

Invisible leaders? Reviewing contemporary evidence about women leaders in education

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the findings from a review of the scholarly literature concerning women leaders in education. The PRISMA¹ approach was used to review the contemporary evidence (2014-2024) and 30 articles were identified that fully met the inclusion and exclusion criteria set for the review. A thematic analysis of the selected articles was undertaken, and five main themes emerged. Results suggest that the under-representation of women in leadership roles and the barriers that women face in securing leadership positions remain dominant within the contemporary evidential base. The review findings suggest that women are still likely to encounter complex, inter-related discriminatory challenges when seeking a leadership post. The review findings also highlight that such challenges are well documented in evidence spanning over 30 years. Finally, the article suggests that the use of more sophisticated methodological approaches, including more longitudinal research studies of women leaders (both aspiring and in post), would add significant value to the knowledge base.

KEYWORDS

Women leaders; Women in education; Educational leadership

Introduction

While women continue to find their way into various leadership positions in schools and universities, in general, there remains a persistent under-representation of women in the most senior positions in education (Gaus et al. 2023). Given that women are far more prevalent across the education sector generally, it remains perplexing that men continue to dominate the top leadership jobs while women leaders, in contrast, appear to be relatively invisible. It is even more puzzling that the 'glass ceiling' preventing women from reaching the

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dizzy heights of senior leadership currently remains robustly intact. As Moreno et al (2024, 19) note 'whilst women are well represented in middle leadership roles, they are disproportionately underrepresented in senior roles in educational organisations globally, despite women making up the majority of the education workforce'.

There is ample evidence that the reason for the under-representation of women in leadership roles partly resides in the fact that the provision of family care is unequally divided between women and men (Morgan et al. 2021). A recent review of the literature on this subject (Torres et al. 2024) underscores the way in which caring duties disproportionately fall on women in ways that can potentially derail career progression and promotion opportunities. They note 'in the workplace, mothers face a motherhood penalty, where they are perceived as being unfit for leadership roles, are evaluated as less competent and less committed to their careers, receive lower salaries, and are denied advancement opportunities. As a consequence, mothers tend to occupy fewer leadership positions than men (including fathers) and childfree women' (Torres et al. 2024, 1).

Overall, the evidence relating to the under-representation of women in leadership roles is extensive. Researchers have systematically highlighted how women become less and less visible as they move higher up the leadership ladder, whether in schools or universities (Blackmore 2013; Coleman 2001, 2010; Fuller 2014 and Porritt 2021). With a few exceptions, women still tend to be absent from the most senior leadership positions in educational organisations despite being similarly qualified or as experienced as men. Even though gender roles and expectations have often been cited as the main drivers of workplace inequalities (Bush 2021) in contemporary times when societal norms and views are so dramatically different from those several decades ago, why is that women seem to be so invisible when it comes to filling the most senior leadership positions?

The literature on the barriers and enablers to women's progress to senior leadership positions is consistent in what it outlines. Overwhelmingly, the evidence signals cultural, organisational, structural, and personal barriers to the promotion and progression of women into senior leadership roles (Maheshwari, Nayak, and Nguyen 2021). In short, there are significant barriers to entry that operate, sometimes below the waterline, making it more difficult for women to progress to the top leadership jobs.

The evidence concludes that a powerful amalgam of personal, organisational, and professional factors stealthily and often silently, hold women back. These factors can combine in ways that result in double or even treble discrimination against women seeking senior leadership roles. From interviews with over 200 women leaders in education, Weiner and Higgins (2023) outline the many forms of sexism and racism that women face in the workplace, including microaggressions, stereotypes about women's work, and the expectation of uncompensated emotional labour.

In universities, the research-intensive systems and structures that support the natural progression of men often work against women who, for a range of reasons, find themselves on a different career pathway. It is common in universities for women to be allocated leadership roles which require some caring or nurturing aptitude hence many women in universities hold senior positions related to student care, welfare or progression rather than research (Denney 2023). In schools, Thompson and Stokes (2023) highlight the barriers facing women seeking middle leadership roles in school. They note that the main barriers include family and caring responsibilities plus informal networking that can sometimes exclude and often marginalise women.

Of course, not all women nor the barriers they face are identical. Issues of race, diversity, culture, and socio-economic status overlap and when combined can exacerbate inequities. Hence certain groups of women, particularly minority groups, are more vulnerable to discrimination and inequitable treatment in the workplace (Harris 2020). The evidence is clear, race, ethnicity, age, income, health, and sexual orientation all affect women's chances of securing leadership opportunities, and any mix of these factors can offer a potent basis for discrimination.

Research from various disciplines has illuminated the ways in which multiple social categories *intersect* to shape outcomes for women in the workplace. Hence in any consideration of women in leadership it is important to remember that while gender is a powerful factor, it is not an isolated phenomenon. The intersectionality of various characteristics (e.g. gender and race, gender and sexuality, gender, and age) combine in subtle but powerful ways to influence the judgement and decision making of others. Intersectionality has been defined '*as overlapping social categories, such as race and gender, that are relevant to a specified individual or group's identity and create a unique experience that is separate and apart from its originating categories*' (Rosette et al. 2018, 3).

