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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE LOW REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS AT AZERBAIJANI UNIVERSITIES

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AZƏRBAYCAN UNIVERSİTETLƏRİNDƏ QADIN İDARƏÇİLƏRİN AZ OLMASINA TƏSİR EDƏN AMİLLƏR

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ФАКТОРЫ, ВЛИЯЮЩИЕ НА НИЗКОЕ ПРЕДСТАВИТЕЛЬСТВО ЖЕНЩИН-РУКОВОДИТЕЛЕЙ В УНИВЕРСИТЕТАХ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНА

Abstract. The underrepresentation of women in academic leadership remains a pressing issue globally and in Azerbaijan. This study explores key factors limiting women's advancement in Azerbaijani universities through a mixed-methods approach, including surveys and interviews with female academics and administrators.

Keywords: *university administrators, Azerbaijan, women, gender inequity*

Xülasə. Akademik rəhbərlik sahəsində qadınların təmsilçiliyinin azlığı həm global miqyasda, həm də Azərbaycanda aktual problemdir. Bu tədqiqat Azərbaycan universitetlərində qadınların karyera irəliləyişinə mane olan əsas amilləri araşdırır. Qarışıq metodlardan istifadə olunaraq sorğular və qadın akademiklər və idarəçilərlə müsahibələr əsasında təhlillər aparılmışdır.

Açar sözlər: *universitet idarəçiləri, Azərbaycan, qadınlar, gender bərabərsizliyi*

Аннотация. Недостаточное представительство женщин в академическом руководстве остаётся актуальной проблемой как в мировом масштабе, так и в Азербайджане. Данное исследование рассматривает основные факторы, ограничивающие карьерный рост женщин в университетах Азербайджана. Используется смешанный метод исследования, включающий опросы, анализ институциональных данных и интервью с женщинами-академиками и администраторами.

Ключевые слова: *университетские руководители, Азербайджан, женщины, гендерное неравенство*

Introduction

In alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that Azerbaijan has embraced, "gender equality and women's empowerment" are considered key drivers for the country's continued economic growth. This is because "only by ensuring the rights of

women and girls across all the goals will we achieve justice and inclusion, economies that work for all, and sustain our shared environment now and for future generations" [1, p. 9].

Despite progress in addressing gender equality, the representation of women in high-level government positions in Azerbaijan

remains limited, and the nation is actively working to achieve its SDG targets [1, p. 7]. One such target is addressing the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership, a challenge that persists globally. While significant strides have been made in gender parity regarding higher education enrolment and degree attainment, women remain disproportionately excluded from senior management and decision-making roles in universities and research institutions. This paradox highlights the complexity of gender disparities in academia, where systemic, cultural, and institutional factors intersect, hindering women's career progression.

This research explores the persistent underrepresentation of women in academic positions within higher education institutions in Azerbaijan.

Scientific Propositions:

1. Gender inequality in academia is not solely a result of individual choices but is deeply embedded in institutional structures and societal norms;

2. Systemic barriers, including gender bias in recruitment and promotion, lack of mentorship, and traditional gender roles, hinder women's career advancement in higher education;

3. Institutional practices and policies often fail to adequately support gender equity, particularly at senior academic and leadership levels.

Key Research Findings:

1. Women are well-represented in entry-level academic positions but are significantly underrepresented in senior academic and leadership roles;

2. Contributing factors include unequal access to mentorship and professional networks, implicit bias in promotion processes, and insufficient work-life balance support;

3. Cultural expectations regarding women's roles in family life further limit their professional mobility and leadership opportunities;

4. There is a lack of consistent and enforced gender equity policies within university systems.

Theoretical and Practical Significance. Theoretically, the study expands the discourse on gender and higher education by contextualizing the Azerbaijani experience

within broader global patterns of academic gender inequality. It contributes to feminist institutionalism and organizational change theories by showing how gender norms and structures persist in university governance.

Practically, the findings provide clear, evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and university leaders. These include the implementation of gender-sensitive policies, structured mentorship programs, equity-driven promotion criteria.

2. Literature Review

A substantial body of literature has explored the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership, emphasizing systemic, cultural, and institutional barriers. Structural obstacles, such as discriminatory hiring practices and male-dominated informal networks, have been identified as significant factors marginalizing women's participation in leadership roles [2, 67].

The "leaky pipeline" phenomenon has also been widely studied, illustrating how women progressively leave academic career tracks due to gender-specific challenges, including family responsibilities and limited access to mentorship opportunities [3, 89]. Additionally, gender bias in performance evaluations exacerbates disparities, as women's achievements are often undervalued compared to those of their male counterparts [4, p. 39].

