An Evaluation of Female Leaders in European Higher Education and the Glass Escalator

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Abstract

This paper will evaluate the gender imbalance in European higher education. Women are underrepresented in leadership positions, and many face barriers such as unconscious bias, lack of access to networking opportunities, and work-life balance issues.

There is a theory that could better explain why this phenomenon is occurring—the theory of the glass escalator or glass elevator. Williams (2013) coined the theory of the glass escalator to explain how women are still overlooked for administrative roles in predominately female careers. The research suggests that the glass escalator phenomenon is still prevalent. Studies have shown that men in female-dominated professions, such as nursing and teaching, are likelier to be promoted to leadership positions and earn higher salaries than women in the same fields.

This preliminary research will qualitatively study women leaders in European higher education institutions by correlating the theory of the glass escalator. The research will utilize secondary data from the European Commission from 2021. The goal will be to evaluate and promote gender balance and assess how institutions can take steps forward. By taking these steps, institutions will be better able to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education leadership and create a more equitable and just academic environment.

Key Words: Glass Escalator, Gender Issues, Higher Education, Women Leadership, Leadership

1.0 Introduction

Where do we start? The unfortunate starting point is, "I cannot believe we still need to discuss this." Considering recent trends worldwide, we must endure discussing gender. Despite progress made in recent years toward gender equality, many issues and challenges still need to be addressed to achieve actual gender acceptability. In many societies, if not all, there remains an overall gender bias, such as pay, violence, stereotyping, and lack of representation. According to Tabassum and Nayak (2020), there has been an increase in gender stereotyping against women over the past few years that has inhibited more equalization. Not to mention that there are still issues with women in leadership positions. This pessimistic philosophy has solidified in our modern society, such as the former Prime Minister of New Zealand (Jacinda Ardern) being asked why she was meeting the Swedish Prime Minister. The question continued *because you are similar-aged females.* There was no second thought that the meeting was about a million-dollar trade mission.

Research on leadership has tended to be male-centric both inside and outside the university, with a preponderance of male researchers and male leaders as its primary subjects. As a result, women leaders have been measured against the traits and behaviors of males in leadership positions (Dunn, Gerlach, and Hyle,2014). To shed light on women's behaviors as academic leaders, Dunn et al. used reflection research in this study to examine the leadership experiences of three female higher education administrators. The knowledge gathered can aid women in academic leadership roles and those who aspire to academic leadership by allowing us to understand better how women navigate the predominantly male world of higher education administration. Women still received condemnation for being in a prescribed male role, but there is less thought given to males in prescribed female roles (Little, 2016).

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The term glass escalator describes this phenomenon where men in female-dominated professions tend to rise higher and faster in their careers than their female counterparts. This is often attributed to systemic biases and discrimination that favor men in the workplace, even in fields where women are the majority.

According to Fisher and Kinsey (2012), "Universities are sites where there are still strong associations between men, power, and authority: academic identities are drenched with images of various masculinities" (p. 50). Gender and gender in equality are constant in all professions and societies. According to Little (2016), masculine ways of doing things are inherent in the organization's structural, ideological, and symbolic aspects, as well as in everyday interactions and practices. This continues to illustrate the fact that we still have a gender-balancing issue in an array of areas.

This paper will evaluate the principles of the glass escalator as it relates to European higher education evaluating secondary data. This inconsistency can be seen in all levels of leadership within higher education. According to Savigny (2014), despite the significant advancements made by the feminist movement in Western societies, women are still less likely than their male counterparts to get promoted, receive higher salaries, or even land jobs. Thus, there is still a need to evaluate the reasoning.

2.0 Problem and Opportunity Description

Today we are still challenged by an inconsistency between men and women occupying leadership positions (Fritz & Knippenberg, 2017). This study evaluates this inconsistency of women leaders in European higher education by evaluating the glass escalator theory. Williams (2013) coined the glass escalator theory to explain how women are still overlooked for administrative roles in predominate female careers. According to Williams's theory, education has long been a field that is linked to women.