With the idea of intersectionality clearly in mind, this article takes a contemporary look at women in leadership within education. The article reviews selected contemporary evidence with the prime aim of drawing upon established and recognised scholarly work to offer insights into the current position of women leaders in this broad sector. The intention of this article is to assess how far contemporary evidence suggests that the prospects for women seeking senior leadership roles in education have improved, changed or stayed the same over the last decade. The article offers thematic insights into the selected knowledge base and reflects upon how future research studies on this topic might benefit from different methodologies and research approaches.

The initial scope of this review included both schools and higher education. A preliminary scan of the available scholarly evidence, however, quickly showed a disparity between the available evidence on women leaders in schools and women leaders in higher education. It is acknowledged that a great deal of

writing and scholarly work has been focused on female school leaders but much of it resides outside the inclusion criteria set for this review.

Consequently, while this article draws primarily on selected contemporary evidence about women leaders in higher education, the implications and conclusions readily apply to women leaders within schools. It is fully acknowledged that one of the limitations of this review resides in the parameters set and the fact that the review only includes articles written in English. It is accepted therefore that key scholarly work may have been omitted and that work contained in books, chapters, multi-media, etc. is missing. The chief purpose of this review is to look at the current scholarly evidence pertaining to women in leadership within education and to summarise what it outlines.

Method

It is important to note at the outset that this is a scoping review with the prime intention of illuminating selected literature specifically highlighting current issues regarding women in leadership within education. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) method was used as it is well established method of reviewing scholarly evidence (Moher et al. 2009). The aim of the review was to gain an insight into the contemporary evidence on women leaders in education by scrutinising selected scholarly work. The review was guided by the following questions:

- (1) What are the main themes in the contemporary literature concerning women in leadership in education?
- (2) How far are the issues raised in the contemporary literature different from those highlighted more than a decade ago?
- (3) What research designs could be employed in future scholarly work on women leaders in education?

The methodological approach used in this review process follows specific guidelines outlined by Kitchenhand (2004) and is in line with the PRISMA three-stage approach outlined in Appendix 1. The PRISMA approach allows those undertaking reviews of scholarly evidence to clearly report what they did and what they found. It also offers a clear rationale for the included and excluded texts and the selection process (Page, et al. 2009).

When reviewing any evidence, there is a need to follow clear steps that show how the evidence was assembled and analysed. The PRISMA approach is considered reliable to meet this need due to its highly structured framework and its transparent approach (identification, screening, and inclusion). Through the rigorous adherence to the PRISMA steps it has been posited that researchers can minimise bias or errors occurring in the review process thus ensuring the outcome of their analysis is robust and trustworthy (Moher et al. 2009).

Following the PRISMA guidelines, the initial stage of the review commenced with setting keywords and clear search criteria (inclusion and exclusion criteria). This stage was followed by extensive database searches and the subsequent scrutiny and screening of articles for final selection. An analytical framework was then developed based on emergent themes from the selected articles.

In terms of setting keywords, combinations of the following were used in the review using the syntax below.²

Syntax: TI (woman or women or female or females) AND TI (lead or leaders or leadership or leading or manage or management or admin or administrator or principal or president) AND TI (higher education or university or universities or college or academia).

In terms of the search syntax,

TI: This indicates that the search terms are restricted to the title (TI) of the articles. This ensures that the resulting articles have a primary focus on the specified topics.

OR: This operator is used to include any of the listed terms. It broadens the search to cover various synonyms and related terms.

AND: This operator is used to combine different concepts, ensuring that all specified terms are included in the search results.

The selected keywords (see [appendix 3](#)) used in the review were as follows:

- Group 1: Women-related terms
- Keywords: woman, women, female, females
- Group 2: Leadership-related terms
- Keywords: lead, leaders, leadership, leading, manage, management, admin, administrator, principal, president
- Group 3: Higher Education-related
- Keywords: higher education, university, universities, college, academia

As noted earlier, the review initially included schools and higher education but the returns of suitable scholarly work that fully met the inclusion criteria and adhered to the exclusion criteria was small. Hence it was decided to only focus on higher education to work with a larger body of evidence that could be analysed thematically.

Potentially, with any review process a large, unwieldy body of evidence could emerge hence it was important to define the inclusion criteria used in the review process to identify and select relevant studies. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Countries: all
- Language: English only
- Keywords for search: Title (only keywords identified were used to search the titles – Appendix 3)

- Peer Reviewed Journals (SCOPUS and ISI only)
- Databases: Only articles in (1) Ebscohost (Academic Research Complete), (Education Research Complete, ERIC, Teacher Reference Teacher), (2) Web of Science, were included.
- Date of search April 2014 – April, 2024 (10 years)

In order, to make the review process manageable and tightly controlled, exclusion criteria were also applied at the screening stage. The aim of the exclusion criteria was to ensure that the key focus of the selected study (women in leadership in education) remained central and that other lenses on this issue, while important, did not take the review in different directions and away from its core purpose.

