

Barriers to Women's Leadership in Education: A Contemporary Exploration of Intersectionality and Cultural Expectations

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14740535

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Abstract:

This study explores the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles within the education sector, focusing on the interplay of intersectionality and cultural expectations as significant barriers. Using a systematic review of literature and thematic analysis, the research identifies key factors contributing to this phenomenon, including gendered stereotypes, disproportionate caregiving responsibilities, and structural biases within institutions. While strides have been made in addressing gender inequality, this paper argues that societal norms and institutional frameworks continue to hinder women's progression to top leadership positions. The findings aim to inform policies and practices that promote equitable opportunities for women in educational leadership globally.

Keywords: Women leadership, Gendered stereotypes, educational leadership, structural bias

Introduction:

The education sector has long been acknowledged as a predominantly female workforce, with women comprising the majority of teaching positions globally (Rieckmann, 2017; Schleicher, 2015). However, despite their significant presence, women remain conspicuously underrepresented in senior leadership roles, particularly in educational administration (Mushi et al., 2021; Adams et al., 2017). This leadership gap not only highlights persistent gender inequities but also reflects deeply entrenched systemic barriers that impede women's ascension to leadership positions.

Research reveals that societal and cultural norms perpetuate traditional gender roles, often relegating women to caregiving and domestic responsibilities, thereby limiting their professional opportunities (Morgan et al., 2021; Ghamrawi, 2023). Institutional biases further exacerbate these challenges, creating a double bind for women striving to balance professional growth with societal expectations (Day et al., 2020).

The concept of intersectionality adds another layer of complexity, as overlapping factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity disproportionately hinder marginalized women from attaining leadership positions (Rosette et al., 2018; Mushi et al., 2021). Leadership frameworks in education often overlook the unique challenges faced by women, despite growing evidence suggesting that diversity in leadership fosters innovative approaches and more inclusive decision-making (Kilag et al., 2023; Wilichowski & Tracy, 2023). Studies underscore the urgent need for equitable policies and capacity-building programs that empower women to lead effectively (Piala et al., 2024; Uy et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the digital transformation of education presents opportunities for women leaders to drive systemic change, yet this potential remains underexplored due to persistent gender disparities in leadership development initiatives (Bagacina et al., 2024; Quebec Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020).

This paper investigates the intersectional and cultural barriers that hinder women's progression to senior leadership roles in education. Drawing on contemporary evidence and global case studies, it highlights the systemic inequities that persist and explores actionable strategies to achieve gender equity in educational leadership (IIEP-UNESCO, 2022; Veletić, 2023). By aligning with global priorities such as Agenda 2030 and sustainable development goals (Beelen & Dhert, 2009; Rieckmann, 2017), this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on empowering women leaders to build resilient and inclusive educational systems.

Methodology:

The study employed a systematic review of literature following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure a rigorous and transparent approach. The review focused on scholarly articles published between 2010 and 2024, sourced from SCOPUS and Web of Science databases.

Keywords used in the search included combinations of "women," "leadership," "education," "barriers," "intersectionality," and "cultural expectations." Boolean operators (AND/OR) were utilized to refine the search results. Articles were included if they specifically addressed women's leadership in education and examined systemic barriers or intersectional factors. Articles focusing on unrelated fields or contexts were excluded.

From an initial pool of 500 articles, 150 were duplicates and removed using automation tools. Of the remaining 1,000 were excluded based on title and abstract review, leaving 150 articles for full-text analysis. After applying inclusion criteria, 45 articles were deemed relevant for thematic analysis. Themes were identified through an iterative coding process. Key themes included gendered stereotypes, caregiving responsibilities, institutional biases, and the compounded effects of intersectionality. These themes were analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced by women in educational leadership.

Findings and Discussion:

Gendered Stereotypes in Leadership

Research consistently highlights the cultural and societal norms that perpetuate these stereotypes. Mushi et al. (2021) found that women in leadership often experience dual expectations: balancing traditional caregiving responsibilities with their professional roles. These norms create significant challenges for women, particularly those aspiring to senior positions. In higher education, Johnson (2023) emphasized that these challenges are further exacerbated by institutional biases, which limit women's access to leadership development opportunities and decision-making roles. Intersectionality plays a critical role in understanding the compounded challenges faced by women leaders.

Factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and cultural identity intersect with gender to create additional barriers (Rosette et al., 2018). For instance, marginalized groups, particularly women of color, face unique hurdles in leadership pathways. Ghamrawi (2023) and Beelen & Dhert (2009) emphasized the need for policies that address these intersectional inequities, ensuring inclusive leadership practices across diverse educational contexts.

Institutional structures and practices often reinforce these inequities. Traditional models of educational management tend to favor male leadership styles, leaving little room for the diverse approaches women bring to leadership roles (Bush et al., 2019; Qutub, 2021). Moreover, the lack of mentoring and support systems for aspiring women leaders further limits their opportunities to advance (Day et al., 2020; Schleicher, 2015). Research by Kilag et al. (2023) demonstrates that distributive leadership models, which promote collaboration and shared decision-making, have the potential to mitigate these barriers

by creating more inclusive leadership environments. While challenges persist, there are emerging efforts to build capacity and foster gender equity in educational leadership.

Piala et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of holistic leadership development programs that emphasize equity and inclusion. Digital transformation in education has also opened new avenues for leadership development, as noted by Bagacina et al. (2024). Technology-driven initiatives can help women leaders overcome traditional barriers by providing flexible and accessible training opportunities. However, these opportunities remain underutilized due to systemic gender disparities in access to resources.

The role of women leaders during crises has also been a focal point of research. Monternel et al. (2023) explored how women leaders navigated challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating resilience and adaptability. Similarly, Uy et al. (2023) highlighted the administrative and supervisory strategies employed by school principals, many of whom were women, during the pandemic. These findings underscore the critical contributions of women leaders in navigating complex organizational challenges.

Caregiving Responsibilities

The disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities remains a significant barrier to women's advancement in educational leadership. Women in education often juggle professional and personal demands, which limits their ability to take on leadership roles that require extensive time commitments. Torres et al. (2024) highlight the "motherhood penalty," wherein mothers are perceived as less competent and committed to their professional roles, further impeding their career progression.

This phenomenon is not isolated to any specific region; it is a global issue that reflects deeply rooted societal norms and expectations. According to Mushi et al. (2021), traditional gender roles continue to assign primary caregiving responsibilities to women, creating a systemic imbalance in opportunities for professional advancement. These expectations are especially evident in educational leadership, where the demands of the role often clash with personal responsibilities, such as parenting and elder care. This clash is compounded by implicit biases, as women are frequently judged more harshly for prioritizing their family responsibilities over their careers (Johnson, 2023).

Educational leadership requires significant time and emotional investment, as highlighted by Adams, Kutty, and Zabidi (2017). Leaders must not only manage institutional goals but also inspire and motivate others. However, women often find themselves constrained by societal expectations, which assume that their primary role is to care for their families. This expectation leads to a double burden, wherein women are required to excel both at home and at work. According to Beelen and Dhert (2009), this dual expectation can lead to burnout, reducing the likelihood of women pursuing or thriving in leadership roles.

In addition to societal norms, organizational structures and policies also play a critical role in perpetuating gender disparities. Mulford (2003) emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive policies that accommodate the unique needs of women leaders, such as flexible working hours and parental leave. Without these accommodations, women are often forced to choose between their career aspirations and their caregiving responsibilities, a decision that disproportionately affects their representation in leadership positions.

Research also suggests that the lack of mentorship and support networks exacerbates the challenges faced by women. According to Piala et al. (2024), mentorship programs can provide women with the guidance and encouragement needed to navigate the complexities of educational leadership. These programs not only offer practical advice but also help women build confidence and resilience, which are essential for overcoming the barriers imposed by caregiving responsibilities.

Day, Sammons, and Gorgen (2020) advocate for a more holistic approach to leadership development, one that recognizes and addresses the unique challenges faced by women. This includes promoting gender equity in leadership training programs and creating environments that support work-life balance.

Similarly, the IIEP-UNESCO (2022) report emphasizes the importance of resilient education systems that empower women to take on leadership roles without compromising their personal responsibilities.

