerations included supporting integrity, confidentiality (where relevant), and respect for collaborators and communities involved in the sustainability projects described (Lapadat, 2017; Lee, 2018). Finding details of institutions or individuals have been anonymized or generalized where necessary, and the narrative intentionally centers shared insights over personal promotion (Burles & Bally, 2018). The author acknowledges the subjective nature of the account and positions as one lens among valid experiences of leadership in the Global South.

Results

Navigating the Landscape of Barriers

This section presents key findings based on the author’s professional journey as a woman library leader in Iran, analyzed through the intersecting frameworks of sustainability leadership, gender studies, and development discourses relevant to the Global South. The insights are thematically organized into four interconnected domains: structural barriers, sociocultural constraints, innovation and adaptation, and identity-informed leadership.

Structural and Institutional Barriers

Sustainability leadership in the Global South is often exercised within environments characterized by systemic constraints, most notably limited resources, fragile institutional support, and inconsistent policy implementation (Abouzeid et al., 2022). Within the Iranian higher education landscape (Hamidifar & Ebrahimi, 2016; Nazarzadeh Zare et al., 2018), these barriers are not abstract; they define the everyday realities of library leadership. Drawing from direct experience, three interrelated institutional challenges stand out: resource scarcity, bureaucratic resistance, and policy–practice misalignment (Table 1).

Table 1

Structural and Institutional Barriers.

Barrier	Description	Strategic Responses	Innovations
Resource Scarcity	Chronic underfunding and sanctions restrict	Develop open-access repositories;	Host international webinars;

	access to digital tools and training.	foster inter-university partnerships; involve students.	student-led digitization.
Bureaucratic Resistance	Hierarchical systems and rigid policies slow down gender-responsive or SDG-aligned reforms.	Use informal networks; pilot impactful projects.	Small-scale interventions with visible results.
Policy–Practice Misalignment	The policy mentions SDGs, but implementation lags due to outdated systems.	Translate policy into local plans; use data-driven advocacy.	Faculty collaboration on scalable, compliant services.

Resource scarcity stands as a persistent and structuring constraint on the modernization of library systems in Iranian universities (Rezazadeh et al., 2019; Fazeli & Attarzadeh, 2024). Chronic underfunding, further intensified by international sanctions (Kokabisaghi et al., 2019; Mehrabi, 2014) and restricted access to global knowledge infrastructures have limited libraries' ability to update digital collections, implement modern cataloging systems, and provide sustained professional training. These constraints are not episodic challenges but enduring structural conditions that shape what leadership can realistically conduct, and how progress must be negotiated rather than assumed.

The author's leadership experience developed within conditions of significant resource constraints in a university library. Limited access to scholarly resources affected faculty research and graduate education and required incremental approaches to addressing immediate needs. Rather than pursuing comprehensive solutions that were not financially possible, the author expanded participation in interlibrary loan networks and negotiated with a private information provider to obtain limited database access through a low-cost contractual arrangement. Although the resulting access was partial, these measures addressed specific research needs and proved how targeted interventions could extend access within existing resource constraints. This experience contributed to a conceptualization of sustainability as keeping continuity of access and services under conditions of constraint rather than as the achievement of resource adequacy.

Inter-university collaboration later became an important component of the author's leadership practice. Sharing training opportunities, digital services, and institutional capabilities with peer institutions reduced duplication and expanded access without

requiring substantial added funding. The author's involvement in international professional organizations also created opportunities to extend access to professional knowledge and ability. Through these networks, international experts were invited to take part in online events, reducing some of the financial and geographic barriers associated with professional exchange. Over time, the author organized and moderated more than thirty webinars and panel discussions, primarily addressing the professional development and empowerment of public and academic librarians at the national level.

Other initiatives included a short interview series on entrepreneurship and libraries and summer schools featuring international speakers. In several events, the author provided live interpretation to ease linguistic and cultural accessibility. These activities required relatively limited financial resources but depended on sustained relational work, including coordination, trust, reciprocity, and professional networks. Collectively, these experiences suggest that sustainability in resource-constrained environments may depend not only on financial resources but also on the capacity to develop and keep collaborative professional networks and to use existing resources strategically.

Together, these practices illustrate how frugal innovation unfolded not as a single intervention but as an iterative leadership process, shaped by trial, feedback, and adaptation. Scarcity did not merely restrict action; it actively redirected leadership toward participatory, low-cost, and globally connected strategies. Over time, these approaches strengthened institutional self-reliance and sustained professional engagement despite persistent constraints. Bureaucratic resistance further complicated efforts to implement progressive and sustainability-oriented initiatives (Mojarad et al., 2020), particularly those led by women. Traditional hierarchical governance structures and rigid administrative procedures often slowed or obstructed initiatives such as gender-responsive services or SDG-aligned reforms (Hill & Lynn, 2004). These barriers were rarely explicit. Resistance was enacted through delay rather than denial.

