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Gendered Leadership Dynamics and Female Leadership: Underrepresentation of Women in
Leadership Positions in Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions

Sara Hasanli

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APPROVED:

Dr. Vafa Yunusova, Academic Supervisor

Dr. Ulviyya Mikayilova, Committee Member

Dr. Arzu Mammadova, Committee Member

Dr. Ulviyya Mikayilova, Dean of the School of Education

Date: 20.05.2024

STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICITY

I certify, having reviewed the ADA's policy on plagiarism, that this thesis entitled “Gendered Leadership Dynamics and Female Leadership: Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Positions in Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions” is entirely my work and does not contain any unacknowledged contributions. I hereby affirm that this master's thesis, which represents my independent research, has not been previously submitted for any degree or examination.

Signature:

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Date:

20.05.2024

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Abstract

This study aimed to initiate a discourse regarding the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership positions in Azerbaijani higher education institutions (HEIs). The review in the thesis critically analyzed the global scientific community and the theoretical frameworks that were used to investigate factors that may have influenced or hindered women's representation in academic leadership positions.

Following a qualitative methodology, the data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with 12 individuals, comprising high-ranking individuals within the university hierarchy, encompassing positions such as Heads of Laboratories and Divisions, Faculty Deans, Department Heads, and other individuals from both genders who hold leadership posts at the university. A thematic analysis unveiled a number of significant findings. Initially, the results of this study provided insights into multiple facets of the gender imbalance present in academic leadership positions at Azerbaijani HEIs. The academic community's perspectives on academic leadership and the essential attributes of an effective leader in academia are exposed through the discourse surrounding academic leadership. Perceived differences in leadership styles between males and females were also revealed. The factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions were determined and categorized as external, institutional, and individual-level factors considering the responses of participants. Although there was consistency with the findings of previous research conducted in other contexts, the cultural element was a distinguishing characteristic of the experiences of female leaders in Azerbaijan. The significance of fostering gender diversity in leadership positions to improve the performance

of organizations and establish a more inclusive atmosphere within academic institutions was determined.

The results of the study emphasized the necessity for structured interventions, gender mainstreaming initiatives, and institutional reform to foster gender diversity and equality in Azerbaijani higher education institutions. Large-scale research would be conducted to make the topic more scrutinized and/or investigated, to establish cause-and-effect relationships, to test hypotheses, and to determine the opinions, attitudes, and practices of a large population, to reach generalizability, which in turn could contribute to the progression of women into positions of academic leadership and cultivate inclusive environments.

Keywords: Academic Leadership, Female Leadership, Gender Representation, Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Problem Statement

Although the integration of women into the workforce has been increasing drastically, the persistence of underrepresentation in leadership positions in almost all industries remains a significant issue (Hideg & Shen, 2019; UN Women, 2021). In accordance with various studies, striking gender disparity persists within higher education institutions and universities on a global scale, notably in the most authoritative and influential posts, where women continue to be inadequately represented (Avin et al. 2015; Bruckmüller et al. 2014; Cook and Glass 2014; Howe-Walsh et al. 2014; Machado-Taylor and Özkanli, 2013).

Rising employment opportunities for women are also inevitable in Azerbaijan, whereas the Global Gender Gap Report presents that the country hasn't experienced substantial advancements in the reduction of the gender gap in its ranking (*97 out of 146*), and gender egalitarianism still does not attain the anticipated in certain domains, particularly in leadership and administrative positions in Higher Education institutions (World Economic Forum, 2023). However, higher education is regarded to be a gender-inclusive environment and ought to foster equal opportunities, representation, and support to thrive academically and professionally all individuals (Bailyn, 2003; Kreitz-Sandberg, 2016; United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in Azerbaijan, 2022).

The statistics disseminated by the Azerbaijan State Statistical Committee at the beginning of the 2021/2022 academic year are quite revealing regarding the gender distribution in executive positions in Azerbaijani State Higher Education institutions. According to the statistics, rectors are overwhelmingly male (90.2%) with a striking (9.8%) of them being female;

the situation is essentially identical among vice rectors: (19.6%) of vice-rectors are women, and a significant (80.4%) of them are men; at the level of deans, a mere (25.5%) are women, while a significant majority of (74.5%) are men. Further down the academic hierarchy, among heads of departments, women occupy (29.6%) of the positions, while men dominate (70.4%). Within Azerbaijani higher educational institutions, the exclusive domain in which women exhibit numerical superiority over men is within non-leadership positions, notably among teachers, where 61.4% of the faculty comprises women, in contrast to the 38.6% represented by men (Azerbaijan State Statistical Committee, 2022).

The most recent statistics released by the Azerbaijan State Statistical Committee, in conjunction with the data presented in the Global Gender Gap Report, evidently demonstrate the existence of the problem in Azerbaijan and the imperative demand to address it.

Significance and Purpose of the study

The glaring numerical differences underscore the significant gender disparity in leadership in Azerbaijani higher education institutions which pose substantial questions about the barriers that prevent women from ascending to senior positions at universities. Not only is it important for equity and social justice, but addressing these discrepancies is also essential for promoting diversity and inclusive decision-making within the educational system. Research also supports that organizations perform better when they diversify decision-making positions and leadership (Czabanowska et al., 2017). Furthermore, it holds significance given that when women are unable to advance to higher-paying positions or are underrepresented in leadership roles they are financially affected as a result, which leads to a gender pay gap (Johns, 2013). One of the primary underlying factors of the underrepresentation of women in universities is the

ongoing maintenance of entrenched gendered power dynamics, which leaves the institutional culture lacking senior female role models. However, women in leadership positions serve as role models for female students and academics. When women see other women in influential roles, it inspires and encourages them to pursue leadership positions, further their careers, and break down gender stereotypes (Hoyt & Simon, 2011). These facts highlight the importance of understanding the dynamics of gendered leadership within higher education institutions in Azerbaijan.

Consequently, this research aims to explore the perceptions of academics regarding the plausible factors contributing to gender disparity. Likewise, the objectives of the study are to investigate the barriers women encounter with ascending to leadership positions, and the potential consequences of this underrepresentation on academic governance, gender equity, and institutional growth in Azerbaijani higher education. This inquiry emanates from the realization that, although a plethora of literature has been written about gender differences in academic leadership across the globe, they might not be applicable to the institutional and sociocultural environment of Azerbaijan. A context-specific investigation is necessary due to the profound impact of institutional norms, cultural nuances, and systemic complexity on the persistence of gender discrepancies in academic leadership. Therefore, this study's main goal is to identify the institutionally and culturally specific factors that contribute to the gender gap in academic leadership that currently exists in Azerbaijan.

Ultimately, this study may contribute to providing context-relevant insights unique to Azerbaijani HE Institutions, raising awareness, and developing initiatives that can foster gender equity in Azerbaijani higher education and make it more feasible for women to advance to senior positions within the academic hierarchy. Moreover, it may aid in expanding the academic

literature on gendered leadership dynamics and female leadership, particularly in non-Western contexts.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How is gender disparity in academic leadership perceived by academics in Higher Education Institutions in Azerbaijan?
2. What are the experiences of female academics in ascending leadership positions within Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions?

Definitions of Key Terms

Gender Stereotyping: Generalizations regarding the characteristics, behaviors, and social roles of men and women ascribed to them based on their gender formulate gender stereotyping (Heilman, 2012). This phenomenon involves the configuration of assumptions that might favor the maintenance of prevailing gender norms and inequality and it is shaped by historical, cultural, and societal factors (Ellemers, 2018).

Academic leadership: Academic leadership is a complex and dynamic concept that includes the visionary and strategic leadership provided by individuals in educational institutions. It entails the effective management of a challenging academic environment with a strong institutional mission, and fostering an inclusive and innovative academic community (Gallos & Bolman, 2021). Academic leaders in universities generally comprise positions like rectors, vice-rectors, deans, and heads of departments who possess pivotal roles in shaping the institutional landscape (Roberts, 2020).

Female Leadership: Female leadership refers to the active and influential involvement of women in leadership positions in a variety of contexts, including social, political, professional, and communal settings. It entails women engaging in authoritative, managerial, and decision-making roles, implementing their unique experiences, and contributing to the advancement of organizations and societies (Offermann & Foley, 2020).

Glass Ceiling: The "glass ceiling" is a metaphor that refers to a pervasive and frequently unnoticed barrier that hinders people's ability to advance in their careers—especially women within businesses, organizations, or social structures. This phenomenon limits the prospects for progression into senior leadership roles regardless of their accomplishments, competencies, and qualifications (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017).

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Women dominate significantly less proportion in leadership positions throughout a variety of industries and are underrepresented globally, including in higher education and corporate environments (Burkinshaw & White 2017; Louise Morley, 2013; Wallace & Wallin, 2015). The literature consistently highlights a multitude of factors that hinder women's progression into managerial and leadership roles, and contribute to male prevalence in senior leadership positions within academia. To ensure that a comprehensive understanding of the topic is achieved, sources were examined spanning from 2007 to 2023 in the topic. A wide range of scholarly articles, books, and conference papers that have been subjected to peer review is included, and the compilation of these materials was accomplished through the utilization of a number of recognized academic databases, such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, ERIC, and ProQuest. Hence, an extensive review of literature is conducted regarding the hindrances encountered by female academics in their pursuit of leadership roles, drawing insights from a wide spectrum of sources, including Western literature, as well as more proximate contexts such as Eastern and post-Soviet countries. These challenges were meticulously categorized and structured under specific thematic headings within the scope of this study.

Traditional gender hierarchies and masculinized organizational structures

Stereotypical gender roles, according to Kinnear and Ortlepp (2016), are a major hindrance for women trying to redefine power models and leadership legitimacy. A masculine template is commonly used in leadership literature which mainly relates men to leadership qualities, on the contrary, feminine stereotype-related traits such as warmth and empathy are frequently considered as having little relevance for success in leadership (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). On the other hand, women who exhibit traits that are commonly associated with men,

such as ambition and assertiveness, are frequently criticized for being challenging or departing from traditional notions of femininity (Aiston, 2015). Therefore, in order to overcome gender prejudice, women are obliged to exceed performance expectations and provide superior efficacy with a striking balance between traditional notions.

There is a widespread consensus that the majority of the impediments women face while ascending managerial posts are caused by socio-cultural structures such as belief systems, social values, religious beliefs, cultural norms, familial structures, power and authority systems, etc. that are present in many nations. Lee (2011) asserts that the insufficiency of women in high positions is a result of traditional masculine societal norms. The Azerbaijani setting, where comparable gender biases and cultural norms continue, is not substantially different from this scenario (Karimova, 2020). Wallwork (2016) asserts that Azerbaijani women have historically been underrepresented in the comparatively high-paying oil industry and managerial positions and are instead primarily employed in low-paying occupations.

According to Morley and Crossouard (2015), there is frequently a strong cultural bias that favors men over women when it comes to advancements because men are typically considered "natural" leaders in society. However, a recent study by Bornman (2019) indicates that Generation Z members of both genders give preference to transformational and feminine leadership attributes over more conventional male leadership styles. Seale et al. (2021) also propose that women aspiring to senior leadership roles should embrace a transformational leadership approach to address and transform patriarchal workplace cultures.

Discriminatory practices in the advancement process for leadership roles

Inequitable recruitment and advancement procedures in academic environments limit women's career advancement who aspire to pursue leadership positions, even though they

possess the required qualifications for these positions (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Sanderson & Whitehead, 2016). Additionally, Sanderson and Whitehead (2016) highlighted that internal advancement procedures tend to be established by men, which subsequently maintains the systemic barriers preventing women from achieving higher positions and consequently lacking transparency. Furthermore, Tessens, White, and Web (2011) imply that female academics frequently face obstacles in their attempts to join social and professional networks dominated by men, which is an essential step in career advancement as well. Research also suggests women may be less likely to pursue leadership roles in settings with organizational cultures that are dominated by men (Morley & Crossouard, 2016).

