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INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO SUPPORTING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Abstract

This article examines innovative approaches to supporting women's leadership in the educational environment of higher education institutions. Despite significant progress in female representation in academic settings, gender imbalance in educational leadership remains a critical global challenge. Through analysis of contemporary theoretical and applied research from American, European, and Asian institutions with varying levels of economic development, the study identifies key barriers to women's advancement in academic leadership. These include cultural factors (entrenched gender norms and male-dominated institutional cultures), psychological barriers (imposter syndrome and leadership anxiety), and organizational obstacles (glass ceiling phenomena and biased hiring practices). The research highlights the particular challenges in Kazakhstan, where women constitute only 26.5 percent of top university leadership despite their substantial representation among higher education professionals. By examining global best practices and Kazakhstan's specific context, the study identifies effective Innovative Approaches including institutional initiatives, structured networking opportunities, formalized mentoring programs, and family-supportive policies. Based on this analysis, the research proposes forward-thinking interventions for Kazakhstan's higher education sector: implementing targeted leadership development programs, enhancing transparency in human resource policies, creating innovative work-life balance solutions, and establishing robust professional networks for women academics. These innovative approaches aim to address persistent gender disparities while creating sustainable pathways for women's leadership advancement in higher education. The analysis emphasizes the importance of comprehensive, context-sensitive strategies that adapt proven innovative practices to local educational environments.

Keywords: gender equality, academic leadership, women leaders, gender stereotypes, glass ceiling.

Introduction. Gender equality, including in higher education, remains one of the most important challenges of modern society, despite the positive steps taken in recent decades. While women constitute a significant proportion of students and professors in universities, their presence in high academic and managerial positions remains limited. These findings are supported by studies that point to the difficulty of promoting women to leadership positions in university academic environments (Redmond et al., 2016; Gandhi & Sen, 2021).

Researchers note that there is a direct link between the level of gender equality and economic

performance of a country (Mukhamadiyeva et al., 2019). Using the case of Kazakhstan as an example, they showed that reducing gender disparities will not only contribute to social development, but will also have a positive impact on the country's economy, increasing the effectiveness of existing programs to develop human capital and strengthen economic stability. Kazakhstan is taking steps to achieve gender equality through the implementation of state strategies, including the Concept of gender and family policies until 2030 (On approval of the Concept of family and gender policies in the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2030, 2016) and

commitments to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 – Gender Equality (United Nations Kazakhstan, n.d.). These initiatives emphasize Kazakhstan's commitment to creating equal opportunities for men and women. However, despite legislative efforts, statistical data from recent years show that the situation in education is still far from ideal. According to reports from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, women are a more qualified labor force than men: 41.4% of women have higher education, while among men the percentage of persons with higher education is lower. In the education sector, the total number of female employees is 79.2% of all employees (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023). On average, the number of female senior managers in universities is 26.5%. Statistically, there are three male rectors for every one female rector (Bureau of National Statistics, n.d.). Thus, taking into account the employment of women in the education sector, we see a significant gender imbalance in the representation of women in leadership positions in higher education.

Despite the abundance of data on gender issues in general (Koenig et al., 2011), there is a gap in educational research between the need to synthesize and systematize available information and its fragmentation. Relevant data, studies, and reports exist in isolated forms, making it difficult to use them effectively to develop systemic solutions. This gap hinders the full analysis and development of strategies to address the gender imbalance in academic leadership.

In this regard, the generalization of the best world and Kazakhstani experience of psychological and pedagogical support of women's leadership in the educational environment of universities is relevant and in demand. This will contribute to the formation of a sustainable environment for career and personal development growth of women leaders, will help to adapt the best support strategies to the cultural context of Kazakhstan. This approach will not only minimize barriers, but also create a system that promotes the development of women's professional

competencies, strengthening their positions in academic leadership and the fulfillment of the country's international commitments in the framework of sustainable development.

In the context of our study, by mechanisms of psychological and pedagogical support we will mean a set of tools, processes, strategies and practices that contribute to the creation of favorable conditions for the career growth and development of women leaders in higher education.

Purpose of the study: development of science-based recommendations for the implementation of mechanisms of psychological and pedagogical support for women leaders, adapted to the educational system of higher education in the Republic of Kazakhstan based on the identification and analysis of factors that hinder the development of women's leadership.

With the objective in mind, we have formulated the following *research questions* for this paper:

1. What socio-cultural, organizational and psychological barriers impede the career development and advancement of women leaders?
2. What mechanisms contribute to the successful career development of women executives in a professional environment?
3. What mechanisms of Kazakhstan can be proposed, taking into account the adaptation of successful world experience?

