

## FROM ACADEMIA TO POLITICS: HOW LEADERSHIP INEQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION SHAPES WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

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**Abstract:** This article examines how leadership inequality in higher education shapes women's political representation. Drawing on Acker's theory of gendered organisations, the study identifies structural barriers embedded within academic institutions that limit women's access to leadership. Using a comparative analysis of the United Kingdom and Uzbekistan, the research explores the institutional pathways linking academia to political participation. The findings demonstrate that inequality in higher education constitutes a critical constraint on women's advancement into political leadership.

**Keywords:** women's leadership, political representation, higher education, gender inequality, institutional structures, Uzbekistan, academia to politics.

## ОТ АКАДЕМИИ К ПОЛИТИКЕ: КАК НЕРАВЕНСТВО ЛИДЕРСТВА В ВЫСШЕМ ОБРАЗОВАНИИ ВЛИЯЕТ НА ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЕ ПРЕДСТАВИТЕЛЬСТВО ЖЕНЩИН

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**Аннотация:** В данной статье анализируется влияние неравенства лидерства в системе высшего образования на политическое представительство женщин. Исследование основано на теории гендерных организаций Джоан Акер и выявляет структурные барьеры, ограничивающие продвижение женщин к руководящим позициям. На примере Великобритании и Узбекистана проводится сравнительный анализ институциональных механизмов перехода от академической среды к политике. Результаты показывают, что неравенство в высшем образовании является важным фактором, ограничивающим участие женщин в политическом лидерстве.

**Ключевые слова:** женское лидерство, политическое представительство, высшее образование, гендерное неравенство, институциональные структуры, Узбекистан, академия и политика

## AKADEMIYADAN SIYOSATGA: OLIY TA'LIMDAGI YETAKCHILIK TENGSIZLIGI AYOLLARNING SIYOSIY VAKILLIGINI QANDAY SHAKLLANTIRADI

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**Annotatsiya:** Ushbu maqola oliy ta'lim tizimidagi yetakchilik tengsizligi ayollarning siyosiy vakillikka erishish jarayoniga qanday ta'sir ko'rsatishini tahlil qiladi. Tadqiqot

Acknering genderlashgan tashkilotlar nazariyasiga asoslanib, akademik muhitdagi strukturaviy to'siqlarni aniqlaydi. Buyuk Britaniya va O'zbekiston misolida ayollar yetakchiligi rivojlanishi va siyosiy tizimga o'tish mexanizmlari qiyosiy o'rganiladi. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, oliy ta'limdagi tengsizlik siyosiy yetakchilikka kirish imkoniyatlarini cheklovchi muhim omil hisoblanadi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** ayollar yetakchiligi, siyosiy vakillik, oliy ta'lim, gender tengsizligi, institutsional tuzilmalar, O'zbekiston, akademiya siyosatga

The problem of women's representation in politics has gone beyond electoral and party institutions to become an issue of broader institutional mechanisms determining leadership development processes. In this respect, universities play a crucial role due to being not merely centers of scientific activity but also spaces for leadership training, elite reproduction, and political socialization. Hence, gender discrimination at the highest level in higher education should be considered a systemic problem directly affecting women's involvement in politics. The present article suggests considering women's lower academic leadership as a structure barrier impacting political representation of women. At the same time, in case of emerging economies like Uzbekistan, where political and educational reforms have only recently started, the problem is even more acute.

Internationally, gender equality is acknowledged as a core developmental priority, and is included among the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, namely, SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment. Despite some achievements, global indicators continue to demonstrate low rates of female leadership in various sectors, including both academic and political spheres. For instance, according to UNESCO statistics, while women comprise a significant number of academic staff worldwide, their presence significantly drops when reaching the top-level executive offices [1]. This situation is caused by systemic obstacles and referred to as a "leaky pipeline." In addition, parliamentary statistics provided by the Inter-Parliamentary Union demonstrates that currently, less than a quarter of world parliamentarians are women [2].

First and foremost, the relationship between academics and politics is not coincidental, and there is much more to it than meets the eye. Academics represent institutions where leaders' skills and expertise are nurtured. As argued within the framework of Bourdieu's concept of social capital, connections within institutions of elite status can make or break one's chances of gaining power [3]. Thus, universities should be regarded as key producers not only of academic elites but also politicians. The result is that the inequality associated with leadership in higher education has spill-over effects in politics. Since women are less likely to become academic leaders, their opportunities to become politicians are reduced as well due to the associated exclusion from powerful networks and decision-making experience.

As the study reveals, although women make up about half of all academic workers in the United Kingdom, they are underrepresented in senior positions, such as vice-chancellors and professors. This case represents an instance of structural contradiction, which shows that even high levels of participation do not mean that women have an equal share in leadership. Feminist scholars believe that this situation is caused by deep-rooted organisational cultures, where men are favoured over women and traditional career paths over flexible ones [4]. For instance,

according to Acker, organisations are inherently gendered since they have gendered norms that determine people's access to authority and power [5].