Furthermore, digital transformation in education offers new opportunities for women leaders. Bagacina et al. (2024) highlight how technology can facilitate flexible working arrangements, enabling women to balance their professional and personal commitments more effectively. By leveraging digital tools, educational institutions can create more inclusive environments that accommodate the diverse needs of their leaders.

The way forward requires a multi-faceted approach. Schleicher (2015) stresses that strong leadership is essential for 21st-century learning, and achieving this requires tapping into the full potential of both men and women. Addressing caregiving responsibilities is not just a matter of equity; it is a necessity for building robust and effective educational systems. As Ghamrawi (2023) points out, sustainable development in education hinges on the ability to harness diverse perspectives, and this can only be achieved by dismantling the barriers that prevent women from reaching their full potential in leadership roles.

The disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities continues to hinder women's advancement in educational leadership. Addressing this issue requires a combination of policy reforms, organizational support, and societal change. By fostering inclusive environments and leveraging technological advancements, educational institutions can create a more equitable landscape where women can thrive as leaders.

Institutional and Structural Biases in Educational Leadership

Institutional frameworks within educational organizations often reinforce gender disparities, perpetuating an imbalance in leadership roles. Policies and practices, such as informal networking and mentorship opportunities, tend to favor men, sidelining women from critical pathways to leadership advancement. Research by Thompson and Stokes (2023) underscores how these frameworks restrict women's access to strategic decision-making roles, relegating them instead to responsibilities centered around student welfare or administrative tasks. This structural bias not only limits professional growth but also diminishes the diversity of perspectives in leadership.

The skewed distribution of leadership opportunities begins with organizational cultures that undervalue women's potential. Adams, Kutty, and Zabidi (2017) emphasize that educational leadership in the 21st century requires inclusive policies that bridge gender gaps and foster equitable opportunities. However, entrenched biases often hinder progress. As Mushi et al. (2021) point out, informal systems of mentorship and networking are predominantly male-dominated, limiting women's access to critical professional relationships. These barriers are further exacerbated by societal norms that perpetuate stereotypes about women's leadership capabilities.

Women's leadership roles are frequently confined to administrative or welfare-oriented responsibilities, rather than strategic or executive-level positions. Day, Sammons, and Gorgen (2020) argue that successful school leadership requires strategic vision and decision-making capabilities, yet women are often excluded from such opportunities. This exclusion is rooted in institutional norms that undervalue women's contributions to high-stakes decision-making, a pattern also highlighted by Schleicher (2015), who notes that effective leadership relies on diverse perspectives and collaborative practices.

Ghamrawi (2023) discusses the alignment of educational leadership with Agenda 2030, emphasizing the need for policies that support gender equity in leadership roles. Despite these global goals, institutional resistance persists. For instance, Piala et al. (2024) advocate for capacity-building programs tailored to women's leadership development, arguing that such initiatives are essential to overcoming systemic barriers.

Moreover, structural biases within organizations create a cycle of exclusion. Kilag et al. (2023) highlight how distributive leadership models, while effective in theory, often fail to address gender disparities in practice. The prioritization of male leadership in critical decision-making roles undermines the potential

of distributive leadership to create equitable environments. Beelen and Dhert (2009) further underscore the role of teacher educators in dismantling these biases, suggesting that mentorship programs must be restructured to support women's leadership journeys.

The consequences of institutional biases extend beyond individual career trajectories. According to Veletić (2023), gender disparities in leadership hinder the overall effectiveness of educational systems. The lack of diverse leadership perspectives limits innovation and resilience, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Uy, Sasan, and Kilag (2023) highlight how women leaders often excel in fostering resilience and engagement during crises, yet their contributions remain undervalued.

Intersectionality and Discrimination in Educational Leadership

The concept of intersectionality underscores how overlapping social identities, such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status, amplify the discrimination faced by minority groups. For women in educational leadership, these compounded inequities create unique barriers to advancement. Harris (2020) highlights that intersectionality introduces challenges requiring nuanced and tailored solutions. These complexities are deeply rooted in systemic biases, which disproportionately affect minority women aspiring to leadership roles.

