

Gender Inequality in Higher Education Leadership Desigualdad de género en el liderazgo de la educación superior

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Summary. This study investigates the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within higher education institutions in Tecomán, Colima, Mexico. Despite national and institutional policies aimed at fostering gender equity, women hold only 35.8% of senior academic and administrative roles in the region. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study draws on data from structured interviews with female leaders and surveys administered to over 200 faculty and administrative staff across 16 higher education institutions. The findings reveal that cultural norms, organizational structures, and insufficient institutional support continue to restrict women's access to leadership roles. The most significant barriers identified include male-dominated leadership cultures, work-life imbalance, and the absence of effective mentorship. Comparisons with international contexts, such as Malaysia and Middle Eastern countries, underscore the need for context-sensitive and culturally adaptive strategies. The study concludes that genuine progress toward gender equity requires more than policy declarations; it necessitates structural reforms, inclusive leadership models, and institutional accountability mechanisms. These findings offer critical implications for the design and implementation of equitable leadership pathways in regional academic systems.

Keywords: Gender equity, academic leadership, higher education, women in leadership.

Resumen. Este estudio investiga la persistente subrepresentación de las mujeres en puestos de liderazgo dentro de las instituciones de educación superior en Tecomán, Colima, México. A pesar de las políticas nacionales e institucionales orientadas a fomentar la equidad de género, las mujeres ocupan solo el 35,8 % de los cargos académicos y administrativos de alto nivel en la región. Mediante un diseño de investigación de métodos mixtos, el estudio se basa en datos provenientes de entrevistas estructuradas a mujeres líderes y encuestas aplicadas a más de 200 miembros del personal docente y administrativo de 16 instituciones de educación superior. Los hallazgos revelan que las normas culturales, las estructuras organizativas y el apoyo institucional insuficiente continúan restringiendo el acceso de las mujeres a puestos de liderazgo. Entre las barreras más significativas identificadas se encuentran las culturas de liderazgo dominadas por hombres, el desequilibrio entre la vida laboral y personal, y la ausencia de mentoría efectiva. Las comparaciones con contextos internacionales, como Malasia y los países de Oriente Medio, subrayan la necesidad de estrategias sensibles al contexto y adaptables culturalmente. El estudio concluye que un progreso genuino hacia la equidad de género requiere más que declaraciones de políticas; exige reformas estructurales —incluidos los modelos de liderazgo— y mecanismos de rendición de cuentas institucional. Estos hallazgos ofrecen implicaciones críticas para el diseño y la implementación de trayectorias de liderazgo equitativas en los sistemas académicos regionales.

Palabras Clave: Equidad de género, liderazgo académico, educación superior, mujeres en puestos de liderazgo.

1 Introduction

Despite significant progress in women's inclusion in higher education, a marked disparity persists in leadership positions within educational institutions in Tecomán, Colima, where women hold only 35.8% of leadership roles (Lyon, 2024). Gender inequality in educational leadership remains a global concern with far-reaching implications that extend beyond academic environments (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2022). In Mexico, this disparity is particularly pronounced in higher education, where

women make up a significant portion of the workforce yet are underrepresented in executive roles (Regis College, 2024).

Although various efforts have been undertaken to implement gender equity policies, women in Tecomán continue to face substantial barriers that hinder their advancement (Regis College, 2024). Recent data reveal that only 35.8% of leadership positions are occupied by women, illustrating a persistent gender gap despite equal qualifications and competencies among female educators (Lyon, 2024).

The principal objective of this article is to explore the specific factors contributing to gender disparity in educational leadership within the regional context of Tecomán, Colima (Regis College, 2024). Through a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative research, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that restrict women's upward mobility in academic leadership (Chao, 2024).

2 Theoretical Framework

Women in higher education encounter a wide range of obstacles that limit their access to leadership roles. These barriers can be broadly categorized into three dimensions: individual, sociocultural, and organizational (AAUW, 2022).

