


Chapter 9

Women's Leadership Aspirations in Higher Education: Navigating the Cultural and Societal Barriers

Sakeerthi Sairam

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9116-9938>

Jain University, Bangalore, India

Madhavi R.

CMS Business School, Bangalore, India

ABSTRACT

Women are poorly represented in leadership positions across industries including in higher education. This underrepresentation is not simply a result of institutional biases or individual choices made by anyone but is deeply rooted in the societal and cultural dynamics. The primary influence on women's leadership aspirations is the perception of interpersonal relationships and support systems. This aligns with findings from Salas-Lopez et al., who emphasize the importance of having a critical mass of women in leadership roles to foster an environment conducive to gender equity. The researchers have used the systematic review of literature using PRISMA for this study. By blending empirical research with theoretical perspectives, they explore the influences of these external pressures in the women's pursuit of their ambitions of being in leadership positions in the higher education sector, not forgetting about her challenges in navigating through the social stigmas and the family responsibilities.

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INTRODUCTION

Indra Nooyi, the Indian-origin former CEO of PepsiCo said in her memoir “My Life in Full”, “My parents allowed me to do wild things like climbing trees and fall down and play in a rock band- so everything that a traditional woman in India didn’t do. So, in many ways, as I always say, I won the lottery in life”. Although she speaks about her struggle in reaching the top position of a company like PepsiCo in full length in her memoir, this line caught the researcher’s attention in particular. The struggles she has gone through in her job are no less than what a man would have to go through to reach the leadership roles. But what stood out differently in her case was the additional struggles that she had to go through, imposed by the society at large. And like what she correctly pointed out, she won the lottery in her life by getting a supportive family, which is also considered to be a brownie point for a “woman” to excel in her career. She is just one example. There are multiple women across the globe starting from normal job roles to higher leadership positions who go through such societal and cultural barriers, even to fulfill their smallest ambition to “stand on their own feet”. What is more alarming is the lack of enough women, who can be quoted when we talk about leadership roles, in any domain. The case is not different in education, more specifically in higher education. “Women in the fields of STEM often fall behind or lose out as they move through the system to reach senior positions. To retain more women, the higher education environment needs to be conducive to developing a mentality where women are required in the system”- this was quoted by Dr. Gagandeep Kang, a well-known figure in the field of health and science in India, a senior virologist at the CMC, Vellore, and the first woman scientist to be picked as a Fellow of London’s Royal Society. Although teaching is often referred to as a “female-centric job”, the number of females in leadership positions in higher education is not commendable. The latest figures of the top 200 institutions in “The World University Rankings 2025” stated that women headed 55 of the top 200 Universities across the globe (27%). Although this figure is hailed as a great achievement on the occasion of “Women’s Day, 2025”, because it showed an increase of 96% from just 28 female heads in 2015, it’s still a lackluster figure if compared to the number of male heads in a so-called “female-dominated” domain. The case extends likewise in India. As per research done by “Dr. Darshna Banker, Assistant Professor at Lal Bahadur Shastri Institute of Management, Delhi”, the number of educational institutions led by women in India in 2015, 2018, and 2021 stood at 54, 63, and 110 respectively. This gap stresses the importance of a

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