The core idea of Acker's theoretical framework is that "organisations are inherently gendered" because their structures and processes reflect gendered assumptions that shape opportunities [5]. It is important to note that academic positions are built around the myth of "the unencumbered worker" who is always available, mobile, and productive. Such expectations discriminate against women since they are usually responsible for child-rearing and other care tasks while engaging in academic work related to teaching and administration. Thus, the ability of women to progress in their careers is determined by organisational structures rather than any personal factors.

In response to identified structural contradictions, special programmes of leadership development have been established in many countries. Aurora – one of such programmes implemented in the United Kingdom – aims to develop the skills, confidence, and networks of female academics. Nevertheless, according to the analysis presented in the dissertation, such programmes mostly produce individual effects without altering any structural inequalities [6]. Critics refer to this practice as the "fix the women" approach when the problem lies in organisational culture rather than in individual characteristics.

These effects of structural inequality extend further than the academic sphere and reach into the domain of politics. Politics, like academia, involves elements of networking, visibility, and recognition. Individuals who do not have access to opportunities to gain the relevant networks, be visible, and earn symbolic and social capital are less likely to enter political leadership positions. Importantly, in contexts in which professional expertise and qualifications play crucial roles in leading to political offices, this problem takes on added importance. Comparative studies in politics demonstrate that elites' academic achievements are often used as key criteria in recruiting future political leaders [7].

For Uzbekistan, this connection holds special importance. Indeed, since gaining independence in the early 90s, Uzbekistan has implemented extensive reforms in order to modernize both its higher education system and its political institutions. Current reforms have focused on promoting gender equality and increasing the participation of women in political affairs, including the implementation of quotas and institutional changes. Official statistics report that the share of women in the Oliy Majlis (the Parliament of Uzbekistan) increased over recent years. Nevertheless, similar to trends throughout the world, this success at the national level masks ongoing issues in terms of representation at lower governance tiers and unequal gender structures within organizations.

Indeed, Uzbek researchers observe that although women have considerable representation among students, their presence in leadership positions in universities has been traditionally low [8]. In turn, the existence of these trends mirrors what researchers in the UK and elsewhere report regarding gendered organization structure. Together, culture, expected norms, and institutional practices form a unique combination that hinders women's ability to rise to upper-tier positions. As a result, higher education remains a potential resource for political leadership yet unutilized.

However, the intertwining of organizational reforms with cultural factors creates another level of complexity regarding women's ability to lead and develop leadership. While governmental policies focus on achieving equality, the informal norms that remain influential

can significantly impede women's ability to become leaders. This phenomenon is consistent with the idea of "inequality regimes," in which formal equality operates alongside informal exclusionary practices [5]. Therefore, to tackle leadership inequality, interventions need to address both of these dimensions and not just formal equality alone.

In the case of Uzbekistan, one of the most important institutional reforms aimed at developing women's leadership capacities is the creation of the School for Women Leaders under the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The program was created in collaboration with the Family and Women Committee of Uzbekistan as a government initiative focused on providing comprehensive preparation for leadership in public service and in politics. Specifically, the program includes an extensive training course consisting of 552 hours. The course is targeted both at women already working in public institutions and those whose future careers might involve holding upper-level jobs. Overall, the School for Women Leaders can thus be viewed as a state-run project designed to create a pool of potential women-leaders for national public administration [11]. Unlike many shorter-term initiatives funded by foreign donors, this program takes place within the official governance structure, giving it increased credibility and potential for long-lasting influence. Moreover, unlike many gender-equality programs that have a wider focus, this program is explicitly aimed at preparing women for government positions. The School for Women Leaders aims specifically at training individuals for positions in state politics, including participating in the process of administration and politics on a high level. Nevertheless, the analysis of the program reveals another trend characteristic of the global situation described above. Namely, the fact that leadership interventions tend to prioritize capacity building of individuals over the change in the organizational structures of power [5;6]. For Uzbekistan, this means that while the program marks a major step towards creating the framework for accessing political leadership, it is crucial to complement it with further structural changes in the public administration and higher education institutions [12].

First, the proposed work contributes to filling gaps between the two fields of academic knowledge – higher education studies and political representation by conceptualising leadership inequality in academia as an institutional driver of political participation. Second, it develops an integrated model of gender inequality in higher education, suggesting that the problem cannot be addressed with merely electoral reforms; instead, attention should be paid to institutional pipelines of leadership formation.

The study is highly relevant for the development agenda of Uzbekistan as a nation striving towards building strong democratic governance and promoting inclusive development. In this context, increasing the number of women leaders across sectors acquires the status of a strategic goal. Given their role in leadership development and training, higher education institutions need to be reconsidered not only as venues of educational process but also as political institutions capable of promoting political empowerment of women. Addressing the problem of gender inequality in higher education could lead to additional societal gains, namely women's political representation in decision-making bodies.

Therefore, the problem of gender inequality in higher education is one of the key underresearched factors affecting women's political representation. Building on the existing global literature, theoretical approaches and insights provided by both British and Uzbek scholars, this paper aims to explore leadership inequality in higher education and its political

implications in the context of feminist institutionalism. The goal is to highlight the importance of institutional mechanisms behind the problem and their connection to other spheres of social and political activity. The proposed study will serve as methodological background for further research and analysis of higher education as an obstacle and enabler of women's political empowerment.