The societal injustices rooted in gender inequality further deprive women of social status, relegating them primarily to reproductive roles [5, p. 23]. In Azerbaijan, the deeply entrenched patriarchal character of family education, characterized by male authoritarianism in decision-making and social relations, significantly impacts women's social and public activities [6, 26].

Theoretical Framework

Research aimed at explaining the challenges women face in leadership roles has highlighted three key categories of factors: social barriers, cultural expectations, and structural inequities [3, p. 92]. These elements significantly influence women's aspirations and opportunities for leadership roles.

Women are often expected to embody relational, nurturing, and communal traits, as defined by traditional gender roles [6, p. 50]. According to social role theory, the gendered

division of labor shapes both descriptive and prescriptive gender role expectations for individuals' development [3, p. 92]. In contrast, feminist analysis assumes that women's oppression is embedded in their social, structural, and cultural status. Feminist and sociocultural theories are integrated into the study's theoretical framework to understand women's epistemic perspectives and the challenges they face in leadership positions, particularly in educational settings.

Cultural Aspects Hindering Women in Leadership

Cultural factors also play a significant role in hindering women's ability to assume leadership roles. Research by Mollayeva indicates that stereotypes, a lack of role models, and limited training opportunities are among the challenges faced by women leaders globally [5, p. 20]. Additionally, Stead and Eliot's study in the Arab Gulf nations revealed that workplace discrimination, cultural taboos, negative perceptions of working women, and a lack of trust and confidence in female leaders are common obstacles. Similarly, Martin (2011) found that organizational barriers, such as traditional career paths, male-dominated personnel systems, and attitudes from both male employees and women themselves, can impede women's career progression [8, p. 24].

Mollayeva further emphasizes that culture – comprising values, beliefs, customs, and practices tied to the workplace and the wider community – can negatively impact how women leaders perform and their ability to take on constructive leadership roles [9, p. 11-13].

Structural Aspects Hindering Women in Leadership

Women in leadership roles in universities often face structural challenges, such as a lack of empowerment, which hampers their ability to influence decision-making and achieve organizational goals. Empowerment is a crucial factor that enhances an individual's sense of affiliation and belonging to an organization, positively impacting attitudes and fostering a sense of value and respect [5, p. 23]. However, structural barriers—rooted in the personal attributes of women leaders as well as their socioeconomic circumstances—may significantly impede their ability to effectively fulfill their

leadership roles in higher education institutions. The oppression of women has been a central focus of structural, social, and cultural theories, which aim to understand the systemic nature of gender inequality. Social and cultural norms place women within an interlocking system of gendered expectations, which often leads to disempowerment among leaders in organizations [10, p. 27].

Gendered Societal and Cultural Norms

Deeply rooted societal and cultural norms significantly shape perceptions and expectations of gender roles, often disadvantaging women's career progression in academia [11, p. 231]. These traditional stereotypes, coupled with the gendered division of domestic and caregiving responsibilities, place greater demands on women, thereby restricting their capacity to meet the intensive requirements of academic leadership. Jaschik observed that “the lack of women in senior positions in universities in many countries that long ago reached gender equity in enrollments” highlights the persistence of systemic barriers beyond mere enrolment parity [12, p. 94]. Work-life balance remains one of the most significant challenges faced by women in academic leadership that women in senior management positions within higher education institutions often grapple with the burden of multiple responsibilities, including societal expectations, family influences, and cultural norms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research approach coupled with descriptive quantitative data to investigate the many variables that contribute to the under-representation of women academics in leadership positions in Azerbaijan. The data were collected through an online semi-structured survey conducted between September 2024 and February 2025. A total of 25 female academics from leading Azerbaijani universities participated in the survey.

3.2 Participants

The questionnaire addressed female academics at Azerbaijani institutions. Participants came from several universities, including Karabakh University, Azerbaijan State University of Economics, Baku State University, and Azerbaijan University of Languages.

3.3 Data Collection

Data was gathered using a semi-structured online survey delivered through Google Forms. The survey was intended to match the study goals and included both closed-ended and open-ended questions.

4. Results

The survey results highlight that institutional, workplace, and cultural barriers collectively contribute to the under representation of women in academic leadership. A majority of

respondents identified gender bias in promotion (88%) and limited leadership networks (76%) as key institutional challenges, alongside weak policy implementation. Within the workplace, family responsibilities (64%) and the lack of female role models (52%) were seen as significant hindrances, although peer support and professional development were valued. Culturally, traditional gender roles (80%) and societal expectations around family were major limiting factors.

