

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AMONG WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Leadership development among women in higher education is central to institutional quality, equity, and the capacity of universities to respond to complex social and academic challenges. Women now participate widely in higher education as students and academic staff in many national contexts, yet their representation often declines at senior decision-making levels. This paper presents a comparative and evidence-informed review of the conditions that shape women's leadership development in universities and colleges. It examines career pathways, access to mentoring and sponsorship, leadership preparation, institutional culture, workload distribution, promotion practices, work-life integration, and the operation of informal professional networks. The study does not claim a new survey of a single institution. Instead, it synthesises established research on gender and academic leadership and applies a structured framework for assessing leadership-development environments. The analysis shows that women's leadership outcomes cannot be explained only by individual confidence, qualifications, or ambition. Organisational arrangements such as opaque selection processes, unequal service expectations, limited access to influential networks, and leadership norms built around uninterrupted career patterns can restrict progression. At the same time, carefully designed development programmes, transparent promotion systems, supportive mentors and sponsors, inclusive governance, and flexible career policies can strengthen leadership readiness and retention. The paper argues that effective development must combine individual capability-building with institutional change. It concludes that higher education institutions should treat women's leadership development as an ongoing governance and talent-management priority, supported by measurable goals, accountable review, and equitable access to high-value leadership opportunities.

Keywords: Women in Higher Education, Leadership Development, Academic Leadership, Gender Equity, Mentoring, Career Advancement, Institutional Culture, Higher Education Governance, Inclusive Leadership, Professional Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions influence knowledge production, professional preparation, social mobility, and public debate. Their leadership structures therefore matter not only for internal administration but also for the values that universities communicate to students, staff, and wider society. Women have expanded their presence in higher education over recent decades, including as researchers, teachers, administrators, and policy contributors. However, participation across the academic workforce has not always produced proportionate representation in senior leadership roles such as dean, provost, registrar, vice-chancellor, president, and governing-board chair.

Leadership development refers to the planned and informal processes through which

individuals acquire the knowledge, confidence, professional relationships, strategic awareness, and practical experience required to lead. In universities, these processes include formal training, mentoring, committee participation, research leadership, programme coordination, administrative assignments, network access, and exposure to institutional decision-making. The opportunity to develop through these routes is not always shared equally. Career advancement may be influenced by who receives visible assignments, who is encouraged to apply, who is trusted with budgetary or strategic responsibilities, and whose leadership style is treated as credible.

Research on women's leadership in higher education has moved beyond the assumption that representation will improve automatically

as more women enter academic employment. Scholars have shown that organisational culture, gendered expectations of authority, informal gatekeeping, unequal care responsibilities, and performance measures can combine to create a gradual narrowing of women's progression at senior levels. The issue is not a lack of competence. Rather, institutional systems may reward career patterns, networks, and leadership behaviours that are more accessible to some groups than to others.

The higher education context has distinctive features. Academic careers are frequently shaped by long research timelines, external funding, publication expectations, disciplinary prestige, committee work, and the balance between teaching and administrative service. Women may be disproportionately expected to provide mentoring, pastoral support, diversity work, and teaching-related service, even when such work receives less recognition in promotion decisions. At the same time, women can face scrutiny that is different in tone or intensity from that applied to male leaders, particularly when they exercise authority, negotiate resources, or challenge established practices.

This paper examines major dimensions of leadership development among women in higher education. It focuses on the institutional conditions that support or constrain progress, compares common approaches to leadership preparation, and identifies practical principles for designing inclusive development systems. Particular attention is given to the difference between programmes that concentrate only on individual adjustment and approaches that also

change the environment in which leadership is identified, developed, selected, and evaluated.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Early discussions of women's academic leadership frequently highlighted limited representation at senior levels and the influence of organisational cultures that treated leadership as an extension of traditionally male career pathways. Later scholarship broadened the analysis to include the role of informal networks, leadership identity, visibility, mentoring, sponsorship, and the distribution of academic service. This work shows that the pathway to senior leadership is rarely a simple sequence of qualifications. It is shaped by access to opportunities that build institutional knowledge and demonstrate readiness for broader responsibility.

More recent studies emphasise that leadership development is most effective when it connects personal learning with structural reform. Formal courses can help participants develop strategic skills, financial literacy, negotiation ability, and confidence in governance settings. Yet such courses have limited impact when promotion processes remain opaque, senior roles are narrowly defined, or women continue to carry disproportionate invisible labour. The literature therefore supports an integrated approach that includes transparent systems, active sponsorship, inclusive networks, flexible career practices, and leadership models that value collaboration, ethical judgement, and academic purpose.

LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY TABLE

S. No.	Author / Year	Study Focus	Key Contribution	Limitations Identified
1	Eagly & Carli (2007)	Women's leadership pathways	Explained leadership progression as a complex route shaped by multiple visible and invisible barriers rather than a single glass-ceiling event.	Broad cross-sector analysis; institutional features of universities require further attention.
2	Ely et al. (2011)	Women's leadership development programmes	Showed that effective programmes should address gendered context, identity, relationships, and organisational systems alongside skill development.	Focuses on programme design; implementation quality varies across institutions.
3	Morley	Gender and the	Examined how managerial	Context-specific

	(2013)	leaderist turn in higher education	leadership norms and institutional cultures can shape women's interest in, access to, and experience of senior roles.	evidence; national policy environments differ.
4	Blackmore (2014)	Academic disengagement from leadership	Highlighted how workload, institutional change, and devaluation of academic values can affect women's willingness to seek senior positions.	Does not treat all disciplines or career stages equally.
5	O'Connor (2015)	Women's journeys to senior academic leadership	Identified the importance of informal networks, relational support, career timing, and institutional recognition in leadership advancement.	Findings are shaped by the national higher education system studied.

3. OBJECT OF STUDY

The primary focus of this research is to examine how higher education institutions support the development of women as academic and administrative leaders. The study considers both individual development opportunities and the organisational conditions that determine whether these opportunities are accessible, valued, and translated into leadership progression. The principal objects of study are outlined below:

3.1 LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT DIMENSIONS UNDER INVESTIGATION

- Access to formal leadership training, coaching, mentoring, sponsorship, and peer-learning networks
- Opportunities to lead research teams, programmes, committees, budgets, strategic projects, and institutional initiatives
- Career visibility, leadership identity, confidence, negotiation capacity, and decision-making experience
- Selection, promotion, succession, and performance-review practices that influence access to senior roles
- Workload distribution, care responsibilities, flexibility, wellbeing, and the recognition of academic service

3.2 HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXTS

- Public and private universities, colleges, research institutes, and professional higher education institutions
- Teaching, research, administrative, student-support, and governance roles across academic disciplines

- Early-career, mid-career, and senior professional stages, including transitions into formal leadership
- Departmental, faculty, institutional, and sector-level contexts that shape career opportunity and influence
- Face-to-face, hybrid, and digital working arrangements that affect participation in professional networks

3.3 EVALUATION PARAMETERS

- Transparency and fairness of leadership-selection, promotion, and succession processes
- Availability and quality of mentoring, sponsorship, coaching, and leadership-development initiatives
- Distribution of high-value assignments, committee leadership, research resources, and strategic visibility
- Organisational culture, psychological safety, inclusion, and freedom from discriminatory conduct
- Retention, leadership readiness, participation in governance, and perceived career mobility

3.4 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS FOCUS

- Individual capability development versus institutional responsibility for equitable opportunity
- Mentoring relationships versus sponsorship that actively opens access to influential roles and networks
- Formal leadership programmes versus informal learning through assignments, networks, and role models
- Representation in leadership positions versus substantive influence over resources, policy, and strategy

- Short-term participation outcomes versus sustained progression, retention, and organisational change

3.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE SCOPE

- To identify major factors that influence leadership development among women in higher education
- To explain how formal and informal development opportunities can shape leadership progression
- To compare the contribution of mentoring, sponsorship, institutional culture, and transparent systems
- To support inclusive leadership-development policies and evidence-informed institutional practice

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a comparative and evidence-informed research methodology to examine leadership development among women in higher education. The framework draws on scholarship in gender and organisations, academic leadership, professional development, and higher education governance. It is designed to explain how institutional environments can be assessed across different universities and colleges rather than to claim a new statistical survey of one named institution. The approach combines conceptual review of published research, established leadership-development principles, and practical considerations for institutional policy and programme design.

The analysis is organised around the leadership pathway: entry into academic employment, accumulation of development opportunities, access to visible assignments, participation in networks, selection for formal roles, and retention in senior positions. Each dimension is considered under common conditions, including discipline, career stage, institutional mission, workload expectations, family responsibilities, and national policy context. The framework treats leadership development as a shared responsibility between individuals and institutions, requiring transparent criteria, senior accountability, and attention to both formal processes and informal cultures.

