


# Chapter 14

## The Silent Choice: Understanding Why Women Decline Leadership Roles in Higher Education

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter examines the intricate dynamics of women's leadership in higher education, emphasizing the obstacles that led to their underrepresentation in top positions. Notwithstanding progress in gender equity, women hold merely approximately 30% of leadership roles, contending with institutional prejudices, cultural expectations, and societal conventions that undermine their aspirations. The chapter emphasizes the influence of preconceptions that categorize women as less capable or excessively emotional, resulting in a double bind in leadership approaches. It underscores the significance of mentorship and the visibility of accomplished women leaders as measures to address these biases. Additionally, it demands institutional dedication to gender parity, promoting inclusive cultures, and specialized mentorship programs to help women in their quest for leadership positions. This chapter seeks to confront these obstacles to cultivate a more fair academic climate that appreciates varied*

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*leadership styles and promotes women's ambitions in higher education.*

## **INTRODUCTION TO WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP**

### **Overview of Leadership in Higher Education**

The leadership landscape in higher education has experienced considerable transformation in recent decades (Akour & Alenezi, 2022; Mok & Marginson, 2021). Historically male-dominated, leadership positions in universities and colleges are progressively acknowledged as vital to the advancement of educational institutions. Nonetheless, despite advancements in gender parity and an increasing number of women obtaining advanced degrees, women continue to be underrepresented in top leadership roles, including university presidents, deans, and department directors.

Recent statistics indicate that women hold around 30% of senior leadership positions in higher education, highlighting the ongoing gender disparity (Ghamrawi et al., 2024). This disparity is especially evident in several domains, including science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), where women are both underrepresented in leadership roles and professor posts. The absence of female participation in these positions impacts institutional culture and influences policy-making, resource distribution, and the broader academic milieu (Salamon, 2023).

The present environment indicates that the routes to leadership are frequently intricate and laden with obstacles. Women seeking leadership positions may face numerous obstacles, such as hidden prejudices, insufficient mentorship, and organizational cultures that may prefer male leadership styles (Kapadia, 2023). The issues are intensified by the simultaneous demands of professional obligations and personal commitments, disproportionately impacting women due to cultural expectations surrounding caregiving and household duties.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 epidemic has exacerbated these issues. Female academics have indicated heightened workloads and emotional strains, resulting in elevated burnout rates and, in numerous instances, a reassessment of their career paths (Tembelis et al., 2024; Douglas et al., 2022). The pandemic has highlighted the vulnerability of women's roles in higher education leadership, leading many to reassess their ambitions and goals.

### **Historical Context**

The historical trajectory of women's engagement in higher education leadership is defined by key milestones that reflect broader cultural shifts about gender roles and equality (Meza-Mejia et al., 2023; Klenk et al., 2022). In the early 19th century,

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