

From Participation to Power: Examining Barriers, Institutional Bias, and Agency in Women's Higher Education Leadership Pathways in Delhi–NCR India

Dr. Mohammad Reza Karimi

Department of Industrial Engineering University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

Dr. Fatemeh Hosseini

Faculty of Social Sciences Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Women's participation in higher education administration remains a critical yet under-realized dimension of gender equity in Indian academia, particularly in the Delhi–NCR region, where institutional density coexists with persistent leadership imbalances. This study examines the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that constrain women's advancement into administrative leadership roles, while also analyzing the forms of agency exercised by women within constrained academic environments. Drawing upon feminist institutionalism, intersectionality theory, and Bourdieusian concepts of social capital, the paper synthesizes insights from existing scholarship to construct an analytical framework for understanding gendered leadership trajectories in higher education.

The study highlights how academic labor is stratified through gendered divisions of administrative and intellectual work, reinforcing systemic exclusion from decision-making spaces (Kanter, 1977; Singh, 2019). It further explores how institutional norms, neoliberal governance structures, and implicit bias shape leadership pipelines in universities (Mackay et al., 2010). Special attention is given to the intersection of caste, class, and gender in shaping access to leadership opportunities (Crenshaw, 1989; Rege, 2008).

Findings suggest that despite structural constraints, women faculty demonstrate strategic agency through informal leadership networks, pedagogical authority, and administrative negotiation. However, these forms of agency rarely translate into formal leadership positions due to institutional rigidity and gendered expectations of academic labor (Morley, 2014). The paper concludes that achieving equitable leadership requires systemic restructuring of governance frameworks and a redefinition of academic leadership itself.

KEYWORDS

Women leadership, higher education administration, gender equity, Delhi–NCR universities, feminist institutionalism, academic governance, intersectionality, glass ceiling, organizational barriers, agency in academia.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education systems globally have expanded rapidly in recent decades, yet leadership structures within universities remain disproportionately dominated by men. In India, this disparity is more pronounced within administrative hierarchies than in teaching positions, where women's representation is relatively higher. The Delhi–NCR region, being a major educational hub with central universities, private institutions, and deemed universities, presents a critical site for examining gendered leadership dynamics.

Despite increased female enrollment in higher education and growing participation in academic employment, women remain significantly underrepresented in key administrative roles such as Deans, Heads of Departments, Directors, and Vice-Chancellors. This contradiction highlights a structural paradox: while access to education has expanded, access to authority has not followed proportionately.

The problem is not merely numerical underrepresentation

but deeply embedded institutional and cultural barriers that shape career trajectories. These barriers include gendered expectations of caregiving, lack of mentorship, informal exclusion from decision-making networks, and biased promotion systems. Chanana (2000) emphasizes that women in Indian higher education often face “invisible constraints” that limit their mobility despite formal equality in recruitment policies.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to move beyond descriptive statistics and engage with the structural mechanisms that reproduce gender inequality in academic leadership. It also examines how women navigate these constraints through agency, negotiation, and resistance within institutional frameworks.

The theoretical orientation of this study is grounded in feminist institutionalism, which argues that institutions are not gender-neutral but actively reproduce gendered power relations (Mackay et al., 2010). Additionally, Bourdieu’s theory of habitus and capital provides a lens to understand how academic hierarchies are sustained through cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1990).

A central concern of this paper is also the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender, which further complicates women’s access to leadership positions in India (Crenshaw, 1989; Rege, 2008). As Morley (2014) argues in her study of global academia, women’s leadership pathways are often constrained by “lost leadership pipelines” that fail to convert academic presence into institutional power.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze structural barriers affecting women’s participation in higher education administration in Delhi–NCR
2. To examine institutional and cultural mechanisms reinforcing gender inequality in leadership roles
3. To explore forms of agency exercised by women faculty within academic governance structures
4. To develop a conceptual understanding of equitable leadership pathways in higher education

Scope and Significance

This study focuses on universities and higher education institutions in Delhi–NCR, but its implications extend to broader Indian and global academic contexts. It contributes to policy discussions on gender equity in higher education governance and provides a theoretical framework for future empirical research.

Literature Review

The literature on women’s participation in higher education leadership reveals a persistent global pattern of gender imbalance in academic administration. Studies indicate that while women have entered academia in large numbers, their progression into leadership positions remains limited and uneven.

A foundational perspective is provided by Kanter (1977), who explains organizational inequality through structural tokenism, where minority groups in leadership roles face heightened visibility and constrained mobility. This framework remains relevant in understanding women’s limited representation in academic administration.