Impeding factors on an individual scale

Individual factors, particularly lack of self-confidence, provide a substantial challenge for women pursuing leadership posts in numerous industries, including the academic stage. Pursuant to Niederle and Vesterlund (2007), one of the main obstacles women encounter while advancing leadership roles is a lack of confidence that stems from a lack of empowerment from role models. For women in leadership roles, it is essential to act as mentors, assisting other women in the workforce as they pursue their careers. Therefore, the visibility of female leaders acquires critical importance in driving the empowerment of other women (Sealy & Singh, 2010). The literature also has extensively indicated the lack of self-esteem that women possess in leadership: men often overestimate their talents, but women usually give realistic appraisals of themselves or even underestimate them (Johns 2013; Louise Morley 2013). Accordingly, individual challenges that preclude potential female leaders from taking up leadership positions in Azerbaijani HE Institutions could be their low confidence and self-image. On the other hand, enhanced representation of women in leadership roles can positively influence their perceptions of career

advancement and bolster their self-confidence while operating in circumstances where men predominate (Born, Ranehillb, & Sandberg, 2018; Herbst, 2020).

Ingrained Societal Expectations and Role Stereotyping

Women abstain from pursuing leadership roles in most developing countries including Azerbaijan due to family responsibilities which are influenced by traditional preconceptions and cultural stereotypes. As highlighted by Sowjanya et al. (2017), deeply embedded patriarchal social structures and family systems in society often serve as barriers, constraining women from deviating from assigned roles that entail childcare and familial responsibilities, hindering their progress in their careers. They are firmly convinced that having a high workload poses challenges to striking a healthy balance between work and life and navigating between parent and employee identities and it jeopardizes matrimonial and familial relationships (Morley, 2013). As a result, female academics find themselves in a challenging position, juggling between the demands of two significant institutions: their family and the university. Hence, women need to acquire boundary management skills when the lines between work and life become more complicated to preserve a harmonious balance (Field & Chan, 2018). As stated by Kahn (2014), numerous organizations lack policies that are conducive to female employees, often maintaining predominantly masculine corporate cultures, whereas family-friendly policies can assist women leaders in effectively juggling their familial duties, fostering flexible work settings, and enhancing their performance in both personal and professional spheres. Conversely, Von Hippel et al. (2017) found that the implementation of family-friendly policies has the potential to amplify gender stereotypes and engender adverse attitudes toward women in the workplace.

In summary, the preceding discussion has underscored several significant factors with the potential to profoundly influence the career advancement of women in senior leadership roles in

HE Institutions. The prevalence of masculine cultures, rooted in patriarchal values, gives rise to organizational environments that fail to acknowledge the distinctive contributions women leaders can bring to the workplace. Discriminatory practices in the advancement process for leadership roles further compound this issue, perpetuating systemic barriers to women's progression. The review also delves into impediments on an individual scale, recognizing factors that hinder the career development of women aspiring to leadership roles. Moreover, it explains the influence of ingrained societal expectations and role stereotyping, elucidating how these cultural constructs impact women's leadership trajectories. The societal norms and stereotypes surrounding gender roles contribute to the perpetuation of biased perceptions, hindering the acceptance and recognition of women in leadership roles within HE institutions.

By synthesizing these critical dimensions, the literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by women seeking leadership positions in higher education. The elucidation of these factors informs the scholarly discourse on strategies to foster greater gender diversity and inclusivity within the leadership echelons of HE institutions. Moreover, female leaders may have the opportunity to enhance their preparedness for upcoming leadership roles by getting more information available to them regarding the potential challenges they will encounter through this literature review.

On the other hand, there are obvious gaps in the existing literature on a local context addressing the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) which requires more exploration and investigation. While a plethora of studies address gender gaps in academic leadership across diverse worldwide contexts, there is a scarcity of research that delves directly into the unique issues and dynamics of the Azerbaijani Higher Education Sector. Likewise, the generalizability of closer contexts

such as Eastern and post-Soviet studies addressing the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership is questionable due to insufficient details on data collection and analysis methods, unlike Western literature. Furthermore, a predominant characteristic of the studies under review is their quantitative nature, with a limited number delving into a comprehensive exploration of the perceptions and experiences of academics regarding the plausible factors contributing to this gender disparity. Hence, further research is required to understand how academics perceive the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in Azerbaijani university settings, as well as the factors that perpetuate this gender imbalance.

Theoretical Background

The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within Azerbaijani Higher Education institutions can be investigated through the lens of Social Role Theory, as articulated by Eagly (1987). According to Social Role Theory, roles that are assigned to men and women by society have a significant effect on career prospects and choices, which contributes to elucidating the persistent disparities between genders. Eagly and Karau (2002) contended that the prevailing female gender stereotype contradicts the expectations associated with leadership roles. This incongruity arises from the societal perception that women are communal, while leaders, often associated with men, are expected to be agentic. According to Eagly et al. (2003), cultural stereotypes frequently relate leadership with characteristics that are typically associated with masculinity, like dominance and assertiveness. As a result, women may face discrimination in leadership positions, as there is a widespread belief that they lack the necessary assertiveness and decisiveness deemed essential for effective leadership. On the other hand, women who have

historically been assigned caregiving and household tasks may be discouraged from pursuing or continuing in leadership roles by the societal imposition of these responsibilities. As a result, women tend to develop lower levels of ambition in career advancement compared to men, often confining their aspirations to more traditional and stereotypically feminine occupations and avoidance of leadership positions (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Particularly in academic settings, while undertaking leadership responsibilities, female academics may encounter challenges in juggling familial obligations with the demanding responsibilities inherent in the role of an academic leader.

The historical identification of leadership with agentic skills creates a considerable barrier for women seeking and presently holding leadership roles in academia as well. This alignment with agentic attributes, which are frequently associated with masculinity, creates an implicit bias that can influence views of leadership competency (Eagly & Carli, 2018). Women in higher education may find themselves contending not only with the requirements of their roles but also with societal expectations influenced by traditional gender stereotypes. Role Congruity Theory, as a continuation of Eagly's theory, emphasizes the perceived incongruity between the expectations imposed on women in their traditional gender roles and the assertive, task-oriented qualities traditionally associated with leadership roles which is also inevitable in academia. This inconsistency produces a subtle but persistent stigma against women in positions of leadership. The expectations established by societal norms contrast with the perceived needs of leadership positions, resulting in women's underrepresentation in top positions in higher education institutions. As a result, women seeking leadership positions may undergo more scrutiny due to their leadership style (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Chapter 3. Research Design and Methodology

This research aimed to explore the perceptions of academics regarding the plausible factors contributing to gender disparity, the barriers women encounter with ascending to leadership positions, and the potential consequences of this underrepresentation on academic governance, gender equity, and institutional growth in Azerbaijani higher education.

In this chapter, a restatement of the research questions was followed by an exploration of the selected research design and methods. Additionally, the identification of participants, the data collection instrument, methods of data collection and analysis, as well as ethical assurances, were presented. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How is gender disparity in academic leadership perceived by academics in Higher Education Institutions in Azerbaijan?
2. What are the experiences of female academics in ascending leadership positions within Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions?

Research Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of academics regarding the obstacles hindering the progression of women leaders within Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions. Focusing on comprehending and interpreting the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in higher education necessitates to employment of qualitative research methodology for exploring the richness and complexity of research participants' experiences and perspectives as well as social context (Patton, 2014). This approach empowered me to delve deeply into the complexity and richness of research participants' experiences. Furthermore, qualitative research provides a contextual understanding of social phenomena

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Given that my investigation is centered on factors within the specific context of Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions, utilizing qualitative methods enabled me to scrutinize the distinctive cultural, institutional, and social dynamics shaping women's leadership roles. These considerations collectively made qualitative research the preferred methodology for comprehensively understanding the factors influencing women's leadership roles in Azerbaijani HE Institutions.

Research Design

Specifically, this study embraced a phenomenological research design that is descriptive in nature and centers on an individual's lived experiences to discern phenomena as perceived by those actively involved in a given situation (Bliss, 2016; Delve & Limpaecher, 2022; Groenewald, 2004). Employing the phenomenological lens enabled me to uncover and explore the experiences of female and male academics in relation to the factors influencing their representation in senior leadership positions at universities. Interpretation of the participants' perceptions expanded my knowledge about the phenomenon and provided me with a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Research Paradigm

I approached this study through an interpretivist lens, embracing the understanding that the realities of human experiences are inherently multifaceted, and subjective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It implies any research participant's reality is comprehended by their own experience of it, which may differ from another participant's due to the influences of their social or professional background (Sandberg, 2005). Hence, acknowledging the diverse range of women's experiences, an interpretive approach not only recognizes but also values the multitude

of perspectives within the studied group. This paradigm facilitated the inclusion of various voices, thereby promoting a more thorough understanding of the challenges encountered by women in leadership positions in Azerbaijani HE Institutions.

Data Collection

In this research, interviews were employed as the primary data collection method, a widely utilized approach in educational research. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), interviews serve as a valuable means of gathering insightful information about the lived experiences of participants and the meanings they attribute to those experiences. To explore the perceptions and experiences of academics regarding the factors influencing the progression of women in academic leadership at Azerbaijani HE Institutions, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Semi-structured interviews afford the researcher a degree of control over the conversation's trajectory (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), therefore it enabled me to identify and elaborate on pertinent points raised by the research participant and cultivate a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon. Although the research participants comprised individuals in high-ranking positions with demanding schedules, an offline format for interviews was preferred considering the alignment with their schedules. In adherence to the consent of participants, interviews were recorded to prevent data loss and to ensure the accuracy of the information acquired throughout the interview process (Bauman, 2015).

Initially, an interview protocol was formulated comprising questions designed to elicit insights into the perceptions and experiences of research participants regarding gendered leadership dynamics within the context of Azerbaijani higher education. The protocol

encompassed questions prepared to initiate a thorough exploration and foster in-depth discussions on the factors that impact the progression of women into senior leadership roles. Additionally, considering the flexibility of semi-structured interviews, I drafted some interview questions beforehand and created others (see Appendix C), such as probing or follow-up depending on the participant's answers during the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Prior to interviews, participants received a detailed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, and their voluntary participation (see Appendix B). The consent form emphasized that confidentiality will be protected to the utmost extent, assuring participants that their identities and responses will be anonymized.

Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at Azerbaijani public Higher Education Institutions and the number of involved universities was three. As inclusion criteria of research sites, convenience of the institution and accessibility of the target population were considered. Particularly, considering accessibility is higher in public universities in comparison to private universities, three public universities in Azerbaijan were involved in the study to allow more comprehensive research. Moreover, a crucial step in the research site selection process was a thorough analysis of the organizational and academic structure at each university which allowed me to examine and analyze the leadership dynamics and current representation of women in leadership positions at Azerbaijani public HEIs.

The participants in this study predominantly included high-ranking individuals within the university hierarchy, encompassing positions such as Heads of Laboratories and Divisions, Faculty Deans, Department Heads, and other individuals from both genders who hold leadership

posts at the university. This diverse selection in terms of gender and leadership positions strived to provide an in-depth investigation of the different perceptions and experiences of individuals holding substantial positions within the academic institutional structure by capturing a thorough cross-section of leadership layers. The following Table 1. provides a comprehensive overview of the key attributes of the participants in the sample, specifically gender and holding position at their institution.

