A longitudinal research about women representation in university leadership in Iran

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Abstract

Although measurable improvements have accrued in women conditions in Iran, their representation in higher education leadership has not caught up proportionately. Some of the areas of improvements are: Women's life expectancy, women's literacy rate, nationwide women's acceptance at universities, and rise of gender-adjusted index of human development. On the other hand, women representation in higher education leadership has been constantly very low.

We have conducted a longitudinal research in three large universities in Iran: Tehran University, Shahid Beheshti University, and Allameh Tabataba'I University. Our cross-sectional research at 1992, 2002 and 2012 reveals that, this deficiency has been a continuous trend during the past twenty years.

The findings of this research raise a number of facts, some of which appear to be particularly of note: Women now comprise more than two-thirds of university entrants, the number of female students and female faculty members have been raised considerably, and women have expressed repeatedly their readiness and interest in taking managerial and decision-making positions. The most important facts about women presence in leading academic positions is that there are very few of them at this level. This is a real problem in the academic arena that cries for an immediate change.

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

Introduction

One of the few facts about women presence in leading academic positions in Iran is that there are very few of them at this level. In order to recognize the situation of academic women in Iran and their real and actual participation in the universities, a longitudinal research has been conducted in a twenty year period.

The research has been carried out on three different stages: 1992, 2002, and 2012. The ultimate goal of this cross-sectional research was to recognize the changes in women representation in university leadership during the last twenty years in Iran.

Scope of research

The first research was conducted in 1992 and covered three large universities in Tehran:

Tehran University (TU)

Shahid Beheshti University (SBU)

Allameh Tabataba'I University (ATU)

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

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

Hypotheses

The hypotheses of all three researches were:

1) There is not an effective use of the existing workforce of women at universities,
2) Gender is a determining factor in selection for key positions in universities.

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

Method

The basic method of enquiry was gathering data about the hypotheses through questionnaire, interviews, and review of documents and records. Questionnaires were sent to all women faculty members of three universities. This questionnaire contained thirty questions and it was designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data. In addition, open-ended questions elicited descriptive information about women career trajectories, glass ceiling in their way upwards, obstacles to attain their promotion to the key positions and preferred strategies to address these barriers and remove the obstacles.

Discussion

Although measurable improvements have accrued in women conditions in Iran, their representation in higher education leadership has not catch up proportionately. Some of the areas of improvements are: Women's life expectancy, women's literacy rate, nationwide women's acceptance at universities, and rise of gender-adjusted index of human development. On the other hand, women representation in higher education leadership has been constantly low.

Women in universities can play an important role, by educating and developing a qualified workforce for the country and share in building the necessary infrastructure for the development. In order to contribute more effectively, talented academic women should be advanced in leadership and top managerial positions. These women should enjoy a sense of belonging and support from their organizations. Universities should create an environment where academic women feel accepted and supported to succeed to the highest level of hierarchy. But the reality is very different and cultural barriers play an important role in this arena.

Research results

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

Tables-1

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

Age range & work experience
According to the findings of research, most women are of an appropriate age to accept responsibilities, because they have good work experience and also have enough potential for occupying high-level positions.

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

Family status & motherhood
More than 81 percent of academic women in the sample were married and about two-third of them had children. This means that in spite of their very important motherhood and family responsibilities, which are deeply

emphasized in Iranian culture, women are willing to continue to contribute to the wider society, and so they deserve to be better protected.

University title

Compare to 1992, a higher proportion of women faculty members are assistance and associate professors. The number of full professors has slightly increased. These women are teaching at every level and have a significant role in teaching in BA and MA levels.

Academic publications

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

Managerial positions

Although the number of women appointed in managerial positions has slightly increased during the last twenty years, women are not proportionately represented in the senior positions.

A situation must be provided in which women can see their way upwards rather than sideways.

Training facilities

Another question that we asked was how training facilities were distributed among men and women. In the early stage of the research, findings showed the uneven distribution of these facilities, but after twenty years the number of women who have received scholarship, fellowship, sabbatical leave or other training privileges has been increased.

Conclusion

The findings of our research are not surprising. In fact, our findings at 2012 once again reinforce the two previous researches in 1992 and 2002. The most

prominent fact is that there are only very few women in leadership and top managerial positions in academic environment. As Morahan says, a major challenge is that there are few women in leadership positions for other women to look up to (Krupa, 2012).

Our cross-sectional research raise a number of facts, some of which appear to be particularly of note: Women now comprise more than two-thirds of university entrants, the number of female students and faculty members have been raised considerably. The low representation in academic leadership contrasts with the boom in female students in past thirty years in Iran. Besides, women have expressed repeatedly their readiness and interest in taking managerial and decision making positions. As a matter of fact, the findings of our research demonstrate that the notion that women are not ambitious towards leadership positions is wrong. Women have equal leadership aspirations in an environment where they can feel fully accepted and supported to succeed. Academic women in Iran universities have demonstrated their ability and most of them have proven their strong interest in participating fully in university leadership, but still they face enormous barriers and discriminations. Many questions naturally come up at this point, among them: Why are there so few women appointed for key managerial and leadership positions in universities? Why are they stuck in bureaucratic middle management roles and are expected to implement men's decisions but are not allowed to hold decision-making positions? Why are women hired for positions of technical expertise but have to wait much longer than men for promoting to leading positions? Why according to Kerfoot & Whitehead, the 'boys' culture does still proliferate. This suggests that in higher education environment the majority of women are performing 'dirty jobs' of middle management in a highly insecure and frustrated environment (Prichard et al, 1998).

Suggestions

The following suggestions would facilitate women leadership in academic environment:

1. Challenging the status quo

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

2. Compensating the past

To redress long-standing inequity and to compensate for the shortages of the past, it is time to do something for women by providing special quotas for scholarships, sabbatical leaves, and different training courses, in an accelerating rate. This would enable them to increase and update their knowledge and competence and perform their responsibilities to a higher standard.

3. Fostering meritocracy

Meritocracy means the distribution of duties and responsibilities according to personal qualifications and accomplishments. In this system, selection, promotion, job benefits, and distribution of existing facilities should be according to one's merit and performance (Zahedi, 2013). In order to foster meritocracy in universities, a special committee might be established to undertake selecting the most qualified persons for leadership and key managerial positions. Establishing more open and egalitarian recruitment, hiring and promotion practices would prepare the necessary foundation for qualified applicants to be evaluated without regard to gender.

4. Occupying the seats in university boards

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

5. Preferred leadership style

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

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