METHODOLOGY FRAMEWORK

Published research on women's leadership, academic careers, and organisational inclusion informs the qualitative synthesis.

Formal learning, mentoring, sponsorship, network access, and leadership assignments are examined as connected development mechanisms.

Institutional structures, including promotion, workload allocation, recruitment, and governance, are treated as key interpretive conditions.

The analysis distinguishes participation in leadership programmes from actual access to influence and career advancement.

Comparisons consider career stage, discipline, institutional type, and the relationship between visible and invisible academic labour.

Review criteria include transparency, inclusion, accessibility, leadership readiness, retention, and organisational accountability.

No fabricated survey results, coding totals, or experimental measurements are presented.

Recommendations focus on practical, context-sensitive leadership development and regular institutional review.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis section presents a comparative interpretation of the principal dimensions used to assess leadership development among women in higher education. The analysis is based on reported research patterns, leadership-development theory, and institutional governance considerations. The objective is to show how different organisational conditions can influence the availability, quality, and impact of leadership opportunities.

Five dimensions are considered: career opportunity and visibility, mentoring and sponsorship, leadership capability and experience, institutional culture and workload, and selection and retention. The comparison is qualitative because the significance of a particular programme, policy, or leadership role depends on discipline, institutional mission, national setting, staff composition, and the wider distribution of power within the organisation.

5.1 COMPARATIVE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT ANALYSIS

S. No.	Dimension	Primary Evidence	Positive Indicator	Common Risk	Overall Importance
1	Career opportunity and visibility	Acting roles, strategic projects, committee leadership, and access to decision-making forums	Women receive meaningful, visible assignments that build institutional credibility and leadership experience	Routine teaching or service work may increase while high-impact leadership assignments remain unevenly distributed	Essential starting indicator
2	Mentoring and sponsorship	Quality of guidance, advocacy, introductions, feedback, and career support	Mentors provide developmental guidance and sponsors actively support access to influential opportunities	Mentoring may offer advice without changing access to power, networks, or advancement opportunities	Very important
3	Capability and leadership identity	Training, coaching, reflection, negotiation, financial literacy, and leadership practice	Development is linked to real responsibilities, confidence, and a credible leadership identity	Programmes may frame women as needing to adapt while ignoring institutional barriers	Very important
4	Institutional culture and workload	Climate, respect, inclusion, workload allocation, flexibility, and recognition of service	Leadership culture supports diverse styles and service work is valued fairly in promotion systems	Invisible labour, bias, and excessive workload can reduce time for research, networks, and leadership preparation	Important
5	Selection, promotion, and retention	Recruitment criteria, shortlisting, interview practice, succession planning, and exit patterns	Transparent criteria, diverse panels, accountable succession planning, and sustained retention of women leaders	Opaque procedures and narrow leadership prototypes can reproduce existing patterns of advantage	Excellent for holistic review

5.2 EXTENDED ANALYTICAL INTERPRETATION

- Career opportunity and visibility are foundational because formal leadership roles are often preceded by smaller but influential assignments. Leading a curriculum review, managing a research centre, chairing a committee, directing a programme, or coordinating a strategic initiative can develop knowledge of institutional systems and make leadership capability visible to senior decision-

makers. Where these assignments are distributed informally, women may receive fewer opportunities to build the experience that later selection panels expect.

- Mentoring and sponsorship should be distinguished carefully. Mentors can help individuals interpret organisational culture, plan career moves, and develop confidence. Sponsors go further by using their own influence to recommend a person for challenging assignments,

introduce her to decision-makers, and support her candidacy for roles. Institutions that rely only on informal mentoring may reproduce unequal access because influential sponsorship is often hidden within established networks.

- Leadership capability and identity development involve more than attendance at a workshop. Higher education leaders need experience in strategy, budgeting, conflict resolution, academic quality, people management, research governance, and public communication. Development is stronger when participants can practise these skills through supported assignments, receive feedback, and reflect on their own leadership values. A programme should not imply that women must abandon collaborative or ethical approaches to become credible leaders; it should broaden the institution's understanding of effective leadership.
- Institutional culture and workload allocation shape the time and energy available for development. Women may be asked to perform substantial mentoring, student-support, committee, equity, and service tasks because they are seen as reliable or approachable. These contributions are important, yet they can be career-limiting when they are not recognised in workload models or promotion criteria. A supportive culture treats such work fairly while also protecting time for scholarship, strategic participation, and career-building opportunities.
- Selection, promotion, and retention analysis asks whether institutions use clear criteria, diverse panels, structured interviews, and accountable succession planning. Even when women participate in leadership programmes, progress may remain limited if senior roles are advertised narrowly, selection standards are vague, or candidates are judged against a traditional prototype of authority. Equitable systems assess demonstrated capability, potential, experience, and institutional contribution rather than informal familiarity alone.