Table 1. Participant Information

Participant	Gender	University	Position at HE Institution
P1	Female	University A	Dean, School of Education
P2	Female	University A	Dean, Enrollment Management
P3	Female	University A	Program Director
P4	Female	University A	Manager, Student Recruitment
P5	Female	University B	Director of International Center for Master's and Doctoral Studies
P6	Female	University B	Head of Economics Department
P7	Female	University B	Director of Organization of Scientific Activities Unit and the Chair of Women Researchers Council
P8	Female	University B	Director of Bloomberg Financial Laboratory
P9	Male	University B	Dean, Digital Economics

P10	Male	University C	Head of International Relations Department
P11	Male	University C	Dean, Social Sciences and Psychology
P12	Female	University C	Head of Journalism Department

Sampling

Purposeful sampling was employed in this qualitative research, aiming to identify and select a population of interest pertaining to the phenomenon under investigation. This method entailed the deliberate determination and selection of individuals or groups with exceptional knowledge or experience related to the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Patton (2002) underscores the importance of factors beyond knowledge and experience, placing particular emphasis on attributes such as availability, willingness to participate, and the capacity to articulate experiences and opinions thoughtfully. This consideration led to the adoption of convenience sampling in this study. The target population comprised Heads of Laboratories and Divisions, Faculty Deans, Department Heads, and other individuals who hold leadership posts at the Azerbaijani HE Institutions, recognizing the practical challenges of involving high-ranking individuals and emphasizing the necessity of convenience in forming a sample that accurately represents the intended leadership positions. The sample size was 12 and contingent on accessibility, ensuring that selected participants were readily available for interviews, thereby

optimizing the practicality and efficiency of the study while focusing on gaining valuable insights from influential decision-makers in the higher education context.

Data Analysis

The data was collected and analyzed concurrently since this method of data analysis minimizes the possibility of repetitious, overwhelming, and irrelevant data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As the first step in qualitative data analysis, the recorded data from the interviews was transcribed to produce an organized and comprehensible format that forms the basis for the next phases of research. In order to manage the collected data effectively, a coding process was implemented systematically from the initial stages of data collection. The pertinent units of data were identified and compared to the subsequent meaningful units, consequently, categories were constructed employing coded units (Saldaña, 2021). Furthermore, thematic analysis was adopted for this study which is congruent with the qualitative data and involves exploring and analyzing themes within the data in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following an inductive analytical technique, themes were identified as clusters of interconnected classifications with shared significance.

Trustworthiness of the study

As stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), regardless of the study design, it is of the utmost importance to conduct the research ethically, and the researchers' commitment to ethical conduct is motivated by the ultimate goal of providing trustworthy, valid, and reliable knowledge, emphasizing the importance of adhering to rigorous standards. As Kalu and Bwalya (2017) indicated, to maintain the quality and rigor of the study and guarantee trustworthiness, the

critical elements of qualitative research including credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability were applied.

Credibility

One of the most significant factors is the study's credibility which is related to the validity of the study and in turn its impact on findings. Prolonged involvement with participants, persistent observation if suitable to the study, peer debriefing, positionality, member-checking, and triangulation are all strategies used to ensure credibility (Connelly, 2016).

Triangulation

In qualitative research, triangulation is the process of using multiple approaches to create an in-depth comprehension of a phenomenon or the convergence of data from several sources to test validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Particularly, in this study, I utilized data source triangulation to strengthen the validity and credibility of the research findings which entails cross-validating information from several data sources and different populations (Flick, 2013). I conducted a systematic comparison and contrast of the insights obtained from individuals at different hierarchical levels and different participant groups (male and female) of the organization by using interviews. By contrasting and comparing the responses of male and female participants, I utilized triangulation which enabled me to cross-validate the data by considering the viewpoints of individuals of both genders, thereby preventing any potential bias in the conclusions resulting from the responses of a specific demographic cohort.

Peer debriefing

In this study, I used peer debriefing to investigate the methodology in an impartial, independent manner in order to enhance the credibility of my research study. I collaborated with

more experienced, unbiased individuals to review transcripts, analyze the methods, and evaluate research findings (Janesick, 2007). By subjecting the study to the scrutiny of my instructor and supervisor, I aimed to identify potential biases, refine the research approach, and validate the interpretations made.

Member check

To ensure data accuracy and validity of the study findings, I applied member checks. I returned to the study participants to validate their responses to avoid misunderstandings regarding interviewee responses, elucidating intended meanings, and spotting any potential biases or misinterpretations on my behalf (Thomas, 2017).

I verified in this study that participants were able to relate the interpretations I developed using their experiences and that the results appropriately represented their perspectives by providing a concise summary of the study findings with them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This methodical strategy strengthened the study's trustworthiness demonstrating the dedication to a rigorous and credible research process.

Dependability

The degree of consistency and reliability of findings and interpretations during the course of the research process is referred to as dependability (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008).

Dependability necessitates the use of meticulous methods for collecting and analyzing data, and as indicated in the data analysis section, I utilized Thematic analysis to raise the level of dependability by promoting consistency and lessening the possibility of bias in the interpretation of results. Furthermore, in order to ensure the dependability of the research findings I employed audit trail, triangulation, and positionality (Flick, 2013).

Audit Trail

Dependability requires the thorough preservation of an Audit Trail. Researchers should record all steps involved in their decision-making process, such as collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. Transparency is ensured by this documentation trail, which also makes it possible to verify, duplicate, or expand the study in the future the study procedure (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). For instance, every stage of my research process was meticulously documented, from the formulation of research questions to data collection and analysis strategies including the challenges that surfaced and any modifications made throughout the research.

Positionality

Positionality is defined as the position adopted by the researcher within a particular research study, and certain dimensions of positionality—such as gender, race, and nationality—are culturally assigned or widely seen as constant Holmes (2020). According to Cohen et al. (2011), to be able to acknowledge, construct, evaluate, and explain the researcher's positionality, self-reflection is a required and continual activity during the inquiry. Since my study is also related to one of the aforementioned dimensions—gender—my positionality in this research study regarding female leadership and the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles might have an impact on the research process. My own experiences and opinions regarding female empowerment and gender equity served as an example of my positionality. As a supporter of gender equity, my viewpoint might influence how I approached the problem and research questions, formulated interview questions, or navigated the interview process. Being conscious of my positionality and how it could affect the research process was essential since being transparent about these consequences enhances the study's overall validity and reflexivity

(Holmes, 2020). Therefore, I explicitly addressed any potential biases and assumptions I might hold concerning the study in my positionality statement.

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability also known as external validity is one of the four essential components of trustworthiness, and it is the degree to which research findings and interpretations can be relevantly applicable to different contexts or settings outside of the original research environment (Patton, 2014). It entails the capacity to extrapolate—that is, apply—the knowledge acquired from the research to comparable circumstances, demographics, or environments, hence increasing the possibility of deeper comprehension and utility (Flick, 2013). Hence, a primary consideration is ensuring the transferability of my research findings about the gendered leadership dynamics and underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in Azerbaijani HEIs. Recognizing the variety of circumstances in which leadership dynamics emerge, I endeavored to provide extensive details of the research methodology, participant characteristics, and contextual elements, so thereby future researchers and practitioners can examine the relevance of the study's findings to their instances. Moreover, I intended to improve the study's transferability, allowing for broader applicability and relevance across a variety of organizational and cultural contexts in addition to education.

Ethical Considerations of the Research

One of the fundamental cornerstones for the trustworthiness of a qualitative research study is the ethical conduct of the study, and to ensure the study's ethical conduct, researchers have to recognize how to handle ethical quandaries that may occur during data collection and publication of findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Particularly data collection techniques, interviews, for instance, embrace researcher-participant interaction, which could provoke ethical

quandaries during the research process. Therefore, the researcher is responsible for ensuring that the whole research process has been conducted with sensitivity and integrity and it adheres to scientific research ethics (Patton, 2014). In adherence to rigorous ethical conduct, this study emphasizes the paramount importance of transparent discourse throughout the research process. A meticulously designed consent form, emphasizing voluntary participation and explicitly detailing the study's objectives and implications (see Appendix B), was provided which was suggested by Patton (2015), as an ethical consideration. Given the participants' high-ranking status, privacy and confidentiality were strictly enforced, with measures in place to protect sensitive information. Given the sensitive nature of gender-related issues, precautions were taken to avoid any potential hurt or discomfort. This dedication extended to ensuring that participants in positions of influence feel protected in their participation, maintaining a conducive environment during the conduct of the study. Ultimately, to protect the collected data in a secure spot, I stored it in a cloud service on a password-protected computer (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

Chapter 4. Findings

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the findings. In this section, I offer a concise categorization of the factors that contribute to this underrepresentation and present the main ideas as distinct headings in this section of findings to provide a basic overview of the results. Furthermore, tables and figures are employed to provide a concise summary of the findings, serving as a convenient reference to quickly grasp the main results. The results of this study suggest that several factors at the external, individual, and institutional levels may have an impact on the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions.

This investigation focused on exploring the perceptions of academics regarding the plausible factors contributing to gender disparity, the barriers women encounter with ascending to leadership positions, and the potential consequences of this underrepresentation on academic governance, gender equity, and institutional growth in Azerbaijani higher education. This inquiry emanated from the realization that, although a plethora of literature has been written about gender differences in academic leadership across the globe, they might not be applicable to the institutional and sociocultural environment of Azerbaijan. A context-specific investigation was necessary due to the profound impact of institutional norms, cultural nuances, and systemic complexity on the persistence of gender discrepancies in academic leadership. Therefore, through this study, I aimed to determine the institutionally and culturally specific factors that contribute to the gender gap in academic leadership that currently exists in Azerbaijani HE Institutions. The purpose of this research was to understand the participants' perspectives on the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership roles and the factors that contribute to this problem, and I collected data intending to answer the following research questions:

1. How is gender disparity in academic leadership perceived by academics in Higher Education Institutions in Azerbaijan?
2. What are the experiences of female academics in ascending leadership positions within Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions?

Qualitative data was gathered through in-depth interviews with individuals holding leadership positions at three Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions (University A, University B, University C). Data collection was conducted at the onset of the spring semester in the 2023-2024 academic year. The study included a total of 12 academics in leadership positions, consisting of 3 males and 9 females. The data was obtained from individuals holding different hierarchical positions, including deans, heads of departments, program directors, laboratory/division directors, and other leadership roles.

Academic Leadership Discourse

This research was centered on the underrepresentation of women in leadership, particularly in academic leadership. Consequently, I commenced the interviews by requesting participants to define academic leadership, along with the essential qualities that characterize an effective academic leader and the ways in which it differs from leaders in other fields. Regarding academic leadership and the core qualities needed for effective leadership in this field, the participants offered a wide variety of viewpoints. Their remarks showed commonalities even though their opinions and perceptions were different.

It was underlined how important it is to have a comprehensive understanding of the procedures that are followed at the institution as well as the ability to thoroughly supervise a variety of aspects, as opposed to focusing solely on specific aspects. One of the participants from

the university C stressed the need for an academic leader to have a full awareness of the operations of the university in order to provide a diverse variety of perspectives and solutions:

... academic leader is someone who understands multiple areas of academic processes at university and it is important that they can oversee larger areas rather than small pieces. So that someone who can offer a diverse approach and diverse opinions to the issues.

Another participant's perceptions from the university A highlighted an increasing issue over the dynamics of leadership inside educational institutions while defining the academic leader:

... it has been my concern over the few past years because we can see sometimes the educational institutions being led by people who are, who come from outside, who have never been exposed to real teaching and learning process. So, I believe this is one of the important factors that the person who leads the academic unit, at least who is involved in leading the academic unit.

As the female participant from the university A stated, over the course of the past few years, there has been a discernible pattern in which individuals who have not had direct experience with the genuine teaching and learning processes are taking on leadership posts within educational institutions. Concern expressed by the participant brings to light the potential hazards that might arise from having leaders who do not have direct experience working in the field of education, particularly with regard to comprehending the complexities of teaching and learning. In their argument, they contend that in order for leaders to be effective inside academic units, it is essential for them to have some level of connection or experience with the educational processes that they are responsible for managing. It also highlights the relevance of leaders who offer not only administrative expertise but also a profound awareness of the fundamental educational mission of their respective institutions.

