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Editorial: More Practical Gender Research is Needed in Higher Education Leadership and Management

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Abstract

This Editorial explores the challenges and barriers faced by women in leadership roles within higher education institutions using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This Editorial investigates internal, external, and institutional obstacles hindering women's progression into leadership positions. Gender biases, socio-political traditions, cultural expectations, and institutional norms contribute to the under-representation of women in leadership roles. Additionally, internal factors such as lack of confidence and fear of failure further impede career advancement. Despite these challenges, the editorial highlights the pivotal role of women in shaping leadership standards and underscores the transformative impact of diverse leadership teams. The Editorial advocates for pragmatic scholarly approaches to considering achievement of equal opportunities for women in leadership, emphasising education, progressive workplace policies, mentorship programs, and cultural shifts. By embracing an approach nested in the macro-, meso-, and micro-level environments, a more holistic approach to research aimed at fostering innovative scholarly advancement is encouraged.

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Introduction

Scholars are increasingly interested in researching the higher education sector, which has become an interdisciplinary field of study (Quarchioni et al., 2022). Prior to the year 2000, researchers primarily concentrated on policy development or teaching methods within this sector (Bearman et al., 2012; Yuting et al., 2022). However, there is now a growing focus on researching women's empowerment and leadership roles in academic institutions (Adams & Periasamy, 2023; Maheshwari, 2023). Consequently, numerous scholars have advocated for additional studies examining the current positions of women leaders and managers within higher education (Scott, 2018; Maheshwari et al., 2021; Mate et al., 2019).

As a result, gender equality has garnered substantial attention, aiming for equal rights, opportunities, and responsibilities for both male and female employees within organisations (World Economic Forum, 2021). Despite this heightened awareness, gender inequality remains a persistent issue within higher education institutions, particularly favouring male employees in specific job allocations, potentially due to perceived performance differences (Devlin, 2022; O'Connor, 2019). This concern extends globally across primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors, with recent literature highlighting the under-representation of women in leadership roles (Burkinshaw et al., 2018; World Economic Forum, 2021). This issue is more accentuated in Asian countries compared to Western counterparts (Maheshwari et al., 2021).

Women play a vital role in higher education, bringing diversity to the workplace with diverse leadership styles and skills, thus making a significant impact on the sector (Fitzgerald, 2018). In recent years, the *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* (JUTLP) has published several articles examining the leadership challenges and opportunities for women in higher education (e.g., Butler-Henderson et al., 2022). Some of these include attempts to highlight challenges women are facing to advance their careers (Chapple, 2022; Devlin, 2022). Other articles propose models to build leadership capacity in women and claims to leadership (Aiston, 2022; Harvey & Jones, 2022). However, many of these articles fail to articulate effective strategies to build leadership capacity in women.

This Editorial aims to provide an overview of current research on women's leadership in higher education globally to both prospective authors and our JUTLP readers. It compares the obstacles encountered by women in leadership roles in Western and Asian countries and provides insights into the nuanced challenges they face and propose effective strategies to overcome them. This Editorial continues to reinforce the need for stronger research into equity in educational leadership and management.

Barriers Faced by Women Leaders in Western and Asian contexts

There is a growing consensus globally that women face limitations in their leadership roles within higher education compared to their male counterparts (Acker, 2012; Dunn et al., 2014; Redmond et al., 2017). Barriers to women's leadership in higher education can be delineated through two perspectives from an internal subjective viewpoint of the women leader and an external objective standpoint based on observation (Lan Thi Dang, 2017; Eagly, 2007; Maheshwari, 2022; Young, 2004). Internally, the progression of women leaders in higher education is significantly impeded by gender stereotyping (Young, 2004). In this Editorial, we draw on Bronfenbrenner's (2000)

ecological model to explore macro-, meso-, and micro-level challenges. Externally, women leaders in higher education confront a range of barriers at different levels, including macro-level socio-political hindrances (Lan Thi Dang, 2017; Eagly, 2007), meso-level institutional obstacles (Maheshwari, 2023; Mate et al., 2019), and micro-level individual challenges (Young, 2004). The foremost barrier preventing women from taking on leadership and management roles in higher education institutions is the prevalence of bias towards female leadership (Devlin, 2022; O'Connor, 2019). Despite this, numerous studies highlight women leaders are often characterised as more communal, helpful, friendly, sympathetic, gentle, soft-spoken, and interpersonally sensitive compared to their male counterparts (Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Lord & Preston, 2009). However, some scholars argue that these behaviours could have contributed to lower leadership effectiveness or selection (Wallace & Marchant, 2009).

