

Example of essay on women in leadership in higher education

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



Theoretical Framework

Women in leadership in higher education: Theoretical framework

Introduction

While 'feminism' and 'feminist' are terms that have been explored at length in literature, affiliating these terms to concepts of leadership has been rare. However, feminists have increasingly evaluated and studied the practice of leadership from a feminist perspective, or feminist leadership, especially since the advent of Second Wave feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. However, majority of this work remains unpublished and difficult to access as it is not available as part of journal or on the internet.

Most prominent feminist theories are based on common assumptions that affirm that society is male dominated, and that there is a need for change. As a result of these basic characteristics, most feminist theories follow a political approach, which is, in itself addressing a wide range of agendas such as reforming or transforming society and organizations as well as transforming current understanding of feminist theory and practice. Based on these observations, Lober placed these feminist theories under three categories, namely: a) gender resistance, b) gender reform, and c) gender rebellion.

Gender Reform

Gender reform is a form of liberal feminism that states that men and women are biologically similar and hence this aspect of gender should not be taken into consideration when providing job opportunities. It also takes the view

that women have lowered skill sets when compared to men due to the differences in attributes between men and women brought about by their social segregation based on sex role. Should women be able to enhance their skills and qualities, they will be able to attain wages and salaries more equitable to those of men.

The gender reform theory has been supported by leadership and gender based organizational studies . This mass of literature focuses on comparing the social standings of men and women with reference to discrimination and seeks to explain the reasons for this inequality . At an organizational level, the impact of gender on predominant work related concepts such as job satisfaction and power and the role that gender plays in them is emphasized. Behaviorist and experimental psychological research, using mostly quantitative methods, forms a prominent basis for the theoretical framework of gender reform theories. Here, while women are considered to be the research category, gender forms the variable .

Gender Resistance

Considered to be the opposite of the gender reform approach, the gender resistance theorists suggest that instead of trying to eradicate the differences between men and women, they should be honoured . According to this study, women have life experiences that are unique from those of men and that the impact of these on the behaviour of women in patriarchal settings needs to be studied in depth . The broader gender resistance theory can be further segregated into three key theories, namely: a) radical feminism, b) psychoanalytical feminism, and c) standpoint feminism.

Resistant feminism arose in opposition to liberal feminism that sought to address individual challenges in order to bring about equality among the genders. However, radical feminism counters that inequality of genders arises from societal norms that proclaim men to be more privileged as a result of their masculinity . Hence, an understanding of the broader social order, rather than individual attributes, is required to bridge the gap between women and leadership. According to radical feminists, this would require a change in cultural preference from masculinity to a ' female culture' .

Psychoanalytical feminism refutes the biological characterization of genders by Freud and suggest a female dominated deduction , paving the way for a more psychological comprehension. Similarly, standpoint feminism calls for the addition of the unique aspect of women's experiences and viewpoints to create a culture and knowledge base that does not downplay the feminine standpoint .

Gender Rebellion

A more radical approach towards when compared to gender resistance is gender rebellion. The feminists proclaim that, rather than trying to marginalize the differences between men and women, feminism should strive to eradicate the concept of differences all together. According to this approach, the concept if gender has been created through years of social stigma, unbalanced power relations, and universal identification of women . This asymmetric power distribution reveals itself differently through its interactions with social segments based of class, race and ethnicity, as well

as other characteristics such as political and cultural history, to which a person belongs .

According to gender rebellion feminists, although organizational theories seem to gender impartial, it has given rise to a substructure that is gender biased . These theories focus on what are considered to be masculine attributes such as power, language, discourse and knowledge, thereby curbing the comprehension of organizations . Studies based on this approach rely on the breaking down of theories that take into consideration the viewpoints of marginalized sections of the society . Through this method, they are able to provide a fresh perspective of organizational theories and practices that could possibly address the gender power bias.

Feminist Educational Leadership

Feminine Educational Leadership theory differs from liberal and radical feminism in that it is not solely created to address feministic issues but to include a broader political scope which covers issues such as class, race, sexualities and differences in abilities (Glazer 1991). Hence, it can be said that feminist educational leadership is driven by a need to equality (Blackmore 1993a), is anti-sexist as well as anti-racist (Gosetti & Rusch, 1995), and relies on a feministic approach to question as well as transform hegemonic organizational practices (Blackmore 1996).

The foundation of feminist educational leadership lies in liberal politics. For this purpose, actionable critical reflection becomes essential (Blackmore 1996). Critical reflection allows a person to recognize the differences in things and seeks practical ways to address unfair practices and unbalanced

relationships that impact issues such as the subjugation of women and racism. Women who follow this approach are often branded as being radical or rebellion feminists or 'activists' and this can hinder the perception that society has of their capabilities as a leader (Matthews, 1995, P247). On the contrary, being outsiders in predominantly patriarchal organizations, such as educational institutions, it becomes necessary for women to strive against sexism and racism (Ah Nee-Benham & Cooper, 1998).

Relevance and Use of Feminist Theories in Current Research

The four theories discussed in the preceding sections apply to the current study which aims to study the career paths of women who had attained the position of presidents at colleges and universities. The study will also delve into the subject of the individual journeys of the women, their experiences and interactions, the perceptions of institutions towards female presidents, how these women view their position and whether they believe in the existence of the glass ceiling beyond which women leaders cannot progress. The four theories mentioned will help identify the approaches that these women may have followed and how effective these proved to be in addressing the challenges they faced as women on a male dominated career path.

Power forms an integral part of feminist theories as well as organizational concepts. According to literature, feminists tend to use power as a means and facilitator of results. This is accomplished not by exercising power in the form of control but rather by empowering others through respecting

colleagues and recognizing their efforts as workers and thinkers (Ferguson, 1984). This behaviour has been known to bring down domination in institutions and change attitudes, perceptions, policies and structures that contribute to the oppression of women. Capper suggests that every organization have an internal measurement of power and control that can prevent assumptions of balance as well as power being taken for granted (1992). It can further reveal how the imbalance of power has been contributing to the subjugation of minorities within the institution (p. 106).

Another aspect that is central to feminist educational leadership is care as an ethic as it helps cope with oppression (Beck, 1994). Literature written by feminists as well as those who have studied feminist educational leadership claims that by creating an environment of respect (Beck, 1992), encouraging compassion (Hurty, 1995) facilitates a sense of belonging and community. In patriarchal institutes such as schools, colleges and universities, caring for students by female members can lead to further oppression (Ferguson, 1984). McCall on the other hand proposes that feminine caring can help break oppressive and biased practices towards women, coloured people as well as those that are financially handicapped (1995).

Leaders in educational institutions who practice care as a core ethic have three key challenges, namely: a) enhancing academic performance, b) addressing social issues, and c) revising organizational policies (beck 1994). Having a feminist approach and viewing these challenges from a woman's point of view assists in understanding oppressive attitudes. It is important to understand the most important feminist theories and their applicability to

women striving to attain positions of leadership in educational institutions. The gender reform, gender resistant, gender rebellion and feminist educational leadership theories will enable a better understanding the mindsets of women leaders in the field of education, which is a necessity for the success of this research and study.

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