



Received: 26 December 2024

Revised: 13 January 2025

Accepted: 16 January 2025

# IMPACTS OF FEMALE SERVANT LEADERSHIP ON EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: A CASE OF EMPLOYEES IN PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ZHENGZHOU, HENAN, CHINA

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Professor Dr. Wing-Keung WONG Asia University, Taiwan  
(This article belongs to the Theme 1: Business & Economic in Industry 5.0)

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## Abstract

This study examines the impact of female servant leadership characteristics on leadership competency, to study the impact of female leadership competency on employee engagement, and to study the impacts of female servant leadership characteristics on employee engagement. The study is a mixed method research design composed of quantitative and a main study and qualitative research to confirm the results—the semi-structured questionnaire collected data from 422 employees in private higher education institutions in Zhengzhou, China. Descriptive statistics and multiple regression were used to analyze variables and test hypotheses, while content analysis was employed to analyze qualitative data and confirm the results of the quantitative analysis. The results from the study revealed that female leaders with servant leadership styles were most interested in employees' career progress at a very high level. Regarding female leadership competency, the results indicated that female leaders represented building relationship dimension the most at a very high level, and the results indicated that under female servant leadership, the employees presented emotional engagement the most. The results from multiple regression analysis revealed that female leaders with servant leadership characteristics had a significant positive impact on leadership competency in private higher education institutions. Leadership competency significantly mediated the relationship between female servant leadership and employee engagement. Finally, female leaders with servant leadership characteristics significantly positively impacted employee engagement.

**Keywords:** Employee Engagement, Female Leader, Leadership Competency

**Citation Information:** Ren, Y., & Bunchapattanasakda, C. (2025). Impacts of Female Servant Leadership on Employee Engagement: A Case of Employees in Private Higher Education Institutions in Zhengzhou, Henan, China. *Asian Administration and Management Review*, 8(1), Article 10. <https://doi.org/10.14456/aamr.2025.10>

## Introduction

Currently, many private higher education institutions in China have females to function as higher-level managers or even executives. There has been a significant change from the past when men were primarily in charge of managerial roles. However, even with more females in managerial positions, many things are still behind (regardless of tradition or corporate culture). While the global academic narrative increasingly points towards the positive consequences of female leadership, especially in raising a culture of strong employee engagement, it remains to be discerned if this narrative seamlessly aligns with the realities of China's advanced cities. Global discourse often lauds many women's unique leadership attributes, including empathy, collaboration, and a more holistic approach. These attributes are frequently linked to elevated levels of employee engagement, fostering environments where academia can thrive in its truest sense. The applicability of global insights to the specific landscape of Zhengzhou remains a subject of considerable debate. Several factors warrant close examination when attempting to transpose generalized perspectives onto a locale distinguished by its unique social, cultural, and economic fabric. Thus, it is prudent to approach the task of such mapping with a level of circumspection that accounts for these particularities.

Zhengzhou is one of China's fastest economic and social development cities, with an estimated population of 12 million. It stands at the crossroads of time where ancient customs and traditions synchronize with modern buildings. While the city is speedy to adopt global modernity, it remains tied to deeply rooted Chinese traditions, especially regarding people's perceptions of gender and leadership. This cultural perception is that female leaders in organizations work freely but might uniquely transmit their leadership skills and competency to engage and motivate their employees. To investigate this issue deeper, this study uses Zhengzhou City as a case study to explore the complicated interaction between female leadership, particularly servant leadership style, and employee engagement in private higher educational institutions. The study digs deeper into female servant leadership's efficiency and examines whether female leaders' leadership competency impacts employee engagement.

## Literature Reviews

Fucharoen et al. (2017) found an increasing number of successful female executives, which enhances the number of female executives in higher education in Thailand. Servant leadership helps employees work to improve and achieve common goals, while employee skills and work experience motivate employees to achieve their company's goals (Page & Wong, 2000). Few studies have examined the relationship between female servant leadership and leadership competency. A servant leader applies courage and altruism to set, translate, and execute a compelling vision for the benefit of employees, the organization, and society (Coetzer et al., 2017; Cheewakoset et al., 2024). Effective leadership plays a pivotal role, as engaged employees often have leaders who inspire trust, provide clear direction, and foster a positive work culture. Melchar and Bosco (2010) indicate that servant leaders can develop a culture of followers who are servant leaders themselves. Gorenak and Ferjan (2015) indicate that organizational values strongly influence managers' competencies. This study, thus, hypothesized as follows:

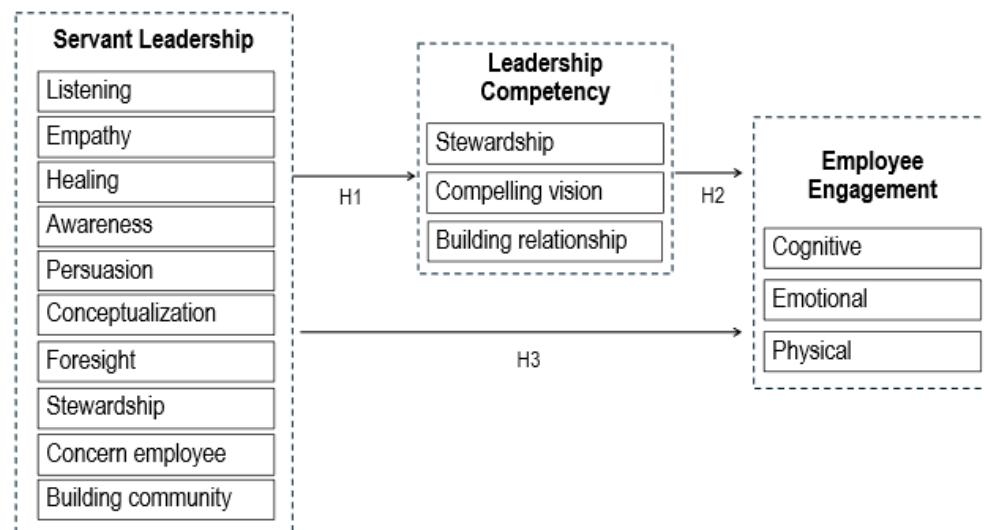
H1: Female servant leadership characteristics have a significant impact on leadership competency.

Servant leaders think beyond day-to-day realities and dream great things for the organization. Casting visions is critical to leaders because dreams are the institution's road map to the future. Abun et al. (2023) found a significant positive correlation between the managers' competencies and employee engagement, and improving leadership competencies would enhance employees' work engagement. Stroud (2009) indicates that the leadership competencies of senior leaders (from the perspectives of the direct report and combined rater sources) have significant

relationships with the engagement of employees. Sulantara et al. (2020) find that leadership competence positively and significantly affects employee performance. Bandura (2001), as a result, shows a higher degree of engagement. This study, thus, hypothesized as follows:  
H2: A significant relationship exists between female leadership competency and employee engagement.

Kahn wrote a paper called “Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagements” in 1990, testing the hypothesis that employees’ physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement at work influences their work experience and job outcomes (Kahn, 1990). Sudbrink (n.d.) supported the idea that engaging employees with cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement helps them feel more secure and confident in their roles, feel that their work is valuable and meaningful, and feel more valued and supported mentally and physically. It also provides employees’ awareness of their goals and a clear understanding of their job, expectations, and role in the organization’s success. Thus, the study hypothesized that:

H3: A significant relationship exists between female servant leadership characteristics and employees’ cognition engagement.



**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework

## Research Methodology

This study is mixed methodology research composed of both quantitative as the primary research method and qualitative as a support method to confirm the results from the quantitative. The study collected data from primary data sources using a survey questionnaire for quantitative study and an interview approach for qualitative study. The population in this study comprises employees over 20 years old who are currently working in private higher education institutions in Zhengzhou City, Henan Province, China. There are either official or non-official numbers of such employees publicly released anywhere. Thus, the number is recognized as an unknown population. In this case, the author implies that the number of employees working in the city's private higher education institutions should be more than 10,000. Therefore, the author determines the sample size in this research study using Cochran's determinant of sample size (Cochran, 1977) using a sampling error of 5 percent or .05 according to the Calculation formula as follows by setting the expected deviation equal to 0.05. Used to compute an ideal sample size for a desired level of precision, it is recommended to be used for studies with infinite populations (Cochran, 1977).