Despite evidence to the contrary, there remains subconscious perceptions that women are less suitable for leadership and management roles. This sentiment is evident in studies conducted in developed countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia (Kataeva & DeYoung, 2017), and a similar viewpoint is observed in a study conducted within the higher education sector in Vietnam (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022). Another study in Vietnam reveals that women leaders' characteristics related to leadership are criticised in various ways. Criticisms include perceptions that women leaders are highly communal and are faulted for lacking ambition, leadership ability, and intelligence (Lan Thi Dang, 2017). Conversely, if a female leader demonstrates high ambition, people may perceive her as lacking empathy. Consequently, women leaders are often seen as deficient in essential leadership skills (Lan Thi Dang, 2017).

Socio-political impediments pertain to deeply rooted cultural traditions in specific regions that women are obligated to follow (Mate et al., 2019). Some evidence in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Asia consistently demonstrate that expectations derived from these cultural traditions put women at a disadvantage compared to men, impeding their advancement into leadership roles (Travel Inspiration, 2019). Investigations into women's leadership in higher education reveal that women are often expected to manage family responsibilities alongside household tasks, imposing an additional burden compared to their male counterparts. Consequently, these dual and often competing paradigms, both at work and home, can pose a significant barrier to achieving effective leadership or management positions (Drake, 2018; Mate et al., 2019; Peterson, 2014).

In some cultures, women are also expected to partake in specific cultural traditions and customs dictated by the society in which they reside. Some studies underscore that women's career progression is influenced by the intricate interplay of cultures, traditional customs, socio-political structures, and legal systems. For instance, Nguyen (2013) posits that within Asian cultures and traditional customs, a distinct concept of femininity has emerged, emphasising stereotypical standards like being dutiful wives, mothers, and homemakers. These cultural barriers are less conspicuous in developed countries.

Institutional barriers for women exist beyond socio-political and cultural challenges. These obstacles arise from a leadership culture predominantly dominated by males, limiting women's involvement in leadership roles (Longman & Anderson, 2016; Morley, 2013; Scott, 2018). Morley (2013) and Lan Thi Dang (2017) point out that, similar to various sectors, universities in developed countries, are predominantly led by men. Given that the leadership characteristics of male leaders

have been ingrained and accepted for decades, altering this institutional culture is a formidable challenge (Lan Thi Dang, 2017; Mate et al., 2019). Consequently, despite women's contributions to higher education development, decision-making power predominantly resides with men at higher levels (Nguyen, 2013). Consequently, female leaders in academia often make sacrifices, accepting lower salaries or positions, perceiving limited opportunities for promotion, and encountering challenges even after promotion. The current literature also provides evidence on how structures, norms, and routines within institutions create disadvantages for the career advancement of women (Lan Thi Dang, 2017; Maddrell et al., 2019). For example, the expectation of long working hours poses difficulties for women, especially as they are often responsible for caring for their children after extended work hours, as revealed in a UK-based study (Maddrell et al., 2019). Poor support policies for women returning from maternity leave and instances of discrimination in selection and promotion further compound the challenges faced by women assuming leadership roles in academic institutions, as corroborated by studies conducted in Australia and Vietnam (Lan Thi Dang, 2017; White, 2003).

In addition to the impact of external culture and a male-dominated professional environment at socio-political and institutional levels, internal factors such as a lack of confidence, the fear of failure and disappointment within the work environment, and pressure from both colleagues and family also acts as constraints against performance (Lan Thi Dang, 2017; Young, 2004). Greguletz et al's (2019) study in Germany suggested that societal norms and family role expectations, can lead to hesitation by women to expand their external networks or pursue leadership positions. Similarly, institutional practices that favour men dampen women's eagerness to participate in power dynamics or politics, contributing to the reasons why women often shy away from leadership and management roles (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006; Morley, 2013). Other challenges reported by women leaders include discrimination during appraisals and in the academic promotion process, elevated stress levels, and gendered leadership styles.

Women's leadership styles were identified as a barrier, with empathic and non-authoritative styles being associated with female leaders. A heightened level of stress was identified in White's (2003) Australian study, with similar findings reported by Acker (2014) for women in Canada and a U.S. study by Longman and Anderson (2016). In contrast, men were considered better leaders due to traits like authoritarianism, emotional restraint, and greater openness to supporting others (Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Lan Thi Dang, 2017; White, 2003). Attempts by women to adopt more masculine leadership approaches often resulted in criticism from peers (Fitzgerald, 2018; Gallant, 2014). While racism was not commonly mentioned, a few women in the U.S. reported experiencing it (Grant, 2015).

Role of Women in Shaping Leadership

The role of women in shaping leadership standards is increasingly pivotal in a world where change is constant. Historically, women have navigated challenges, breaking through societal norms and pushing boundaries to redefine their roles in leadership (Wright & Gray, 2013). Despite progress, women leaders grapple with unique obstacles, from gender biases to entrenched stereotypes, underscoring the importance of addressing these barriers to create inclusive leadership environments (Young, 2004). The success stories of women leaders across diverse fields exemplify the transformative impact they bring, showcasing not only their individual achievements

but also the positive influence on organisational dynamics and societal progress (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

As women's presence in leadership roles continues to grow, so does the recognition of the benefits associated with diverse management teams, challenging traditional norms and fostering innovation (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Rhode, 2017). In embracing inclusivity, organisations can unlock the full potential of their leadership structures, contributing to a more resilient and adaptable future. Strategies for empowerment, such as mentorship programs and supportive policies, further underscore the commitment to dismantling barriers and fostering equality (Holbeche, 2023). Looking ahead, exploring emerging trends offers glimpses into a future where women's contributions are not only recognised but celebrated, signalling a paradigm shift towards a more equitable and diverse leadership landscape.