From the initial scanning of the available literature, it was clear that a wide range of positions, ideas and debates were often superimposed upon or conflated with the notion of women in leadership. Hence, it was decided to exclude any articles where women in leadership became a secondary or minor consideration to other issues, debates or topics. Consequently, articles were excluded if they:

- Reflected any notion of management that was not related to educational leadership (e.g. pain management, managing expectations)
- Had titles where the focus of the article was clearly not about women in leadership but about another topic where women were a category (e.g. 'How do male and female headteachers evaluate their authenticity as school leaders?')
- Were overly concerned or preoccupied with the type of education or setting where this was central focus of discussion (e.g. Catholic Universities, X College, Y school) or where the subject area or field of expertise was the key focus of the article rather than women in leadership roles (e.g. Physical Education and Leadership, Leading in Humanities)
- Focused solely and primarily on a specific country context first and foremost with women in leadership being a sub-set in the discussion (e.g. political or religious context)
- Had not been published in either a SCOPUS or ISI indexed journal.
- Were promotional in orientation i.e. advocating a leadership programme or marketing a university or product.

In terms of the PRISMA approach, the three steps of the review process were as follows: –

Identification

During the initial search process, 700 studies were identified. Among them, 470 articles were immediately excluded as 251 were duplicate articles (excluded by

automation tools), and 219 were excluded by the researchers because they lacked direct relevance to the central focus of the review. For example, in one title that was rejected the focus was on the management of diet system for women in universities. Although all search keywords were found in the title, the study was clearly unrelated to the core purpose of the review and was subsequently excluded.

Screening

After removing duplicates and irrelevant articles, the selection was narrowed down to 230 studies. During the screening stage, the titles, and abstracts of these 230 articles were thoroughly examined, resulting in 63 articles remaining based on their direct relevance, methodological rigour, and quality. Each article was also individually reviewed to determine whether it fully met all the inclusion criteria. The articles were then marked as either 'included for final review' or 'excluded.' The exclusion criteria were also re-applied to double check that all the articles finally selected specifically and centrally focused on women in leadership in education.

Included

In the last stage of the PRISMA process, articles were checked again against the SCOPUS/ISI databases and any non-SCOPUS/ISI articles were removed. SCOPUS is an abstract and citation database known for its quality coverage, peer review guarantee, impact factors and indexing criteria. 30 articles were finally included, and full references appear in a list at the end of the article.

In the next stage of the review process the 30 selected articles were analysed thematically to identify key patterns and trends in the selected body of scholarly work. Braun and Clarke (2006) advocate thematic analysis for its flexibility and usefulness in presenting data that is rich and complex. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) outline that clarity around the process and practice of the method is vital when undertaking thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The review team worked independently and inter-dependently following the same protocols for eliciting key themes and tested these themes in term of representativeness and content validity. Appendix 2 outlines the main themes identified and highlights each of the articles that centrally reflects each of the five themes.

Inevitably, the nature of the subject matter meant that many of the articles selected in this review also covered other themes that did not feature in the final thematic analysis. To offer a coherent narrative around all the selected articles, the researchers took the main themes as signposts for the writing in the section that follows. As a review team we fully acknowledge that the selected articles covered a far broader set of themes, theoretical perspectives

and issues that could be represented or included in the thematic analysis. A deliberate decision was made to highlight the main themes emerging from the articles selected and to return to the three questions stipulated at the start of the review process. The commentary on the results of the review returns to these three questions.

Clearly, the themes that emerged are fairly broad and not mutually exclusive. Rather they coalesce to form a complex set of factors relating to women leaders in education. So, while the commentary appears to be linear and treats each theme independently, it does so in the full recognition that the reality for women leaders in education is far more connected, complicated, messy and convoluted than this section implies. To make sense of the whole, however, we propose that it is necessary to look at each part. Consequently, each of these five themes and the articles supporting that theme (most strongly) will be outlined and discussed separately.

Results

The main aim of this review was to look at the contemporary scholarly evidence, about women in leadership in education, published between 2014 and 2024. As noted earlier, all 30 articles were subject to an analytical process that highlighted key themes or issues. In total, 5 themes emerged from the selected studies. Brief summaries of the articles that comprise each theme follows.³

1. Under-representation of women

Over 30 years, the study of the position, status and experience of women academics has attracted a significant amount of scholarly attention. A key theme in the reviewed literature focused upon what has been termed the 'absent women' discourse, namely the underrepresentation of women in the highest positions in the education sector. Aiston and Yang (2017) consider whether this discourse is primarily a perspective from the West by looking at the position and experience of women academics in other contexts. They note an absence of adequate accessible data within the higher education sector in the East Asian context and use Hong Kong as an example. The article presents large-scale empirical data to show how women academics are 'woefully underrepresented in all levels of leadership' in academia in Hong Kong (Aiston and Yang 2017, 1).

