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Role of Universities in Promoting Women Leadership and Research Participation

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Abstract

This study explores how Universities help women to develop their leadership and research skills. A sequential explanatory mixed methods design was used with surveys completed by 185 faculty and 384 students and interviews conducted with 25 women academics. Quantitative analysis of the data used t-tests, chi-square and regression. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. The analysis showed a clear inequity with women making up 58% of junior faculty and only 28% of leadership faculty. Academic women reported higher bias in promotion and work-life balance than their male counterparts (respectively, $M=4.12$, $SD=0.98$ and $M=4.35$, $SD=0.87$). Women's researchers also reported publishing less ($M=3.87$) than men ($M=6.23$), but this was mitigated through mentoring and funding. In the qualitative data, gendered institutional cultures as well as the lack of mentoring and balancing multiple pursuits/roles was apparent. Building women's leadership pathways depends on transparent promotion systems, implementation of family friendly strategies and the use of structural mentorship and accountability.

KEYWORDS: *Women in Leadership, Higher Education, Gender Equity, Research Participation, Academic Leadership, Institutional Barriers, Mentorship, Work Life Balance, Mixed-Methods Research, University Governance.*

Introduction: There are still challenges when it comes to global disparities in gender participation in academic leadership and research, despite decades of attempts at policy and advocacy. Having made up the bulk of student enrollment in higher education for years, women are still significantly underrepresented in both leadership and research. According to UNESCO (2024), women account for only 31.5% of the world's researchers, and the region varies from having a least 44% female participation in Central Asia and Latin America, to having a least 26% female participation in Southern and Eastern Asia. Along with the number of researchers, the number female leaders in higher education is also concerning, with only 19.78% of leaders compared to 77.52% who are male, and even among the most prestigious and competitive schools, only 29% of doctoral institutions in the United States have women presidents (Kyambade et al., 2024). These stats show an alarming contradiction. The more women are active in higher education, the more they are being blocked from reaching research and leadership positions. Having women in leadership and research positions is not only a numbers issue. It is about cultural and

structural inequities and their impact on the ability of institutions to carry out their purpose of guiding society.

Research consistently finds women researchers lack adequate support when policies are implemented as inequitable systems encourage bias and patriarchal academic cultures (Maheshwari, 2023). Administrative and service-related work commitments join to augment the time women academics have available to allocate to their own research (Kyambade et al., 2024).

Higher education institutions, because of the critical and unique position they hold in society, are in a prime situated place to eradicate inequities. Universities have the capacity and very much the responsibility to jettison barriers of the past in order to construct structures and avenues for advancement for women. If structures are to be purposefully created for women's advancement and leadership within the academy, universities are to formalize programs of mentoring, gender neutral policies and frameworks, various work options, childcare, and woman-centered leadership (Maheshwari, 2023; Othman & Hamid, 2023).

The research that I am doing looks at the role of universities in facilitating women leadership in research. While there has been written record of the barriers women face in higher education as well as some creative solutions, there is still a great need for context specific research regarding how universities can turn policy to practice (Maheshwari, 2023). This study will analyze the policies and practices that exist in the academy, subsequently providing the framework necessary to revise policies and construct the necessary scaffolds within the academy to improve the leadership of women in higher education.

To develop equitable and supportive institutional frameworks that aid women academics with resources and opportunities to transition to senior leadership and research positions requires comprehension of the obstacles and barriers women academics encounter.

Consider the following two scenarios:

1. Women academics sometimes encounter the following problems: limited time, reduced access to resources, personal commitments and responsibilities.
2. Obstacles and challenges faced by women academics: limited resources, high workloads, lack of opportunities, personal problems, time constraints.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the institutional policies and practices that enable or impede women's advancement into leadership positions within universities.
2. To investigate the factors that influence women's research participation and productivity in higher education institutions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What institutional policies, structures, and practices facilitate or hinder women's progression to leadership roles in universities?
2. What factors influence women's research participation and productivity within higher education institutions?