Materials and Methods. This study is a theoretical review of contemporary publications on women's leadership in academia.

Methods used include: *content analysis*: identifying semantic categories (e.g., "gender stereotypes", "organizational practices", "cultural specificities"), key ideas and practices into thematic clusters; *systematization and conceptualization of data*: generalization of data from theoretical and empirical studies followed by systematization.

Procedure. Although this study is not a rigorous systematic review, nevertheless, we followed a certain procedure to develop scientifically valid conclusions and recommendations.

We used the following key phrases to search for publications, using AND and OR operators

to refine the queries: “women leadership”, “leadership in higher education”, “gender equality in academia”, “women in university management”, “gender barriers in education”, “gender imbalance in leadership”, “women leaders’ development”, “prospects of women leadership”.

The following inclusion criteria were established: publications must cover the period from 2010 to 2024, cover research on higher education only, and be published in peer-reviewed English-language publications.

At the first stage, we removed duplicate entries and analyzed titles and abstracts. At the second stage, we analyzed the full text of the articles for compliance with the inclusion criteria. At the third stage, we conducted content analysis, summarizing and systematizing the content of publications.

Results. *Factors and barriers negatively affecting female academic leadership: socio-cultural barriers.*

- Discrimination based on gender stereotypes. Perceptions of leadership are often associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness and authoritarianism, while women who display the same qualities are criticized. For example, female leaders from Germany and the UK have noted that men’s aggressive behavior is socially perceived as assertiveness, whereas similar behavior in women is interpreted as emotionality or incompetence (Read & Kehm, 2016)

- Sociocultural expectations. In countries with traditional cultures, expectations of women focus primarily on their role in the family. For example, in Vietnam, Confucian traditions reinforce the notion that women should focus on domestic responsibilities, limiting their career ambitions (Maheshwari et al., 2023). Studies in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Malaysia indicate that women are expected to be highly involved in the family, which reduces their willingness and ability to assume leadership positions (Islam et al., 2023). Women in Kazakhstan face the influence of traditional, Soviet and Western values, which creates conflicting expectations and complicates their career development. In Kazakhstan, women are forced to balance

family expectations and professional ambitions. This double standard creates significant barriers to career development (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017).

– The predominance of masculine culture in universities. The culture of universities remains predominantly male. Women are often excluded from informal professional networks where key decisions are made. Male dominance is perceived as the natural order, preventing women from participating equally. A study by Read and Kehm (2016) found that women leaders face the fact that their leadership style is perceived as ‘unnatural’ and professional successes are often downplayed. Often women leaders lack knowledge of the ‘rules of the game’ in such environments (Morley, 2012).

Organizational barriers.

- Gender inequality. Women are underrepresented quantitatively in top university positions around the world, regardless of a country’s economic development. In the European Union, for example, only 13% of higher education institutions are headed by women (Morley, 2012). This trend persists despite the high level of women’s participation in higher education and the great work done by states to support gender equality policies. In general, most researchers note a slower and thornier career path for women leaders compared to men. More women are in lower-level academic positions. At the same time, they tend to have high workloads and limited opportunities for career advancement. In Kazakhstan, most women leaders remain at the middle management level, which limits their influence on key decision-making (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2019; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2020; Islam et al., 2023; Mynbayeva et al., 2024; Yahya et al., 2024).

- Policies for hiring and promotion to leadership positions. Hiring and promotion procedures for leadership positions, especially for senior managers, are often shaped by male stereotypes of leadership. For example, requirements for “leadership skills” in job descriptions predominantly align with masculine traits: the ability to actively promote and advocate, high self-confidence, and the ability

to take risks. Additionally, male-dominated selection panels reduce women's chances of advancement (Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Gandhi & Sen, 2021). Lack of transparency and nepotism hinder women's advancement, as access to leadership positions is often determined by informal networks rather than professional achievements (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017).

- Queen Bee Syndrome. It has been observed that older female executives are not always supportive of their younger female executive colleagues. This phenomenon occurs when women in leadership positions perceive other women as a threat and hinder their career advancement. For example, research in Australia and India has shown that female leaders may consciously avoid supporting female colleagues in order to maintain their position in a male-dominated environment (Redmond et al., 2016; Gandhi & Sen, 2021).