Denney (2023) focuses on the ongoing under-representation of women at the most senior levels in universities. The emergence of teaching only routes to promotion and 'Third Space' roles that navigate a pathway between purely professional and academic roles are, it is argued, aimed at women who do not fit the traditional route to senior leadership roles. Denney (2023) highlights how the masculine nature of universities dominates in ways that pose barriers

for women to progress to the most senior roles. She notes that Athena Swan has shone a light on existing inequities within universities regarding the 'gender denial' but argues that it remains a challenge for women to navigate the spaces occupied by men. Denney (2023) also notes that more women than men take on more work that is largely viewed as 'academic housekeeping'. Denney (2023) concludes that women remain the exception rather than the norm in university leadership and even if promoted can be locked into a 'glass classroom' where further progression options may be very limited.

Schiffecker and McNaughtan (2022) focus on the notion of crisis leadership in higher education that has been a focus of global leadership research since 2020. They highlight the need for more research on how women increase their access to high-level leadership positions within higher education and gain greater representation as senior leaders across higher education generally. They point out the need to investigate the specific leadership dynamics that render women leaders successful in their roles. Schiffecker and McNaughtan (2020) emphasise the importance of getting a better understanding of the leadership dynamics that operate within and between different institutional levels that could exacerbate the under-representation of women in leadership positions in higher education. They underline the requirement of more studies that specifically explore how women lead in times of struggle and crisis.

Shepherd (2017) highlights the significant gender imbalance that remains at the executive management level within higher education despite a range of initiatives and developments aimed at increasing the number of women in the leadership pipeline. The article challenges the notion of 'women's missing agency' that has been characterised, by some in the field, as a lack of confidence or ambition displayed by women that causes them to opt out of applying for the top jobs. This idea of 'women's missing agency' has been offered as an explanation for the continued underrepresentation of women in leadership in education. Shepherd (2017) challenges this idea by highlighting the importance of three structural factors associated with the leadership selection process: (a) mobility and external career capital, (b) conservatism, and (c) homo-sociability. She proposes that the idea of 'fixing' the women is not only misconstrued but also is unlikely to be insufficient in redressing the current underrepresentation of women on university executive management teams. Furthermore, it is suggested that women-only development programmes are unlikely to lead to gender equality and propose that change interventions that seek to 'fix' the organisation not the individual may be needed.

Townsend's (2021) study of Black women administrators in higher education found that they are not being retained in their positions because of issues stemming from the identity politics they are exposed to while at work. The consequent underrepresentation of women at senior leadership levels, is purported

to be linked to women's negative experiences at work compounded because of incidents of microaggression towards them. In addition, the article points to racial differences in speech and socialisation as reasons why some women of colour find themselves 'not placed in leadership positions (Townsend 2021, 1). Women in this study point to alienation, being excluded, unreasonably questioned, and discounted as examples of the micro-aggression they experienced which made their workplace difficult to navigate and prompted their decision not to remain within academia.

2. Barriers to progression

In terms of barriers to the progression of women, many of the articles in this review highlighted the complex mix of factors that actively prevent women from progressing into the most senior leadership roles in education. Chance (2021) outlines the adverse experiences that are barriers to progression for Black women in higher education. The article highlights the compounded adversities resulting from the intersectional identities that face Black women within higher education that include 'physical, sexual, and verbal assault and abuse, adverse childhood experiences such as growing up in poverty, being raised by single parents, being subject to bullying, losing loved ones, discrimination, and health issues' (Chance 2021, 1). The findings reveal an association between their ability to develop the necessary leadership skills to advance their career and their lived adverse experiences which present significant personal barriers to progression. The article concludes that while Black women are underrepresented at the top ranks of leadership in the academy, educating and motivating Black women with leadership potential to progress to leadership positions must remain a high priority.

Coetzee and Moosa (2020) note that the barriers to the progression of women into senior leadership roles include the glass ceiling, gender discrimination, the old boys' network, stereotyping, poor support and personal circumstances. They also highlight the concept of the 'glass cliff' where women who are promoted to leadership roles often feel vulnerable and in a precarious position, so they feel the need to work much harder than their male counterparts. Coetzee and Moosa (2020) note how retention is a barrier to promotion emphasising that women within academia often choose not to stay because of the challenges they face. Failure to retain women within higher education the authors propose is one way of ensuring that men are promoted and progress within academia. Coetzee and Moosa (2020) conclude that the retention of women is possible and the barriers they face can be overcome through institutional support, quality relationships, better work-life balance, recognition and opportunities for growth.