As an additional point of emphasis, the participants underlined the value of critical thinking and analytical skills, as well as the requirement of possessing a solid educational background. In addition, they emphasized the significance of having a comprehensive understanding of international practices in order to effectively lead in a variety of academic settings.

The majority of participants emphasized the value of characteristics such as emotional intelligence, the ability to collaborate with others, and the ability to communicate effectively for academic leaders. The possession of emotional intelligence permits leaders to adeptly negotiate interpersonal dynamics, while excellent communication facilitates collaboration and the formation of agreement within academic teams.

Furthermore, the participants emphasized how important it is for academic people to cultivate a culture of development and to engage in continuous learning. The giving of support and encouragement to subordinates in order to facilitate their growth and advancement is an essential component of academic leadership. One of the participants from the university B defined an academic leader as:

Academic leader has to have an academic voice to deliver to the community, to provide the speech and the support for the community, to change, to make the transition in the community that what kind of voices you are delivering to the community.

The participants have underlined a need for visionary leadership since leaders are required to stay current on advancements in their particular fields and push their employees to strive for excellence. The importance of leading by example was noted, as leaders were expected to possess the leadership values that could be instilled in their team members.

One of the respondents during the interview highlighted a significant distinction between academic leaders and business leaders, and stated that “a strong commitment to scientific

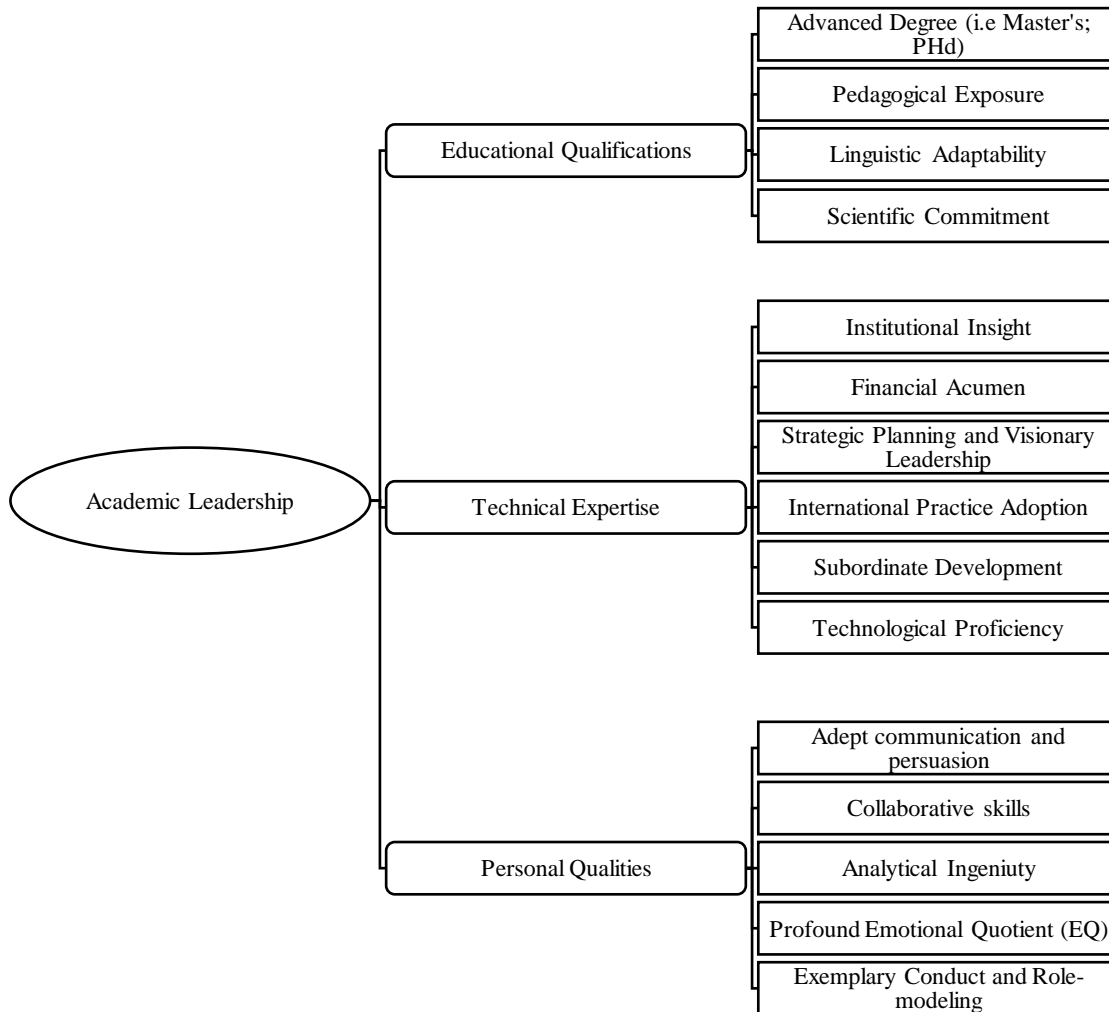
contribution and advancement is the key characteristic of academic leaders.” Academic leaders, unlike leaders in other fields like business, place scholarly endeavors and research as essential obligations of their leadership, and the level of dedication displayed not only improves the academic atmosphere but also deviates them in the pursuit of knowledge and promotion of intellectual development within their institutions.

A master's or doctoral degree, as well as knowledge of modern technologies and finance, and strategic planning, was underlined by the participants as a prerequisite for academic leadership. The possession of several language skills was also seen to be advantageous in promoting international cooperation and staying current with breakthroughs in global scholarly research.

In summary, the findings highlighted the multifaceted and varied attributes that are associated with academic leadership (see Figure 1). These qualities require a combination of educational qualifications, technical expertise, personal qualities, and a commitment to ongoing learning and development. Successful academic leaders are those who can effectively manage the complex dynamics of higher education institutions while simultaneously empowering their team members to attain excellence in their academic endeavors.

Figure 1

Definition of Academic Leadership



Perceived variation in leadership styles of male and female academics

An intricacy of viewpoints influenced by numerous factors becomes apparent upon scrutinizing responses pertaining to differences in leadership approaches between male and female leaders within academic institutions. *Although a subset of respondents acknowledged that there are perceived variations in leadership styles according to gender, the majority of respondents emphasized the significance of individual differences and the impact of external factors that transcend gender* (see Figure 2). The prevailing viewpoint among the participants was that variations in leadership styles do not inherently stem from gender, but rather manifest

from personal attributes, academic credentials, and qualities. *Gender was not considered as a determining factor in the context of leadership style.*

Conversely, a subset of the participants expressed the view that there exist discernible leadership styles that differentiate male from female leaders. In leadership, males are generally characterized as more assertive and goal-oriented. Conversely, female leadership was described as being more process-oriented, collaborative, and transformational. One of the male participants holds the belief:

... of course, there is a difference in their approaches to communication and conflict resolution, and etc. But it is not about being one better than the other, no each of them is different and think completely differently. For example, I tend to think that women's leadership is more more relationship-oriented but we are more task-oriented.

Diverse viewpoints were expressed regarding the topic of whether differences in leadership styles between the genders are inherent or influenced by social and environmental conditions. Although one perspective posits that genetic predispositions increase the likelihood of men and women developing specific temperamental traits, an alternative viewpoint underscores the importance of environmental factors, personal development, and corporate culture in shaping leadership styles.

Women occupying leadership positions were often associated with inclusive, collaborative, and empathetic approaches, while males in leadership positions were often perceived as more authoritative or assertive. Nevertheless, the participants recognized that these inclinations are not universal and may vary among individuals. Some participants believe that female leadership can be more successful in some instances due to the nature and multiple identities they are holding. For instance, one of the female participants exemplified it in this way:

...when women are placed in high positions in society, they make better decisions, they make more optimal decisions. What is the reason? A woman does not think

as a single woman, but also as a mother, and also as a wife, and women are more effective in activities related to management and leadership.

Another female participant from the university A expressed a similar perception regarding the leadership styles of male and female academics:

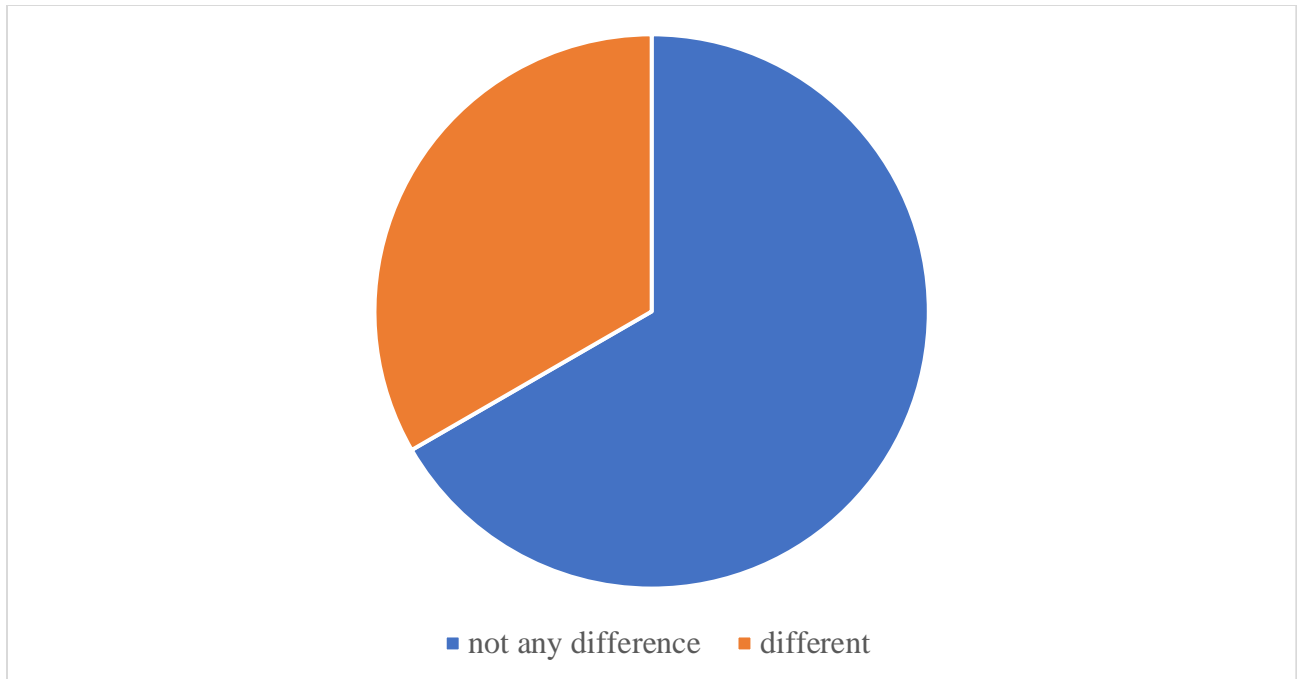
...females are more multitasking. So if you assign a male leader a certain task, if he has a certain department, he will work completely, and he will focus on the steps to achieve his goal. But if you assign, or if you provide him with different departments, For him, simultaneously managing different types of jobs will be very hard. Uh, but for the females, uh, on the contrary, it will be easier. Because, I mean, considering the nature of women, considering the, um, the scope of the job, we do not only at work but at home as well.

Even though commonalities were observed, participants emphasized the importance of recognizing individual differences and the diversity of effective leadership. Successful leaders, irrespective of gender, must possess the capability to adapt their leadership styles to suit a diverse range of situations and environments.

Despite the existence of assumptions suggesting discrepancies in leadership styles between men and women, the available data suggests that the factors influencing leadership approaches within academic institutions interact in a complex manner. The dynamic nature of gender equity and the evolving expectations of institutions of higher education both contribute to the wide range of leadership styles that exist. This underscores the criticality of employing inclusive and flexible leadership strategies that transcend gender biases.

