

# Micro-Level Factors That Affect Females' Decisions Towards Leadership in Higher Education: A Literature Review

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**Abstract:** This paper is based on an ongoing PhD research named “Understanding the Lack of Female Leadership in Higher Education of Kazakhstan”. The aim of this study is to identify empirical studies that explored micro-level factors affecting female leadership in higher education. Thus, a systematic literature review technique was used to synthesise research from a gender perspective of leadership in higher education. An initial screening process resulted in a final sample of 37 appropriate studies. The synthesis of these empirical studies revealed that there are different leadership domains in higher education: academic and professional. Therefore, the micro-level factors that affect these domains include the purpose of doctoral studies, the change of interests, identity and gender, self-awareness, self-management, self esteem, self efficacy and work-life balance. This study contributes to the development of female leadership in higher education.

**Keywords:** female leadership, higher education, systematic literature review

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## 1. Contextual background

Kazakhstan has a unique history, which perplexes in an interesting and conflicting societal expectations on gender roles. These norms echo in families, education and careers of women (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017, 2019). Kazakhstani females might be discouraged by their family members to pursue technical or higher ranked positions; and are advised to choose “more feminine” professions (Almukhambetova & Kuzhabekova, 2020). The reasoning is that a woman should not be more ambitious than men, therefore her current or future husband will be more comfortable with her career choice. Interestingly, education, due to its nurturing nature, is considered a feminine profession in Kazakhstan (Dubok & Turakhanova, 2018). For instance, in the higher education sector of the country, women represent 64% of all faculty members. Kazakhstani female faculty members are as educated as male faculty members, however, the number of women at the higher education leadership level is significantly lower than men (Lipovka, 2018). This phenomenon is not unique to Kazakhstan, therefore this paper presents the part of the literature review of the ongoing PhD research on female leadership in higher education.

Literature shows that academic professions has expanded, and there are no more clear-cut boundaries between academic identities (Whitchurch, 2006; Whitchurch, 2008; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2009). For the clear understanding of concepts, the author acknowledges several distinctions in university careers that are applicable to this study. Academic careers in universities are related to teaching, research and service, which may include some administrative or supervisory responsibilities. Non-academic careers in universities may consist of counselling and consultative positions, and also program or project management. Leadership, planning, policy-making, supervision and other administrative responsibilities are referred to as managerial positions. Other careers that do not require overseeing and decision making, can be named as non-managerial careers, since they require only carrying out the professional functions for the organization (Whitchurch, 2008). The author realises that some positions may overlap and may not have clearly bounded responsibilities in higher education settings.

## 2. Search methods

The author followed the systematic literature review process in order to explore the gender perspective of micro-level factors that affect decisions to pursue leadership careers in higher education because the systematic literature review is an objective and comprehensive process to collect information about the empirical research in a clear and transparent manner (Cresswell & Creswell, 2017; Klassen, Jahad & Moher, 1998; Weed, 2005).

At first, the Google Scholar search was used to identify key words, get the initial ideas about the discussion and to locate the most authoritative publications and authors in the relevant domain by comparing the number of citations. Some articles were in open access, some were not. The author saved the exact titles and DOIs of the publications of interest, in order to access them through university's online library. After the core articles were identified, the author used the “snowballing” method by going to the references of these articles and exploring

the relevant literature in more details. Therefore, this study presents the initial search via Google Scholar, snowballing the references of the core articles relevant to the topic and accessing specific fee-based articles through the university's database. This initial step of the literature review process was completed in an academic year of 2020 - 2021. The next step in the literature review process is to separately analyse the databases for which the university have access. After that, the sources in local language will be explored. These steps of the literature review are in the process in the academic year of 2021-2022.

### 3. Sample

The articles that are located in the initial literature review process had to comply with the following criteria: 1) to be published in a peer-reviewed journal; 2) in English language; (3) have keywords “female/women in top management/leadership in higher education” or “female/women leaders/top managers in higher education”. The year of publication was not restricted. After identifying relevant studies, the inclusion criteria were checked again, and the full text articles were obtained. The full texts of the articles had to be: (1) an empirical study, (2) discuss female leadership in higher education as main topic. A final sample of articles consisted of 37 appropriate studies, which were published from 1998 to 2019. 18 of those studies are quantitative, 19 are qualitative.

