

## Issues on female academia: A cross-sectional research in Iran

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### ABSTRACT

Although measurable improvements have accrued in women conditions in Iran, their representation in higher education leadership has not caught up proportionately. Some of the areas of improvements are: Women's life expectancy, women's literacy rate, nationwide women's acceptance at universities, and rise of gender-adjusted index of human development. On the other hand, women representation in higher education leadership has been constantly very low. We have conducted a longitudinal research in Iran's three top universities, which are University of Tehran, Shahid Beheshti University, and Allameh Tabataba'i University. Our cross-sectional research at 1992, 2002 and 2012 reveals that, this deficiency has been a continuous trend during the past twenty years. The findings of this research raise a number of facts, some of which appear to be particularly of note: Women now comprise more than two-thirds of university entrants, the number of female students and female faculty members have been raised considerably, and women have expressed repeatedly their readiness and interest in taking managerial and decision-making positions. The most important facts about women presence in leading academic positions is that there are very few of them at this level. This is a real problem in the academic arena that cries for an immediate change.

Keywords: Management, academic women, meritocracy, leadership style, gender discrimination

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## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the few facts about women presence in leading academic positions in Iran is that there are very few of them at this level. For bringing awareness about this unfortunate fact, a longitudinal research was designed and administered with the time span of twenty years. The main agenda of this research has been looking into women's situation in Iran's academia, and the level of their actual participation in the academic contexts.

This cross-sectional research has been carried out on three different stages: 1992, 2002, and 2012. In each stage, the changes that have occurred in the level of women leadership in universities have been scrutinized.

## **SCOPE OF RESEARCH**

The first research was conducted in 1992 and was conducted in Iran's three top universities, which are University of Tehran, Shahid Beheshti University, and Allameh Tabataba'i University.

The second research was conducted after ten years, in 2002 in the same universities.

The third research was conducted after another ten years in 2012, again in the same universities.

## **HYPOTHESES**

The hypotheses of all three researches were:

- 1) The potentials of female workforce are being overlooked in Iran's academic context.
- 2) Gender plays an influential role in the process of designating potential figures in leading academic posts.

The present article reveals the findings of the last phase, i.e. 2012.

## **METHOD**

Besides conducting an in-depth archival study about the subject of inquiry; the main method of data collection was based on interviews and questionnaires. In the first step, the questionnaires were filled out by the research population (female academic figures in Iran's top three universities).

This questionnaire contained thirty questions and it was designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data. In addition, open-ended questions elicited descriptive information about women career trajectories, glass ceiling in their way upwards, obstacles to attain their promotion to the key positions and preferred strategies to address these barriers and remove the obstacles.

## **DISCUSSION**

Although measurable improvements have accrued in women conditions in Iran, their representation in higher education leadership has not catch up proportionately. Some of the areas of improvements are: Women's life expectancy, women's literacy rate, nationwide women's

acceptance at universities, and rise of gender-adjusted index of human development. On the other hand, women representation in higher education leadership has been constantly low. The female workforce is capable of performing an influential role in Iranian academia; by providing a fertile context for students' effective education and development. In order to contribute more effectively, talented academic women should be advanced in leadership and top managerial positions. These women should enjoy a sense of belonging and support from their organizations. Universities should create an environment where academic women feel accepted and supported to succeed to the highest level of hierarchy. But the reality is very different and cultural barriers play an important role in this arena.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### Number of Faculty Members

Total number of faculty members in three universities has gone up since twenty years ago. The percentage of women faculty members has been raised in TU and SBU, but has decreased in ATU (Table-1).

Table 1

University	Total		Women %		Men %	
	1992	2012	1992	2012	1992	2012
TU	1077	1747	9.09	13.4	89.4	86.6
SBU	320	535	16.2	18.5	90.9	81.5
ATU	399	386	22.7	15.3	77.3	84.7

### Age Range and Work Experience

In regards to the data which has been collected throughout the research, the majority of the research population is qualified for being designated in leading academic posts. In that, not only are they age-appropriate; but also, their work experience and academic potential is highly remarkable.

### Level of Education

The level of education has been raised in year 2012. While in 1992, more than 62 percent of women faculty members had a Master degree, on 2012, all of them had a doctoral degree. This means that their knowledge and awareness has been promoted and they are more eligible to hold managerial positions in academic environment.

### Family Status and Motherhood

More than 81 percent of academic women in the sample were married and about two-third of them had children. This signifies that although maternity duties and family obligations are culturally prioritized in Iran; women are eager to fulfill their vocational potentials and make an invaluable contribution to professional context of their society.

## **University Title**

Compare to 1992, a higher proportion of women faculty members are assistance and associate professors. The number of full professors has slightly increased. These female academic figures have taken on an effective role in educating undergraduate and graduate students.