Figure 2

Perception Regarding the Distinction Between Male and Female Leadership



Gender Imbalance Acknowledgement and Progressive Future Outlook

Regarding the assessment of viewpoints on gender representation in leadership roles within Azerbaijan's higher education institutions, almost all participants acknowledge the preponderance of men in positions of authority, whereas they also note the positive trends and ongoing efforts that are being made toward gender diversity in their institutions.

All the participants claim that there is a gap in the gender composition of leadership roles, highlighting the fact that in Azerbaijani HE institutions, male leadership is more prevalent than female leadership. "... it's a pity to look at high-level events and to see that the majority of people who sit in the front rows are men with ties and suits and we rarely see a woman at very high positions."

Participants voice their worry about the lack of gender balance in leadership positions, noting instances in which women are conspicuously absent from high-level events and underrepresented in top administrative posts, particularly as vice-rectors and rectors. Despite the growing number of women who are occupying middle management roles and leadership positions at the departmental level, the top leadership positions continue to be dominated by men, which presents a hurdle to the goal of reaching gender parity.

Although the participants are aware of the gender discrepancies that exist at present, almost all of them have expressed optimism regarding future trends. They anticipate a change towards greater gender diversity in leadership posts within the next few years in Azerbaijani Universities. "... if you will conduct a comparative analysis in the next 10 years I think the trend is going to be more female leadership in educational entities in Azerbaijan." However, they expressed that in order to expedite development and attain genuine gender parity in leadership roles, it is necessary to make concerted efforts and take proactive initiatives. The consensus among participants was that this gender imbalance in leadership roles might have detrimental effects on organizational performance. The significance of attaining a harmonious equilibrium between masculine and feminine perspectives in leadership was underscored by participants as a means to enhance organizational performance.

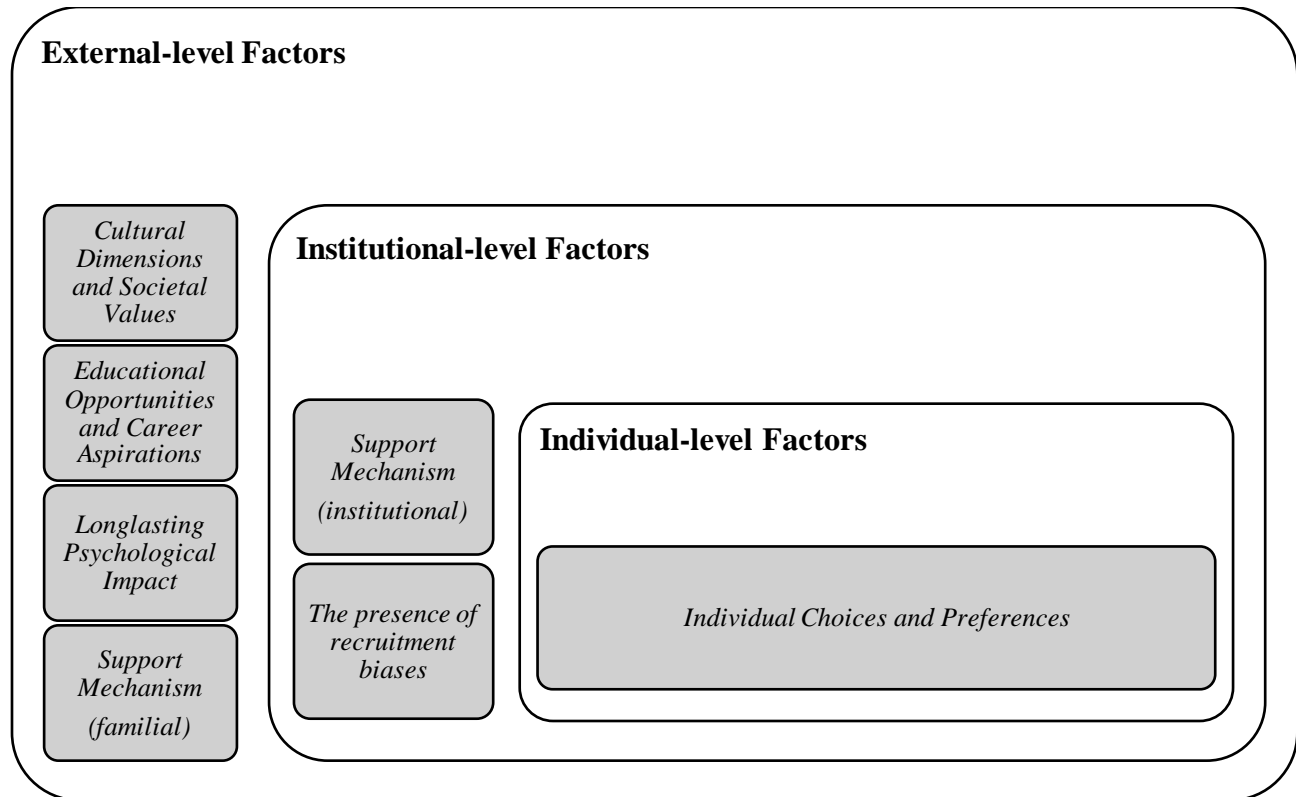
Contributing Factors to Female Underrepresentation in Leadership Positions

A number of factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions were consistently highlighted by the individuals who took part in the research interviews over the course of the study. The opportunities for advancement that are available to women inside academic institutions are

impacted by several factors according to the respondents, such as the presence of internalized stereotypes, the responsibilities that women have to their families, the national attitude, and the absence of support mechanisms. The purpose of this research was to shed light on the underlying causes that contribute to the lack of gender representation in leadership positions and to provide important insights that can be used to design successful measures to promote gender equity and inclusivity in the context of higher education in Azerbaijan. The participants' invaluable insights and experiences played a pivotal role in uncovering these factors throughout the qualitative data collection. The findings of the study demonstrate that female underrepresentation in leadership positions in Azerbaijani HE institutions is influenced by diverse nature factors which can be categorized as external, institutional, and individual-level factors considering the responses of participants (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Factors Contributing to Female Underrepresentation in Leadership Positions



Cultural Dimensions and Societal Values

A significant factor that leads to the underrepresentation of women in positions of authority is the emphasis placed on the national cultural dimension in Azerbaijani society which is based on very high masculine values, family-centric norms, and cultural measurements throughout history, as participants have pointed out:

... a key factor that we are facing right now, the cultural one. We need to change it. That's why we need a constructive approach. Right now in Azerbaijan, we have the traditional approach rather than the constructive one. Therefore, being an academic leader requires a heavy workload that may create challenges for women. This is the relation, you know, this is the cultural mind that we are dominant over the old people's mind. We need to change the mindset, the mentality, and the cultural norms.

It is emphasized by the participants that the impact of societal values that prioritize women's roles as caregivers and homemakers at the price of their professional aspirations can be considered the most significant factor:

...women are mostly seen as the protector and care of a family rather than someone who should pursue a career. Unfortunately, most women who are in very high positions are expected to be divorced or be very tough.

Furthermore, it is common for women who aspire to take on leadership posts to come up against cultural expectations that require them to adopt masculine traits or adhere to conventional gender stereotypes. This perpetuates the misunderstanding that successful women are expected to model their leadership styles after their male counterparts as one of the male participants stated: “... so even if they are at high positions, they are expected to be a man like, so to say in order to get there.”

Educational Opportunities and Career Aspirations

According to the respondents, one of the notable impediments to the progression of women into leadership roles is the restricted availability of educational prospects beyond the attainment of a bachelor's or master's degree. Participants observe that cultural expectations to prioritize familial obligations over professional growth dissuade women from seeking higher education, namely PhDs, which are seen as incongruous with raising a family:

... so when it comes to choosing the candidate for a leadership position, there aren't enough candidates who are a woman. But then there are so many reasons why this happens. Women are not given enough education opportunities. Even if they are, it usually stops at the bachelor level. To go into a Ph.D., get a proper Ph.D., especially abroad is seen as a hindrance to getting family on time, having family on time, and kids on time. That's why what happens usually women stop at the bachelor's or master's level, they don't do their PhDs.

Another female participant also shared similar viewpoints regarding the educational opportunities and their impact on further career progression:

... so, when men are given better conditions to grow, then of course when you are choosing leader, there will be more male candidates than women. So it should start from the point when women are given equal opportunities as men for the education they are supported by.

Education is one of the few fields that generally women outnumber men whereas the situation in leadership is almost identical to the other realms. One of the factors contributing to this representation is related to the career aspirations of men which triggers an inclination toward male leadership in academic settings. As one of the female respondents stated:

... Males do not want to be supervised by females. And in higher institutions, when it comes to teaching, even as a professor, even at the higher level, not all males are inclined towards teaching and this profession. So, if they attract them, they try to attract them at least as leaders. It's a kind of incentive for them, so they will join us. At least you will not be put under this female leadership guidance.

As a result, teaching positions may be more appealing to men when they are portrayed as leadership positions rather than instructional responsibilities contributing to the perpetuation of traditional gender stereotypes concerning the capabilities and expectations of leadership. This subject draws attention to the ingrained gender prejudices and gendered incentive structures that exist within the academic community.

Longlasting Psychological Impact

Several participants asserted that prejudices against women that are implanted in them from childhood have a significant impact on how they see their talents and how confident they are in leadership posts.

... I believe those kinds of assigning gender prejudices from childhood also affect their future behavior. When you assign these behaviors from childhood, they think that this is how a man should be. This is how a girl should be, yeah.

Likewise, the participants voiced their concerns over the prejudices that society has against women in leadership positions, which can result in feelings of uncertainty, self-doubt, and imposter syndrome among female leaders, particularly in environments that are dominated by males with authority.

... And the way the women are raised also affects how they feel inside. So if from childhood I'm being told that you know, you're a girl, you're supposed to have family, kids, career is not important, what are you going to do in front of all men doing presentations? So why would I feel bad as a leader in a room full of executives if they're all male? For example, if I know or think that there is a societal prejudice that men, men do not like woman leaders, If I strongly believe in that, then I may feel very bad about presenting something in front of them.

The study participants indicate that women internalize the stereotypes that society offers, undermine their self-perception, and become convinced that leadership positions are not consistent with their capabilities or aspirations. They believe that individuals' opinions of their own leadership capabilities are influenced by cultural norms and societal expectations, which may cause some women to choose the path of least resistance when it comes to leadership possibilities. The following statement shared by one of the respondents exemplifies the long-lasting psychological impact, "... She couldn't even imagine herself as a leader of the university or someone who leads the political system."

Support Mechanisms

The perspectives held by families regarding women's education and job aspirations have a substantial influence on their prospects for progress within the academic sphere. The participants highlight a lack of familial support, which may serve as a deterrent for their daughters in their pursuit of leadership positions, mostly due to the perceived difficulties and time demands associated with such endeavors:

...they don't want to be an academic. Because for being an academic person, you have to put a lot of effort and you have to work. You have to not work, you have to study for a long time. To be an academic, you have to at least spend more than 10 years at the university for being someone in the academia. The problem, I think, comes from the families first, that they don't support their daughter in this way.

Moreover, according to some of the participants, the lack of mentorship, supervision, and networking prospects intensifies the underrepresentation of women in positions by restricting their ability to obtain guidance and assistance within institutions, which demonstrates the lack of proper support mechanism on the institutional level in addition to the familial level.

The presence of recruitment biases

The underrepresentation of women in senior positions is further compounded by gender prejudices in recruiting procedures which is classified as the main inhibiting institutional factor. According to the participants, there is a preference for male candidates because of the preconceptions that they have regarding their dedication to their work and their lack of family responsibilities. On the contrary, there is a significant obstacle that women in leadership posts must overcome in order to successfully juggle their professional responsibilities with their family obligations. One of the challenges that participants emphasize is the difficulty of properly managing a demanding position without jeopardizing commitments to either work or family.

