

Women's Leadership and Gender (In)Equality in Academia in Azerbaijan

Inara Yagubova

Topics of Discussion

Social, cultural and structural challenges that women face at the different stages of their career in HEIs. Role of education and personal development in the career growth of women. Possible interventions and solutions to the gender inequality in HEIs in Azerbaijan. Mechanisms for women empowerment.

Introduction

This document summarizes a roundtable discussion titled “Women’s Leadership and Gender (In)Equality in Academia” that took place on 16 November 2023 under the auspices of UNESCO Participation Program at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University. The event was moderated by Inara Yagubova. Participants represented a wide range of Azerbaijani stakeholders including universities, research centers, non-governmental organizations, and independent experts.

The roundtable was organized in view of the current situation in Azerbaijan regarding women’s underrepresentation at managerial positions in higher education institutions (HEIs) and academia overall. The roundtable aimed to focus on the promotion of gender equality and the importance of having women in senior leadership positions. The roundtable also discussed the challenges faced by women in HEIs and focused on possible solutions and interventions that can be made at

Inara Yagubova is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) and an adjunct faculty at ADA University. She is the former Project Manager of the EU Centre of Excellence at ADA University, where she coordinated the flagship GCRF COMPASS project led jointly by the University of Kent and the University of Cambridge. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author.

different levels designed to overcome gender inequality at the decisionmaking level in academia. This document concludes with a set of recommendations provided by the participants for policymakers.

Gender (In)Equality in HEIs

The issue of underrepresentation of women in senior management posts inside HEIs requires heightened attention at national and international levels. At present, women leaders are not represented in sufficient numbers to be able to champion the change process. Over the past decades, women have been underrepresented in many sectors despite their remarkable gains in education and workplaces.

A significant gender imbalance remains at the senior management level within higher education—despite the number of women working in HEIs outnumbering men in some cases. Research conducted in foreign countries [RIGHT?] shows that in some cases it is lack of self-confidence, ambition, or professional guidance that leads women to opt out of applying for leadership positions in higher education institutions. According to such studies, in most cases, women academics hesitate to apply for senior roles without specific encouragement or endorsement of their credentials from others.

Structural factors including a limited ability to participate in international conferences, long work hours, and family commitments create further barriers in women's career at HEIs.

The gender parity statistics in higher education leadership in Azerbaijan are well documented, which implies that the pool of women's administrative talents is not optimally utilized. According a 2023 report published by State Statistical Committee, in Azerbaijan 85.7% of university rectors are men, while only 14.3% are women; 75.4% of vice rectors are men, while 24.6% are women; 68.5% of deans are men, while 33% are women; and 67% of head of departments are men, while 33% are women.

Summary of Major Points

The roundtable brought together various stakeholders and provided a platform for an intensive and insightful discussion on different aspects of women's underrepresentation in leadership roles in HEIs in Azerbaijan. The roundtable began with a constation, rooted in Western-led social science research, that gender inequality is a multidimensional issue that has social, cultural, and structural aspects. Participants considered that there are multiple factors within institutional structures, systems, and mind-sets that require transformative change. Participants also noted that women's own difficulties at both personal and professional levels should be taken into consideration while making interventions.

The barriers and challenges mentioned by the participants can be summed up in three categories.

First, socio-cultural factors:

- Due to early marriages, childcare, and unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities women start their careers later, or they take break, and thus lose years (and continuity) for career development. Most working women face the challenge of combining different roles (work and family).
- Due to gender-based stereotypes and misperceptions, as well as a lack of understanding of constitutional and legal rights (equality), women have comparatively less self-confidence and ambition regarding the pursuit of career goals. Some existing family models (those traditional ones characterized by a strict division of gender roles) may be at the root of such things, as they are seen as impede women's empowerment and the realization of women's dreams and the actualization of their potential from early childhood.

Second, structural and institutional challenges:

- State policies are gender neutral but do not reinforce the application of gender parity in the workplace.
- Lack of support and talent development programs at some universities that can assist women to enhance their professional skills.
- Lack of quota or affirmative action systems and evaluation mechanisms of gender balance at the workplaces.
- Lack of data and research on women underrepresentation in the leading roles and its causes.
- Lack of initiatives to apply foreign best-practices, experience, and standards that can pave the way for better women's representation in managerial and leading roles at Azerbaijani universities.
- Challenges involving employers' expectations and the perception of women and their roles. These include men leaders' unwillingness to work with women as peers, which can shape the chances of women to take on greater managerial responsibility—and even to apply for such positions.

Third, personal-level challenges like lack of communication and emotional intelligence skills as well as lack of self-confidence skills. The foregoing helps to explain why women apply for managerial positions in HEIs in fewer numbers than men.

Recommendations

In view of the current situation regarding women's representation in managerial positions HEIs and academia overall, the participants in the IDD roundtable underlined the importance of interventions at structural, socio-cultural, and personal levels.

The participants proposed the following set of policy recommendations to address women's underrepresentation at HEIs.

- Governments should supplement broad gender policies for the community at large (by tackling issues like equal pay, work-life balance, etc.) with targeted policy tools for higher education. The establishment of a quota system—i.e., the setting aside of a certain percentage of jobs for women in recruitment—could be one way forward.
- More family-friendly policies such as parental leave and flexible work schedules for parents are also regulatory policies that might advance gender equality in HEIs. This, in turn, can serve as basis for the conduct of more policy research on women's underrepresentation in leadership roles, which can, in turn, generate information to help policymaking and foster interventions.
- Continuous data collection on gender balance should be conducted by the government to reinforce existing regulations and measure their effectiveness.
- Increasing awareness of gender inequality and fostering a culture of gender equality inside HEIs to create a favorable environment to address gender inequality in academia.
- Recruiting and promotion rules support should use performance evaluation metrics.
- Introduce targeted funding and training programs for women. In particular, HEIs should offer talent management programs for women to support them at all stages of their academic careers.
- Dissemination policies may be used to raise public awareness about implicit biases or gender stereotypes, thereby promoting more equal representation in leadership roles at university level.
- Women leaders can be drivers for change by positioning themselves as role-models in traditional media and social media, which can break gender stereotypes and encourage other women to pursue academic careers and achieve leadership positions.