As we navigate the complexities of leadership in the twenty-first century, it becomes evident that women play a critical role in shaping not just the narrative but the very fabric of leadership structures (Holbeche, 2023; Rhode, 2017). The historical context of women's journey in leadership underscores the resilience and determination required to challenge preconceived notions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In facing challenges ranging from discrimination during promotions to shouldering a disproportionately high level of stress, women leaders exhibit unwavering strength (Acker, 2012; Burkinshaw et al., 2018; White, 2003). Yet, these challenges persist, emphasising the need for continued efforts to dismantle barriers and create pathways for women to ascend to leadership positions.

The success stories of women leaders stand as testaments to the transformative impact they have on their respective fields (Acker, 2014). These stories echo far beyond individual accomplishments, illustrating the broader positive influence on organisational cultures and the communities they serve. The changing dynamics of leadership, influenced by the increasing presence of women, not only redefine traditional notions but also foster environments where diverse perspectives are valued (Debebe et al., 2016). The paradigm shift propelled by the critical role of women in shaping leadership is ongoing. By recognising their contributions, addressing challenges, and actively promoting inclusivity, we pave the way for a future where diverse and equitable leadership is not just an aspiration but a reality (Debebe et al., 2016; Holbeche, 2023; Rhode, 2017). The journey is ongoing, and as we collectively navigate these shifts, the potential for a more inclusive, innovative, and resilient future comes into sharper focus.

There Still is Not Enough Evidence-Based Solutions

As the call for gender equality resonates globally, it is essential to chart actionable pathways that ensure equal opportunities for women in leadership roles in both Asian and Western countries. This Editorial provides some evidence of pragmatic strategies, acknowledging that the journey towards gender equity requires a synchronised effort transcending geographic boundaries. Going beyond a mere goal, securing equal opportunities for women in leadership roles becomes a transformative necessity. This not only corrects historical imbalances but also enhances societies by unlocking the full array of talent. At the foundation of transformative change lies education. Encouraging and facilitating girls' entry into fields traditionally dominated by men (e.g., STEM: Cheryan et al., 2017). Simultaneously, workplaces become incubators for gender equality through progressive policies. The adoption of flexible work arrangements, robust parental leave

structures, and comprehensive diversity programs creates environments where women can not only enter but also thrive in their chosen professions (Lewis & Humbert, 2010). Mentorship and networking programs are also powerful tools, providing invaluable support, guidance, and pathways for women to ascend into leadership roles (Holbeche, 2023).

In addition, revealing unconscious biases is crucial in dismantling barriers for women leadership, complemented by essential legal reforms to guarantee equal pay and unhindered opportunities for career advancement (Clack & Gabler, 2019). Leadership development initiatives fortify this foundation, preparing women to assume influential roles across diverse sectors. Entrepreneurship, often an untapped realm, becomes a gateway for women to challenge norms and contribute substantively to economic landscapes (Vossenber, 2016). A cultural shift, challenging stereotypes and fostering inclusivity, may be a good place for scholars to begin their research.

By embracing a broader approach to considering the macro-, meso-, and micro-level environments, the collectively pave not just a path but a thoroughfare for equal opportunities for women, fostering environments where diversity is not merely accommodated but celebrated. In Asian and Western countries alike, this multifaceted strategy envisions a future where women stand on equal footing, contributing their talents and perspectives to the betterment of societies worldwide.

Conclusion

This Editorial outlines a way of thinking about women's leadership in higher education research. While our aim is to advice prospective authors and our readers alike an overview of current research on Women Leadership in Higher Education (women's leadership in higher education) globally, we also compared the obstacles encountered by women in leadership roles in Western and Asian countries, providing insights into the nuanced challenges they face and propose effective strategies to overcome them. We invite research on gender equality in leadership roles, focusing on actionable pathways for equal opportunities for women. Studies on educational initiatives promoting girls' participation in STEM, workplace policies fostering gender equality, and mentorship programs supporting women's advancement are also encouraged. Additionally, research on legal reforms for equal pay, and career advancement opportunities is welcomed. By examining these areas, we aim to contribute to the creation of more inclusive and equitable research that seeks to understand how best to support women's leadership in higher education.

Conflict of Interest

The two Associate Editors that authored this contribution disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university. The authors have produced this manuscript without artificial intelligence support. The authors acknowledge with gratitude the support and review provided by Associate Professor Gail Wilson during the development of this Editorial.

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