Review of Related Literature

The Persistent Gender Gap in Academic Leadership and Research: Research on women in academic leadership and research has been conducted for many years, and early research by Kanter (1977) and Acker (1990) investigated structural inequality in gendered academia and provided insight into systemic problems within the academy. The concepts of "tokenism" and "gendered organizations" are useful to explain persistently problematic

phenomena in contemporary academia. In more recent research, scholars have moved beyond descriptions of women's marginalization in academia to identify the systemic barriers to women's advancement and the methods and structures that can be used to advance women. A systematic research study by Meza-Mejia et al. (2023) concluded that women have engaged in leadership in higher education in teaching, research, and management, although women's participation in these areas of higher education continues to be unequal, thus continuing to perpetuate gender inequity.

Barriers to Women's Leadership Advancement: Contemporary literature has analyzed a number of specific constraints that prevent women from advancing into leadership roles in academic institutions. These constraints occur at different levels of an individual, an institution, and at a socio-cultural level. Inertia-producing structures are inequitable recruitment and promotion procedures, unequal access to mentoring and professional sponsorship, and inequitable distributions of administrative and service workloads that give little time to conduct research and development for academic leadership.

Gender Disparities in Research Participation and Productivity: Another dimension of women's academic engagement is participation in research and productivity. Participation in this area has importance to women's career growth as well as the institution's reputation. Many studies have shown the persistent scholarly publication disparity between male and female academics. Gao et al (2023) examined the research productivity of women faculty in Vietnamese higher education. They noted that although women faculty make research contributions, they are still below the average when compared to their counterparts around the world. However, women faculty's scholarly contributions are noted in the disciplines with marginalized women scientists.

Institutional Accountability and Policy Implementation: Though there is a greater commitment to gender equity in higher education, research shows a policy-practice gap. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2024-25 calls on national governments to formulate strong gender equity policies to reduce the inequities present in higher education leadership to address the diversity gap. Policies to address the inclusion of women in senior leadership positions are, nonetheless, perceived as ineffective, and are impacted by the fragmentation of women's careers, lack of equity in institutional support, and pernicious gender bias.

Leadership Styles and the Value of Women's Leadership: Recent research has examined women leaders in higher education and has shown that there are women leaders in Malaysia and Indonesia who embrace an egalitarian style of leading that includes cooperation, and as a result, have been highly successful. Emotional intelligence differentiates men and women. Women excel in emotional intelligence with overall and component scores. There is a need to understand how women leaders uniquely serve in higher education and how it may improve the effectiveness of institutions. Conversely, women in higher leadership positions have been described as holding ambivalent and contradictory positions. Many institutional cultures stay firmly rooted in gender inequality with women subtly but completely dominating in higher education.

Gaps in the Literature and Directions for Future Research: While existing literature has made progress in examining barriers, enablers, and results for women's leadership and research participation, there are several areas that need more attention. First, although some work has focused on developing countries, the majority of studies focus on developed countries. Second, there is little work that examines overlap and intersectionality of race, class and gender, and what social categorizations means for

women in different locales. Third, interventions for addressing gaps have been documented, but the available information describes the interventions and their context, not their effectiveness or how to sustain them. Fourth, the relationship between women's leadership and engagement in research, including the ways leadership impacts women's capacity for research, has been understudied. This report responds to each of these four areas by analyzing policies and practices that influence women's access to leadership positions in different countries; both developed and developing. It looks at the factors that influence women's participation and productivity in research within universities.

Research Design: This study used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design in two phases. In Phase-I, a quantitative survey was conducted to understand barriers, enablers, and the representation of women in leadership and research positions. In the second phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sub-sample in order to deeply understand their experiences and strategies. This phase of the design allowed qualitative data to explain and enrich the quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori&Teddlie, 2021).

Population and Sampling: The selected university had approximately 335 staff members and ~22,000 students. For the quantitative phase, stratified random sampling was used based on gender, rank, and discipline to choose 185 teachers and 384 students (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was used to choose around 20-25 women academics (early-career to senior leaders) to include a range of and intersection of multiple perspectives (Etikan et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015).

Research Instrument: Two research methods were utilized. The first method utilized a tool that contained five sections that included: (a) demographics, (b) institutional policies, (c) barriers, (d) enablers, and (e) research productivity that were constructed from the literature (Maheshwari, 2023; Meza-Mejia et al., 2023) and piloted with 20 academics (Overall Cronbach's alpha value was 0.86). The second method used an interview guide that consisted of four themes: career path, barriers/enablers, research experiences, and the culture of the institution. This guide was created using the results of the quantitative analysis and were reviewed by experts (Tisdell & Merriam, 2025).