Individual barriers often stem from internalized perceptions regarding leadership capabilities. These include a lack of self-confidence, fear of failure, and diminished aspirations to pursue leadership positions (Chao, 2024). Such psychological barriers are frequently reinforced by gender stereotypes, which contribute to a lower professional self-image and reduced ambition among women (Mohamad et al., 2025).

Sociocultural barriers originate from entrenched gender norms and societal expectations that prioritize women's roles in the domestic sphere. In many cultural contexts, caregiving responsibilities are traditionally assigned to women, reinforcing the perception that they may be less suitable for high-responsibility leadership positions (Mohamad et al., 2025). This conditioning results in a gender bias that frames leadership as an inherently male domain, thereby discouraging women from aspiring to executive roles (AAUW, 2022).

Organizational barriers arise from institutional cultures that favor masculine leadership traits, often characterized by competitiveness and individualism. In contrast, leadership styles typically associated with women—such as empathy, collaboration, and inclusivity—are frequently undervalued or overlooked in formal leadership selection processes (Lyon, 2024). Consequently, female leaders may experience uncertainty regarding their professional advancement, along with limited access to promotion opportunities and mentorship (Zabludovsky Kuper, 2025).

These intersecting barriers create a structural disadvantage that hinders women's full participation in academic leadership. Understanding and addressing them is crucial for developing policies and institutional practices that support gender equity in higher education leadership.

2.1 International Perspectives on Gender Inequality in Higher Education Leadership

Gender inequality in educational leadership is a persistent global issue, thoroughly documented in literature from various regions. Although women are well represented at the student and early-career academic levels, their presence in senior leadership roles remains alarmingly low. Global statistics indicate that only 25% of top-tier universities are led by women, with this figure dropping to as low as 15% in some European countries (Regis College, 2024).

A major obstacle lies in the widespread cultural association of leadership with traditionally masculine traits. This perception undermines women's leadership aspirations and creates environments where female leaders are evaluated against biased standards (AAUW, 2022). Research suggests that in regions ranging from the Middle East to Latin America, cultural norms discourage viewing women as competent leaders (Lyon, 2024; Mohamad et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities remains one of the most cited challenges for women in leadership (Chao, 2024). The conflict between family obligations and career advancement has been widely reported, with studies showing that up to 83% of women believe household responsibilities hinder their full participation in leadership development (Lyon, 2024).

Institutional policies frequently fail to provide the necessary support structures, such as flexible work arrangements or mentoring programs designed to foster women's leadership potential (Mohamad et al., 2025; Zabłudovsky Kuper, 2025). This lack of structural support underscores the need for institutions to go beyond surface-level policies and engage in authentic, long-term commitments to gender equality (Chao, 2024).

Addressing gender disparities in higher education leadership is not only a matter of equity but also a strategic imperative for institutional excellence. Promoting gender-inclusive leadership fosters diverse perspectives, strengthens innovation, and enhances the overall performance of educational organizations (AAUW, 2022; Regis College, 2024). Achieving equitable leadership representation thus requires proactive, systemic change involving policymakers, institutional leaders, and broader society.

2.2 Cultural Norms and Their Impact on Women's Academic Leadership

Cultural norms play a decisive role in shaping both opportunities and challenges for women in academic leadership, particularly in societies where traditional gender roles remain deeply entrenched. In many cultures, women are expected to assume caregiving responsibilities within the household, which significantly limits their ambition and availability to pursue leadership careers (Lyon, 2024). These expectations are often internalized, reinforcing stereotypes that depict women as less competent or less suitable for leadership roles (AAUW, 2022).

This internalized cultural pressure contributes to the persistence of the "double burden" phenomenon, wherein women must navigate both domestic and professional responsibilities. As a result, many women find themselves facing a continuous tension between career advancement and societal expectations, which can deter them from aspiring to leadership positions (Mohamad et al., 2025).