The rooted problem is historical; it can be conceived as the hegemonic masculinity theory developed by sociologist R.W. Connell in the late 1980s. This theory posits that certain ideals and expectations associated with masculinity are considered dominant within a given society or culture. This theory is archaic and is a remnant of ideology that shaped the belief system from the 19th century that gender was solely linked to sexuality. Although this belief has been reshaped, there remains an underlying theme of gender inequality in modern times. In a study by Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter (1995), the authors state that "current beliefs about women can be described as modern sexism" (p. 200). Most feminist theories are rooted in the ideology that there is inequality between genders. Studying gender differences and feminism is not a new field of study. The field of feminist theory first surfaced in the late 18th century. Although the theory's construct is new to conjecturing gender behavior, gender roles and abilities were already assigned. The idea of gender in the 18th century dates back to creation and the roles and tasks appropriated to males and females. Females are traditionally considered caregivers and homemakers, while men are the providers or wage earners.

Over the centuries, there have been some shifts in this ideology, but it has been limited. We can see biases if these concepts are built upon and linked to current issues facing women. The underrepresentation of women in higher education and academic positions in Europe has been a longstanding issue. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon:

1. **Gender bias:** One of the main reasons for the underrepresentation of women in higher education is the presence of gender bias. Women are often subjected to discriminatory practices, attitudes, and cultural preconceptions that prevent them from advancing in their careers (Régner, Thinus-Blanc, Netter, Schmader, & Huguet, 2019).
2. **Work-life balance:** Women are often expected to take on more domestic responsibilities, such as childcare and housework, making it challenging to maintain a demanding academic career (Stoilova, Ilieva-Trichkova, & Bieri, 2020).
3. **Institutional barriers:** Many academic institutions have policies and practices that can make it difficult for women to advance in their careers. For example, promotion and tenure processes may be biased against women, and women may need access to the same resources and networks as their male counterparts (Gibney, 2016).
4. **Unconscious bias:** Unconscious bias refers to people's implicit attitudes and stereotypes, which can influence their decisions and actions. This can lead to women needing to be noticed for opportunities and promotions, even if they are qualified (Régner, et al2019).
5. **Lack of role models:** The underrepresentation of women in higher education can also be a self-perpetuating cycle, as fewer women are in leadership positions to serve as role models and mentors for younger women (Régner, et al2019).

To address these issues, European academic institutions must proactively address gender bias and promote diversity and inclusion. This could include implementing policies to support work-life balance, promoting unconscious bias training, and increasing the representation of women in leadership positions. Additionally, efforts to encourage and support women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields could address the underrepresentation of women in academic posts in these areas.

3.0 Women in Leadership

Women's leadership is an area of study focusing on women's unique leadership qualities and experiences in higher education. It recognizes that women often face specific challenges and barriers in leadership positions and seeks to identify strategies and approaches to help them succeed. It has been illustrated by Sheppard (2017) that "A significant gender imbalance remains at the executive management level within higher education despite several initiatives to increase the number of women in the leadership pipeline and ensure they are better prepared for these roles" (p. 82). This leads to a gap in leadership role models.

One of the key themes in women's leadership theory is the importance of relational leadership. This approach emphasizes building relationships and creating supportive networks within the organization. According to Zenger and Folkman (2019) "women scored at a statistically significantly higher level than men on most leadership competencies we measured (para. 2)." Women are often skilled at building relationships and fostering collaboration, which can be particularly important in higher education, where interdisciplinary work is increasingly essential.

Another important aspect of women's leadership is recognizing the need for work-life balance. Women often face competing demands, such as caregiving responsibilities, making it challenging to maintain a demanding leadership position. Strategies that support work-life balance, such as flexible scheduling and telecommuting, can help to address this issue. In addition, women's leadership highlights the importance of promoting diversity and inclusivity in leadership positions (Little, 2016). Women bring unique perspectives and experiences to leadership roles, and having a diverse leadership team can help create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for all organization members. It is theorized that our preconceived notions about women are rooted in our history. This thought process can be seen as the barrier that has hindered women from advancing into executive roles. These beliefs have caused uncertainty for women to have self-belief.