Gallant (2014) proposes that the under-representation of women in higher education (HE) leadership is a persistent global phenomenon. In this research

she considers the possibilities of a programme aimed at ensuring more women are represented in leadership roles. The findings reveal ambiguities and contradictions that surround the notion of leadership, particularly the way the participants positioned themselves as potential leaders. Conclusions suggest that how women see themselves as a leader and the skills they feel they bring to this role may be at odds with what universities model and require of their leaders.

Gandhi and Sen (2021) propose that even though women far outnumber men in the teaching fraternity in universities, in terms of leadership they remain restricted to middle-ranking roles. In a sector which has traditionally attracted many women as their preferred career choice they argue that the lack of an adequate talent pool cannot explain the lack of progression to the top leadership jobs. They note that barriers to progression include an absence of policies and practices to encourage female leadership, a gendered workplace where men dominate, lack of role models and a traditional socio-cultural workplace which is de-motivating for women and prevents them from seeking leadership opportunities.

In their work, Gaus et al. (2023) reveal two social cognitive practices that affect women's endeavour to emerge as leaders (1) the incongruities of cultural and cognitive expected status belief and status characteristics about females with the expected performance of leadership. (2) the incongruities of cultural and cognitive expected ways of emotional expression on women with the expected performance of leadership. In essence they point to deep cultural barriers that prevent women from considering leadership roles.

Howe-Walsh and Turnbull (2016) focus on the lack of women in senior positions in science and technology (ST) in universities in the UK. They highlight the challenges facing women in academia particularly those aspiring to leadership positions. The research examines women's experiences regarding the perceived barriers to leadership in ST faculties in UK universities. The findings show the highly gendered nature of ST faculties and reinforce how women struggle to navigate their careers in the face of considerable barriers including organisational influences such as temporary work arrangements, male-dominated networks, intimidation and harassment, as well as a lack of a confidence in relation to progression and promotion within academia.

Leišytė, Pekşen, and Tönnies (2022) found vertical gender segregation in the management structures of the university they studied, where women academics were far more likely to experience career progression barriers than men. They found evidence of the persistence of gender segregation at the university, despite the transformation of university HRM practices and uncovered gender tokenism among university management. In terms of institutional barriers, Lipton (2015) points to the quality assurance policies and practices instilled within universities, which it is argued, has significant gendered consequences for academic women in higher education. The article concludes that understanding the relationship between gender and assessments of research

excellence is central to tackling the differences in male and female academic career trajectories and the lack of women in academic leadership positions.

Looking across different contexts and cultures, Maheshwari (2023) considers if any differences are evident in the barriers facing women in university leadership in developed and less developed countries. The study concluded that most of the research in women's leadership in higher education had been done in the US and Canada, with a dearth of literature on women's leadership in higher education in Asia. The evidence that focuses on less developed countries, however, suggests that women face similar barriers to securing a leadership post in higher education as in more developed settings. In another study, Maheshwari, Gonzalez-Tamayo, and Olarewaju (2023) looked at the barriers facing women securing leadership positions in higher education within a developing country. The barriers included perceived leadership style differences between men and women, the burden due to family responsibilities, the male-dominant culture, poor institutional support and personal factors.

Peterson (2014) notes that while Sweden has the highest percentage of female university Vice Chancellors in Europe this does not necessarily mean that women have successfully broken the 'glass ceiling' by overcoming the barriers that exist to progression in leadership. The article suggests that some of increasing workload, role conflict and decreasing status and prestige remain significant barriers to women's progress into leadership positions. Peterson (2014) also revisits the concept of the 'glass cliff' where it is proposed that women are appointed to precarious leadership roles in situations of turbulence and problematic organisational circumstances thus setting them a task that is hugely time consuming and harder to combine with a home life and a successful scholarly career.

Finally, Redmond et al. (2017) considers some of the challenges facing women in the most senior positions in university and considers the ways in which, despite the barriers, women can move on to successful leadership positions. The article offers several recommendations for early and mid-career women in academia aspiring to formal leadership positions. The first recommendation concerns the importance of personal ownership of one's career progression. The second recommendation relates to planning for the future. The third recommendation pertains to resilience and the fourth recommendation relates to a focus on recognisable outcomes. The fifth recommendation highlights that women should actively seek and establish personal support mechanisms such as mentoring, coaching or joining networks but a final message is that institutions should actively offer women the support they need to reach senior leadership roles.

3. Women's leadership roles and development

Several articles in the review focused on the roles women play in leadership positions and the leadership preparation offered to women. Brabazon and Schulz

(2020) focus on a mentoring programme initially designed to redress the underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions. The article reflects on the structural barriers facing women seeking leadership positions in higher education and questions 'firstly, why women would bother aspiring for promotion, and secondly, the very real impediments to women in institutionally undervalued disciplines who nevertheless do' Brabazon and Schulz (2020, 876). The article reflects on the work required to ensure that mentoring, coaching and other formal/informal leadership development initiatives stimulated real structural change. The authors in this study found that Black women administrators in higher education, for a wide range of reasons, despite mentoring opportunities, chose not to stay in academia long term, Gedro et al. (2020) consider the leadership development opportunities needed in time of crisis and argue that dividing men and women into different leadership styles or approaches may prove to be unhelpful and unproductive. The authors conclude that leadership development programmes should focus primarily on organisational climate, culture and offer prospective leaders support to operate at all levels in the organisation that actively encourage and promote the selection and development of women in leadership positions.