- Lack of mentoring and low inclusion/non-inclusion of women in professional networks. The absence or low number of positive female role models and mentors hinders women's advancement. In addition, participation in professional networks, which are often formed as "old boys' clubs" (Gandhi & Sen, 2021), is limited for women. Women often do not gain access to such networks, which reduces their chances of career advancement (O'Connor, 2020). For women, this is felt as a lack of sufficient social capital and professional support (Redmond et al., 2016). At the same time, women are less prepared for leadership positions compared to men (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2019).

- The "glass ceiling" and "glass cliff" phenomena. Gender biases limit women by creating invisible barriers to their advancement (the "glass ceiling"). Often women are appointed to crisis positions ("glass cliff") where they are more likely to fail. This has the effect of reinforcing stereotypes about women's inability to be effective leaders. An article on Swedish academic leaders notes that women are more likely to hold positions in difficult and unstable environments, such as when universities are experiencing serious financial

or organizational problems (Peterson, 2015). These positions come with increased workloads and less status, making them less attractive and more challenging and successful career paths (Kuchumova et al., 2024).

- Inflexible working conditions. Traditional structures of managerial working hours that include irregular schedules complicate the balance between career and personal life for women. For example, women cite the need for flexible schedules to successfully balance family and professional responsibilities (Redmond et al., 2016; Gandhi & Sen, 2021).

Psychological barriers.

- Imposter syndrome. This phenomenon is particularly characteristic of women leaders who doubt their competence and consider their achievements to be the result of luck rather than the result of their professional skills. In Kazakhstan, almost all women leaders who participated in the study faced this syndrome at different stages of their careers. It should be rightly noted that if imposter syndrome is present in a woman in a mild form, it can be a stimulus for self-improvement and creativity. Kazakhstani women have noted that self-doubt can motivate them to learn and take risks (Kanatova, 2023).

- Fear of high workload and responsibility. Women in various countries, including Mexico and Vietnam, often forgo career advancement for fear of the additional workload and responsibility associated with leadership positions. Women fear criticism for making mistakes in such environments, suggesting perfectionism as a personality trait. (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022; Maheshwari et al., 2023).

- High psychological burden. Women face additional emotional pressure and stress related to the need to meet gender expectations, prove their competence and combine professional and family roles (Morley, 2012; Peterson, 2015).

The key mechanisms that contribute to successful career development of women leaders in academia.

- Transformation of cultural and gender stereotypes in the university environment. The gradual abandonment of patriarchal norms in Mexico and India and other countries is

contributing to an increase in the number of women aspiring to leadership positions. In Vietnam and Sweden, there is a growing awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion in the workplace (Peterson, 2015; Gandhi & Sen, 2021; Maheshwari, G., & Nayak, R., 2022; Maheshwari et al., 2023).

- Changing mentality of employers of educational organizations. The younger generation of employers show a more open attitude towards women in leadership, which contributes to their career development (Maheshwari, G., & Nayak, R., 2022).

- Positive perceptions of leadership roles in society in general and in academia in particular. In countries where collaboration and participation are valued (e.g. Sweden), women leaders find more support and approval for their empathetic and collaborative leadership style (Peterson, 2015).

- Institutional support. Gender equality policies, such as initiatives to empower women in universities, contribute to creating an enabling environment for their career advancement. For example, the increase in the number of women university presidents indicates progress in breaking the glass ceiling in higher education governance (Peterson, 2015; Maheshwari et al., 2023).

- Family support. In many countries, support from family, including partners and parents, is critical for women leaders. In Australia and India, men are increasingly taking on some domestic responsibilities, allowing women to focus on their professional lives. In Vietnam and Mexico, family support helps women effectively balance work and family commitments (Redmond et al., 2016; Gandhi & Sen, 2021; Maheshwari, G., & Nayak, R., 2024; Maheshwari et al., 2023; Kanatova, 2023).

- Networking and social capital. A key factor in psychoeducational support for women is participation in formal and informal professional networks and communities. Social capital acquired through such networks facilitates access to resources, mentors, and career opportunities (Australia, India). Women who are actively involved in professional communities are better positioned to advance

their careers and develop leadership skills (Redmond et al., 2016; Gandhi & Sen, 2021).

- Mentoring and support for executives in academia. Mentor support plays a meaningful role in women's careers, especially at the beginning of a managerial career. For example, in Vietnam, mentoring provides both professional and psycho-social benefits to help women overcome challenges and accelerate their career progression. Having role models and women leaders willing to share their experiences inspires and motivates success (Maheshwari, G., & Nayak, R., 2022).

- Solid track record. Women who demonstrate outstanding professional achievements are able to overcome bias. Their performance becomes the main argument for recognizing their competence (Read & Kehm, 2016).