... For you as a leader of the university, as a leader of the school, it would be more, um, it would be more effective if you hire a male candidate, because he will dedicate, devote all his work, all his time to teaching, most probably considering that he doesn't have children. Uh, he will spend some extra time at work. Uh, in addition to that, he will not have excuses. But, for women, it is very challenging to manage and to manage them effectively and efficiently without making either your children suffer or your work suffer from that.

Consequently, gender gaps in leadership are perpetuated by implicit biases present in hiring and promotion processes. The marginalization of women in academic leadership is perpetuated by societal expectations pertaining to gender roles and family duties, hence reinforcing systemic hurdles that impede their progress during the recruitment and advancement procedures.

Individual Choices and Preferences

According to the participants, not all the factors behind underrepresentation are related to external dimensions, there are personal factors that influence women's choices including their values and priorities. Some women prefer to prioritize personal fulfillment and familial responsibilities over their professional advancement, and as a result, they abstain from leadership posts with their intentions:

... but sometimes women themselves are not interested in getting the position. It is the choice of the ladies. The lady prefers her family values, for example, she quits her job for her family.

Similarly, some choose to work part-time or in flexible arrangements as an alternative to managerial roles that are extremely demanding to create a better balance between their professional and personal lives:

...because at one point, you just get tired of this leadership position, and you want to go back to teaching. Just purely teaching and staying away from all these administrative duties, because you feel better in the classroom. If you switch to an administrative position, you lose this flexibility.

The subsequent table provides a comprehensive description of the themes that surfaced during the data analysis pertaining to the elements that contribute to the inadequate representation of women in leadership roles within higher education institutions in Azerbaijan, structured by the categories that these themes incorporate.

Table 2

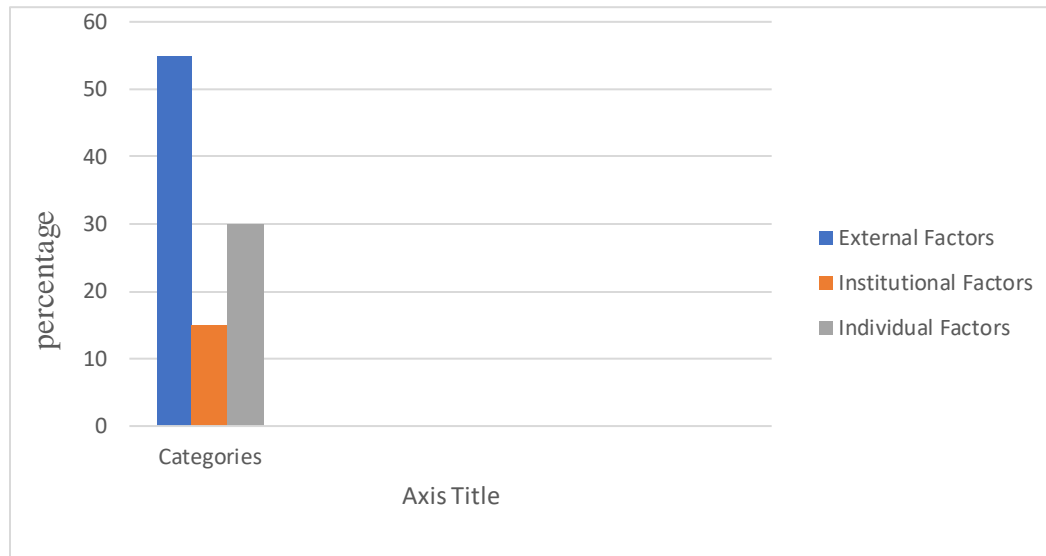
Factors Contributing to the Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Positions in Azerbaijani HEIs

<i>Categories</i>	
<i>External-level factors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ <i>Cultural Dimensions and Societal Values</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>high masculine values in society</i> • <i>family-centric norms</i> • <i>traditionally assigned gender roles</i> • <i>cultural measurements and expectations</i> • <i>cultural priority: caregiving over career</i> • <i>conventional gender stereotypes on leadership traits</i> • <i>glass-ceiling</i> ❖ <i>Educational Opportunities and Career Aspirations</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>restricted availability of educational prospects</i> • <i>reduced probability of overseas education</i> • <i>reduced opportunity for PhD pursuit</i> • <i>an inclination toward male leadership in academic settings</i> • <i>gendered incentive structures</i> ❖ <i>Long-lasting Psychological Impact</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>imposter syndrome</i> • <i>childhood gender prejudices influencing self-perception and confidence</i> • <i>uncertainty and self-doubt regarding the leadership capabilities</i> ❖ <i>Support Mechanism (familial)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>a lack of familial support for women's educational and career aspirations</i> • <i>perception of leadership in academia as requiring extensive time and effort by families</i>
<i>Institutional-level factors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ <i>Support Mechanism (institutional)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>the lack of mentorship, supervision, and networking prospects at universities</i> • <i>lack of representation and role-models</i> • <i>lack of empowerment</i> ❖ <i>The Presence of Recruitment Biases</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>preconceptions influencing hiring decisions</i> • <i>subjective criteria in recruitment</i> • <i>maternity-bias</i> • <i>preference for male candidates</i>

<i>Individual-level factors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ <i>Individual Choices and Preferences</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>prioritizing personal fulfillment and familial responsibilities</i> • <i>desire to work part-time or in flexible arrangements</i> • <i>demanding nature of administrative jobs</i>
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According to the findings based on frequency analysis of thematic codes (*Figure 4*), the main factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions are primarily related to external factors, rather than institutional and individual factors. While the results reveal that external factors are the primary cause of the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions at Azerbaijani higher education institutions, it is impulsively the same data that indicates women's individual decisions and preferences also significantly influence the present situation. According to the data, although institutional-level factors have a lesser impact than individual and external factors, they are also among the inhibiting factors to the representation of female academics in senior leadership positions in Azerbaijani Universities.

Figure 4

Frequency Analysis of Thematic Codes Based on Categorical Factors*Perceptions and experiences regarding the discriminatory practices*

The results of the interviews indicate that participants generally acknowledge the presence of discriminatory attitudes and barriers that prevent women from advancing to senior positions at universities, even if they have not personally experienced such obstacles. Many individuals demonstrated awareness of the instances in which their colleagues were subjected to discriminatory practices. A few of the participants candidly shared their individual encounters with challenges:

... yes, when I applied to the university as an international relations specialist, they just write in the notice, like a note, only male specialists can apply for this, and I just put my CV in front of the international relations department to the column. She told me that only males, and I said, it doesn't matter that the position of the gender you mean like? And only male, please put my CV and the reach of the Human Resources Department. Okay, if you extract my CV and then I will call the director. And out of 20 males,

I was selected by the director to the position and I said that please change this kind of narrow-minded thing to underestimate women. You can encourage women in science while making any kind of announcement.

Although in this case, notwithstanding the initial impediment, the woman demonstrated determination and actively opposed the circumstance, this case clearly demonstrates the prevalent presence of gender-based prejudice in practice in Azerbaijani Universities. This underscores the urgent need to address systemic barriers and foster a more inclusive environment that enables women to advance in higher education without facing discriminatory obstacles.

In addition, participants claimed that even while there might not be any policy that are specifically designed to either hinder or support the career progression of female academics toward leadership roles, the actual practice that takes place within institutions does not necessarily reflect the absence of such impediments.

Strategies for Fostering Gender Equity in Academic Leadership

Several notable themes emerge from the responses of the participants on the strategies that can be used to overcome gender inequality in leadership positions within Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions. Initially, there is a consensus regarding the significance of setting conditions that are “equitable” rather than “equal”, which would enable women to compete on a comparable basis with men. Rather than merely working towards equality, it is vital to work towards ensuring equitable conditions. This is because even if everything is equal, it may not necessarily be fair for women under the circumstances:

... so to look at that and if there are women who lack the skills that are needed to be leaders, give them an opportunity to develop those skills. You know how there's a difference between equality and equity. So, create more equitable conditions for women to be competing with men at the same level.

As participants expressed when it comes to progressing to leadership roles, women frequently face a unique set of obstacles and challenges due to systemic prejudices and social expectations, whereas males do not experience these same obstacles and challenges. Thus, women may continue to have difficulty competing on an equal footing with their male counterparts if these underlying inequities are not addressed and individuals are not provided with specific support. As a result, putting an emphasis on equity makes it possible to recognize and eliminate these obstacles, which ultimately results in the creation of a more equitable and inclusive workplace.

Accordingly, several recommendations are made to create these equitable conditions including providing opportunities for skill enhancement and additional education, providing assistance to female employees who are seeking graduate degrees, and lowering their workload to encourage educational advancement. One of the female respondents stated that "... it depends on us, the educators and educational institutions, firstly in addition to family, environment, and society."

Likewise, another male respondent claimed the importance of creating equitable conditions for women in academia:

... I think if universities support their woman female employees more to get their education, so support them. If they come with a bachelor level to support them to get their master's in different ways by decreasing their workload by supporting them financially then also to get their PhDs. So further education opportunities could be supported by higher education institutions.

In addition, participants emphasized the importance of raising awareness and altering mindsets to confront gender biases in the HE Institutions. The recommendations range from the implementation of gender-friendly policies to the modification of labor regulations in order to

address imbalance and underrepresentation through both parties in terms of family support and government support.

Additionally, participants emphasized the crucial significance of female leaders as role models in academia by displaying accomplished women who are currently serving in various leadership positions as sources of inspiration and direction. Consequently, the participants advocated for the necessity of increasing the visibility of female role models within academic settings. This is due to the fact that their presence has the potential to instill confidence and ambition in female students and academics, thereby paving the way for greater gender diversity and representation in leadership roles in the future in Azerbaijani Universities. One of the female participants asserted how the lack of role models contributes to the current representation:

...I think it also creates a challenge for young women when they enter an organization and don't see any women at higher levels. However, I believe that industries and universities in particular should prioritize making it easier for novice ones to see more women in senior leadership roles or a few women on the board than just one or two. This is because there will be a critical mass of people in those roles, and that will be more encouraging to them.

The Role of Gender Diversity in Leadership on Organizational Performance

Ultimately, a sophisticated viewpoint on the value of gender diversity in leadership roles in academic institutions has been revealed during the interviews. The majority of the participants underlined the associations between gender equity in academic institutions and social cohesiveness. They also proposed that achieving a gender balance in leadership posts can result in improved managerial capacities and more efficient decision-making procedures. Furthermore, they emphasized the harmonic relationship that exists between masculine and feminine characteristics, and they proposed that a combination of “emotions and power” might potentially improve the ambiance of the academic environment for students, educators, and the community.

Furthermore, the participants underlined that having diverse leadership teams might manifest the needs and opinions of the diverse student body and community more effectively, which in turn would strengthen the reputation of Azerbaijani higher education institutions. The existence of these teams would contribute to both the career advancement of academics and the overall improvement of academic environments and outcomes.

... Work environments become more civilized when both genders participate. Involvement of both genders, men, and women, in any field, increases creativity and the quality of creativity; in fact, the collaboration of both genders in the same field produces extremely positive outcomes.

Some male participants recognized the significance of increasing the number of women in leadership positions in academia because women are frequently more successful and motivated than men. "... In academia, let's be honest, women are more motivated and successful than men, to be honest." This perspective presents a critique of conventional gender roles and emphasizes the possible advantages that can arise from gender diversity in academic leadership.

Although a considerable number of participants underscored the advantages of gender diversity in university leadership positions, others articulated reservations regarding its direct correlation with favorable results for academic institutions. They emphasized the significance of prioritizing employee quality, stating that when selecting executives, personal qualities, competencies, skills, education, and knowledge are of the utmost importance. This viewpoint posits that enhanced outcomes might not be assured by gender diversity; rather, the focus should be directed toward the qualifications and capabilities of individuals, irrespective of their gender.

... I mean, can't highly correlate with each other because at the end of the day, we're talking about competencies, we're talking about skills, we're talking about education, knowledge, uh, and some personal characteristics.