Moreover, organizational structures in many academic institutions continue to reflect male-dominated norms, perpetuating a cultural infrastructure that reinforces these gendered expectations. The so-called "glass ceiling" remains a critical barrier, impeding women's advancement into leadership roles despite their qualifications (Chao, 2024). The absence of female role models in senior academic leadership further exacerbates this situation by depriving aspiring women of the mentorship and inspiration necessary to pursue similar paths (Zabłudovsky Kuper, 2025).

The stereotype of the "masculine leader"—emphasizing traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness—often compels women to overcompensate, striving for exceptional performance just to be considered competent. In culturally conservative environments where leadership is still predominantly viewed as a male domain, this struggle becomes particularly acute (Regis College, 2024). Such contexts demand dual interventions—both institutional and cultural—to foster genuine progress toward gender equity (Abdul-Alim, 2025).

Therefore, academic institutions must actively implement inclusive policies that promote leadership traits such as empathy, collaboration, and emotional intelligence—qualities frequently attributed to female leadership styles. Doing so not only benefits women but also enriches institutional performance through the integration of diverse perspectives (AAUW, 2022; Mohamad et al., 2025). Structural transformation requires a deliberate re-examination of the cultural narratives that limit women's potential and sustained efforts to build an inclusive leadership pipeline (Lyon, 2024).

3 Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively analyze female representation in leadership roles within higher education institutions in Tecomán, Colima. The methodological framework integrates both quantitative and qualitative components to capture the multidimensional nature of gender disparities in academic leadership (Regis College, 2024).

The research is classified as non-experimental and cross-sectional, providing a snapshot of the current state of gender representation in leadership without manipulation of variables. This design allows for a contextual understanding of how institutional cultures and gender equity policies impact women's career trajectories in academia (Chao, 2024).

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 16 higher education institutions within Tecomán, including both public and private organizations. The selection was based on institutional diversity and varying degrees of gender representation (Mohamad et al., 2025). The study engaged approximately 200 participants, including academic leaders, faculty members, and administrative staff, to ensure a broad spectrum of perspectives.

3.1 Data Collection Instruments

Two primary instruments were used for data collection:

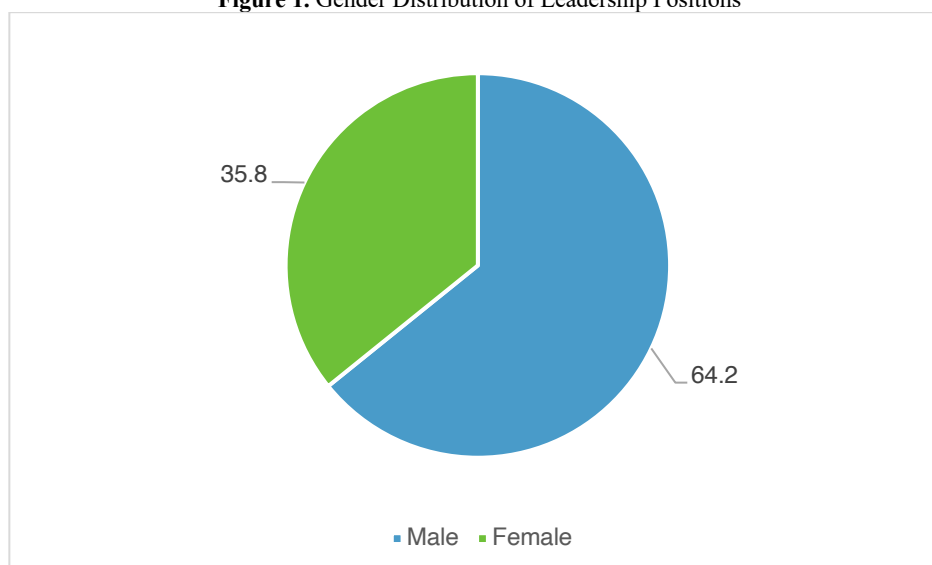
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Female leaders from each institution were interviewed to gain in-depth insight into their personal experiences, challenges encountered, and perceptions of institutional support. The interview protocol was designed to elicit discussion on leadership aspirations, perceived barriers, and organizational culture.
- **Survey Questionnaire:** A structured survey was distributed among faculty members at the selected institutions. This instrument aimed to capture quantitative data on perceptions of gender equity policies, representation, and institutional support mechanisms. The survey included Likert-scale questions and open-ended items to ensure a combination of quantitative data and nuanced responses (Lyon, 2024).

