

1 Women Leadership in Higher Education: Can the Glass Ceiling be broken?

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Abstract

In the current discourse on inclusion and equity agenda, gender equality issue remains critical and still captures the centre stage around the globe. Despite some positive results due to the persistent resistance to correct the historical exclusion of women in playing important roles in the position of power, the gap remains wide in the area of higher education leadership as women are not on the same footing as men. This article presents a statistical overview of gender disparity in leadership positions in higher education across the world. It highlights the significance of women representation in leadership positions in institutions of higher education and advocates strategies for achieving this goal using exemplary practices from selected literature.

Keywords: women, empowerment, equality, higher education

Statistical overview on gender disparity in women leadership position

The 2016 presidential election of the United States of America is by far proven to be the most amusing, as well as controversial event in the history of US politics. Among several other factors, America's aspiration for having its first woman president makes this presidential race extraordinary. Each time she appears on the screen either for a debate or campaign, she displays some form of effort to break the ultimate glass ceiling of American politics to create history. Critical attention is drawn and consistent

efforts are made all over the world to establish gender equity and bring inclusion in all significant areas. The first World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education published by UNESCO (2012) provides evidence that there is a significant increase in the number of women enrollment in higher education and women participation in politics and corporate organization are getting better. However, in the area of higher education leadership, women are not on the same footing as men. In a review of women as leaders in academia, Nidiffer (2010) in Gender and Women's Leadership handbook states that women continue to fall behind their male colleagues in progressing towards leadership roles. Airini, et. al., (2011) argues that although a few women do advance to leadership roles in universities, "gender imbalance among senior university academics is an acknowledged problem in many countries" (p. 44). Morley (2014) presents a statistical snapshot of women Vice-Chancellors across the globe which shows that among the selected countries, Hong Kong performs the worst with having no female as a Vice-Chancellor; followed by, Kuwait (2%), Japan (2.3%), India (3%) and Turkey (7%). Statistics from the European Union are equally disheartening that report only 13% of Vice-Chancellor positions are held by women while the United Kingdom reports that 14% of their Vice-Chancellors are women. Prof. Louise Richardson was able to break the glass ceiling of nearly 800 years by becoming the first female Vice-Chancellor of the prestigious University of Oxford in the year 2016. The statistics improved significantly with Sweden reporting that 43% of the Vice-Chancellor positions are held by women. Accordingly, Malaysia and Australia reported that 15% and 18% of the Vice-Chancellor positions are held by women respectively. Universities in East Asia are rapidly climbing up the ranking ladder, for example, eight universities in Hong Kong are included in the top 50; three universities in Japan are in the world's top 50; and another three universities in Mainland China are in the global top 50. However, gender disparity remains highly noticeable. It should be noted that there is a high number of women exceeding greatly in academia but most of them are unable to break the ceiling to the top leadership positions. According to Singh (2008), women comprised only 22.3% of the senior management team in the Commonwealth countries. He presented a pattern among the Commonwealth countries that suggested the number of women and men are equal at the lecturer position; however, as the occupational and academic ladder moves up, the proportion of women decreases significantly.

Why is women representation in leadership positions significant?

According to Burkinshaw (2015), women's representation in power positions is considered significant for four major reasons: one, for social justice that advocates institutions to be just and treat people with equality; second, for equity and parity that focus on the issue of gender pay and opportunity gap; third, for enhancing the quality

of leadership that can be facilitated by diverse practices; and fourth, for economy and business, as organizations with equality and inclusion are looked upon and perceived in a positive light. The White House Project (2009) implies that having women leaders to lead higher education institutes is much more than a mere gender parity because having women as academic leaders will potentially have a significant influence on institutions' knowledge and scope of research. The presence of women in leadership roles in higher education will contribute to positive and unique experiences which they will not have under gender-homogenous leadership.

In addition, the White House Project also states that women leaders will serve as "powerful role models and mentors to younger women starting out on the path to leadership themselves" (p. 16). All across the world, women in leadership roles of higher education are considered instrumental for economic growth and sustainability as they can contribute with a different perspective to make an impact. Morely (2013), on under-representation of women in leading position in higher education quotes in the European Commission Report 2011, "There is a business case e.g. skills wastage, a social justice case e.g. removing exclusionary structures, processes and practices, and cognitive errors case e.g. gender bias in knowledge, technology, and innovation for investigating and overturning this state of affairs". A book by Grogan and Shakeshaft in *Women and Educational Leadership* (2011), mentions that female leaders in academia tend to bring an instructional focus to leadership by bringing the spiritual dimension to their work and are able to provide a diverse perspective on a variety of societal and educational problems. Women through their participation in the leadership positions can become agents of change in fighting the gender disparity battle around the world. Therefore, capacity building and the opening of other avenues for women to take the lead positions in academia are a matter of utmost importance.

How can we break the ceiling?

Progressing women towards leadership positions in higher education is a complex and multifarious process (Flood, et. al., 2010). There have been a number of recent efforts that have the potential to bridge the gap of gender disparity; however, there is still a lot to be desired. As the famous adage "Fix the leaks in the pipe" goes, a variety of efforts and initiatives are underway to resolve the women in higher education 'pyramid' issue. Leadership development programmes such as capacity building remain at the forefront to prepare and support women at early stages of their academic careers to prepare them to rise to the top managerial level. Madsen, Longman and Daniel (2012) emphasize the need to inculcate increase in aspirations, develop skills and competencies, mentoring, and coaching women for leadership in higher education.