In the author's experience, proposals were rarely rejected explicitly; instead, they were often deferred or left unresolved. When the author proposed an information literacy training program for graduate students, implementation remained pending for an extended period. Meetings were repeatedly deferred, and correspondence accumulated without substantive responses. This pattern of nonresponse can be understood as a form of institutional resistance, particularly when the absence of an explicit decision prevents an initiative from moving forward. Rather than abandoning the proposal, the author reframed the initiative in relation to existing institutional priorities. The proposed program was presented in terms of its potential to improve the quality of research proposals, strengthen students' academic skills, enhance library services, and contribute to student satisfaction and institutional reputation.

The author also began with small-scale, low-risk activities that needed minimal formal approval. Initial workshops were piloted, early outcomes were shared informally with faculty, and observable benefits were documented. These activities created

opportunities to prove the value of the initiative before seeking broader institutional commitment. Over time, the accumulation of evidence and the development of internal relationships contributed to greater institutional support for inclusive and sustainability-oriented initiatives. This experience shifted the author's approach to leadership from seeking formal approval at the outset toward building evidence, relationships, and incremental support within bureaucratic systems.

Policy–practice misalignment stands for another structural barrier to institutional change (Heine, 2024). Although national higher education policies increasingly reference the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and digital transformation, policy ambitions may not be accompanied by the operational capacity needed for implementation within academic libraries. Outdated procurement procedures, infrastructural limitations, and weak monitoring mechanisms can constrain the translation of policy goals into practice. Within this context, the author functioned as an institutional translator, connecting policy discourse with the practical realities of library work across national and international professional settings. Through data-informed advocacy, collaboration with faculty and international colleagues, and iterative planning, library initiatives were connected to institutional priorities while staying responsive to community needs. This process helped translate broad strategic goals into initiatives that were more visible, defensible, and actionable within the institution.

Narrating these experiences serves not only a reflective but also a methodological purpose. Storytelling provides a means of examining how leadership develops through encounters with institutional constraints, resistance, and adaptation. It also makes visible forms of relational and organizational labor that may otherwise remain undocumented. By tracing specific moments of adaptation, resistance, and recalibration, this autoethnographic account illustrates how sustainable leadership can appear through situated practice rather than through predetermined prescriptions. In this context, leadership involves navigating structural limitations, developing incremental responses, and creating conditions through which institutional and cultural change can gradually occur.

Sociocultural and Gendered Norms

In addition to institutional barriers, sociocultural dynamics exert a profound influence on how women enact and sustain leadership in the context of the Global South (Nguyen et al., 2023). For the author, as for women leaders in Iran, the leadership journey unfolds within a complex web of traditional expectations, gendered hierarchies, and cultural scripts that define who is seen as legitimate and authoritative. These norms, though often implicit, shape access to power, limit recognition, and generate continuous pressures to conform to roles historically reserved for men (Table 2).

Table 2*Sociocultural and Gendered Norms.*

Constraint	Description	Strategic Responses	Innovations
Patriarchal Leadership Structures	Leadership seen through masculine traits, sidelining women.	Build mentorship networks; use participatory leadership.	Form international alliances to amplify credibility.
Role Conflict	Women are expected to prioritize family over leadership roles.	Model flexible leadership; promote work-life balance.	Pilot hybrid/part-time leadership models.
Social Legitimacy & Cultural Resistance	Women's authority often questioned; legitimacy undermined.	Use culturally resonant storytelling; involve stakeholders.	Establish community advisory boards.

Within Iranian academic institutions, leadership has often been shaped by long-standing organizational norms that tend to prioritize assertiveness, formal authority, and hierarchical decision-making. While these norms are not inherently exclusionary, they can create environments in which collaborative and relational leadership styles more often associated with women leaders are less readily recognized or valued. As a result, women library managers may find that their leadership capacities require ongoing demonstration rather than being assumed from position alone. Through the author's membership in international associations, the author has engaged in global collaborations, assumed leadership roles (The Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) and mentored PhD scholars through the ASIS&T research wing. These experiences have led the author to adopt strategic, relational leadership approaches that emphasize inclusion and collaboration, challenging gendered assumptions and contributing to greater recognition of women's authority in Iranian academic settings.