The paper employs a qualitative, conceptual and comparative research design informed by the theories of feminist institutionalism and organisational sociology. The theoretical foundation is mainly based on the institutionalist model of gender inequality suggested by Acker. According to this model, institutions can be viewed as spaces for production and reproduction of power, hierarchy, and gender inequality. At the same time, theoretical perspective will include insights from feminist political theories and higher education studies by scholars such as Morley, O'Connor, and Bhopal, whose extensive works explore the problem of gendered leadership in academic institutions.

A comparative methodology will be used with the United Kingdom chosen as a reference case and Uzbekistan as the country of focus. In order to gain an understanding of the dynamics and mechanisms operating in a relatively developed and established system, this research uses the example of the UK. Its political and educational systems represent the subject of active scholarly inquiry in recent years; thus, the body of knowledge available allows identifying universal trends and patterns and analysing them in Uzbekistan.

Findings reveal the existence of a persistent and inherent link between leadership inequality in higher education and women's political representation. The link operates via a number of mutually reinforcing factors related to the production and accumulation of organisational capital, normative processes, and career paths. At the initial stage, the analysis reveals significant vertical gender gap in higher education institutions. Women's presence in universities and colleges appears high both at entry and mid-career levels, while a sharp decline occurs among senior management positions. This situation is confirmed by numerous studies of the UK; despite the lack of relevant statistical data, evidence from Uzbekistan is consistent with it. In line with Acker's theory, such gender inequality is rooted in the structure of organisations. Leadership development programs, like Aurora in the UK, seem to fail to produce any positive change in this respect.

Secondly, the research proves that leadership norms in higher education are masculinised implicitly. Criteria such as uninterrupted career paths, high levels of research productivity, and availability can be considered neutral; however, they correlate with male-specific career patterns [4]. This creates a structural inconsistency because such conditions conflict with women's experiences. In particular, they prevent women who undertake family-related caregiving responsibilities from accessing leadership positions. The same phenomenon is observed in Uzbekistan because women are traditionally assigned to care about their families' welfare and well-being.

Thirdly, access to informal networks and sponsorship becomes crucial for advancing into senior positions. The research shows that although mentoring programs have been developed, informal networks and connections are still dominant in the process of promoting scholars. This finding is consistent with global literature and the dissertation, which state that sponsorship is essential for reaching senior positions. For Uzbekistan, where professional

networks are often connected with social structures, the impact of informal networking is likely to be even stronger.

Such organizational patterns have serious political implications for women's access to political representation. According to the research, there are at least three pathways via which inequality in higher education can affect women's political participation.

Firstly, senior academic positions provide women with visibility, credibility, and opportunities to establish connections. Thus, lack of representation hinders the access of female scholars to political activities and elections. This point is especially pertinent for Uzbekistan because academic success plays a considerable role in being politically recognized and recruited.

Secondly, women cannot develop leadership skills and gain experience when remaining unrepresented among scholars and leaders. In this regard, higher education serves as a breeding ground for developing strategic, managerial, and decision-making abilities needed for political involvement.

Thirdly, women's representation contributes to challenging stereotypical beliefs about leadership and creating new models and norms. In turn, lack of representation only reiterates existing biases and perceptions that leadership roles belong to men. Such processes have a wider effect because they shape women's aspirations and influence voting behavior.

However, while in the UK the issues associated with women's political underrepresentation have received due attention, this problem remains neglected in Uzbekistan. Although the country has successfully increased women's formal political representation, especially in the Oliy Majlis, the structure of educational institutions still prevents women from advancing to the top of political ladders. This phenomenon reveals the necessity of addressing structural gender inequality, and not only the formal one.

The analysis shows that in both cases, policymakers tend to concentrate efforts on implementing individual-based strategies aimed at improving training and capacities of women, which is a common practice across the world. However, as has been demonstrated, this approach does not deal with structural issues that contribute to reproducing inequality.

At the same time, opportunities for transforming institutional arrangements are available both in the UK and Uzbekistan. The current reforms in higher education and public administrations create room for introducing changes to promote gender equality. Specifically, reforms can include changing promotion criteria, addressing issues with workloads, and facilitating leadership development. Based on examples from different countries, such transformations will make higher education environments supportive of women's professional and career growth. This way, women's political representation can be improved considerably.

In conclusion, the article proves that leadership inequality in higher education institutions becomes a structural factor affecting women's political representation. By revealing a connection between academic and political leadership, the study highlights the significance of institutional pipelines for promoting women's leadership and providing equal access to power. Thus, individual strategies to promote gender equality should be replaced with structural measures that will bring significant improvements.

For Uzbekistan, in particular, it means that women's political representation can be enhanced through institutional changes in higher education institutions. Otherwise, women's political underrepresentation will persist, and the situation will stay unchangeable. Further

research on this topic can benefit from conducting additional research in order to gather qualitative data and investigate intersectional aspects of gendered inequality in academia and politics.

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