The integration of these two methods enabled triangulation of data, enhancing the reliability and depth of the findings. By combining narrative accounts with quantifiable trends, the study offers a robust assessment of the structural and perceptual factors shaping female leadership in the regional academic context.

4 Findings

The results of this study highlight persistent gender imbalances in academic leadership within higher education institutions in Tecomán, Colima. Quantitative data revealed that only 35.8% of leadership positions were held by women, underscoring a substantial gender gap despite the existence of formal equity policies (Lyon, 2024). Additionally, 43.2% of survey respondents perceived institutional support for aspiring female leaders as insufficient, suggesting a disconnect between policy formulation and practical implementation (Regis College, 2024).

Figure 1. Gender Distribution of Leadership Positions



Source: Own elaboration using Microsoft Excel 365

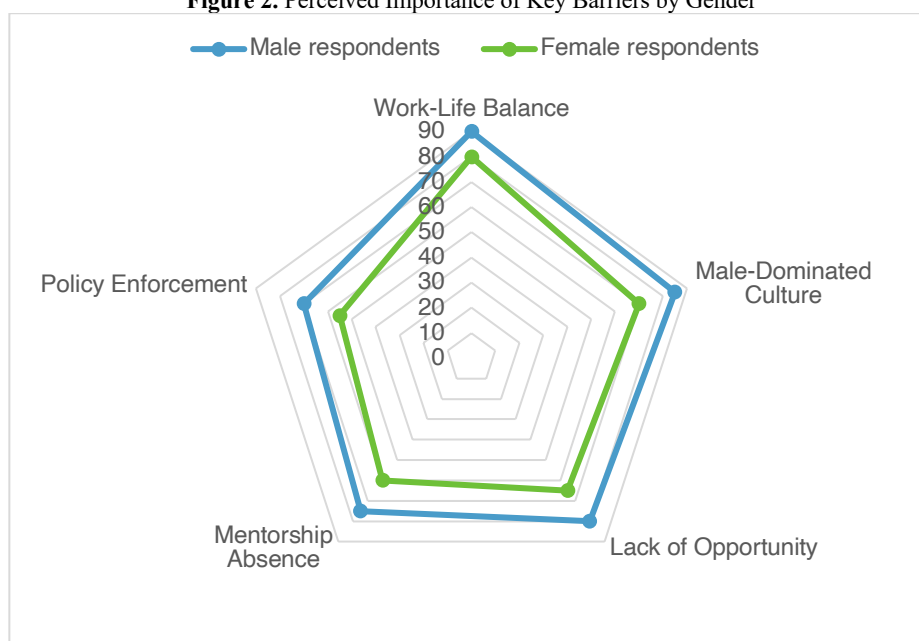
The figure 1 shows a pie chart that illustrates the proportion of senior academic and administrative roles held by men and women in higher-education institutions in Tecomán, Colima (2024). Men occupy 64.2 % of leadership posts, whereas women hold only 35.8 %, underscoring a persistent gender gap despite formal equity policies.

4.1 Key Barriers Identified

A multi-dimensional analysis of responses uncovered critical barriers impeding women's advancement into leadership roles. Among these, the work-life balance challenge (Barrier B2) emerged as the most significant overall obstacle (Support Index = 76.2), particularly emphasized by male respondents as the second-most critical barrier (Mohamad et al., 2025). Interestingly, female respondents ranked this issue as their ninth-most pressing barrier, highlighting differing perceptions across gender lines. Nevertheless, previous literature consistently identifies work-life conflict as a central impediment for women, often intensified by traditional gender expectations (AAUW, 2022).