Cultural expectations also impose role conflicts, particularly around the perceived incompatibility between professional ambition and familial obligations (Baker, 2010). Traditional norms in Iran often place the burden of caregiving squarely on women (Yoosefi Lebni et al., 2020), creating other emotional and logistical challenges for those in leadership roles. In the face of such expectations, the authors have modeled flexible and empathetic leadership by crafting narratives grounded in service, education, and community care. By championing work-life balance and inclusive decision-making, the author reconciles societal expectations with professional goals and shows that

leadership can be both culturally rooted and transformative. The author has also piloted hybrid and part-time leadership practices, embedding adaptability and inclusivity within academic leadership structures.

Women in leadership often meet skepticism or resistance stemming from socially constructed notions of legitimacy. Their decisions may be questioned more readily, their authority undermined, and their presence in public forums viewed as exceptional rather than standard. To address this, the author draws on culturally attuned strategies rooted in local values and collective identities. Through storytelling, aligning initiatives with respected traditions, and engaging community stakeholders, the author narrates her leadership in ways that cultivate legitimacy. As these narratives translate into visible outcomes, such as stronger community engagement, improved literacy initiatives, and successful research collaborations, the author's personal credibility grows alongside broader acceptance of inclusive leadership.

Innovation and Strategic Adaptation

Navigating the layered challenges of institutional rigidity, chronic underfunding, and socio-political constraints needed more than perseverance; it demanded innovation born of necessity (Moallemi et al., 2020). Within such a constrained environment, conventional leadership models often reliant on top-down decision-making and formalized planning proved insufficient (Table 3).

Table 3

Innovation and Strategic Adaptation.

Innovation Area	Description	Strategic Practices	Examples
Frugal Innovation	Sustain services under funding constraints.	Repurpose equipment, use open-source tools; involve students.	Refurbishment and reuse program for legacy computers and devices
Local and Indigenous Knowledge	Promote Iran's intellectual heritage.	Indigenous Community Projects.	Indigenous Agricultural and Craft Collaboration.
Iterative Learning	Adapt services based on feedback and changing needs.	Pilot programs, adjust based on feedback; document learning.	Refine digital literacy workshops regularly.

The author's leadership journey has unfolded through continuous adaptation, in which creativity, responsiveness, and context-sensitive improvisation became important for sustaining library services under resource constraints. In response to persistent economic limitations, the author adopted frugal innovation as a practical strategy for keeping core library functions. This included repurposing existing equipment, using

open-source tools, and involving students in aspects of service delivery. One example was the refurbishment and reuse of legacy computers and other devices, which helped support access to digital services while also providing opportunities for students to develop practical skills and take part in the stewardship of shared resources.

Beyond technical adaptation, the author's research has focused on recognizing and supporting local and Indigenous knowledge as an important dimension of library and information practice. In a context in which Iran's regional identities and Indigenous knowledge systems may be underrepresented in formal academic settings, the author took part in community-based projects that approached research as a process of knowledge exchange and co-creation rather than solely as documentation. Collaborations with Indigenous farmers and women involved in handicrafts supported the documentation and exchange of agricultural and craft knowledge. These activities also created opportunities to connect community knowledge with formal information systems, contributing to cultural continuity and reinforcing the role of the library as a socially embedded institution. Such practices are consistent with broader approaches to sustainability, cultural preservation, and inclusive knowledge ecosystems (Thorpe & Gunton, 2022; Ghasemy et al., 2023; Missingham, 2021).

Iterative learning stands for another part of the author's leadership practice. Rather than treating library services as fixed or universally applicable, the author has used piloting, participant feedback, and ongoing adjustment to respond to changing needs. For example, digital literacy workshops (Seifi, 2026) were changed in response to participant feedback and documented learning outcomes. This iterative approach allowed programs to be adjusted as needs appeared and created opportunities for reflection and continuous improvement. Lessons from these initiatives were after documented and shared through professional networks, extending their potential influence beyond individual interventions.

Within this context, innovation can be understood not simply as an enhancement to existing services but as a response to institutional and resource constraints. Frugal innovation, engagement with Indigenous and community knowledge, and iterative learning represent complementary strategies for adapting library practices to local circumstances. Together, these practices illustrate how context-sensitive leadership can contribute to institutional resilience while addressing broader concerns related to equity, cultural preservation, and sustainable development.

Identity-Informed Leadership Practices

Leadership, particularly in the Global South, is inherently shaped by the personal and social identities of those who undertake it (Nguyen et al., 2023). For women in such contexts, leadership is not merely a role or function; it is a negotiation of multiple, intersecting identities, including gender, class, ethnicity, and professional background. Identity-informed leadership practices (Table 4).