- Developing resilience and adaptability in women leaders. Women with adaptability and resilience are more successful in overcoming career challenges. In Australia and Sweden, these qualities are considered key to leadership (Peterson, 2015; Redmond et al., 2016).

- Developing self-esteem and self-efficacy. Confidence in their leadership abilities and awareness of their own potential play an important role in women's career development. In Vietnam, recognition of their leadership styles motivates women's career development. Belief in their ability to succeed is especially important in fields that traditionally have more men, such as STEM (Maheshwari, G., & Nayak, R., 2022; Kuchumova et al., 2024).

- Building personal resilience and tolerance for bias. Women who perceive criticism as an opportunity for growth are more successful in adapting to leadership challenges. Their ability to remain confident in their decisions under pressure helps them constructively navigate difficult career moments (Peterson, 2015; Read & Kehm, 2016).

Discussion. The findings emphasize the complex structure and depth of barriers and factors affecting women's career advancement in academic leadership. Sociocultural barriers, such as traditional expectations and stereotypes, require changing societal norms. Organizational barriers emphasize the importance of transpa-

rency in personnel policies and the need to create an inclusive environment. For example, successful mentoring practices and professional networks can play a key role in supporting women to overcome internal and external barriers. However, it is important to recognize that women leaders often experience internal contradictions and difficulties, which requires special attention to developing their self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Mechanisms that promote and support women leaders demonstrate that it is possible to create a more favorable environment for their career development. Experience from countries with high levels of gender inclusion shows that systemic changes, such as flexible working hours and support for family responsibilities, can significantly improve the situation.

Kazakhstan can learn from international experience and adapt successful practices to its cultural and institutional context. The following recommendations are based on the analysis and synthesis of current practices and approaches developed in the area of psycho-pedagogical support mechanisms for women's leadership:

- Developing inclusion and diversity policies in universities. Research shows that inclusive and diverse teams are more likely to innovate (Peterson, 2015; Morley, 2012). Universities with high levels of gender diversity experience better governance, increased student achievement, and improved organizational culture. Gender diversity in governance structures contributes to reduced bias and a more equitable environment. For example, in Sweden and Norway, inclusive human resource policies focused on increasing the number of women in leadership positions have led to improved overall university reputation and competitiveness (Peterson, 2015).

- Encourage the use of cultural context. Kazakhstan's cultural context includes elements of traditional, Soviet and Western culture that can be used as a resource. The flexibility and adaptability of Kazakhstani women allow them to successfully manage different expectations. Emphasizing and articulating the success stories of Kazakhstani women leaders is critical to building positive role models (Redmond et al., 2016).

- Developing mentoring programs. Mentoring programs play a key role in supporting the career development of women leaders in academia. For example, the ACE Women's Leadership Mentoring Program assists female participants through one-on-one sessions with experienced mentors who share management strategies and help overcome career barriers (Gandhi & Sen, 2021). The Aurora Leadership Program in the UK focuses on mentorship from women leaders who share experiences in adapting to gender challenges and help develop confidence in making managerial decisions (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022). In addition, the European Women Rectors Association (EWORA) organizes mentoring initiatives that allow young leaders to learn from more experienced peers and strategies for successful management (European Women Rectors Association, n.d.). Implementing similar mentoring initiatives in Kazakhstan is recommended as they can address the challenges women face in balancing traditional expectations with professional ambitions while fostering their integration into leadership roles and enhancing their career progression in academia.

- Support transparency in human resources policies. Introduce clear and open processes for selection and appointment to leadership positions to eliminate the influence of gender stereotypes and nepotism. In universities, where key promotion decisions are often based on personal connections rather than professional achievements, women face limited access to leadership positions. Transparent criteria and systems for evaluating candidates minimize the possibility of such informal practices (Morley & Crossouard, 2016).

- Creation and development of professional networks in Kazakhstan, integration into international communities. Creating a Kazakhstani national network of women leaders in higher education, which will include online platforms for discussing issues and sharing successful practices, will help strengthen professional and personal ties. Participation in international networks such as the European Women Rectors Association (EWORA) will provide Kazakhstani women academics with

many opportunities, such as access to global best practices, training, and access to a research base on leadership topics. According to the European Women Rectors Association (n.d.), the knowledge and experience gained here can be used to develop and implement new approaches to gender policy in Kazakhstani universities.