In their work, Pifer, Tevis, and Baker (2023) focus on how women leaders develop and enact their leadership practices in support of higher education institutions and their members. The findings from the study point towards an emergent 'Institutional-Individual Leadership Model', which it is argued needs to be tested and refined through further research. It is proposed that this new model could provide a basis for more finely attuned leadership support and development for women in leadership positions.

4. Women as leaders – reality, approaches and challenges

Another theme that emerged from the selected body of work concerned the lived experience of women as leaders, the approaches they used to lead, the nature of their influence and the challenges they faced. Burkinshaw and White (2017) argue that the gendered power relations at play in universities stubbornly maintain entrenched inequalities for women. The precariousness for women of leadership careers is explored in the article illuminating critical gender power-relations at work. The article argues that it is universities themselves that need fixing, not the women. It concludes that women's growing resistance to toxic power relationships, reflects their dissatisfaction with higher education leadership and its culture of masculinity.

Glass, Cook, and Pierce (2020) consider whether the representation of women in leadership roles reduces sexual harassment claims on college campuses. The article looks at the impact of women's workplace authority on sexual harassment claims. It considers women as agents of change within a gender power struggle. The authors suggest that their findings 'provide a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which sexual harassment can be prevented. Rather than

focusing on appointing solo or token women to leadership roles, harassment prevention should focus on integrating and increasing the numbers of women into leadership ranks' (Glass, Cook, and Pierce 2020, 205).

In their article, Harvey and Jones (2022) suggest that a recognised challenge for women in higher education learning and teaching is one of rightfully claiming leadership. They note that university processes for recruitment, promotion, awards, grants and fellowship are based on an ability to document and convincingly present one's leadership contribution. Yet, the authors suggest that the contribution of women to learning and teaching often accords with a more distributed leadership approach which may render women unable to quantify and claim their leadership contribution. The challenge for women, they suggest, is finding ways of capturing and measuring their leadership impact, so they are not disadvantaged when it comes to formal assessment and promotion.

Kersh (2018) highlights how workplace factors like managing multiple roles means that for women, work can ebb into personal life. The study examined the relationship between stress and the health risks to women in administrative roles in higher education with a particular focus on the coping strategies they employed. The results suggest that women administrators were employing effective strategies when dealing with daily work stressors and developed a degree of learned resourcefulness. The study concludes that there is a long-term potential for physical and mental health issues arising from high levels of stress experienced by women leaders. A recent systematic review of the evidence (Urbina-Garcia 2020) found that female academics generally reported higher levels of stress and mental health concerns compared with men. The evidence also shows that the impact of stress on women's mental health was exacerbated during the pandemic (Giorgi et al. 2020).

Qadhi et al. (2023) similarly highlight how women leaders balance multiple demands, especially in male-dominated cultures. The article comments on the intricate way the female participants formed their leadership identities, emphasising values like motherly care, trust, and respect. The authors note that while formal leadership training was lacking for women leaders, within the context of this study, women drew on past experiences and family support to handle their leadership tasks and life responsibilities.

In their study, Selzer and Robles (2019) looked at the key professional development advice related to career paths, challenges faced, and lessons learned from senior women leaders. Their findings suggest that aspiring women leaders needed to be ready to navigate institutional challenges, often outside of their control, such as bureaucracy and politics, budgetary constraints, forces impacting student affairs, and institutional change. They conclude that 'the needle can move for women in higher education leadership positions if women identify themselves as aspiring leaders, create time for career assessment reflection, and take action to implement strategies for advancement endorsed by successful senior women.' (Selzer and Robles 2019, 1).

Wilkinson and Male (2023) explored how senior women leaders in the UK Higher Education exhibited leadership during the pandemic. The study investigated whether women's leadership approaches changed during this time and the impact that leading an organisation through COVID had on them personally. Their findings show while their fundamental leadership approaches did not change, the female leaders in the study exhibited situational approaches with higher levels of distributed leadership than pre-pandemic. The study noted acute pressures on women leaders during the pandemic in terms of their work-life balance. The overall conclusion emerging from this research suggested that women leaders 'weathered the pandemic with professional and personal strength and an eye on the future' (Wilkinson and Male 2023, 16).

5. Male leadership: impact and perspectives

The final theme in this review includes articles written about the impact that male leaders can have on women and the way in which male leaders view female leaders. In her article, Marshall (2023) outlines the way in which some male leadership behaviour can be toxic. She proposes that male toxic leaders convey a myriad of characteristics, behaviours, and actions that can contribute to destructive environments leading to harmful consequences for the followers but particularly for women leaders. The article concludes that such behaviour can be intimidating to women and can actively prevent them progressing into leadership roles for fear of victimisation and retribution from men in positions of power who choose to abuse that power.