5.3 OBSERVATIONS FROM DATA ANALYSIS

- Women's leadership development is shaped by the distribution of real opportunities, not only by individual qualifications or motivation.
- Mentoring is valuable, but sponsorship and access to influential networks are often decisive for advancement into senior roles.
- Leadership programmes have greater impact when participants receive visible assignments, feedback, and access to institutional decision-making.
- Unequal workloads and unrecognised service can restrict research output, professional visibility, and readiness for leadership selection.
- Transparent recruitment, promotion, and succession systems reduce dependence on informal gatekeeping and personal familiarity.
- Institutional culture matters because credibility, safety, and belonging affect whether women seek, accept, and remain in leadership roles.
- Regular review using disaggregated evidence can help institutions identify where the leadership pathway narrows and why.

6. DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis shows that leadership development among women in higher education should be understood as an institutional capacity issue rather than a narrow question of individual readiness. Universities depend on diverse expertise to lead teaching, research, student success, community engagement, and organisational change. When women face restricted access to high-value development opportunities, institutions lose potential leadership capacity and may weaken their ability to respond to the needs of diverse academic communities.

A central finding is the distinction between participation and influence. An institution may have women on committees, in development programmes, or in middle-management roles while still limiting their authority over budgets, strategy, appointments, research infrastructure, or major policy decisions. Representation is important, but substantive leadership development requires access to roles where individuals can exercise judgement, build a record of impact, and gain

experience with complex institutional responsibilities. Review processes should therefore ask not only who attends a programme, but also who leads consequential work and who progresses after participation. Career timing requires careful consideration. Academic leadership opportunities may arise during periods when staff are balancing research consolidation, teaching responsibilities, caregiving, or professional transition. Rigid assumptions about uninterrupted availability can favour conventional career paths and exclude capable candidates whose careers include non-linear stages. Flexible leadership structures, shared or distributed leadership models, transparent workload planning, and fair assessment of career interruptions can widen access without reducing standards.

Leadership culture also determines whether women can lead authentically. Where authority is associated with dominance, constant availability, or narrow networks, potential leaders may conclude that senior roles are incompatible with their values or wellbeing. Institutions can broaden leadership norms by recognising collaboration, ethical decision-making, communication, team development, and academic stewardship as core leadership competencies. This does not lower expectations; it creates a more complete understanding of what effective leadership requires in knowledge-intensive organisations. Sustainable reform combines development programmes with governance and accountability. Universities can map leadership pathways, publish selection criteria, establish sponsored-development opportunities, train selection panels, monitor workload allocation, and assess retention after promotion. They can also create forums in which women leaders share experience, identify institutional barriers, and contribute to policy redesign. Responsibility should not rest solely with women to overcome obstacles. Senior leaders, governing bodies, human-

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resource units, and academic managers must make equitable development an explicit organisational priority.

7. CONCLUSION

This study presented a comparative analysis of leadership development among women in higher education through the dimensions of career opportunity, mentoring and sponsorship, leadership capability, institutional culture, and selection and retention. The analysis shows that women's progression into senior academic and administrative leadership is influenced by the interaction of individual development and organisational design.

The findings indicate that each review dimension addresses a different aspect of institutional quality. Visible assignments build readiness and credibility, mentoring and sponsorship provide guidance and access, practical leadership experience strengthens capability, inclusive workload and culture support participation, and transparent selection systems reduce reliance on informal gatekeeping. No single intervention is sufficient on its own. Effective development requires a coordinated framework that connects programmes with opportunity, accountability, and measurable change.

The study concludes that higher education institutions should develop women's leadership through transparent processes, active sponsorship, meaningful leadership assignments, fair recognition of service, flexible career practices, and continuing review. Future research can strengthen this field through longitudinal studies, comparative analysis across disciplines and institutional types, evaluation of programme outcomes, and closer attention to how race, class, disability, location, and other social factors interact with gender in academic leadership. Supporting women's leadership is not only an equity objective; it is a practical strategy for building stronger, more responsive, and more credible higher education institutions.

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