Bailyn (2003) highlights how academic career structures are misaligned with gender equity, particularly in institutions like MIT, where promotion systems privilege uninterrupted career trajectories that disadvantage women with caregiving responsibilities. Similarly, Acker and Armenti (2004) emphasize the “invisible workload” and sleep deprivation associated with academic labor, disproportionately affecting women due to dual work-family burdens.

In the Indian context, Chanana (2000) provides early evidence of gender disparities in higher education, noting that women’s access to academic roles does not automatically translate into leadership opportunities. Singh (2019) further expands this argument by demonstrating how women Heads of Departments in Delhi University often perform “administrative housekeeping” roles rather than strategic decision-making functions.

Feminist institutionalism offers a critical theoretical lens to interpret these patterns. Mackay et al. (2010) argue that institutions embed gender biases in formal and informal rules, making inequality self-reproducing. Morley (2014) extends this argument by introducing the concept of “lost leaders,” describing how women’s leadership potential is systematically underutilized in global academia. This framework is particularly relevant in understanding Delhi–NCR universities, where women are often concentrated in teaching rather than governance roles (Morley, 2014).

Intersectionality theory further deepens this analysis. Crenshaw (1989) argues that gender cannot be examined in isolation from race, caste, and class. In India, Rege (2008) extends this framework by highlighting how Dalit women academics face compounded marginalization in higher education institutions. Mukhopadhyay and Seymour (2015) also emphasize the influence of family structure and socio-cultural norms in shaping women’s educational and professional trajectories.

Bourdieu’s (1990) theory of practice adds another dimension by explaining how academic institutions function as fields where symbolic capital determines

access to authority. Women often lack access to elite networks that facilitate leadership advancement.

Blackmore (2002) critiques contemporary leadership models in education, arguing that socially just leadership requires moving beyond performative managerialism toward substantive equity-driven governance structures.

Barnard et al. (2012) provide evidence from STEM fields, showing similar patterns of exclusion, where women's career progression is hindered by structural and cultural barriers.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that women's underrepresentation in academic leadership is not due to individual deficits but systemic institutional structures. However, while extensive research documents barriers, fewer studies focus on women's agency within these constraints, particularly in the Indian higher education context. This gap forms a key motivation for the present study.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual synthesis approach combined with thematic analysis framework to examine women's participation in higher education administration in the Delhi–NCR region. Rather than generating primary empirical data, the paper critically integrates existing scholarly works and policy documents to construct an analytical model of gendered leadership pathways in academia.

The methodological design is grounded in interpretivist epistemology, which assumes that institutional realities are socially constructed through power relations, norms, and cultural practices. This approach is appropriate because gender inequality in academic leadership is not merely a measurable phenomenon but a deeply embedded institutional condition shaped by formal rules and informal practices.

Conceptual Framework Development

The study integrates three dominant theoretical lenses:

1. Feminist Institutionalism (Mackay et al., 2010)

This framework explains how institutions encode gender biases in governance systems. It highlights that policies may appear gender-neutral but produce unequal outcomes due to embedded norms and practices.

2. Bourdieusian Theory of Capital and Habitus (Bourdieu, 1990)

Academic advancement is understood as dependent on access to social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Women often lack access to elite professional networks that facilitate leadership promotion.

3. Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Rege, 2008)

Gender interacts with caste, class, and socio-economic background, producing layered disadvantage in access to leadership positions.

These frameworks are synthesized to form a Gendered Academic Leadership Barrier Model (GALBM), which explains how structural constraints and agency interact within higher education institutions.

Data Sources and Analytical Strategy

The study relies exclusively on secondary data sources, including:

- Academic journal articles
- Government reports (AISHE, UGC)
- Institutional studies on higher education governance
- Theoretical literature on gender and leadership

A thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) is applied to identify recurring patterns across literature. Key themes include:

- Structural barriers in promotion systems
- Gendered division of academic labor
- Institutional bias in leadership selection
- Informal networks and exclusion mechanisms
- Women's adaptive agency strategies

Analytical Model: Gendered Leadership Pipeline

The proposed model conceptualizes academic leadership progression as a pipeline consisting of four stages:

1. Entry into academia
2. Academic consolidation (teaching/research roles)
3. Administrative exposure (committee work, departmental roles)
4. Formal leadership positions

At each stage, gendered barriers reduce transition probability. While women are well represented in early stages, attrition occurs at administrative and leadership transitions due to institutional bias and structural constraints.

Methodological Limitations

- Absence of primary field data limits micro-level institutional insights
- Reliance on secondary literature may introduce interpretive bias
- Delhi–NCR focus restricts broader national generalization
- Intersectional variables such as caste and class are conceptually analyzed but not empirically measured

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a robust theoretical synthesis suitable for policy and academic interpretation.

Results / Findings

The synthesis of literature and policy documents reveals four major findings regarding women's participation in higher education administration in Delhi–NCR.