In her study, Moody (2022) captures the voices of men to offer their perceptions of women as leaders. Findings revealed that although men in leadership positions appeared to understand the challenges experienced by women, the deeper embedded (real) levels of patriarchy and institutional culture along with the impact on women's lived experiences were not fully appreciated. The male respondents' experiences of women's leadership reflected a broad spectrum from women as docile to women as influential, leading through persuasion and negotiation. The findings suggest that women coming from outside institutions into leadership positions, have more of an opportunity to challenge the status quo than those who rise through the institutional ranks. The article concludes that while men in the study appreciated how gender diversity impacts on leadership 'this has not culminated in transformation in leadership to the extent of gender equity, nor has it uprooted systemic institutionalised gendered cultures.' (Moody 2022, 7).

Commentary

In terms of the first question asked at the start of this review, the contemporary evidence reveals the significant under-representation of women in leadership

roles and identifies powerful barriers that women face when trying to climb the leadership ladder. In their analysis, Aiston and Fo (2020, 1) propose the concept of 'silencing of academic women', They argue that excessive workload is often used in universities in ways that confine women to an 'ivory basement' and that 'small events' or 'micro-inequities' which are hard to prove or call out can silence academic women and by association, make them invisible.

Recent work further underlines the under-representation of women in leadership positions. Articles focus on the 'leaky pipeline' (Ayyildiz and Banoglu 2024) the unique and intersectional experiences of Black women leaders (Johnson 2023) and the barriers facing women accessing middle leadership (Thompson and Stokes 2023). Overall, the bulk of contemporary evidence remains preoccupied with the challenges facing women leaders in education but offers very few solutions about a positive way forward. While leadership development opportunities such as mentoring and coaching may be lifelines for some women leaders (Watterston and Ehrich 2023), the evidence in this review points to powerful structural fault lines within institutions that can sometimes derail ambition and block the way for women leaders. A toxic masculine culture, inherent in some workplaces, is also a potent factor that can demotivate women from pursuing a leadership role or from enacting their leadership role successfully (Başkan 2020).

To address the second question, the evidence in this contemporary review reinforces how many of the themes found in the broader literature on women in leadership spanning the past 30 years. Successive decades of scholarly work have carefully documented and illuminated the disparities between male and female leaders in aspiration, promotion, reward and perceived success at an institutional level and at an individual level. This considerable body of empirical evidence has highlighted the complexity and tenacity of the inequities that women in education face (e.g. Blackmore 2013, 2022; Coleman 2001, 2010; Fuller 2014; Hall 1997; Lumby and Moorosi 2022; Outhwaite and Simon 2023; Porritt 2021; Power 2006; Showunmi et al. 2022; Thomson, Hall, and Jones 2013).

Of course, there are many successful women leaders around the world within education and other sectors, so the findings from this review are not intended to devalue or diminish their competence, ability or success in any way. Rather it is to reflect on the fact that the most recent body of evidence, on women leaders in education, continues to paint a rather dispiriting picture. In short, it suggests that patterns of gender disparity and inequity remain deeply culturally and structurally embedded at an organisational level.

Turning to the final question about future research approaches used in studies of women leaders in education, meant considering the research designs used in the scholarly work in this review. It was noticeable that most of the articles were small-scale studies, using qualitative methods or autobiographical/grounded theory approaches. While some survey methods were deployed, most studies had small samples and used interviews, in some form, to gather data. Given the subject matter, there is no question that the research

approaches adopted in the selected articles were both legitimate and appropriate, given the sensitivity of the topic and the nature of the disclosures.

It is worth considering, however, whether more sophisticated research methods might be useful in the future to delve more deeply into the issues highlighted and possibly, to unearth other types of findings. For example, more mixed method studies with larger samples and longitudinal studies of women leaders in education using more innovative research methods could add value in an empirical sense.

To conclude, the limitations of this review have been acknowledged earlier. In research there are always choices to be made. It is accepted, however, that using broader or alternative search parameters might have delivered a different selection of articles. Researchers might wish to pursue the possibility of revisiting the contemporary evidence by using different search terms and looking at a broader evidential base. For now, however, the findings from this current review signal a worrying trend and the need for some serious pause for thought.

In so many ways, the findings from this review are disappointing and deeply concerning. They suggest that, despite a plethora of initiatives, actions, programmes and policies, little has changed for women leaders. They are still under-represented at the most senior levels and continue to face barriers to promotion and progression that men do not encounter. Surely, this must be a call to action and a signal that changing the narrative about women in leadership is imperative.