Adams, Kutty, and Zabidi (2017) emphasize that inclusive educational leadership must address these intersectional inequities to foster equitable opportunities. However, institutional frameworks often neglect the interplay of these social categories, perpetuating disparities. Minority women encounter heightened barriers due to limited access to mentorship, networking, and professional development programs, as noted by Mushi et al. (2021). These structural exclusions not only hinder individual career trajectories but also reduce the overall diversity and effectiveness of leadership within educational institutions.

The intersectionality of race and socioeconomic status further compounds the challenges minority women face. Beelen and Dhert (2009) argue that education systems must promote equity at all levels, including leadership, to achieve sustainable development goals.

Day, Sammons, and Gorgen (2020) highlight that successful school leadership depends on diverse perspectives and equitable representation, yet minority women remain underrepresented in decision-making positions. These disparities undermine the potential for transformative leadership that reflects the diverse needs of educational communities.

Leadership development programs often fail to address the unique challenges faced by minority women. Píala et al. (2024) advocate for holistic approaches to leadership development, which include targeted support for marginalized groups. Similarly, Ghamrawi (2023) stresses that achieving the global Agenda 2030 in education requires policies that actively dismantle intersectional barriers. Without intentional interventions, minority women will continue to face systemic obstacles in accessing leadership roles.

Structural discrimination also limits the resilience and adaptability of educational systems. Uy, Sasan, and Kilag (2023) demonstrate how diverse leadership, particularly during crises, fosters organizational resilience and innovation. However, the exclusion of minority women from leadership positions reduces the sector's ability to respond effectively to challenges, as noted by Veletić (2023). Kilag et al. (2023) further argue that distributive leadership, when implemented inclusively, has the potential to empower underrepresented groups and enhance leadership effectiveness.

Addressing intersectional discrimination requires systemic reforms that prioritize equity and inclusivity. By acknowledging and dismantling these barriers, educational leadership can become more representative, resilient, and responsive to the diverse needs of stakeholders. This transformation is critical for fostering sustainable and equitable education systems in the 21st century.

Conclusion:

The persistent underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles within education underscores the pressing need for systemic reform. Despite incremental progress, the barriers women face—rooted in intersectional, cultural, and institutional biases—continue to limit their advancement into influential leadership positions. Addressing these challenges is not only a matter of equity but also a necessity for fostering diverse, inclusive, and innovative leadership that reflects the needs of all stakeholders within educational communities.

Intersectional barriers, such as those linked to gender, race, and socioeconomic status, exacerbate inequities and create unique challenges for women, particularly those from minority backgrounds. Cultural expectations and societal norms further compound these issues, often discouraging women from pursuing or remaining in leadership roles. These persistent obstacles highlight the need for systemic changes that go beyond superficial solutions, requiring educational institutions to critically examine and revise existing policies, practices, and leadership development programs. Educational organizations must adopt proactive measures to dismantle these barriers, including creating mentorship and sponsorship opportunities specifically designed for women, implementing anti-discrimination policies, and fostering an inclusive culture that values diverse perspectives.

Holistic approaches to leadership development, such as those outlined by scholars like Adams, Kutty, and Zabidi (2017), should be prioritized to provide women with the skills, confidence, and support needed to thrive in senior roles. Furthermore, leadership strategies must embrace distributive and transformational approaches, which emphasize collaboration, equity, and empowerment for all stakeholders.

Future research should play a critical role in this transformative process by identifying and exploring innovative strategies and interventions to promote gender equity in educational leadership. Comparative studies across different cultural and organizational contexts could provide valuable insights into best practices and successful initiatives.

Additionally, longitudinal research examining the impact of targeted interventions, such as mentorship programs or inclusive policy reforms, could further inform evidence-based strategies for change. Achieving gender equity in educational leadership is not only a moral imperative but also an essential step toward creating resilient and effective educational systems. Women bring unique perspectives, skills, and approaches to leadership, which can enhance decision-making, foster collaboration, and drive positive organizational outcomes. By addressing the structural, cultural, and intersectional barriers that hinder women's progression, educational institutions can create environments where all individuals, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to lead and contribute meaningfully. This commitment to equity will ultimately strengthen education systems globally, ensuring that they are better equipped to meet the diverse needs of learners and communities in the 21st century.

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