For female respondents, the most critical issue was Barrier B20: Male-Dominated Leadership Structures. Respondents expressed concern that leadership positions in higher education remain heavily male-centric, making it difficult to shift gender representation. They also cited a lack of female role models or change agents who could advocate for gender equality in academic leadership (Zabludovsky Kuper, 2025).

Figure 2. Perceived Importance of Key Barriers by Gender



Source: Own elaboration using Microsoft Excel 365

This radar chart (figure 2) compares how male and female respondents (0 – 100 scale) rate the significance of five obstacles to women's advancement into higher-education leadership. Both groups identify Work-Life Balance as the most pressing issue, but men assign slightly higher urgency than women. Male respondents also perceive Male-Dominated Culture and Lack of Opportunity as more severe barriers, whereas women rate these challenges somewhat lower yet still substantial. Mentorship Absence and Policy Enforcement receive the lowest scores from both groups, indicating that while important, they are considered less critical than work-life demands and entrenched cultural norms. The diverging profiles highlight nuanced gender differences in how key impediments to female leadership are experienced and prioritized.

This barrier was closely linked to Barrier B12: Lack of Opportunity. Female participants noted that leadership trajectories are often shaped by opaque selection processes and political appointments, which are not necessarily based on merit. Such structures restrict access to career advancement opportunities for women, particularly in contexts lacking transparent recruitment and promotion mechanisms (Chao, 2024).

4.2 Interpretation

These findings reveal a layered configuration of systemic and cultural barriers that affect both the perception and reality of female leadership in academia. The fact that male respondents increasingly recognize the challenge of work-life balance suggests growing awareness, but the differential prioritization of barriers by gender indicates ongoing cultural divides within institutional environments.

The prevalence of male-dominated leadership structures, coupled with the absence of support mechanisms, signals a pressing need for higher education institutions in the region to reevaluate their leadership models. A genuine commitment to gender equity must extend beyond written policies and address the everyday realities and expectations faced by women in the academic workplace.

5 Discussion: Analyzing the Barriers Women Face in Academic Leadership

The findings make it clear that the persistence of gender disparity in academic leadership stems from the interplay of structural and cultural obstacles. Among the most significant are the prevalence of male-dominated organizational cultures that limit women's participation in decision-making spaces, the absence of formal mentoring mechanisms to support women's professional development, and the constant tension between family responsibilities and leadership duties. Added to this is the limited or inconsistent enforcement of gender equity policies, which creates a gap between institutional discourse and actual practices. These barriers not only perpetuate exclusion but also hinder the construction of sustainable leadership trajectories for women, underscoring the need for specific proposals aimed at effectively reducing the gap.

The findings of this study reaffirm long-standing patterns of gender-based exclusion in higher education leadership in Mexico, particularly in semi-urban and regional contexts such as Tecomán. Despite incremental policy efforts and growing institutional awareness, leadership structures remain largely male-dominated, and gender equality initiatives often lack the operational mechanisms necessary for meaningful transformation (Zabludovsky Kuper, 2025; Mohamad et al., 2025).

5.1 Gendered Career Trajectories and Delayed Leadership Aspirations

The data indicate that women tend to aspire to leadership positions later in their careers compared to male counterparts, a phenomenon also documented in comparative international studies (Chao, 2024). This temporal delay is not merely the result of personal choice but rather a consequence of cumulative structural disadvantages, including the absence of mentorship networks, limited access to leadership development programs, and cultural expectations that prioritize women's domestic roles over professional advancement (AAUW, 2022).

Such disparities are magnified by sociocultural norms that inform institutional gatekeeping. Cultural values and gendered expectations influence promotion criteria, often privileging characteristics traditionally coded as masculine—assertiveness, competitiveness, and visibility in public decision-making arenas—over competencies such as empathy, collaboration, and conflict resolution, which are typically devalued despite their demonstrated effectiveness in academic leadership (Lyon, 2024; Regis College, 2024).