**Table 1:** Databases and journals included in the systematic literature review

N	Authors	Year	Database	Journal/Report/Dissertation	Type
1	Golde & Dore	2001	ERIC	National Report	Quant
2	Wendler et al	2012	-	Educational Testing Service	Quant
3	McAlpine & Emmioğlu	2015	Taylor & Francis	Studies in Higher Education	Qual
4	Hayter & Parker	2019	Science Direct	Research Policy	Qual
5	Edwards et al	2011	ACER	Higher Education Research	Quant
6	Boyle & Boice	1998	Springer	Innovative Higher Education	Qual
7	De Welde & Laursen	2011	-	International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology	Qual
8	Roach & Sauermann	2010	ScienceDirect	Research Policy	Quant
9	Vasquez-Guignard	2010	ProQuest	Dissertation	Quant
10	Kameshwara & Shukla	2017	MDPI	Administrative Sciences	Qual
11	Sallee et al	2016	Springer	Innovative Higher Education	Qual
N	Authors	Year	Database	Journal/Report/Dissertation	Type
12	Adams	2009	Emerald	Educational Leadership: Global Contexts and International Comparisons	Qual
13	Davies, Spencer & Steele	2005	APA PsycNet	Journal of Personality and Social Psychology	Quant
14	Dunn, Gerlach, & Hyle	2014	-	International Journal of Leadership and Change	Qual
15	Thornhill	2011	ProQuest	Dissertation	Qual

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N	Authors	Year	Database	Journal/Report/Dissertation	Type
16	Airini et al	2011	SAGE	Educational Management Administration	Quant
17	Vicary & Jones	2017	MDPI	Administrative Sciences	Qual
18	Scott	2018	MDPI	Administrative Sciences	Qual
19	Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova	2021	Taylor & Francis	Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education	Qual
20	Lent & Brown	2013	APA PsycNet	Journal of Counseling Psychology	Quant
21	Gander	2018	Taylor & Francis	Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education	Quant
22	Nabi	1999	Emerald	Career Development International	Quant
23	Sagas & Cunningham	2004	Springer	Sex Roles	Quant
24	Ricketts & Pringle	2014	Taylor & Francis	Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management	Qual
25	Major, Quinton & Schmader	2003	ScienceDirect	Journal of Experimental Social Psychology	Quant
26	Won, Bravo & Lee	2013	Taylor & Francis	Managing Leisure	Quant
27	Renkema, Schaap & van Dellen	2009	Emerald	Career Development International	Quant
28	Hancock & Hums	2016	ScienceDirect	Sport Management Review	Qual
29	Clarke	2009	Emerald	Career Development International	Qual
30	Tessens, White, & Web	2011	Taylor & Francis	Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management	Quant
31	Wright	2014	-	Dissertation	Qual
32	Rosser	2004	Springer	Higher Education	Quant
33	Elliot	2003	Springer	Journal of Family and Economic Issues volume	Quant
N	Authors	Year	Database	Journal/Report/Dissertation	Type
34	Lauzun & Morganson	2010	Taylor & Francis	The Psychologist-Manager Journal	Quant
35	Manfredi & Ledwith	2000	-	European Journal of Women Studies	Qual
36	Lewis	2001	Emerald	Women in Management Review	Qual

N	Authors	Year	Database	Journal/Report/Dissertation	Type
37	McDonald et al	2005	Emerald	Employee Relations	Qual

Information from the studies was 4rganized using Garrard’s Matrix Method (1999). For this particular literature review, the main extracted information was: (1) key arguments; (2) contextual information; (3) methodology.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 What are the individual micro-level factors that affect decisions to pursue careers in higher education for academic staff and managers?

#### 4.1.1 *The purpose of doctoral studies*

Some doctoral students, who aspire to become academic staff in their future might not understand what the Ph.D. studies entail (Golde & Dore, 2001; Wendler, Bridgeman, Markle, Cline, Bell, McAllister & Kent, 2012; McAlpine & Emmioğlu, 2015; Hayter & Parker, 2019; Edwards, Bexley, & Richardson, 2011). While there are clear benefits of obtaining a doctoral degree for the future career in terms of investing in human capital, skills, and networking, little is known how graduate students navigate their academic staff careers and how they perceive the job market after obtaining an advanced degree. Large cross-comparative studies has shown that one-half of American graduate students and one-third of European students do not aspire academic staff jobs due to the competitive nature of the profession; and more men, than women desired a faculty career (Golde & Dore, 2001; Wendler et al, 2012). Women related their hesitations to the juggle between family and professional life; however, men were most concerned about professional and institutional influences towards their leadership journey (Wendler et al, 2012).

#### 4.1.2 *The change of interests*

Few studies have examined how the change of individual interests affects the decisions to pursue academic staff careers (Boyle, 1998; Golde & Dore, 2001; Wendler,et al, 2012). According to Golde and Dore (2001) one-third of the doctoral students lose their interest in pursuing academic careers, while only one-fifth become more interested. The reasons for men were related to professional aspects, while women mostly mentioned personal factors (Boyle, 1998).