Where  $e$  is the desired level of precision and the margin of error,  $p$  is the fraction of the population (percentage) that displays the attribute, and  $z$  is the z-value, this study applies  $z = 1.96$ . (Consider a 95% confidence level (leading to an alpha = 0.05) and a 5% precision. Therefore, the sample group of employees is 385, but the author adds 10 % for the more precise results to 422 samples.

This study employs the mixed methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected to identify how female servant leadership and leadership competencies influence the engagement of employees working in private higher education institutions in Zhengzhou City, China. Mixed methods research is the type of research that combines the principal approaches of qualitative and quantitative research (Chou, 2014). Using mixed methodology will make the data collection process more effective for the wide and depth of the data.

For the quantitative study, the author develops a semi-structured survey questionnaire based on the concepts, theories, and past research, then conducts a pilot test with 30 samples. First, the questionnaire is required to go through the Item Objective Congruence (IOC) process by three experts. Then, the questionnaires are distributed to the samples. For the qualitative study, the author developed the questions for interviews, the content of which was analyzed following the research questions and objectives. Quantitative research is to test the variables and test the hypothesis, while qualitative results confirm the results from quantitative research. The author input obtained data from the questionnaire into a statistical analysis software program. For quantitative research, descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean ( $\bar{X}$ ) and stand deviation (S.D.) is employed to analyze and describe demographic profile data and the respondents' behavior—one-way ANOVA, multiple regressions test variables, and the research hypothesis. For qualitative research, the author applies a content analysis approach to analyze the qualitative data obtained from the participants.

## Research Results

### Demographic Characteristics

It could be concluded that most of the respondents are female (56.9 percent), aged between 31 and 35 (30.8 percent), hold bachelor's degrees (36.7 percent), are married (63.7 percent), are position-level officers or staff (57.3 percent), or are lecturers (57.3 percent). They have worked for the current universities for 11-15 years (43.4 percent).

### Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive analysis reveals the respondents' perceptions toward female leaders. Servant leadership characteristics the career progress of employees is most concern at a very high level ( $\bar{X} = 4.28$ , S.D. = .889), followed by using persuasion rather than authority to influence team decisions ( $\bar{X} = 4.25$ , S.D. = .792), demonstrate understanding and empathy towards employees ( $\bar{X} = 4.24$ , S.D. = .688), self-awareness of the impact of their actions on others ( $\bar{X} = 4.22$ , S.D. = .697), fostering a sense of community and collaboration among team members ( $\bar{X} = 4.14$ , S.D. = .738), encourage innovative and long-term thinking ( $\bar{X} = 3.98$ , S.D. = .847), manage resources in the best of the organization's interests, and have the ability to anticipate future outcomes ( $\bar{X} = 3.96$ , S.D. = .896), actively listen to team members' opinions and feedback ( $\bar{X} = 3.77$ , S.D. = 1.027), and contribute to resolving interpersonal conflict and a positive working environment, respectively ( $\bar{X} = 3.68$ , S.D. = 1.049) respectively.

### Hypothesis Tests

This study employs multiple regression to test the relationships of variables and to test hypotheses. The results are presented below:

Multiple regression was used to test the hypothesis to compare the relationship between female servant leadership characteristics and employee perception of leadership competency using t-

test and sig (p-value), which compare the perception at 95 percent ( $\alpha = .05$ ); therefore, the sig value is acceptable at less than  $.05 = \text{accepted hypothesis}$ .

**Table 1** Relationships between Servant Leadership Characteristics and Leadership Competency

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.037	.204		9.988	.000
Listening and feedback	.138	.024	.211	5.672***	.000
Empathy	.048	.037	.049	1.315	.189
Healing	.047	.023	.074	2.053*	.041
Awareness	-.052	.048	-.054	-1.076	.283
Persuasion	.111	.031	.130	3.610***	.000
Conceptualization	.152	.032	.240	4.782***	.000
Foresight	.161	.043	.214	3.760***	.000
Stewardship	.209	.043	.262	4.900***	.000
Concern about the progress of employees	.289	.034	.381	8.429***	.000
Community building	-.019	.044	-.021	-.428	.669

Note: \*Sig  $\leq .05$ , \*\*sig  $\leq .01$ , \*\*\*sig = .000

Information from Table 1, the analysis results find relationships between female servant leadership characteristics, which are Listening and feedback ( $t = 5.672$ ), healing ( $t = 2.503$ ), persuasion ( $t = 3.610$ ), conceptualization ( $t = 4.782$ ), foresight ( $t = 3.760$ ), stewardship ( $t = 4.900$ ) and concern on the employee' progress ( $t = 8.429$ ) and leadership competency of building relationship dimension. The results, therefore, accepted that  $H_1$  Female servant leadership characteristics have a significant relationship with leadership competency.