Moreover, some evidence from Swedish higher education are promising showing the increased participation of women in leadership positions which assures that appropriate intervention can produce similar positive results in other parts of the world as well. In line with the evidence from the literature and personal experiences, we recommend the following three strategies and initiatives that can potentially advance the effort for gender equity and inclusion in higher education.

Research: The women development institutes and organisations across the developing countries must deliberate on focused research agenda that is capable of leading all the other initiatives towards eliminating the issue of gender inequality and inclusion for leadership in higher education. Focused research agenda will encourage a systematic collection of data on gender statistics in higher education leadership roles in the region. It will also help define a parameter to monitor and interpret growth patterns. Through research, factors that facilitate or impede women's participation in leadership roles in higher education can be explored systematically to create a framework that is grounded in theoretical and empirical underpinnings. Focused research agenda should encourage investigation of this issue from a critical perspective where challenging data could be analysed with innovative technique to gain insights into the formation of national policies and legislative frameworks for women's development into academia. One example of such initiative can be found in Murray, Tremaine, & Fountaine, (2012) work titled "Breaking through the Glass Ceiling in the Ivory Tower" where they used a case study to investigate the factors in a particular context that helped female professors in getting ahead in academia. The research data produced recommendation and a pathway for junior academic women to attain and maintain the positions of power. Institutions can also establish publication outlets in the forms of empirical journals, periodicals, or magazines to provide an outlet for research-based findings to be communicated to the wider community. These opportunities will not only advance research and innovation in the area but also bring a conscious awareness among the members about the urgency of this issue, give innovative ideas to practitioners working in this area as well as facilitate the Human Resource Departments into developing effective programs.

Capacity building: The literature suggests that the process of leadership development is still a less explored area; however, capacity development programmes to support women's career planning and development are widely recommended as effective strategies. Madsen, Longman and Daniel (2012) provide a comprehensive list of samples on leadership development programmes designed for the development of female staff and faculty members at universities level. A number of countries

around the world have taken such initiatives with promising results. For example, in India, the University Grants Commission carries out development programmes on higher education leadership for women, while in the USA, the Office of Women in Higher Education's Inclusive Excellence Group and Higher Education Resource Services (HERS) provide leadership development opportunities for women faculty and administrators. In Norway, "The Norwegian Programme for Capacity Building in Higher Education and Research for Development" reflects on leadership attributes and on strategies to enhance and use them effectively. Such programmes develop leadership skills and competencies for transformation in organisations. Therefore, designing and implementing effective capacity building programmes that are centrally focused on this theme is one of the potential ways to contest this issue. Since the context plays an important role in defining leadership practices, these programmes should be designed in ways that are contextually appropriate. This is where the research component plays a significant role. The capacity building programmes must identify the shortcomings or challenges within a particular context to focus and also develop on the weak areas. In order to increase the effectiveness of such capacity building programmes, the trainings should be imparted by using a variety of modes such as problem-solving exercises in the real life context, designing a case study to manage the given issues, and strategic planning or developing a model for consultancy project to expand the women's capacity for effective leadership roles. Knowing the biological and social nature of women, the capacity building programmes should be encouraged to incorporate elements of resilience and grit. In the developing countries, budget and expertise for training and development may obstruct the initiatives. Therefore, appropriate arrangements such as collaboration with international partners or international funding should be sought.

Mentoring and establishing network: The absence of women in leadership positions in higher education is attributed to the women's psychosocial attributes, attitudes, institutional, and social and cultural aspects (Singh, 2002). All these summarise that women are perceived to be biologically (and culturally) submissive and less ambitious; and are required to fulfill the roles that are reinforced by a patriarchal society. It is important for women to seek appropriate support to increase their aspiration, self-efficacy, and self-determination so that they will feel motivated to climb the ladder for leadership. Harris and Leberman (2012) clearly articulate this sentiment and reason out that:

"...because access to developmental relationships within organisations is limited for women leaders due, in part, to the small number of suitable potential mentors and their

exclusion from informal male-dominated networks, the impact of extra organisational developmental relationships for women leaders may be even more important for their advancement into leadership senior roles”.(p.34).

Encouraging leadership aspirant women to set up a network within a similar role would ‘disrupt the patterns of social connectivity at work that have for so long privileged men, and in so doing provide a new way to alter the balance of power between the sexes” (McCarthy, 2004, p. 11). Therefore, we recommend aspirant women leaders in the developing countries to be connected with international partners who are already holding highest leadership positions in universities. Such networks would create an opportunity for aspirants to understand the role of women in management of higher education, develop skills and competencies to make well-informed decisions, learn strategies for a better balance in their personal and professional lives and build a community to exchange support and address exclusion. Obtaining mentors or coaches, preferably females, is another potential way to respond to this crisis. Senior women in similar power positions can share their personal experiences and insights that have helped them to overcome their difficulties during their own journey to the top. These mentoring sessions can initiate an honest and practical interaction into the unknown during the process of leadership development for women while at the same time these senior women can serve as models for the others.

Conclusion

Progressing women in leadership positions, especially in institutes of higher education remains a central issue for most of the countries around the world. With the changing times, the role and definition of leadership are transforming each day. Therefore, it is important to seek policies and initiatives that will empower women and enable them to accept these challenges. Important lessons can be learned from the successful systems that have delivered positive results towards this issue and existing programmes should be evaluated against establishing a benchmark for further improvement. The leadership training programmes for the women should include contextual elements from their own unique environment and aspiring women leaders need to build a strong network with women in power from other places for inspiration and personal development.

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