

# Chapter 15

## Understanding Women's Avoidance of Leadership in Higher Education: Challenges, Narratives, and Pathways Forward

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines why women in higher education avoid leadership roles. Through an analysis of institutional structures, societal norms, and individual experiences, this chapter illuminates the complex factors contributing to women's decisions regarding leadership roles. The chapter highlights challenges such as systemic gender inequality, the demands of the “greedy workplace,” and societal expectations and draws from theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and personal narratives to offer evidence-based recommendations. These recommendations focus on policy reforms, cultural shifts, and individual empowerment strategies to promote gender equity in higher education leadership. By understanding and addressing these barriers, higher education institutions can create a more inclusive and equitable environment that benefits all members of the academic community.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite the growing presence of women in academia as students, educators, and researchers, their voices are often missing from the decision-making tables where the future of higher education is shaped. Statistics consistently show that although women may hold a majority of faculty positions, they represent only a small percentage of university presidents, indicating a significant gender inequality in higher education. This lack of representation is not merely a statistical anomaly; it has tangible consequences for the academic community. The absence of women in leadership positions limits the diversity of perspectives in decision-making, perpetuates gendered inequalities, and stifles innovation. Understanding the reasons behind this limited presence requires a closer examination of not only the external barriers women face but also the factors that contribute to their active avoidance of women's leadership roles.

This chapter will examine how institutional structures, societal norms, and personal experiences intersect to shape women's decisions regarding higher education leadership. Concepts such as the “greedy workplace,” gendered institutions, and organizational inequities will provide a framework for understanding the complex interplay of factors that contribute to women's avoidance of leadership. The chapter will also explore the impact of challenges such as work-life balance, imposter syndrome, and the lack of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities on women's leadership aspirations. By understanding these dynamics, this chapter aims to contribute to systemic change by proposing policy reforms, advocating for cultural shifts, and empowering women to overcome barriers and achieve their full leadership potential in higher education.”

Leadership in higher education is a critical factor in shaping the policies, practices, and culture of academic institutions. Despite the increasing presence of women in academia as students, educators, and researchers, their representation in senior leadership roles remains disproportionately low. This gender imbalance is reflective of a broader, systemic issue that underscores the persistence of societal and institutional inequities. Women's underrepresentation in leadership is not merely a statistical anomaly; it is an indicator of the structural, cultural, and organizational barriers that hinder gender equity in higher education.

Understanding the reasons behind women's limited presence in leadership requires a closer examination of the dynamics within higher education institutions. These include the “greedy workplace” concept, as proposed by Goldin (2021), which highlights how demanding professional environments create conflicts between career aspirations and personal responsibilities. Gendered institutions, a framework explored by Angervall et al. (2018), shed light on how academic structures and practices are inherently shaped by patriarchal norms, privileging men over women.

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