$H_2$ : Female leadership competency has a significant impact on employees' engagement.

**Table 2** Relationship between Female Leadership Competency and Employee Engagement

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.873	.151		5.791	.000
Listen to and assist the employee	-.066	.043	-.076	-1.512	.131
Provide guidance and give feedback	.524	.042	.472	12.615***	.000
Perform stewardship	.588	.040	.463	14.560***	.000
Clear vision, mission, and objectives	.276	.040	.257	6.978***	.000
Clear direction	.177	.046	.192	3.894***	.000
Effective organizer	.286	.037	.258	7.752***	.000
Perform good relationship	-.051	.048	-.038	-1.053	.293
Communication & motivating	.181	.036	.180	5.041***	.000
Balance tasks and relationship	.034	.045	.026	.754	.451

Note: \*Sig  $\leq .05$ , \*\*sig  $\leq .01$ , \*\*\*sig = .000

Information from Table 2, the analysis results find relationships between Female Leadership Competencies which are providing guidance and giving feedback ( $t = 12.615$ ), performing stewardship ( $t = 3.894$ ), Clear vision, mission, and objectives ( $t = 6.978$ ), clear direction ( $t = 3.042$ ), effective organizer ( $t = 7.752$ ), foresight ( $t = 9.078$ ), and communication and motivating

( $t = 5.041$ ) and employee cognitive engagement. The results, therefore, accepted  $H_2$ : Female leadership competency significantly impacts employee engagement.

$H_3$ : A significant relationship exists between female servant leadership characteristics and employee engagement.

**Table 3** Female Servant Leadership Characteristics and Employee Engagement

Model	Unstandardized		Standardized	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Coefficients		
(Constant)	1.793	.260		6.900	.000
Listening & assist	-.045	.031	-.063	-1.452	.147
Empathy	.121	.047	.114	2.592*	.010
Healing	-.017	.029	-.024	-.568	.570
Awareness	.351	.061	.332	5.705***	.000
Persuasion	-.015	.039	-.017	-.395	.693
Conceptualization	.099	.041	.142	2.425*	.016
Foresight	.484	.055	.589	8.849***	.000
Stewardship	.222	.054	.256	4.099***	.000
Concern about the progress of employees	.141	.044	.171	3.236**	.001
Community building	-.096	.057	-.096	-1.688	.092

Note: \*Sig  $\leq .05$ , \*\*sig  $\leq .01$ , \*\*\*sig = .000

Information from Table 3 illustrates that female servant leadership characteristics, empathy ( $t = 2.592$ ), awareness ( $t = 5.705$ ), conceptualization ( $t = 2.425$ ), foresight ( $t = 8.849$ ), stewardship ( $t = 4.099$ ), and concern for employee progress ( $t = 3.236$ ), affect employee engagement. Therefore, the analysis results accept the  $H_3$  that there is a significant relationship between female servant leadership characteristics and employee engagement.

### Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data was collected from female managers in private higher education institutions in Zhengzhou, China. The questions were translated into Chinese by a Chinese language expert. Respondents were not given a copy in advance to prevent prior prepared answers. The same method and questions were used in the interviews for all participants. The interview schedule began with initial questions about the participant's work experience and leadership pathway. More in-depth questions followed to allow the participants to discuss their servant leadership roles and how they view themselves as leaders. Questions about employee engagement followed this. These interviews allowed the researcher to approach the interviews as an open-ended input to identify work (Alvesson, 2002; Sakdapat et al., 2024). The study investigated female managers who work in private higher education without classifying the types of jobs in the universities. The author prepares the interview by contacting the presidents of the universities that are members of the same association in Zhengzhou during the seminars.