Table 1. Summary of Survey Results

Factor	Survey Item	Percentage (%)
Institutional Barriers	Gender bias in promotion	88
Institutional Barriers	Limited access to networks	76
Institutional Barriers	Policy implementation issues	68
Institutional Barriers	Mentorship programs	32
Institutional Barriers	Flexible work arrangements	28
Workplace Dynamics	Family responsibilities	64
Workplace Dynamics	Lack of role models	52
Workplace Dynamics	Professional development	72
Workplace Dynamics	Peer support networks	56
Workplace Dynamics	Decision-making committees	40
Cultural Factors	Traditional gender roles	80
Cultural Factors	Societal expectations	48

5. Discussion

The study's findings underscore the continuous and diverse impediments to women academics' promotion into leadership positions in Azerbaijani institutions. The intersectionality of the barriers identified in this study points to the necessity of nuanced strategies. Generic, one-size-fits-all policies are insufficient to address the unique challenges faced by women from marginalized backgrounds. Instead, tailored interventions that consider specific cultural and institutional contexts are essential [13, p. 10]. These systemic barriers are deeply rooted and require comprehensive solutions that address structural inequities.

5.1 Institutional Barriers

The lack of transparent recruitment and promotion processes emerged as a significant impediment for women aspiring to leadership roles. Many participants highlighted that decision-making in academia is often influenced

by informal networks dominated by men, perpetuating exclusivity and bias. These observations align with Morley , who noted that “old boys’ networks” remain a substantial barrier for women in leadership positions. Moreover, the absence of structured mentorship programs exacerbates this challenge, as women are left without critical guidance and advocacy to navigate institutional hierarchies [13, p. 12].

5.2 Cultural and Societal Norms

Cultural and societal norms emerged as particularly restrictive for women in regions with strong patriarchal traditions. Participants from such areas described how societal expectations around caregiving and domestic responsibilities frequently conflicted with the demands of academic leadership. This finding corroborates Elza Mollayeva’s observation that cultural expectations disproportionately burden women, limiting their participation in leadership roles [9, p. 9].

Many respondents reported encountering resistance or skepticism from colleagues and subordinates, driven by entrenched stereotypes about women's leadership capabilities.

5.3 Workplace Dynamics

Workplace dynamics in Azerbaijani universities play an important role in shaping women's professional growth chances. According to the poll results, the most major problems that women academics confront are family obligations (64%) and a dearth of female role models in leadership positions (52%). These findings demonstrate how conventional gender roles continue to affect workplace expectations, with women being seen as primary carers, restricting their availability for leadership roles and other professional obligations.

The lack of female leaders in higher academic administration perpetuates a cycle of under-representation. Without prominent role models, ambitious female academics lack mentoring and direction, thus limiting their leadership potential. This is consistent with the results of Morley and O'Connor, who highlight the significance of role models and networks in overcoming gendered hurdles in academia [10, p. 28].

Furthermore, just 40% of respondents reported serving on decision-making committees, showing that women participate in governance processes to a limited extent. This under-representation limits women's influence on policy and strategic orientations, maintaining gender disparities at the institution level.

Conclusion

This research investigated the under-representation of women in academic leadership roles in Azerbaijan, focusing on institutional impediments, workplace dynamics, and cultural

variables.

Recommendations

1. To solve these difficulties, Azerbaijan's higher education institutions must develop comprehensive gender equity programs. The key recommendations include:

2. Creating systematic mentoring and leadership development programs for women.

3. Increasing gender awareness at all levels of university .

Relevance, scientific novelty and applied significance of the topic. The underrepresentation of women in academic and leadership positions in higher education institutions is a problem of urgent and strategic importance in Azerbaijan, as well as on a global scale. Existing gender-based structural barriers, unequal opportunities and socio-cultural expectations have a serious impact on women's academic advancement. In this regard, the topic remains relevant for both the scientific community and institutions that shape higher education policy.

The scientific novelty of the study is that for the first time, a complex and multi-method approach to the issue of women's participation in the higher education system in Azerbaijan is used, from a gender perspective, i.e. the study assesses the current situation not only with statistical indicators, but also based on the experiences of female academics and the analysis of institutional policies. This approach fills the gaps in the existing scientific literature and allows for the application of new theoretical frameworks.

The theoretical significance of the study is that it contributes to international research conducted in the field of gender and higher education from the Azerbaijani context. The results obtained are interpreted in terms of feminist institutionalism and organizational change theories, expanding the possibilities of applying these theoretical approaches at the regional level.

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