5.2 Policy-Practice Disjunction and the Need for Structural Realignment

A critical insight emerging from this study is the evident disjunction between the formal existence of gender equity policies and their perceived or actual implementation. Although a growing number of

institutions have adopted frameworks to promote gender parity, many respondents noted that these frameworks lack enforcement mechanisms, are poorly communicated, or fail to address the intersectional challenges faced by women (Regis College, 2024).

This disconnect reflects a broader problem of performative equality—institutional discourses that endorse gender inclusion rhetorically without ensuring the structural conditions required for its realization. For instance, maternity leave policies and flexible scheduling are often inconsistently applied, and few institutions have implemented accountability mechanisms to monitor progress toward equitable representation in leadership (Chao, 2024; Mohamad et al., 2025).

5.3 Cross-Cultural Considerations and Global Parallels

These findings are congruent with broader global research documenting the persistence of gendered constraints in academic leadership. In regions such as the Middle East and Southeast Asia, women face similar limitations stemming from patriarchal cultural norms, opaque appointment systems, and gendered assumptions about professional ambition and capacity (Mohamad et al., 2025). Such comparative parallels underscore the necessity for globally informed yet locally contextualized interventions.

Moreover, the study confirms that cultural conditioning, rather than lack of qualification or interest, remains the primary force suppressing female leadership participation. The persistent internalization of inferiority and the scarcity of female role models contribute to a feedback loop in which women are underrepresented and undervalued, further diminishing their visibility and influence (AAUW, 2022; Zabludovsky Kuper, 2025).

5.4 Institutional Culture and the Effects of Gender Representation

Gender representation within academic institutions exerts a profound influence on organizational culture and on how leadership capabilities are perceived, developed, and legitimized. Despite the fact that women constitute a significant proportion of the academic workforce, their underrepresentation in leadership roles perpetuates organizational environments that reinforce gender stereotypes and unconscious biases (AAUW, 2022; Lyon, 2024).

In many cases, cultural norms and social expectations dictate that women prioritize familial responsibilities over professional aspirations. This societal narrative creates a persistent conflict between personal and professional identities, often positioning women as less committed or less capable of sustaining leadership responsibilities (Regis College, 2024). Consequently, access to strategic roles is frequently restricted, not due to a lack of competence, but due to the perception that women cannot fulfill the full scope of leadership obligations.

Organizational culture in academia has historically been shaped by male-dominated leadership models that valorize assertiveness, autonomy, and competitiveness. Leadership traits more commonly associated with women—such as empathy, cooperation, and emotional intelligence—are often undervalued, leading to environments where women must outperform their male counterparts to be recognized as equally competent (Mohamad et al., 2025; Zabludovsky Kuper, 2025). This dynamic not only discourages women from aspiring to leadership positions, but also entrenches the notion that leadership is inherently a male domain.

On the other hand, the presence of female role models in senior academic positions has been shown to exert a positive and empowering influence. The visibility of women in leadership can challenge prevailing norms and inspire the next generation of female academics to pursue leadership careers (Chao, 2024). Moreover, institutions that cultivate mentoring networks and peer support systems contribute significantly to building inclusive environments that value diverse leadership styles.

Institutional policies play a pivotal role in reinforcing or dismantling gender disparities. Flexible work arrangements, family-friendly policies, and targeted professional development programs for women are essential to facilitate career advancement. However, in many cases, these policies exist in name only, without the systemic backing or cultural transformation required for effective implementation (AAUW, 2022; Mohamad et al., 2025). Without active monitoring and accountability, institutions risk perpetuating symbolic inclusivity while failing to produce substantive change.

In sum, the culture of academic institutions must be critically examined and restructured to promote gender equity in leadership. This involves not only removing structural barriers but also redefining leadership competencies to include the full spectrum of effective leadership styles. Addressing both institutional norms and broader cultural narratives is essential for creating an academic environment where gender representation is not merely a metric but a reflection of genuine inclusivity and organizational excellence.