The analysis revealed that female leader respondents' ages were between 32 to 47 years old. They have been working at different levels of managerial positions. They hold positions as dean, associate dean, program director, department directors, and section managers and have 6 to 23 years of working experience at managerial levels. The results also revealed that respondents face no significant gender difference in terms of their profile and their employability for the first time applying for their jobs in private higher education institutions, like the results by Zhong et al. (2014), who found no gender barrier for female job applications. They only faced difficulty in job promotions. Regarding the servant leadership characteristic, the result revealed that the respondents do not acknowledge the term servant leadership.

However, the results from the quantitative analysis indicated that most of them have already presented most of the servant characteristics (leadership characteristics consist of ten significant components, which are listening, empathy, awareness, healing, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, concern employee progress, and building community), Greenleaf (1970), only a few respondents characterized four to five servant characteristics (persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, and concern employee career growth). In response to the questions relevant to leadership pathway and how female leaders feel about their leadership roles regarding employee engagement, the participants, who had worked on similar jobs in the institutions for many years, felt that during the past two decades, they had been denied access to career progress because of their gender. Ultimately, however, it is only in the past 10 years that the gender barrier seems to be reduced. They are promoted to managerial levels and try their best to serve their subordinates better without being aware that their practices are acts of servant leadership.

It could be concluded that female leaders who participated in this research did not know what servant leadership is. The analysis result, however, illustrates their servant-leading behavior provided by the answers during the interviews, finding that they always listen and assist the employee, care for, and are concerned about the employee's happiness during work. All participants prefer to guide their employees and want to create the workplace as a small community to see employee harmony. Some participants keep learning new things and want to try new ideas and adapt them to improve the working process; this represents the persons' innovation.

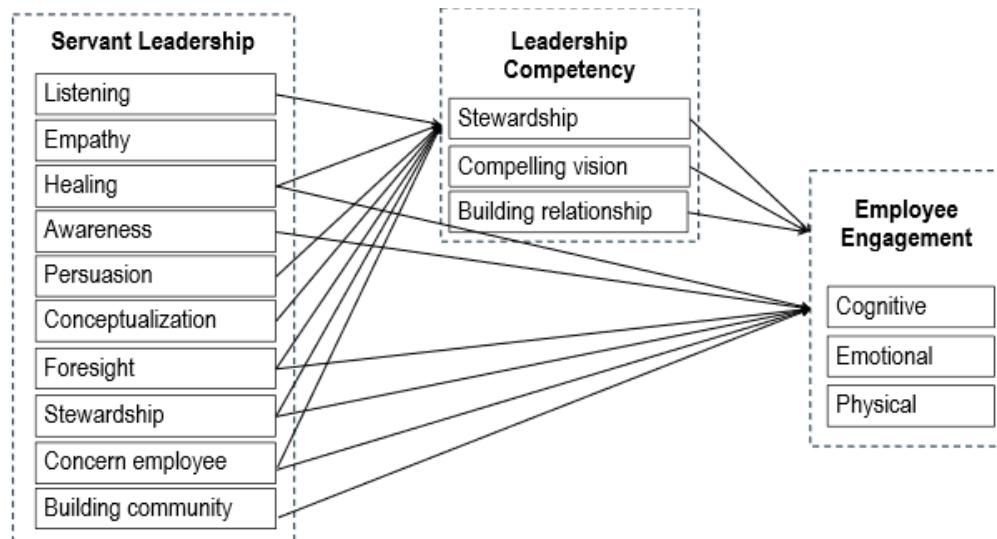
## **Conclusion and Discussion**

Finally, the results concluded that the employees in private higher education institutions in Zhengzhou city perceived female leaders as servant leaders with different characteristics at high to very high levels. The results confirmed that the respondents perceived their female leaders as representing servant leadership characteristics by focusing on employees' career growth the most, and that made the employees rate the highest scores on this characteristic. The results indicate that female leaders perform best on leadership competencies, which are stewardship, building relationships, and compelling vision, at a very high level. For employee engagement, the results indicated that female leaders with servant leadership characteristics significantly impact the three dimensions of employee engagement (cognitive, emotional, physical), with emotional engagement getting the most effect. This result confirms the findings of Alvesson and Billing (2009), who found that women leaders could make employees feel a sense of work engagement. Competency levels were the best predictors of employee engagement (Stroud, 2009).