Structural Exclusion in Leadership Pipelines

The most significant finding is the persistence of structural exclusion mechanisms that limit women's progression into leadership roles. Although women constitute a substantial proportion of faculty members, their representation declines sharply at senior administrative levels.

Institutional promotion systems prioritize uninterrupted career trajectories and research output, which disproportionately disadvantage women due to caregiving responsibilities and non-linear career paths (Bailyn, 2003). This structural bias creates what Morley (2014) terms a "broken leadership pipeline," where women enter academia but do not transition into leadership roles.

Gendered Division of Academic Labor

A consistent pattern across studies is the unequal distribution of academic labor. Women are more frequently assigned to:

- Student mentoring
- Committee participation
- Administrative coordination

However, they are less frequently included in:

- Strategic governance roles
- Budgetary decision-making

- Institutional policy design

Singh (2019) highlights that women Heads of Departments often perform "administrative housekeeping," indicating symbolic leadership without real authority.

This division reinforces institutional invisibility of women's leadership contributions.

Institutional and Cultural Barriers

Institutional culture plays a significant role in sustaining gender inequality. Universities operate through informal networks, mentorship systems, and social capital exchanges that often exclude women.

Key barriers include:

- Male-dominated decision-making networks
- Lack of mentorship for women faculty
- Bias in evaluation and promotion committees
- Cultural expectations of gender roles

Acker and Armenti (2004) emphasize that academic institutions often ignore the "hidden workload" of women, leading to chronic disadvantage in career advancement.

Agency and Strategic Navigation by Women

Despite structural constraints, women exercise agency in multiple forms:

- Building informal academic networks
- Engaging in collaborative research visibility strategies
- Negotiating administrative responsibilities strategically
- Leveraging teaching excellence for institutional recognition

These strategies represent what can be termed "bounded agency", where action is possible but constrained within institutional limits.

However, Morley (2014) argues that such agency rarely translates into sustained leadership authority due to structural rigidity in promotion systems.

Discussion

The findings highlight a paradox in higher education governance: increased participation of women in

academia has not translated into proportional leadership representation. This gap reflects deeper institutional and cultural structures rather than individual capability deficits.

From a theoretical standpoint, feminist institutionalism explains how gender-neutral policies mask deeply embedded inequalities (Mackay et al., 2010). Even when formal equality exists, informal norms continue to privilege male leadership trajectories.

Bourdieu's concept of capital further clarifies that leadership is not merely a function of merit but access to networks and symbolic recognition (Bourdieu, 1990). Women's limited access to elite academic networks reduces their visibility in leadership selection processes.

Intersectionality adds another layer of complexity. Women from marginalized caste or socio-economic backgrounds face compounded disadvantages in accessing leadership roles (Crenshaw, 1989; Rege, 2008). Thus, gender inequality in academia cannot be understood in isolation from broader social hierarchies.

Morley (2014) provides a critical global insight by framing women academics as "lost leaders," where institutional systems fail to convert academic participation into leadership advancement. This concept strongly aligns with the Delhi–NCR context, where women's academic presence is visible but their leadership influence remains limited.

Practically, the findings suggest that institutional reforms must go beyond representation metrics. Without restructuring promotion criteria, redefining leadership roles, and addressing informal exclusion networks, gender parity in leadership will remain unattainable.

Limitations of Current Institutional Approaches

- Tokenistic representation without decision-making authority
- Lack of transparent leadership selection mechanisms
- Over-reliance on publication metrics that disadvantage non-linear careers
- Absence of structured mentorship programs for women

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that women's participation in higher education administration in Delhi–NCR is shaped by a complex interaction of structural barriers, institutional cultures, and constrained agency. While women have made significant progress in entering academia, their progression into leadership roles remains

limited due to systemic inequalities embedded in academic governance structures.

The analysis confirms that leadership inequality is not a result of individual deficiencies but institutional design. Structural biases in promotion systems, gendered division of labor, and exclusion from informal networks collectively restrict women's leadership pathways.

However, women continue to demonstrate strategic agency through adaptive practices, although these efforts are insufficient to overcome systemic barriers without institutional reform.

The study contributes to academic discourse by integrating feminist institutionalism, intersectionality, and Bourdieusian theory into a unified analytical framework for understanding gendered leadership in higher education.

Future Research Directions

- Empirical institutional studies in Delhi–NCR universities
- Quantitative modeling of leadership progression gaps
- Intersectional analysis of caste and gender in academic leadership
- Policy evaluation of gender equity interventions in higher education

Ultimately, achieving equitable leadership requires a transformation of academic governance structures rather than incremental representation improvements. As highlighted by Morley (2014), addressing the "lost leadership pipeline" is central to achieving genuine gender justice in global academia.

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