Also, if one had an experience with teaching or research employment before entering graduate school, it affects positively on further career choices as academic leaders (Edwards et al, 2011; McAlpine & Emmioğlu, 2015). Doctoral students who prefer the freedom of choice and intellectual development are more likely to choose careers in academia; and those who are mostly concerned with salary and access to resources (either financial or in relation to power) prefer job opportunities in corporate or on the individual basis (Roach, & Sauermann, 2010). Early-career researchers change interests from academic careers to other professions in the industry because of lack of clear support from the graduate schools in terms of career opportunities and the navigation processes, but the change of interests from the gender perspective has not been mentioned in the current study (McAlpine & Emmioğlu, 2015).

#### 4.1.3 *The nature of the academic profession*

However, research that explores the academic workforce from the gender perspective exists. Female doctoral students experience different obstacles in their academic staff careers that hinder their aspirations to leadership (Welde & Laursen, 2011). Those barriers include the feelings of isolation, 4arginalization and exclusion because the majority of the academic community are males who have formed their own community of support and treat females as outsiders. The lack of accurate information about career opportunities, the insufficiency of skills and networks, and personal existential crisis coerce potential academic leaders to leave academia (Hayter & Parker, 2019). Also, the lack of female role models in the field cause females to be stressed while juggling between academic work and personal life (de Welde & Laursen, 2011). For women, good academic advising, supervision and mentorship boosted females ’self-confidence to reach higher ranked positions (Edwards et al, 2011; de Welde & Laursen, 2011).

#### **4.1.4 Identity and gender**

An extensive number of empirical research shows that women's proactivity and personal drive towards leadership play a crucial role in their professional lives (Vasquez-Guignard, 2010; Kameshwara, & Shukla, 2017; Calizo, 2011; Saltee, Ward, & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). While women doubted their intellectual abilities, skills or might not desire additional leadership responsibilities due to the lack of energy and time; men expressed more confidence about reaching leadership positions in academia. At the individual micro-level females perceive leadership as an endeavour of men and distance themselves from leadership as a professional identity. Studies from diverse parts of the world illustrate that female academics take more of the domestic responsibilities than men, and hence do not aspire to additional leadership obligations at work (Kameshwara, & Shukla, 2017). Female academics might doubt their professional skills, self-efficacy to be a leader and hence do not apply to promotions (Calizo, 2011). Women academicians disentangle the leadership identity from their personal goals because it contradicts accepting themselves as women. As women, particularly as mothers, female academic staff express guilt of following their personal needs and aspirations (Saltee, Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016).

Adams (2009) describe identity as thoughts how individuals perceive themselves in the contexts such as gender, ethnicity, religion, workplace, family and other social aspects. For women, the issue of identity is complicated, because depending on a context, women may have conflicting societal roles (Adams, 2009; Davies, Spencer & Steele, 2005). The experience in higher education and in public leadership defined gender as a societal constraint to the leadership because of gender-driven roles. As females, women take most of the household issues and the academic management career seems unrealistic to balance with family and personal issues, because the profession is inflexible (Adams, 2009). In Dunn, Gerlach and Hyle's research (2014) female academic managers perceive themselves as "naïve," "having misconceptions," and "being green", because they have not anticipated the path to leadership that they will have: entering the new field in the profession is not always a smooth process, since not all colleagues are comfortable with having a female leader.

#### **4.1.5 Self-Awareness and skills**

Research on female academic leaders has revealed self-awareness as a critical component for the leadership (Thornhill, 2011; Airini, Collings, Conner, McPherson, Midson & Wilson, 2011; Dunn, et al, 2014; Vicary & Jones, 2017). To become a successful leader women have to be aware of their values, priorities, skills, self-perception as a leader and be willing to take rising opportunities: high level self-confidence and self-esteem were crucial factors that helped them to achieve leadership positions in academic management, attributing self-esteem to success (Cubillo, 2003). The ability to lead the team by Stilizing their passion and energy to bring positive changes to organisations is vital for leaders (Scott, 2018). Female academic managers had identified transferable skills are integral for their leadership capacity (Thornhill, 2011).

#### **4.1.6 Proactivity and communication**

In addition to skills, proactivity has been distinguished as a factor that affects female leadership in academic careers. Factors that contribute to the development of female leadership are: "the planned proactivity" which is visualising personal success, setting up small milestones, and learning from mentors and networks and "the spontaneous proactivity" that is putting the doubts aside, taking the advantage of the situations, and making quick, but intelligent decisions (Airini et al, 2011). Female academic leaders in education management should be able to reasonably and proactively communicate with the team for positive workplace dynamics (Dunn et al, 2014). However, communication patterns and perceptions of a leader might be gendered in organisations due to the socialisation. Eagly (1987) explained it as a "gender-role congruity": females are considered as primary caregivers of the family and men are the breadwinners. These socialisation norms have transmitted to the workplaces, and if females' behaviour is different than it was expected, negative attitudes and rejection arise. This theory is well supported from the research from Central Asian context - Kazakhstani female leaders reported experiencing the cognitive dissonance of professional and societal expectations from them (Kuzhabekova & Almkhambetova, 2019).