According to multiple regression analysis results, female servant leadership characteristics (listening, empathy, awareness, healing, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, and concern for employee career growth) significantly positively impact employee engagement (cognitive, emotional, and physical). The results supported by Carter and Baghurst (2014) that under servant leadership, employees are engaged and become more emotionally involved, loyal, and productive, and Wei and Bunchapattanasakda (2024) found that female leaders in higher education displayed strong transformational and democratic tendencies that created a more significant impact on employee engagement.

The results also revealed a significant relationship between female servant leadership characteristics and leadership competency (stewardship, building relationships, and compelling vision). Finally, the results found a significant relationship between female servant leadership and employee engagement in private higher education institutions in Zhengzhou, China. According to the results, the competency of female leaders (stewardship, building relationships, and compelling vision) has a significant positive impact on employee

engagement (cognitive, emotional, and physical). This study also found that leadership competency mediates between female servant leadership and employee engagement. This means that female servant leadership characteristics affect employee engagement by influencing leadership competency levels. The research results from this study, therefore, could form a theoretical model of female servant leadership characteristics and employee engagement, as presented in Figure 2



**Figure 2** Relationships between female servant leadership and employee engagement

### Implication

Findings from this research contribute to both the theoretical and practice of female servant leadership, leadership competency, and employee engagement, particularly in private higher education institutions in Zhengzhou, China. First, the findings from this study enhance understanding of the crucial roles and competency of female servant leadership toward employee engagement in private higher education institutions in China. This is evidenced in the Servant Leadership Theory of Greenleaf (1970), who indicates that servant leadership roles could impact employee engagement (Kahn, 1990). The findings from a multiple regression analysis from this study confirmed that all ten characteristics (listening, empathy, awareness, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, concern for employee progress, building community) of female leaders in private higher education institutions in Zhengzhou positively impact employee engagement. This study creates a new model of female servant leadership characteristics and employee engagement.

New knowledge exists in this research that presents significant roles of female leaders in private higher education institutions in the Chinese context since most institutions share similar cultures, traditions, and values. The new findings indicated that employees in higher education recognized female leaders who had already performed servant leadership while working. The employees also confirmed that their female leaders with servant leadership positively impacted their work engagement. Thus, the findings could be an invention to previous studies that found female employees faced with barriers in Chinese tradition, corporate culture, and the glass ceiling policy that put males above females in higher education institutions. Moreover, this study is a pioneer in finding that many female leaders with servant leadership styles currently work in managerial positions in Chinese private higher education institutions. The results from qualitative analysis also confirmed that many female leaders in private higher education institutions do not recognize that they are now leaders with servant leadership characteristics. The answers from an in-depth interview of the female managers illustrate that all of them are

concerned with employee career growth, empathy, awareness, support, giving advice, and looking into the future for their employees. These findings are beneficial as basis information for future research on female servant leadership in private higher education institutions in the Chinese cultural context, like Alvesson and Billing (2009), who illustrated that cultures have meanings and norms prescribing different characteristics for people. The results also reveal that female leadership competency mediates the relationship between servant leadership characteristics and employee engagement. Thus, in terms of practical implications, private higher education institution executives should address the improvement of females in leadership roles and career opportunities, as mentioned by Kanokpan and Chanchai (2020) and Zhong and Guo (2017).

### **Contribution to Practices**

By nature, private higher education institutions are private organizations. The institutions have more freedom in conducting businesses that rely heavily on the performance of employees. Thus, the institutions require high-quality personnel that engage in their work and produce better performance. The results from this study proved previous studies that female leadership is suitable for leading work teams in private higher education institutions, particularly in Chinese contexts. In addition, the findings also confirmed that the employees engaged with their work in their current jobs under female leaders with servant leadership style. The new knowledge from this study could be know-how for developing leadership training for human resource development or a course in a formal curriculum to provide knowledge and skills for the learners or to widen the knowledge of female leadership, female leadership competency, and female servant leadership in their training programs.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study contains certain limitations, like most other empirical studies. Firstly, the quantitative data was collected only in Henan province. The result may be different if the researcher collects data from different regions of China due to the differences in socioeconomic situation. It is recommended that, for future studies, the researcher collect data from other parts of China and conduct a comparative study to compare the results with those of this current research. Secondly, the sample may not be comprehensive enough, mainly since the participants are highly concentrated in different universities with different corporate cultures, policies, and practices. This may cause some response information and analysis bias; therefore, sample selection needs to be diversified in future research.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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