


Chapter 18

Institutional Policies and Gender Equity: The Role of Universities in Encouraging or Discouraging Women Leaders

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the critical role of institutional policies in shaping gender equity within universities and their impact on women's leadership. It explores the evolution of gender equity initiatives, analysing policies on recruitment, promotion, work-life balance, and safe work environments. Barriers such as unconscious bias, gender stereotypes, and the glass ceiling are discussed, alongside leadership development programs that support women in academia. Case studies from leading institutions and comparative analyses provide insights into best practices, while intersectional perspectives highlight the experiences of marginalized women. The chapter concludes with recommendations for policy reform and future strategies to promote gender equity and leadership opportunities for women in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Gender equity in higher education has garnered increasing attention in recent decades, driven by the recognition that equal opportunities for men and women in academic institutions are essential for social progress and sustainable development.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-0260-7.ch018

Historically, universities have been male-dominated spaces, with limited access for women to pursue higher education and leadership roles. Although there have been significant strides towards gender parity in enrolment and faculty positions, women remain underrepresented in senior academic leadership roles such as deans, department heads, and university presidents. This gap underscores the persistent structural barriers and cultural biases that women face within higher education, despite overall advancements.

Achieving gender equity in higher education goes beyond merely increasing the number of women in academic institutions. It encompasses creating an environment where women can thrive, contribute equally, and ascend to leadership roles without facing disproportionate challenges. Institutional policies play a crucial role in shaping such an environment, influencing everything from recruitment and promotion practices to work-life balance provisions and harassment prevention measures. Well-designed policies can proactively address the barriers to gender equity, ensuring fair evaluation, equal opportunities for career advancement, and supportive working conditions for all faculty and staff. Conversely, inadequate or poorly implemented policies can perpetuate disparities, create unwelcoming environments, and discourage women from pursuing leadership roles.

Universities, as influential social institutions, have a unique responsibility and opportunity to either foster or hinder women's leadership development. The significance of higher education institutions extends beyond education and research; they shape societal values, norms, and future leaders. Policies within universities not only reflect broader societal attitudes towards gender equity but also influence the career trajectories of women within and outside academia. For instance, policies related to hiring and promotion can help reduce the gender gap in faculty positions, while leadership development programs can empower women to take on more prominent roles in administration. By setting progressive policies and leading by example, universities can be catalysts for broader cultural change, contributing to gender equity across other sectors.

However, the role of universities in promoting gender equity is complex. While some institutions have implemented successful gender equity policies, others lag behind, often due to a lack of institutional commitment or resistance to change. Challenges such as unconscious bias, rigid organizational structures, and traditional gender roles can undermine policy efforts, creating a disparity between policy intentions and actual outcomes. Furthermore, the experiences of women in higher education are not homogeneous; intersectional factors such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and sexual orientation can compound the barriers faced by women. Therefore, it is vital that institutional policies consider these intersectional factors to foster an inclusive environment that supports all women.

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