## **4.2 What are the individual micro-level factors that affect decisions to pursue careers in higher education for professional staff and managers?**

### *4.2.1 Self-Management, self-esteem and self-efficacy*

Self-management is an individual's behaviour and actions, while facing challenges and opportunities within an organization (Lent and Brown, 2013). Most of the literature on self-management for university professional staff relate it to professional development, stating that professional development opportunities are the core of self-management in career attitudes (Gardner, 2014; Nabi, 1999). Interestingly, research uncovered that men invest more into their professional development than women, but when calculating the financial returns, one's gender did not matter (Sagas & Cunningham, 2004). The research on female professional staff disclose the existence on subjective discrimination in terms of salary, decision-making opportunities and the value of their work which might result in turnover or lowering self-esteem and motivation of females (Major, Quinton & Schmader, 2003; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014). Although women might be offered the same promotion opportunities as men, they are not quick to apply for it because they are more affected with balancing the family-work life or bias at workplaces, which results in their confidence level (Tessens, White & Web, 2011). If women receive verbal reinforcement, encouragement and validation from their peers and supervisors, their level of confidence and motivation for leadership increase and vice versa, if not (Calizo, 2011; Gardner, 2014; Rosser, 2004; Wright, 2014). Female professional staff inform that they undergo professional development to enhance their competencies in order to avoid the "leaky pipeline" – the decreasing number of minority professionals, who could have been successful, but left the job due to various factors, including individual, institutional and larger barriers (Hancock & Hums, 2016).

### *4.2.2 Work-Life balance*

Research agrees that family-friendly policies are useful to address the issues of work-life balance and females with children use such policies the most (Elliott, 2003; Lauzun, Morganson, Major, Green, 2010; Ledwith & Manfredi, 2000; Lewis, 2001; McDonald, Guthrie, Bradley, & Shakespeare-Finch, 2005). Females share that they are not as productive as they could be as professional staff due to the multiple roles they carry, and they need more support from family and institutions (Wright, 2014). More flat and decentralised structure of university management could address work-life balance issues more effectively for all employees, not only females (Lauzun et.al, 2010). Wright (2014) suggests that further research should be conducted from the perspective of female graduate students seeking an employment as university professional staff from the perspective of institutional factors that affect the work-life balance, which will also be explored further in a PhD research.

## **5. Conclusion**

The main purpose of this paper is to unveil the gendered perspective of micro level factors that affect decisions towards leadership in higher education through initial systematic literature review for a broader PhD study. This literature review did not place on the publication year of the studies, however due to the increasing interest on gender studies the author notices that more research had been published in the last two years. Therefore, this literature review is an initial step towards a broader exploration of the topic. An important observation can be made about the leadership studies in higher education - due to the expansion of academic boundaries and careers, one should be always aware of what is considered as leadership in higher education and in which domain - either academic, professional or both.

First, the author has distinguished that leadership careers in universities can be considered as academic or professional ones. Academic staff are employees who teach, conduct research and provide institutional service. Academic managers are personnel with administrative responsibilities, such as deans, rectors, vice-deans i.e. those who are at the executive positions in higher education. Although in some settings academic staff and academic managerial careers may be intertwined. Professional staff also have academic credentials, such as Master's or PhD degrees, and teaching or research experience. These individuals hold specialist roles, but without an academic contract. Professional managers, located higher on the career ladder, have more decision-making power and overseeing functions (Whitchurch, 2006; Whitchurch, 2008; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2009).

Second, this review explored the micro-level factors that influence decision to pursue leadership positions from the perspective of academic or professional staff, with respect to the gender differences. Academic staff and managers were affected by the shifting the purpose of pursuing doctoral studies and the nature of academic

profession, changing personal attitude, complexity in gender and identity perception, being aware of the self and skills, managing, proactivity and communication issues. Female academic staff are less likely to desire leadership positions, because of lack of support and understanding on how to navigate their careers and family life. Some doubt their skills and abilities, therefore not proactive in approaching to leadership positions. For some women, leadership and gender are conflicting issues, because the leadership has a “masculine” nature in some contexts. This findings resonates with the Kazakhstani context, where females are discouraged to pursue leadership positions in order to be “more feminine”.

The gendered perspective on leadership of professional staff and managers were concerned self-management, self-esteem, self-efficacy and work-life balance. Women who are more effective at self-management are more likely to be motivated to pursue leadership careers. Leadership career aspirations are boosted when females have support and role models. One of the main challenges remained is the issue of work - life balance while striving for the leadership positions.

Men and women we have clearly distinguishable and irreplaceable roles in the society. Therefore, it is important to explore the gendered perspective of factors that affect decisions to pursue leadership careers, including those at the micro-level, so that those factors don't hinder anyone from achieving their professional potential, because it is a basic human right and natural desire to develop and progress.

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