Table 4
Identity-Informed Leadership Practices.

Leadership Dimension	Description	Strategic Practices	Innovations
Intersectional Awareness	Recognize overlapping identities in leadership.	Conduct equity audits; tailor services inclusively.	'Library for All' initiative.
Ethical Leadership	Uphold fairness and responsibility through inclusive and time-intensive leadership practices.	Dedicate time to listening, consultation, and inclusive participation; ensure transparency in decision-making.	Time-allocated listening sessions with underrepresented user groups.
Authentic Leadership	Lead with honesty and vulnerability.	Practice reflexive leadership; model transparency and trust.	Storytelling-based leadership and reflective practice sessions.

In the author's leadership experience, identity and lived experience provided an important foundation for understanding institutional relationships, community needs, and questions of equity. Rather than treating leadership as adherence to a single dominant model, the author drew on her positionality and experiences to inform practices centered on empathy, reflexivity, and ethical responsibility. This approach shaped how institutional challenges were interpreted and how decisions concerning services, resources, and community engagement were approached.

A central dimension of this practice was intersectional awareness—the recognition that overlapping social identities can shape access, participation, and experiences of power within institutional settings. The author incorporated equity considerations into aspects of everyday leadership, including service design and community engagement. This included conducting equity audits, consulting with marginalized user groups, and adapting services to reflect cultural and gender diversity. The *Library for All* initiative appeared from these efforts, with accessibility, representation, and inclusion incorporated into the development of both physical and digital library spaces.

Ethical considerations also shaped the author's approach to decision-making, particularly in contexts where formal accountability mechanisms were limited or inconsistently applied. Resource allocation, institutional constraints, and competing stakeholder expectations presented recurring challenges that needed consideration of multiple perspectives. In response, the author emphasized consultation, open dialogue, and transparency rather than relying solely on expedient decisions. Time-allocated listening sessions with underrepresented user groups offered a structured mechanism

for incorporating perspectives that might otherwise have been overlooked. These practices created opportunities for dialogue and greater transparency in decision-making while connecting everyday library operations with broader principles of fairness and sustainability.

Authentic leadership stood for another dimension of this practice, particularly through transparency, reflexivity, and the development of relational trust. The author shared challenges and uncertainties while keeping accountability for decisions and responsibilities associated with her role. These practices were reflected in team interactions and in opportunities for staff to take part in reflective discussions about institutional challenges. Storytelling became one mechanism through which leadership values and experiences could be articulated and connected to collective organizational concerns. Storytelling-based leadership activities and reflective practice sessions created spaces for dialogue in which staff could contribute their perspectives and examine challenges collectively. Such practices also provided opportunities to foster environments in which differing viewpoints could be expressed and considered.

Overall, identity-informed leadership in this context can be understood as a deliberate practice through which positionality, lived experience, and culturally situated values informed approaches to equity, ethical decision-making, and organizational relationships. Rather than functioning as a fixed leadership characteristic, identity shaped how the author interpreted institutional challenges and responded to the needs of diverse communities. The experiences described here illustrate how intersectional awareness, ethical responsibility, and authentic engagement can inform leadership practices that contribute to more inclusive and resilient institutional cultures while supporting broader goals of social justice and sustainable development.

Discussion

Operating with limited authority shaped the author's understanding of sustainability leadership as adaptive rather than positional. Rather than pursuing large-scale reforms that were unlikely to be approved, the author learned to start small, low-risk interventions that aligned with institutional priorities such as service quality, student outcomes, and organizational reputation. Early results were shared informally with faculty and administrators, allowing evidence to build credibility over time. This approach transformed resistance into cautious support and proved how leadership can function effectively within bureaucratic systems while gradually extending their limits.

Over time, the author's leadership expanded beyond institutional boundaries into national and international professional spaces, largely out of necessity (Seifi, 2025). This initiative relied on distributed leadership, professional goodwill, and shared responsibility rather than formal authority or substantial funding. The experience reinforced sustainability leadership principles centered on collaboration, adaptability,

and long-term capacity building. Engagement with international organizations further reshaped the author's leadership practice. These spaces functioned as learning ecosystems rather than representational platforms. Locally developed, frugal innovations such as student-led digitization projects, digital literacy workshops, and community-based initiatives were shared, discussed, and refined through peer feedback. This iterative process highlighted that sustainable leadership is not linear or replicative; it is cumulative and context sensitive. What proved effective was not wholesale adoption of external models, but selective adaptation grounded in local realities.