Overall, women's leadership theory offers valuable insights and strategies for promoting gender equity in higher education leadership positions. By recognizing and addressing women's specific challenges, organizations can create a more supportive and inclusive environment that benefits everyone.

4.0 The Glass Escalator

The term glass escalator describes a phenomenon where men in female-dominated professions tend to rise higher and faster in their careers than their female counterparts. This is often attributed to systemic biases and discrimination that favor men in the workplace, even in fields where women are the majority. While progress has been made in promoting gender equality in the workplace, research suggests that the glass escalator phenomenon is still prevalent. Studies have shown that men in female-dominated professions, such as nursing and teaching, are likelier to be promoted to leadership positions and earn higher salaries than women in the same fields.

It is important to continue addressing and challenging gender biases in the workplace to ensure that all employees, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to succeed and advance in their careers. Williams (2013) coined the theory of the glass escalator to explain how women are still overlooked for administrative roles in predominately female careers. Women in male-dominated professions encounter a "glass ceiling" that prevents their ascension into the top jobs. Twenty years ago, I introduced the concept of the "glass escalator," my term for the advantages that men receive in the so-called women's professions (nursing, teaching, librarianship, and social work), including the assumption that they are better suited than women for leadership positions" (p.609)

As indicated before, the argument is that if education is a female career, the question is, why are there limitations in higher education for female advancement? In evaluating higher education, it is essential to consider whether the curriculum and training provided adequately address issues of gender bias and discrimination in the workplace. This includes educating students and faculty about the glass escalator phenomenon and its impact on gender equality in the workforce.

Additionally, higher education institutions should examine their policies and practices to ensure that they are not contributing to gender disparities in the workplace. This includes promoting diversity and inclusion in recruitment and hiring practices, providing opportunities for professional development and advancement for all employees, and actively addressing issues of gender bias and discrimination in the workplace. Addressing the glass escalator phenomenon requires a concerted effort from higher education institutions and employers to promote gender equality and ensure all employees have equal opportunities to succeed and advance in their careers.

5.0 Women in Leadership Roles in European Higher Education

Women's representation in leadership roles in European higher education has improved in recent years but is still significantly lower than males; even though women now outnumber men in higher education, they continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions. According to a report by the European Commission (2019), women make up only 21% of university rectors, 29% of vice-rectors, and 45% of heads of departments in Europe. The report also found that women are likelier to hold leadership positions in smaller universities and the humanities and social sciences fields. In comparison, men are likelier to hold leadership positions in more prominent universities, natural sciences, and engineering fields.

Several initiatives have been launched across Europe to address this gender imbalance in higher education leadership. For example, the European Women Rectors Association (EWORA) was founded in 2016 to support women in higher education leadership positions and advocate for gender equality. The European University Association (2021) indicated that only 15% of rectors in EUA member universities in 48 countries were female, compared to 85% of males. The situation varies across countries as the proportion of female rectors is above the average in 19 countries and below in eight countries. Notably, 20 nations currently do not have any female rectors. Below (Graph 1) illustrates the current rate of women leaders in higher education in Europe at over 4,000 universities.