This perspective highlights the complexity of the matter, suggesting that although gender diversity might be crucial, it should not diminish the importance of selecting the most qualified individuals for leadership roles.

In conclusion, the results of this study provide insights into multiple facets of the gender imbalance present in academic leadership positions at Azerbaijani HEIs. The academic community's perspectives on academic leadership and the essential attributes of an effective leader in academia were exposed through the discourse surrounding academic leadership. Perceived differences in leadership styles between males and females have also been revealed. Although the gender disparity in leadership positions was recognized, attendees maintained a positive outlook on a forward-thinking future and emphasized the significance of promoting gender diversity to enhance organizational performance. The factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions have been determined and classified per themes. Encouraged approaches to promote gender parity in academic leadership encompassed supplying for advanced education and professional growth, enforcement of gender-friendly policies, and public consciousness campaigns that contest prevailing societal beliefs. The significance of fostering gender diversity in leadership positions to improve the performance of organizations and establish a more inclusive atmosphere within academic institutions has been determined.

Chapter 5. Discussion

In this section, the main concentration will be on contextualizing the findings within the established body of knowledge addressing gender dynamics in Azerbaijani higher education institutions (HEIs). In the literature review, the factors that have been meticulously identified and categorized under four dimensions (traditional gender hierarchies and masculinized organizational structures; discriminatory practices in leadership advancement; impeding factors on an individual scale; ingrained societal expectations and role stereotyping) serve as a framework for comprehending the findings of the research. Generally, the findings of this study predominantly align with existing literature, yet distinct differences have surfaced, particularly concerning culture-specific nuances in the Azerbaijani context.

Initially, the perceptions of research participants regarding the academic leadership discourse contribute to the current body of knowledge on academic leadership by providing a more holistic comprehension of the diverse qualities that could be linked to effective leadership within academic institutions. Previously, in the literature review academic leadership has been defined as a complex and dynamic concept that includes the visionary and strategic leadership provided by individuals in educational institutions, which entails the effective management of a challenging academic environment with a strong institutional mission, and fostering an inclusive and innovative academic community (Gallos & Bolman, 2021). This definition aligns with the generalization derived from the data, which states that successful academic leaders are those who are able to effectively manage the complex dynamics of higher education institutions while simultaneously empowering their team members to attain excellence in their academic endeavors. Additionally, the findings of the study revealed the multifaceted and varied attributes that are associated with academic leadership including visionary and strategic leadership which

are also referred to in the provided literature. Moreover, the themes that surfaced as findings indicated that academic leadership requires a combination of educational qualifications, technical expertise, personal qualities, and a commitment to ongoing learning and development.

While the study referred to in the literature review by Bornman (2019), indicates that transformational and feminine leadership attributes are preferred over more conventional male leadership styles, the findings of the current study diverge from this viewpoint. The prevailing viewpoint among the participants was that variations in leadership styles do not inherently stem from gender, but rather manifest from personal attributes, academic credentials, and qualities. Hence, gender was not considered as a determining factor in the context of leadership style in this study.

The existing research on gender discrepancies within higher education institutions has been acknowledged and expanded upon by the findings of this study. It was clear that the topic at hand was fraught with complexities, as evidenced by the appearance of numerous themes that were similar across a wide variety of viewpoints and experiences. In accordance with the data collected from the participants, the disparity in leadership roles that exists between men and women is driven by a complex interaction of societal expectations and cultural norms; individual decisions; and institutional prejudices. This underrepresentation is influenced by a varied array of factors, which have been categorized into external, institutional, and individual-level factors, according to the findings of the study, which, through a detailed assessment, demonstrates that this underrepresentation is determined in the Azerbaijani context as well.

One of the most important factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in Azerbaijani HEIs is the influence of Cultural Dimensions and Societal Values, which is disclosed as a theme by the findings of the research. It is congruent with the

plethora of research that has been done previously, such as the studies conducted by Sowjanya et al. (2017) and Lee (2011), which highlighted the impact of deeply embedded patriarchal societal institutions and family systems on women's career trajectories. The culture of Azerbaijan is characterized by a cultural emphasis on masculine values and family-centric norms, which serve to reinforce the traditional gender roles that have been established. In accordance with the theoretical framework of Social Role Theory, which sheds light on the influence of societal roles on professional opportunities and decisions, specifically regarding gender inequalities in academic leadership positions at higher education institutions in Azerbaijan, the findings of this research are consistent with the framework. According to Eagly (1987), societal perceptions commonly equate leadership positions with characteristics that are traditionally associated with masculinity and it raises challenges for women who have aspirations of achieving positions of leadership. The participants' perspectives reiterated this idea and in turn, highlighted the necessity of confronting the societal traditions and expectations that limit the advancement of women in the academic arena. Within that structure as a cultural priority, the majority of the responsibilities that are required of women involve the roles of caregiving and housekeeping over their professional aspirations. Hence, the findings demonstrate that women tend to place a higher priority on their familial responsibilities than their professional aspirations which is a significant barrier to their advancement in their careers, notably in academic leadership. This is in line with the perspectives that Morley (2013) has expressed regarding the challenges that women have when attempting to balance the demands of their professional and personal lives and juggling between two identities.

Findings also indicate the expectation to conform to cultural norms that require the adoption of male qualities or adherence to conventional gender stereotypes on leadership traits

and the glass ceiling is one of the challenges for women who seek to acquire leadership roles in Azerbaijani Universities. This is in keeping with the existing body of literature, which typically makes use of a template that is predominantly masculine when discussing leadership and natural leaders while ignoring attributes that are more associated with femininity, according to Burkinshaw and White, (2017); Morley and Crossouard (2015). As a result of the perpetuation of the myth that leadership qualities are inherently masculine, the assumption that successful women should adopt the leadership styles of successful men contributes to the perpetuation of gender biases in organizational contexts, including academia.

The research results underscore substantial barriers related to the availability of educational prospects such as reduced probability of overseas education and reduced opportunity for PhD pursuit for women that hinder the progression of female candidates into leadership positions in higher education institutions in Azerbaijan. Given the lack of comparable results in the literature review, particularly in the Western context, it is clear that this particular facet of the study highlights the distinct obstacles encountered by women in Azerbaijani society. In the local context, it has been affirmed by Aghayeva (2012), who claims women face unique challenges whether pursuing PhD degrees or building careers in academia. Pursuant to Aghayeva (2012), the pursuit of a PhD requires significant sacrifices, compelling individuals to persevere, expend boundless energy, make persistent exertions, and forgo personal life. Given the fact that women in Azerbaijan not only lack representation in leadership positions but also in the scientific area, there may be a correlation between these two phenomena. According to the findings of this research in line with the research by Aghayeva (2012), the absence of a PhD degree further reduces the probability of obtaining leadership positions, which often require such a qualification.

Findings highlight another key factor that contributes to the male prevalence and female underrepresentation in leadership positions at Azerbaijani higher education institutions is the professional aspirations of males and gendered incentive structures. A substantial dynamic that persists in academic environments and contributes to the maintenance of conventional gender biases concerning leadership aptitudes and anticipated conduct in Azerbaijani Universities is highlighted by this particular facet, which, despite not being explicitly addressed in the literature review, highlights a significant aspect. As per the findings, it is evident that the preference of males for leadership posts in comparison to teaching positions in academia is a reflection of the broader societal expectations and norms that pertain to career trajectories and gender roles in Azerbaijan, as asserted by Karimova (2020).

Study results also revealed the long-lasting psychological impacts of deeply rooted gender biases, as women frequently internalize societal stereotypes, resulting in imposter syndrome, particularly uncertainty, and self-doubt regarding their leadership capabilities. The hesitation to pursue or imagine oneself in influential leadership positions, driven by societal expectations and childhood gender prejudices, influences women's self-perception and confidence resulting in a continuous pattern of being underrepresented in academic leadership posts in Azerbaijani HEIs. This aligns with the literature that considered a lack of self-confidence and the lack of self-esteem as substantial challenges for women pursuing leadership posts in numerous industries, including the academic stage, and indicates that it stems from a lack of empowerment from role models within academia (Johns 2013; Louise Morley 2013; Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007). While existing literature often attributes women's lack of confidence in leadership roles to factors such as the absence of empowerment and role models, which are typically seen as institutional influences, the findings of this research shed light on a

distinct dimension within the Azerbaijani context. Here, the study reveals that the roots of women's enduring self-doubt and uncertainty about their leadership capabilities may lie deeper within societal expectations and childhood gender prejudices. Unlike the more immediate institutional factors, these long-lasting psychological impacts are intertwined with cultural norms and historical biases, shaping women's self-perception and confidence in ways that extend far beyond institutional structures. Thus, the study highlights the need to recognize and address these unique socio-cultural dynamics to foster greater gender diversity and inclusivity within Azerbaijani higher education institutions.

Findings also expose the inadequacy of support mechanisms, both familial and institutional, as impeding factors to women's prospects for advancement in leadership within Azerbaijani higher education institutions. These findings are supported by Thomas (2021), who confirms the absence of institutional support, familial and communal support, and restricted prospects for career progression persist as obstacles for women aspiring to secure high-ranking roles in academic leadership. Likewise, he maintains that women who receive support from both institutions and their families have the potential to make valuable contributions to the academia that will shape the future of higher education. In the Azerbaijani context, the lack of familial support also serves as a deterrent for women in their pursuit of leadership positions and it is due to the perceived difficulties and time demands associated with leadership endeavors, whereas the lack of institutional support including mentorship, supervision, and networking prospects intensifies the underrepresentation of women in positions by restricting their ability to obtain guidance and assistance within institutions. In literature, Tessens, White, and Web (2011) also suggested the importance of networking for career advancement, as they provide opportunities within the academic community. The convergence between the findings of the research and the

existing literature highlights the pervasive nature of the networking barriers that women face in academia. This highlights the necessity of institutional support mechanisms to address these challenges and promote gender diversity in leadership roles within Azerbaijani higher education institutions.

Moreover, lack of empowerment and lack of role models as female leaders in senior positions are identified as institutional factors that contribute to the representation and it is in line with existing literature which highlights the importance of the visibility of female leaders in driving the empowerment of other women in academia (Sealy & Singh, 2010).

According to the research findings, the underrepresentation of women in senior positions is further compounded by the presence of recruitment biases which is classified as one of the main inhibiting institutional factors in Azerbaijani HE Institutions. Findings suggest that gender prejudice in recruitment appears in several forms such as preconceptions influencing hiring decisions, subjective criteria in recruitment, maternity bias, and preference for male candidates. This finding is consistent with prior studies indicating that inequitable recruitment and advancement procedures in academic environments limit women's career advancement who aspire to pursue leadership positions, even though they possess the required qualifications for these positions (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016; Sanderson and Whitehead, 2016). As a result, gender prejudices in recruiting procedures compound the underrepresentation of women in senior positions and it perpetuates systemic biases, hindering women's progress in academic leadership roles in Azerbaijani Universities.

Study results reveal that individual factors also influence women's choices to abstain from leadership posts with their intentions including their values and priorities. Some women prefer to prioritize personal fulfillment and familial responsibilities over their professional

advancement, as well as they desire to work part-time or in flexible arrangements considering the demanding nature of administrative jobs. This finding aligns with the research by White & Maniam (2020), which emphasizes the importance of flexible working arrangements, especially for women, in attaining a harmonious equilibrium between work and personal life. Research constantly demonstrates that women significantly appreciate flexible working hours and job sharing as they manage the challenges of balancing their careers and personal responsibilities. These arrangements not only enable women to more effectively allocate their time and duties, but also enhance job satisfaction and overall well-being (Chung & Lippe, 2020; White & Maniam, 2020).

