

# Chapter 17

## Beyond the Class Ceiling: The Untold Choices of Women Opting Out of Leadership in Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

*Despite a growing number of skilled female faculty members, men continue to hold leadership positions in higher education. Through a feminist and social constructivist analysis of structural and cultural limitations, this chapter explores the reasons why many capable women deliberately avoid formal leadership positions. Two significant issues are gendered prejudices and the “greedy workplace” mentality. Showcasing female leaders who lead informally through collaboration and mentorship through story analysis advances inclusive frameworks that facilitate different leadership and gender parity in academia.*

### INTRODUCTION

Although the number of skilled and aspirational women in academics is increasing, men continue to hold a disproportionate number of leadership positions in higher education. In many industrialized regions, women now make up about 50% of faculty seats; yet their representation in top leadership positions is still below 30%, indicating a continuing gender gap (Morley, 2022). Numerous studies examining the obstacles women encounter from institutional prejudices to deeply rooted societal expectations have been prompted by this underrepresentation. While efforts to promote gender

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equality have gained traction, as noted by Morley (2022), institutional and cultural prejudices in higher education still impede women's advancement in the workforce, especially when it comes to official leadership roles.

Academics' "greedy workplace" culture, which requires a lot of time, effort, and dedication and is frequently incompatible with personal and family obligations, is one major obstacle. Recent studies show that 62% of female faculty members and 46% of their male counterparts say that work pressures interfere with their personal lives (Goldin, 2021). Women are disproportionately affected by higher education institutions that place a strong emphasis on strict demands and 24-hour availability, undervaluing work-life balance (Maphalala & Mpofu, 2017). Women are frequently expected to perform traditional gender roles in both the home and the workplace, which adds to the "invisible workload" and exacerbates inequality (Angervall & Beach, 2020). Therefore, considering the structural issues that are still unresolved, many women conclude that the costs of pursuing these jobs, both personally and professionally, exceed the rewards.

Gender stereotypes still affect how women leaders are viewed and treated, even after much study and campaigning. Research indicates that women are more likely to experience double standards that damage their authority and credibility due to scrutiny of both their appearance and communication style (Angervall, Gustafsson, & Silfver, 2018). Moreover, women who display qualities that are typically associated with leadership, such as ambition or assertiveness, may have unfavourable social consequences, whereas males who display similar attributes are frequently rewarded (Orr, 2019). Because of these institutional and societal biases, there is a "leaky pipeline" in which competent women decide to pursue careers outside of leadership. Women's advancement to leadership roles is still hampered by a dearth of female role models, restricted access to networks, and biases in promotion procedures, according to research (Dubois-Shaik & Fusulier, 2018).

Furthermore, women are not sufficiently supported by academic structural policies, particularly when it comes to juggling caring obligations and academic work. Although some organizations have put in place rules that support flexible work schedules and family leave, these initiatives are frequently applied unevenly, and their efficacy is still low. According to a recent survey, for instance, just 27% of academic women who qualified for family leave thought it was available and sufficiently supportive (CohenMiller et al., 2022). The idea that academic leadership is not suited for people with substantial family obligations is strengthened by this lack of institutional support.

Despite significant strides in gender representation among faculty, men continue to dominate leadership in higher education. Globally, women now account for approximately half of all academic positions, yet they occupy less than 30% of senior leadership roles (Morley, 2022). This disparity has prompted growing scholarly

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