## **Academic Publications**

Most women faculty members have written books, articles, course materials and texts. They also have conducted many researches. The number of women faculty members who are actively involved in writing and research has gone up considerably since twenty years ago.

## **Managerial Positions**

Although the number of women appointed in managerial positions has slightly increased during the last twenty years, women are not proportionately represented in the senior positions. A situation must be provided in which women can see their way upwards rather than sideways.

## **Training Facilities**

Another question that we asked was how training facilities were distributed among men and women. In the early stage of the research, findings showed the uneven distribution of these facilities, but after twenty years the number of women who have been awarded by academic grants have grown.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of our research are not surprising. In fact, our findings at 2012 once again reinforce the two previous researches in 1992 and 2002. The most prominent fact is that there are only very few women in leadership and top managerial positions in academic environment. As Morahan says, a major challenge is that there are few women in leadership positions for other women to look up to (Krupa, 2012).

Our cross-sectional research raise a number of facts, some of which appear to be particularly of note: Women now comprise more than two-thirds of university entrants, the number of female students and faculty members have been raised considerably. The low representation in academic leadership contrasts with the boom in female students in past thirty years in Iran. Besides, women have expressed repeatedly their readiness and interest in taking managerial and decision making positions. As a matter of fact, the findings of our research demonstrate that the notion that women are not ambitious towards leadership positions is wrong. Women have equal leadership aspirations in an environment where they can feel fully accepted and supported to succeed. Academic women in Iran universities have demonstrated their ability and most of them have proven their strong interest in participating fully in university leadership, but still they face enormous barriers and discriminations. Many questions naturally come up at this point, among them: Why are there so few women appointed for key managerial and leadership positions in universities? Why are they stuck in bureaucratic middle management

roles and are expected to implement men's decisions but are not allowed to hold decision-making positions? Why are women hired for positions of technical expertise but have to wait much longer than men for promoting to leading positions? Why according to Kerfoot & Whitehead, the 'boys' culture does still proliferate. This suggests that in higher education environment the majority of women are performing 'dirty jobs' of middle management in a highly insecure and frustrated environment (Prichard et al, 1998).

## **SUGGESTIONS**

The following suggestions would facilitate women leadership in academic environment.

### **Challenging the Status Quo**

Academic women must break their silence and become more proactive. They must be aware of their managerial potential and let their natural talents flourish, with self-confidence and self-respect. They should question the existing situation and try to change it.

### **Compensating the Past**

According to the research findings, compared to 1992 in which most academic females had a MA degree, at 2012 all women in the research sample held a doctoral degree. This means that they are more qualified and eligible to hold managerial positions. To redress long-standing inequity and to make amends with the female academic population; it is essential to proliferate the academic grants, fellowships, sabbatical leaves, and different training courses for women in an accelerating rate. By providing this opportunity for them, women will be able to fulfill their potentials to its full extent, and confidently expand their academic and professional ambitions.

### **Legal Support**

Research findings show that more than 81 percent of the academic women in the sample were married and about two-thirds of them had children. In fact, there are so many females in the academia who are playing a dual role i.e., running a household, working in the universities and being involved in job related activities. While Islamic instructions emphasize on motherhood responsibilities, academic women deserve special legal support (such as flexible working hours, nurseries, cultural and educational activities for children) in order rear well balanced children in one hand, and produce qualified students in further education levels on the other hand.

### **Fostering Meritocracy**

Merritocracy refers to the condition of prioritizing one's merit and personal qualifications in the process of power and responsibility distribution. In other words, 'selection, promotion, job benefits, and distribution of existing facilities' take place due to the outstanding qualifications of the workforce. (Zahedi, 2013). In order to foster meritocracy in universities, a special committee might be established to undertake selecting the most qualified persons for leadership and key managerial positions. Establishing more open and egalitarian recruitment, hiring and promotion

practices would prepare the necessary foundation for qualified applicants to be evaluated without regard to gender.

### **Occupying the Seats in University Boards**

Councils, commissions, and committees, are some of the boards in the hierarchy which have very important role in running universities. If occupying the seats of some of the boards is by election, the qualified academic women ought to accept the candidacy and through a democratic process obtain their adequate status in these boards. In the other hand, if occupying is not by election, then appointing the women to these boards would prepare a proper foundation for them to participate in decision-making process.

### **Preferred Leadership Style**

There is a greater need than ever to place more emphasis on equal opportunity and treatment. The author confirms the previous research findings on women abilities. Research has shown that men and women are generally similar in terms of learning ability, memory, reasoning ability, creativity and intelligence (Gibson, 2012, Paris et al. 2009). In a study of the preferred leadership style of male and female leaders in twenty seven countries, it was reported that female managers prefer participative and team oriented leadership dimensions more than men. These are dimensions which more suites the academic environment. Now it is time to improve the old management models in order to promote universities productivity and effectiveness.

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