Results and Discussion:

Interpretation of Quantitative Findings

Table 1: Gender Representation Across Academic Positions (N=335)

Academic Level	Women (%)	Men (%)
Junior Faculty	58%	42%
Senior Faculty	32%	68%
Leadership Roles	28%	72%

Roughly a third of leadership roles and two thirds of senior faculty positions are held by women. The remaining third of junior faculty teaching positions are occupied by women. As described by the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon, women are leaving the academic field at a higher rate, and at almost all career stages, compared to men (Kyambade et al., 2024). The data suggests women are less likely to reach senior leadership roles as evidenced by the distribution of women at lower and higher faculty and leadership roles.

Table 2: Gender difference in Perceived Institutions Barriers (N=185)

Variable	Female		Male		T (183)	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Gender Bias in Promotion	4.12	0.98	2.87	1.12	8.45	< .001
Work life Balance Challenges	4.35	0.87	2.65	1.08	9.23	< .001
Caregiving Responsibilities	4.21	0.92	2.76	1.05	8.76	< .001

Analysis of independent samples t-tests found that male and female academics perceive disparate institutional barriers differently. For participants, the reported perceived gender bias in the male versus female academics' perceived gender bias in the promotion process was significant $F(183) = 8.45$, $p < 0.001$. Female academics perceived bias in the promotion process as $M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.98$, whereas male academics perceived bias $M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.12$. Female academics perceived more balance and conflict between work and family and caregiver responsibilities than male academics, and these differences were significant $F(183) = 9.23$, $p < 0.001$ and $F(183) = 8.76$, $p < 0.001$, respectively. These results corroborate Maheshwari's (2023) systematic literature review where caregiver responsibilities and work-life balance were primary inequities for women's leadership.

Table 3: Gender Difference in Research Productivity

Variable	Female		Male		Test Statistics	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Publications (Last 5 years)	3.87	2.45	6.23	3.12	$T(-5.67)$	< .001
External Collaboration (yes)	34%		62%		$X^2 = 14.23$	< .001

The analysis found differences in research participation in terms of productivity and collaboration. For peer-reviewed publications in the last five years, female academics published on average of 3.87 ($SD = 2.45$) compared to male academics at 6.23 ($SD = 3.12$), $t(183) = -5.67$, $p < 0.001$. Female academics also reported considerably less involvement with research collaborators outside their institutions with a report of their regular collaborations outside the institution at 34% compared to male academics at 62%, $\chi^2(1, N = 185) = 14.23$, $p < 0.001$. Gao et al. (2023) also found that female faculty in Vietnamese higher education had less research participation compared to their male faculty colleagues. However, multiple regression analysis found that when controlling for the described factors the gender disparity was significantly minimized, thus indicating that factors like the availability of research mentorship and funding may potentially explain the gender disparities.

Interpretation of Qualitative Findings

Analysis of qualitative interviews with women academics shows four major themes that describe the effects of systems and structures as well as individual differences on women's leadership and research participation. The first of these themes, 'Navigating Gendered Institutional Cultures', illustrates participants' experiences with implicit bias and microaggressions, as well as the informal and exclusionary nature of support and opportunity networks. One 12-year senior lecturer said, "informal spaces are

predominately men spaces. Coffee breaks and after session meetings spaces are decision making spaces about who gets what opportunity, and because women know and forge relationships in professional spaces, often they miss out on valuable information, connectivity, and career opportunities". Similar findings have been articulated by Maheshwari (2023) who notes the ways that patriarchal academic cultures and systemic biases perpetuate inequities and sustain the gap between stated equity policy intentions and lived reality.

The second theme, 'The Mentorship Gap', focuses on the significance of mentoring and sponsorship for women's careers. Participants noted in particular the positive impact of mentors and sponsors on their careers. An Associate Professor said "My mentor advocated for my case and promoted my case for various leadership positions and introduced me to key decision makers. Without her I would not be where I am today." Participants generally expressed the need for more mentoring opportunities, especially for women in the early stages of their career, which also forms part of Rampersad's (2024) research.