Graph 1: Countries with the Highest Number of Women Leaders in Higher Education
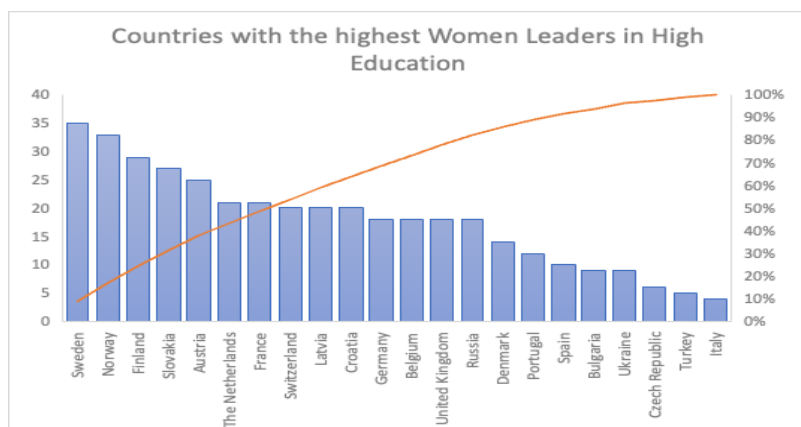
Note. EuropeanPlatform of Women Scientists (2019). Female university leaders in Europe. https://epws.org/female-university-leadership-europe

National policies have also been introduced in several European countries to increase the representation of women in higher education leadership. For instance, in Norway, the Gender Equality Act requires universities to have at least 40% of both genders on their boards. The government has established a Gender Equality Award for institutions that promote gender balance in leadership positions.

Overall, while progress has been made in increasing the representation of women in leadership roles in European higher education, there is still much work to be done to achieve gender equality in the sector.

7.0 The Future of Women in Leadership Roles in European Higher Education

The future of women in leadership roles in European higher education is promising but still faces challenges. In recent years, there has been progress in increasing the representation of women in leadership positions in higher education institutions across Europe. However, women, such as university presidents, rectors, and chancellors, still need to be represented in top leadership positions.

To address this, many European countries have implemented policies and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and increasing the representation of women in leadership positions. These include quotas for women in leadership positions, mentoring programs for women, and gender awareness training for faculty and staff.

Based on the presenting evidence, several steps can be taken to promote women's leadership in higher education in Europe:

1. **Increase awareness:** Raise awareness of the issue of gender imbalance in leadership roles in higher education through public campaigns, conferences, and workshops. This will help to encourage more women to aspire to leadership positions and help to change the perception of what leadership looks like in academia.
2. **Implement gender-neutral policies:** Introduce gender-neutral policies in recruitment, promotion, and evaluation processes to ensure that women have the same opportunities as men to advance their careers.
3. **Encourage mentoring and networking:** Create mentoring and networking programs for women in academia to help them develop the skills and relationships needed to succeed in leadership roles. This will also help to build a pipeline of female leaders in higher education.
4. **Provide leadership training:** Provide leadership training programs for women in academia to develop the skills and confidence needed to succeed in leadership positions.
5. **Establish quotas:** Consider introducing quotas to increase the representation of women in leadership roles. While controversial, quotas have successfully increased gender balance in other sectors.
6. **Foster a culture of inclusivity:** Institutions should create a culture that values and supports diversity, equity, and inclusion. This includes implementing policies to prevent harassment and discrimination, creating safe spaces for underrepresented groups, and promoting awareness of diversity issues.
7. **Hold institutions accountable:** Establish monitoring and evaluation systems to track progress in achieving gender balance in leadership positions and to hold institutions accountable for their commitments to gender equality.

If the institution of higher education can begin to acknowledge there is a gender imbalance, then they can begin to start taking steps to empower more women into leadership roles.

8.0 Conclusion

Gender balance in European higher education leadership remains an ongoing challenge. Women are underrepresented in leadership positions, and many face barriers such as unconscious bias, lack of access to networking opportunities, and work-life balance issues. Reviewing the research question, the glass escalator is still working. However, with the strides that some institutions are taking, it is taking women more time, but with continued support, women can start making their way. To promote gender balance, institutions can take steps such as increasing the representation of women in leadership roles, addressing the gender pay gap, creating leadership development programs, fostering a culture of inclusivity, supporting networking opportunities, and increasing the visibility of women leaders. By taking these steps, institutions can promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education leadership and create a more equitable and just academic environment.

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