5.5 Cross-Cultural Comparisons of Leadership Barriers

Gender inequality in higher education leadership manifests differently across global contexts. While the underlying patterns of exclusion are often similar, the intensity and form of the barriers faced by women are deeply shaped by cultural, institutional, and political contexts. For instance, in many regions, deeply entrenched social norms continue to associate family responsibilities exclusively with women, thereby limiting their perceived ability to fully commit to demanding leadership roles (Lyon, 2024).

Globally, up to 83% of women report that domestic responsibilities hinder their professional development and capacity to pursue leadership opportunities (AAUW, 2022). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in countries where traditional gender roles continue to define leadership as a male prerogative, reinforcing organizational structures that resist gender diversification in governance (Chao, 2024).

In Middle Eastern countries, for example, women face cultural barriers that not only restrict access to leadership positions but also disproportionately burden them with family care duties. These social expectations significantly curtail their academic advancement and leadership aspirations, creating a hostile or unaccommodating environment for women who seek influence within academic institutions (Charnosky, 2024).

Conversely, in countries such as Malaysia, although access to higher education for women has improved significantly, the representation of women in senior leadership positions remains minimal. Studies reveal a disconnection between the increasing number of female academics and the stagnant presence of women in decision-making roles (Mohamad et al., 2025). Women in these contexts often contend with individual barriers such as imposter syndrome, as well as external expectations to prioritize family over career, which mirror the challenges observed in Latin American contexts like Mexico.

These global disparities emphasize the need for culturally sensitive strategies tailored to local realities. While universal frameworks for gender equity provide valuable guidance, they must be adapted to account for intersectional and cultural variables that shape women's lived experiences (Zabludovsky Kuper, 2025). Therefore, gender equity policies must go beyond quotas or representation metrics and engage deeply with the societal constructs that hinder women's leadership participation.

Institutional efforts must include culturally grounded interventions—such as mentorship programs, awareness campaigns, and flexible career pathways—that reflect the specific constraints faced by women in each context. This approach enhances the legitimacy and efficacy of gender equity initiatives and fosters sustainable change in leadership dynamics worldwide.

6 Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the persistent and multifaceted nature of gender disparity in higher education leadership within the regional context of Tecomán, Colima. Despite the existence of institutional policies aimed at promoting gender equity, women continue to hold only 35.8% of leadership positions, a figure that reflects a structural disconnect between formal frameworks and their practical enforcement (Lyon, 2024).

Qualitative insights from interviews suggest that, while gender equity is rhetorically acknowledged, the actual institutional support available to aspiring female leaders is perceived as limited. Notably, 43.2% of respondents reported a lack of actionable backing from their institutions, revealing a critical implementation gap (Regis College, 2024). This mismatch suggests that effective gender equity cannot be achieved through policy alone; it requires a transformation in institutional culture and sustained commitment to structural change.

External social pressures and persistent challenges related to work-life balance continue to hinder women's advancement into leadership roles. These findings align with broader global research that highlights the enduring influence of traditional cultural norms and expectations, which disproportionately burden women with domestic responsibilities and impede their professional growth (AAUW, 2022; Chao, 2024).

Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses:

- Systemic reforms, including transparent and equitable recruitment and promotion processes.
- Robust mentorship and leadership development programs tailored to the needs of female academics.
- Flexible working conditions and institutional support that facilitate the reconciliation of professional and personal responsibilities.
- Cultural change initiatives, aimed at deconstructing gender stereotypes and promoting diverse leadership models.

This study offers critical insights not only for the academic institutions of Tecomán but also for similar regional and global contexts that grapple with entrenched gender inequities. By strategically confronting the institutional and cultural roots of exclusion, educational leaders can build more inclusive environments where women are empowered to lead, innovate, and transform higher education.

Future research should examine the long-term impact of gender equity initiatives on institutional performance, as well as explore the experiences of marginalized women—such as those from Indigenous or rural communities—to further contextualize the barriers to leadership and develop targeted interventions.

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