Furthermore, research findings revealed the connection between gender equity in academic institutions and societal cohesion, and suggested that attaining a gender equilibrium in leadership positions can lead to more optimized decision-making processes and consequently the overall improvement of academic environments and outcomes in addition to the advancement of individuals in Azerbaijani HEIs. This finding is highly consistent with previous research indicating that organizations perform better when they diversify decision-making positions and leadership (Czabanowska et al., 2017)

Although this study has certain limitations, its findings offer valuable insights into various aspects of the gender disparity that exists in academic leadership roles at higher education institutions in Azerbaijan. The discourse pertaining to academic leadership brought to light the viewpoints of the academic community regarding academic leadership and the fundamental qualities that define an effective leader in academia. Additionally, perceived differences between male and female leadership approaches have been uncovered. Despite the acknowledgment of the gender imbalance in leadership roles, participants retained an optimistic

perspective regarding the future and underscored the importance of fostering gender diversity to improve organizational effectiveness. The themes-based classification of the factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions has been developed. Encouraged strategies for advancing gender parity in academic leadership such as providing support for professional development and advanced education, implementing policies that are supportive of the pursuits of women, and conducting public awareness campaigns that challenge dominant societal norms. It has been established that promoting gender diversity in leadership roles within academic institutions is crucial for enhancing organizational performance and nurturing a more inclusive environment.

Limitations

Several limitations were acknowledged in this study and the primary one is the sample size, as the qualitative nature of the research, done through interviews, makes reaching an extensive population impossible. Given the inherent resource limits, including time and financial limitations, the study operated with a smaller sample size. However, the small sample size has limited generalizability, which means that the study's external validity may be compromised by results that are not representative of the larger population (Boddy, 2016). Furthermore, the study's concentration on a target audience of high-ranking individuals fostered accessibility issues that had an undeniable impact on the sample size as well.

Another limitation of this investigation might be sampling bias due to the gender representation among the participants. A gender discrepancy is evident in the sample, as only a minority of male academics (3 out of 12) were present, while the majority were female. The observed discrepancy may be considered a constraint as it has the capacity to distort the

viewpoints and lived experiences that are reflected in the results. Specifically, the potential consequence of the overrepresentation of women is an unwarranted focus on perspectives that are female-centric, which could overlook the viewpoints held by masculine academics. An increased proportion of male participants would have contributed to a more varied and comprehensive spectrum of perspectives, thereby bolstering the validity and comprehensiveness of the study (Saunders et al., 2018).

Self-report bias among participants is a potential concern in this study due to the sensitive nature of the topic under investigation. The presence of social desirability bias might potentially sway participants to offer responses that conform to societal expectations or perceived norms, as opposed to honestly conveying their personal experiences or opinions (Atieno, 2009). The potential consequence of this is that the collected data may lack validity, especially in domains where participants hesitate to disseminate genuine perspectives about the current gender representation in leadership dynamics in their institutions. It might be because of the lack of participants' reliance on the protection of confidentiality considering their reputational posts.

The generalizability of the study's results beyond Azerbaijani higher education institutions might be challenging as well. Particularly, the historical context, cultural norms, and institutional frameworks of Azerbaijan influence the dynamics of academic leadership in the context of this study. The potential for substantial variations in the dynamics of academic leadership across various cultural or institutional contexts may restrict the applicability of the findings. Likewise, the scarcity of literature on the Azerbaijani setting is another limitation, which made contextualization and strengthening the specificity of the study's conclusions more difficult. Despite these constraints, attempts were made to extract useful insights within the given

scope and contribute to the existing body of information on gendered leadership dynamics and female leadership in Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions.

Implications and Recommendations

There might be various implications for academia and broader societal contexts from this research on Gendered Leadership Dynamics and Female Leadership: Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Positions in Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions. Initially, the study clarifies the impediments that women encounter while ascending leadership positions and the institutionally and culturally specific factors that contribute to the gender gap in academic leadership that currently exists in Azerbaijani higher education institutions. Furthermore, research provides insights that can trigger the establishment of interventions and policies for promoting gender equity and inclusivity in leadership roles by identifying these impediments.

The investigation of gendered leadership dynamics in the study also aids in expanding the body of literature on gendered leadership dynamics and female leadership by offering a sophisticated perspective in a non-Western context, particularly in the Azerbaijani setting. However, large-scale research can be conducted to make the topic more scrutinized and/or investigated, to establish cause-and-effect relationships, to test hypotheses, and to determine the opinions, attitudes, and practices of a large population, in order to reach generalizability.

Ultimately, this study contributes to providing context-relevant insights unique to Azerbaijani HE Institutions, raising awareness, and developing initiatives that can foster gender equity in Azerbaijani higher education and make it more feasible for women to advance to senior positions within the academic hierarchy.

In light of the findings of the research, a number of recommendations could be proposed in order to address and overcome the gender disparities that are prevailing in leadership positions within Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions.

Initially, HE institutions may undertake gender impact assessments, audits, and evaluations as a means to detect and rectify gender disparities. These evaluations will offer significant perspectives on the gender-specific obstacles encountered by staff and faculty, allowing them to create specific interventions to advance gender parity and diversity. Also, universities can formulate and implement internal policies that are gender-friendly and encourage equal possibilities for women to hold positions of authority. In addition to addressing concerns such as biased hiring and promotion practices, these policies should also give assistance in maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

Furthermore, gender-specific leadership training programs and initiatives for capacity-building can be provided for female academics that will specifically target the distinct obstacles and limitations encountered by women in positions of leadership and seek to improve the leadership abilities and competencies of women in academia. These programs may concentrate on subjects like surpassing gender prejudice, cultivating self-assurance, enhancing assertiveness, and employing effective communication tactics. Providing customized workshops, seminars, and leadership development initiatives for female academicians can effectively equip them with the skills necessary to surmount obstacles and thrive in positions of authority.

Moreover, structured mentoring and sponsorship programs can be implemented to facilitate connections between female executives and seasoned mentors or sponsors within the organizations. These programs can offer direction, assistance, and prospects for the professional

growth of potential future female leaders. Additionally, mentoring can foster collaboration and promote the exchange of knowledge within the academic community.

Additionally, networking events can be established, both internally and externally, with the explicit purpose of facilitating connections between female executives, peers, industry experts, and possible mentors. It can promote engagement in women's leadership conferences, business events, and professional associations.

Ultimately, higher education institutions could implement mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of gender equity initiatives. Consistently evaluating advancements, gathering data on indicators pertaining to gender, and seeking input from relevant parties can provide valuable insights for making decisions grounded in evidence and foster ongoing enhancements in the promotion of diversity and gender equity in leadership within higher education institutions in Azerbaijan.

In conclusion, although the number of women entering leadership positions in higher education is relatively small, there is a noticeable increase. In order to plan for the future of the university, it is important to leverage the present advancements and consider the specific qualities of sustainable and gender-sensitive leadership that will be necessary (Morley, 2013). Incorporating a greater number of women into positions of power is crucial, however, achieving gender equity should not solely revolve around achieving proportional representation, but also encompass creating inclusive environments, addressing systemic barriers, and fostering a culture that values and supports the contributions of women in leadership roles.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Research Timeline

Stage	Activity	Estimated Duration
Research Initiation and Planning	Identifying research interest; defining research problem; determining research objectives; formulating research questions	September 15 - October 30
Literature Review	Conducting an extensive literature review; articulating the theoretical background for the research	November 1- 30
Research Design and Methodology	Discussing research design, data collection methods, and analysis; developing a research proposal	December 1- 30
Data Collection	Contacting with research participants; developing interview protocol and regulating pilot-testing; conducting interviews with research participants	January 15- February 15
Data Analysis	Transcribing the collected data from interviews; coding and categorizing the data; applying thematic analysis	February 15- March 15
Finalizing the research	Developing recommendations based on findings; peer-review; submission and defense	March 15- April 15

Appendix B: Consent Form

Gendered Leadership Dynamics and Female Leadership: Underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions

Dear Participant:

You are cordially invited to participate in an interview as part of a master's thesis on gendered leadership dynamics and female leadership in Higher Education Institutions in Azerbaijan. Your much-valued participation in the study will significantly contribute to our understanding of the factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in HEIs in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, this study will contribute to providing context-relevant insights unique to HE Institutions in Azerbaijan, raising awareness, and developing initiatives that can foster gender equity in Azerbaijani higher education and make it more feasible for women to advance to senior positions within the academic hierarchy. Moreover, it will aid in expanding the academic literature on gendered leadership dynamics and female leadership, particularly in non-Western contexts.

This study is conducted by Sara Hasanli, MAEM (Master of Arts in Education Management) student at ADA University under the supervision of Dr. Vafa Yunusova. Each interview is expected to last approximately one hour, depending on the length of your responses. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you have the option to decline or choose only to respond to questions with which you feel comfortable. To ensure your privacy, any direct identification information, such as your name, workplace, and position will be eliminated during the data analysis process. The data will only be accessible to reviewers who consent to retain confidentiality, guaranteeing that your identity and any other personally identifiable information will be enclosed from them.

Participating in this study poses no risk to individuals, and every precaution will be taken to safeguard your identity. Your decision not to participate will be kept confidential, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any point. Your voluntary participation not only contributes to academic research but also allows for self-reflection, providing a platform for you to share your experiences regarding your academic leadership pathway. The final copy of the study will not contain any identifying information, and every effort will be made to uphold participant confidentiality, ensuring that your privacy is protected to the utmost extent permitted by law. If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Vafa Yunusova, Assistant Professor at ADA University, by email at vyunusova@ada.edu.az and me at shasanli16730@ada.edu.az

Thank you for participating!

I consent to participate in this study, and by signing below I agree to allow my responses to be recorded for research purposes of this study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Name (Printed) _____

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. Could you please briefly share your professional background, including your current role, responsibilities, and any previous experiences?
2. How do you define academic leadership? What are the skills or competencies that you believe are crucial for individuals in leadership roles within higher education? What are your roles and responsibilities in academia as a leader?
3. What are the differences in the leadership styles or approaches between male and female leaders in the academic institution? If so, could you elaborate on how these styles or approaches differ from each other?
4. How would you describe the current state of gender representation in leadership roles within Azerbaijan's higher education institutions?
5. Does the gender imbalance in leadership and authoritative positions impact the overall organizational performance? If yes, why? If not, why?
6. What factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions? Please be specific and name at least three factors.
7. Have you faced any barriers when aspiring to the current position you are holding in your institution? If yes, can you provide examples? Have you had any aspirations for advancing to more senior positions? If yes, what obstacles or challenges hindered your aspiration?

8. Are there any institutional policies or practices that either hinder or support the career progression of female academics toward leadership roles? If yes, could you name a few of them?
9. What expectations and stereotypes are existing in the society regarding leadership trajectories of women in academic settings? How do they impact the leadership trajectories of women in academia? Be specific and provide a few examples.
10. Have you ever observed or experienced any discriminatory practices in the selection and promotion of academics at university? If yes, can you share any specific case?
11. What individual challenges may preclude potential female leaders from taking up leadership positions?
12. What suggestions or strategies would you propose to address and overcome the gender disparities in leadership roles within Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions?
13. How could fostering gender diversity in leadership positions contribute to the overall success of Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions?

Appendix D: Permission Letter

No _____ “ _____ ” _____ 2024,

Dear _____,

We would like to inform you that the final research ("Gendered Leadership Dynamics and Female Leadership: Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Positions in Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions"), ("Gender əsaslı liderlik dinamikası və qadın liderliyi: Azərbaycan Ali Təhsil Müəssisələrində qadınların rəhbər vəzifələrdə qeyri-mütənasib təmsili") conducted by Sara Hasanli, a second-year MAEM student at ADA University, requires conducting interviews among Faculty Deans, Department Heads, Program Directors, Heads of Laboratories and Divisions and other individuals holding leadership position at your respected university. The purpose of the interviews is to explore the perceptions and experiences of academics regarding the factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions at Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions. For this purpose, we kindly ask you to create conditions for the research.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Dr. Elkin Nurmammadov

Vice-Rector of Academic Affairs