A different discourse on women in leadership is perfectly possible but it will require women across the globe to fully engage with the fact that the barriers they face are not unique, not of their making and can be overcome. Networks and networking can undoubtedly play their part in shifting the dial. Networks are a form of connected autonomy that can drive innovation, empowerment and social change. WomenEd⁴ is one such example of a movement that is successfully connecting women leaders around the world. The core values of this grassroots movement focus on 'elevating women to take the next leadership step'. Given the findings of this contemporary review, this statement could not be more apposite or more urgent.

A cultural shift is perfectly possible but as Sum (2023, 1) notes it will require adopting a 'lens of hope' accompanied by collective, determined positive action. The apparatus of discrimination and the barriers to progress can be removed but it will require women leaders to be more active and more visible. Ironically, the solution lies in having more women in leadership roles at all levels. Only then, will the discourse of under-representation change and only then, will the invisibility of women leaders be viewed as some strange relic of the past.

Notes

1. PRISMA 2020 explanation and elaboration: updated guidance and exemplars for reporting systematic reviews | The BMJ

2. *Syntax*: is a structured format and logical arrangement of search terms, keywords, and Boolean operators (e.g. AND, OR) used to query databases for relevant literature were employed.
3. It is not possible to offer detailed accounts of each article, so summaries are provided in relation to each theme. As acknowledged earlier, all the articles in this review cover a wide range of complex issues. Full references appear at the end of this article.
4. Home (womened.com)

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Review (30)

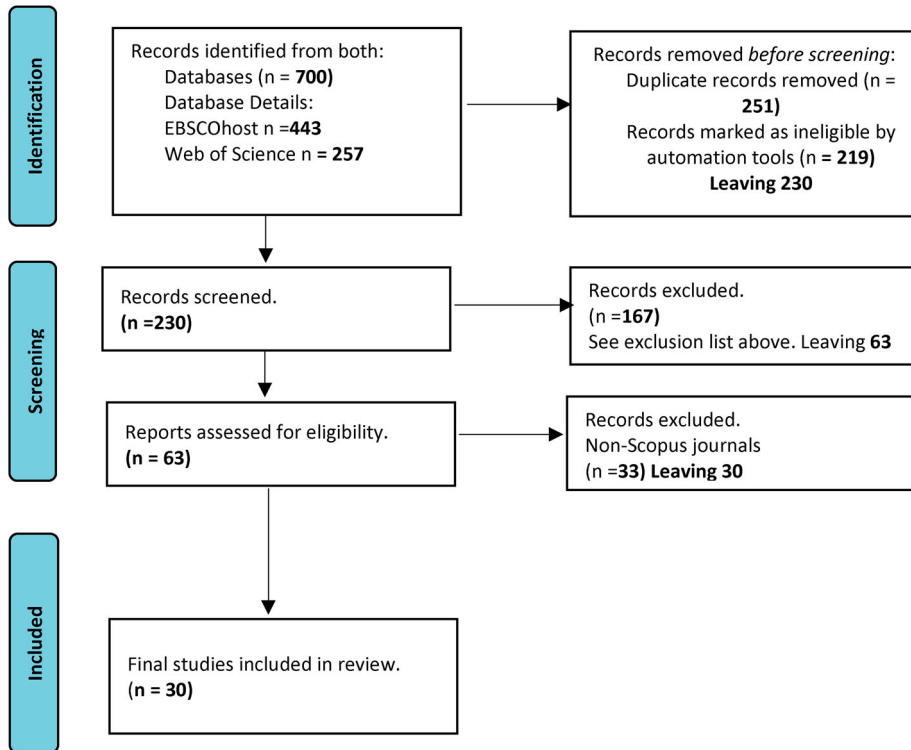
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Summary of PRISMA framework



Appendix 2: Thematic Overview

Themes	References (30)
1. Under-representation of Women (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aiston and Yang, 2017 • Denny, 2023 • Schiffecker and Mcaughtan, 2020 • Shepherd, 2017 • Townsend 2021
2. Barriers to Progression (12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chance, 2021 • Coetzee and Moosa, 2020 • Gallant, 2014 • Gandhi and Sen, 2021 • Gaus et al, 2023 • Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016 • Leisyte et al, 2022 • Lipton, 2015 • Maheshwari, 2023 • Maheshwari, et al (2023) • Peterson 2014 • Redmond et al, 2017
3. Women's Leadership Development (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brabazon and Schutz • Gedro et al, 2020 • Pifer et al, 2023
4. Women as Leaders - realities, approaches, and challenges (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Burkinshaw and White, 2017 • Glass et al, 2020 • Grangerio et al, 2023; • Harvey and Jones, 2022 • Kersh, 2018 • Qadhi et al, 2023 • Selzer and Robles, 2019 • Wilkinson and Male, 2023
5. Male Leadership (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marshall, 2023 • Moody, 2022

Appendix 3. Use of the keywords

Term	Synonym
Woman	"women" OR "Woman" OR "female" OR "females"
Leadership	"lead"" OR "admin"" OR "manage" OR "Principal" or "president"
Higher Education	"higher education" OR "university" OR "college" OR "Universities" OR "Academia" OR Schools