- Leadership development training. Training plays an important role in the development of women leaders in academia by providing them with the tools they need to overcome barriers and strengthen their position. For example, the Aurora Leadership Program in the UK addresses imposter syndrome, strategic management training, and emotional intelligence. These programs help participants feel more confident in decision making and ready for leadership positions (Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Another successful example is the HERS Leadership Institute, which focuses on developing diversity and inclusion management skills to help women successfully adapt to the challenges of leadership roles (Peterson, 2015). In the US, the Harvard Women in Higher Education Leadership Program provides women with access to mentoring networks and training modules aimed at increasing professional self-esteem and developing resilience to bias (Redmond et al., 2016). Such trainings also emphasize negotiation, conflict management and the development of leadership competencies. Successful international examples support the importance of integrating such trainings into professional development (Maheshwari et al., 2023; Gandhi & Sen, 2021).

- Supporting work-life balance. In studies conducted at regional universities in the United States, it has been shown that the introduction of flexible working arrangements, such as the ability to work remotely or choose part-time employment, significantly eases the burden on women leaders. This contributes to the retention of women in leadership positions, especially during periods of work-life balance (Redmond et al., 2016). Such initiatives allow women leaders to feel more comfortable in positions of responsibility, which will reduce the risk of

leaving the professional environment due to the inability to reconcile career and personal life.

- Increasing the role of research and dialog. Research plays a significant role in identifying barriers and analyzing successful psychoeducational practices. For example, in the UK and Germany, funding for gender research in academia has enabled the identification of systemic barriers and ways to overcome them (Morley & Crossouard, 2016). In Kazakhstan, detailed research on gender dynamics, especially in the aspect of educational leadership is still poorly represented. Promoting and funding research on women's leadership, including analysis of barriers and effective psychological and pedagogical support mechanisms tailored to the Kazakh context, seminars and conferences on gender equality would help to disseminate knowledge and support the development of women leaders.

The *limitations* of this study are related to its theoretical review nature, which requires validation and testing of results and conclusions in practice. The time range of sources used (2010-2024) may exclude earlier studies that may still be relevant. Although the study relies on structured methods of analysis, it does not represent a rigorous systematic review, which may affect the representativeness of the data. Finally, the focus solely on higher education excludes consideration of women's leadership in other sectors.

These limitations highlight directions for further research, including conducting empirical studies, deepening local contextual analysis, and expanding thematic coverage.

This article *contributes* to the research on mechanisms of psychological and pedagogical support for gender equality in higher education by emphasizing, clarifying and supplementing the data on barriers and factors affecting career advancement of women leaders. The authors link global trends and local peculiarities, offering specific recommendations for Kazakhstan, adapted to its cultural and institutional conditions. The suggested mechanisms, including mentoring programs, improving transparency in personnel policies and promoting work-life balance, and leadership

trainings, have practical value in addressing the gender imbalance in academic leadership and truly supporting women in leadership positions. The article also reinforces Kazakhstan's efforts to fulfill its international commitments to achieve gender equality within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. Gender balance and effective psychological and pedagogical support mechanisms will enable women leaders to make valuable contributions not only to education, but also to Kazakhstan's prosperity and sustainable development. Thus, the study contributes not only to the theoretical understanding of the problem, but also to the development of practical tools that can be used by researchers, policy makers and educational institutions.

Conclusion. The analysis of gender equality in higher education has identified key barriers to women's advancement to leadership positions and factors contributing to their career success. The problem of gender imbalance remains relevant in the global and Kazakhstani context, despite positive changes in recent decades. The main barriers identified in the study are cultural, organizational and psychological factors. Among them are gender discrimination, lack of transparency in recruitment procedures, prevalence of male stereotypes of leadership,

impostor syndrome and restrictions related to inflexibility of working conditions. Particular attention was paid to the phenomenon of the "glass ceiling" and "glass cliff" that continue to limit women in their career aspirations. In the cultural context, traditional expectations of women's roles and the predominantly male culture in universities also contribute to the persistence of disparities. The study identified a number of innovative approaches in international practice that contribute to the career success of women leaders, including institutional support, access to professional networks, mentors and family support. Of particular importance is the cultivation and support of women leaders' qualities such as resilience, adaptability and self-efficacy, and leadership potential. Based on the analysis of international experience, psychological and pedagogical mechanisms to support women leaders that can and should be adapted for Kazakhstan have been proposed, including the development of mentoring programs, strengthening institutional culture, creating conditions for work-life balance, using professional networks and cultural resources, and leadership training. An important part of these initiatives is addressing gender asymmetries through inclusive and diverse workplace practices.

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