Student-led digitization initiatives, community engagement programs, and multicultural services became sites of experimentation rather than fixed solutions. Each project informed later efforts, revealing gaps, opportunities, and unintended consequences. Through this progression, the author's leadership practice evolved from managing scarcity to cultivating networks. Sustainability was no longer understood as endurance alone, but as the ability to mobilize relationships, knowledge exchange, and collective learning under constraint.

The leadership narrative presented here shows how women in the Global South exercise sustainability leadership in environments marked by structural scarcity, sociocultural resistance, and policy–practice misalignment. Rather than relying on leadership models rooted in institutional privilege or resource abundance, this form of leadership is relational, adaptive, and ethically grounded. The findings show that meaningful institutional change is possible even within rigid structures when leaders strategically combine incremental action, evidence-based advocacy, and inclusive values.

These practices align with multiple Sustainable Development Goals (Faugoo, 2024; ESCAP & World Health Organization, 2019). Contributions to SDG 4 (Quality Education) are clear in expanded access to learning resources through digital literacy initiatives and student-led digitization. SDG 5 (Gender Equality) is advanced through flexible leadership models, mentorship, and the reframing of authority beyond masculinized norms (Ghasemy et al., 2023). An intersectional approach to governance supports SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by addressing barriers faced by underrepresented groups, while efforts to preserve Indigenous and local knowledge through archives and community collaboration align with SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Ethical governance practices and participatory decision-making further contribute to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Importantly, this discussion underscores the need to reconcile global sustainability frameworks with local institutional and cultural conditions (Shahizan et al., 2021; Missingham, 2011; Thorpe & Gunton, 2022). The SDGs cannot be implemented as uniform templates; they require translation, prioritization, and reinterpretation in contexts shaped by constraint and complexity (Hamidifar & Ebrahimi, 2016). Women library

leaders in Iran prove how this translation occurs in practice by integrating global aspirations with local values, professional norms, and community needs.

Conclusion

This study has examined sustainability leadership as it is practiced under conditions of limited authority, resource scarcity, and sociocultural constraint within Iranian higher education. Through an autoethnographic lens, it shows that leadership in such contexts, particularly for women, is rarely linear or formally sanctioned. Instead, it unfolds through adaptive, relational, and often subtle practices that enable change from within institutional limits. The author's experience shows that sustainable leadership is not contingent on positional power or resource abundance, but on the capacity to act strategically, ethically, and persistently within constrained environments.

A central conclusion of this study is that sustainability leadership in under-resourced settings cannot rely on imported models alone. Global frameworks and sustainability agendas require translation into locally practical practices. In practice, this translation occurred through frugal innovation, incremental program design, and strategic alignment with institutional priorities. Concrete examples such as student-led digitization projects, low-cost digital access solutions, participatory ethics initiatives, and inter-institutional collaboration illustrate how leaders can start meaningful change without formal authority. These interventions did not function as isolated successes, but as iterative processes through which learning, credibility, and institutional support gradually accumulated.

The findings also highlight the value of identity-informed leadership. Rather than viewing gendered and cultural positioning as obstacles, this study shows how intersecting identities can inform more inclusive, ethical, and socially responsive leadership practices. By drawing on lived experience, relational awareness, and cultural fluency, the author was able to negotiate resistance, build trust, and design initiatives that resonated with both institutional goals and community needs. Leadership, in this sense, appears not as command but as stewardship shaped through reflection, accountability, and collaboration.

Importantly, the study shows that institutional transformation is often incremental rather than dramatic. Change was achieved through small, visible actions; careful documentation of outcomes; informal coalition-building; and the strategic use of storytelling to legitimize alternative leadership approaches. These practices collectively shifted organizational norms over time. Such findings are especially relevant for leaders who run with "little power" and must rely on influence, evidence, and relationships to advance change.

Taken together, the leadership practices named in this study offer a practical blueprint for sustainable adaptation: start with low-risk initiatives, align them with institutional

priorities, use professional networks, iterate based on feedback, and ground leadership in ethical and cultural awareness. While the empirical context is Iranian higher education, the strategies outlined here apply to academic and special library leaders globally, across genders and institutional types, who work in environments marked by constraint, resistance, or limited autonomy.

In reframing leadership away from visibility, authority, and resource control, this study contributes to a more grounded understanding of sustainability leadership. It affirms that meaningful and lasting change is often generated through quiet persistence, collective learning, and value-driven practice. Such leadership not only advances institutional sustainability but also expands the possibilities for more fair and inclusive futures within higher education and beyond.

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