Discussion: Study findings inform the contribution of universities to the promotion of women's leadership and engagement in research, while contributing to the growing body literature on gender inequities in higher education. The findings show a continuing disparity of women represented in leadership positions. Women constituted 58% of our junior faculty and only 28% of our leadership positions. This is indicative of the leaky pipeline described in other studies (Kyambade et al., 2024; Meza-Mejia et al., 2023). It shows that despite the focus and adoption of numerous policies, universities continue to lose women faculty at key stage transitions, especially in the middle of their careers. The sustained decline in women representation at various stages of career represents institutional inequities and discrimination against women that is deeply embedded in the structures and procedures that favor a particular group of employees, including unfair processes to determine who is promoted, inadequate or no mentorship available, and an unfair distribution of work that negatively impacts women's ability to devote time to the peer-reviewed publication of research and the development of leadership skills.

There is a notable quantitative finding that illustrates women academics have greater awareness for gender bias in the promotion process. This finding corroborates existing research on implicit bias in the promotion of academics (Maheshwari, 2023). Perceiving bias in this case isn't subjective. There is an objective basis for this perception when we consider that women's qualifications and contributions are seen to be less than those of their male counterparts who are their equals. Women academics have been found to have fewer publications attributable to them than their male colleagues for collaborative work and needing to evidence a higher degree of competence in order to be perceived to be as competent as men (Kyambade et al., 2024). Increased institutional support mediated the relationship of gender inequality and research productivity. The regression analysis showed that this was the case. The researchers suggest that universities can create the conditions that will improve women academics' situation by supporting women to have access to mentoring, research funding and collaborative networks.

The qualitative analysis of this study sheds light on the lived experiences of women academics in the context of gendered institutional cultures. The theme of Navigating Gendered Institutional Cultures relates to Acker's (1990) idea of gendered organizations, and refers to the ways some institutions call themselves gender neutral, while in fact they operate behind the scenes with gender-biased assumptions, practices, and norms that favor men (Meza-Mejia et al, 2023). Participants' descriptions of being excluded from informal

networks and decision-making processes describe the 'old boys' network,' which has been recognized as an obstruction to women's career advancement. Universities can reduce the negative effects of informal networks by formalizing and making visible their processes for the identification and development of leadership in their institutions. The qualitative theme of The Mentorship Gap resonates with Rampersad's (2024) work which acknowledges mentoring and sponsorship as vital tools for advancing women's careers in academia. The finding that women in their early career stages of academia have limited or no opportunities for mentoring illustrates the urgent need for universities to design and implement formal mentoring programs which guarantee access for all academics.

The finding that women's leadership styles and skills positively affect institution effectiveness is important. While this research primarily addressed barriers and institutional factors, participants described leadership styles that engaged and included their teams, thereby improving both team performance and institutional culture. These findings confirm findings by Othman and Hamid (2023) that women's transformational leadership shows higher scores for emotional intelligence and collaborative skills. Hence, the promotion of women's leadership should not only be an equity-based goal. It should be a goal focused on increasing effectiveness and innovation of institutions. Therefore, universities should not consider gender equity a mere legally required compliance target. It should rather be a goal focused on improvement of institutional performance and competitiveness.

Conclusion: This study looks at how universities contribute to women's leadership and research. The study aims to understand the barriers and opportunities available for women to become leaders and researchers. Based on the findings, there are large gaps between women and men in leadership positions. Women face barriers related to gender inequality, work-life balance, mentorship, and networking. Women also reported a wide variety of these barriers. Often, universities can overcome these gaps by using evidence-based practices, such as making career paths clear, constructing family-friendly units, and offering well-planned coaching and mentoring opportunities. Unfortunately, many universities do not put these practices into action, even though there are many obvious gaps between policies and actions. This leaves a significant gap between institutions' intentions and true progress toward equity within the universities.

Recommendations

- Establish structured mentoring and sponsorship programs pairing early-career women with senior leaders to ensure career guidance and advocacy.
- Standardize promotion criteria, use diverse selection panels, and conduct regular gender equity audits to eliminate bias in leadership advancement.
- Provide flexible work options, on-campus childcare, and extended tenure clocks to support academics with caregiving responsibilities.
- Develop targeted leadership development programs for women at different career stages to build competencies and networking opportunities.
- Set measurable gender equity targets and publish annual reports on women's representation in leadership and research roles.
- Foster an inclusive institutional culture by addressing implicit bias and ensuring equal access to research funding and collaborations.

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