

## Structural Barriers to Women's Leadership and Professional Development in Moroccan Higher Education. A Mixed-Method Study

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**Abstract**

*In recent decades, Morocco has witnessed a significant expansion in women's access to higher education. However, women in Moroccan universities remain disproportionately underrepresented in faculty leadership and decision-making roles. This study examines the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that hinder the professional development of female faculty members. This study utilized a mixed-methods approach. Data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 100 academic members from three faculties at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University: The Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, the Faculty of Laws, Economic and Social Sciences, and the Faculty of Science, all located at Dhar El Mahraz. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 senior faculty members and current and former leaders within the same institution. Thematic analysis revealed three primary obstacles: exclusion from the decision-making process -45%-, conflict between family and professional obligations -35%-, and 20% expressed a lack of desire for leadership roles, often stemming from systemic discouragement. The findings show how gendered cultural expectations and opaque institutional structures constrain women's career trajectories. The findings suggest multiple solutions, such as prioritizing leadership training, implementing gender sensitive policies, and awareness campaigns. The study concludes that achieving gender equity in Moroccan higher education requires systemic improvements in addition to cultural shifts in attitudes and in gender views.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Morocco has witnessed a significant expansion in access to higher education, with increasing female enrollment signaling progress toward gender parity. Yet, beneath these encouraging statistics lies a persistent and complex reality: women in Moroccan universities continue to face formidable barriers to professional advancement. While female students often excel academically, their transition into faculty roles, leadership positions, and decision-making bodies remains disproportionately limited.

This disparity is not merely a reflection of individual choices or capabilities—it is deeply rooted in institutional cultures, socio-cultural expectations, and policy gaps that collectively constrain women's career trajectories. Gendered norms surrounding authority, mobility, and work-life balance intersect with opaque promotion criteria and limited mentorship opportunities, creating an environment where professional growth for women is often stifled or delayed.

This research is significant because understanding these barriers is essential not only for achieving equity within academic institutions but also for harnessing the full potential of Morocco's intellectual and social capital. This article critically examines the structural, cultural, and policy-related impediments to women's professional development in Moroccan higher education, drawing on empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks to illuminate pathways toward more inclusive academic futures.

Therefore, this article aims to draw back the curtains on the obstacles women encounter to achieve leadership positions in Moroccan universities, and thus suggests solutions for women to gain a respectable professional development. By unpacking these challenges, we aim to contribute to a more equitable academic environment where talent and leadership are not defined by gender, but by merit, equity, and opportunity.

## **2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **2.1. Women's Evolving Presence in Academia**

Women have made significant strides in higher education during the last few decades, both as scholars and as students. They currently make up the majority of university graduates in many regions of the world, and their involvement as faculty members has been continuously rising. Significant gender gaps still exist in spite of these advancements, especially when it comes to leadership representation, career progression, and professional development in higher education (UNESCO, 2021; Morley, 2013). These differences are ingrained in institutional cultures, societal norms, and policy frameworks and go beyond simple numerical differences. Academic women often encounter particular obstacles that prevent them from obtaining mentorship, decision-making positions, research opportunities, and promotions. This literature review critically examines these barriers by exploring the structural, cultural, interpersonal, and psychological dimensions that shape women's professional development experiences in higher education.

### **2.2. Structural and Organizational Barriers**

Because of deeply ingrained institutional logics that consistently favor male career paths rather than isolated instances, structural inequality continues to be a major and persistent barrier to women's development in academia. Exclusionary institutional practices and the ongoing undervaluation of women's academic labor perpetuate unequal access to possibilities for advancement. When research output and publications are regarded as the main indicators of merit, hiring and promotion processes often include criteria that seem gender-neutral yet disproportionately penalize women. The gendered allocation of caring and the persistent absence of institutional support that limits women's ability to satisfy these demands are two

structural conditions under which academic labor is generated that are ignored by such measurements (Bailyn, 2003; O'Connor, 2015).

Despite being officially gender-neutral, many institutions' rules ignore underlying injustices. Promotional procedures, for instance, might not be transparent or rely on unofficial networks that are controlled by male academics. According to Bensimon and Marshall (2003), men are given preference in academic decision-making, teamwork, and information exchange due to the "old boys' club" ethos.

Furthermore, many women experience "glass ceiling" circumstances, in which they are routinely blocked from senior leadership posts despite having the ability to advance to mid-level positions (Cotter et al., 2001). The idea of the "glass cliff" often appears in literature, where women who achieve leadership positions are frequently assigned to dangerous, precarious positions with little prospect of success (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

### **2.3.Cultural and Societal Constraints**

Beyond institutional frameworks, women's career paths are significantly impacted by broader cultural and societal norms, particularly in conservative or patriarchal settings. The majority of caregiving and household duties are still assigned to women by traditional gender norms, which results in structural disadvantages that interact with demands from the workplace. These social constraints disproportionately impact women in academia in the early and mid-career stages, when building a research reputation and publication record is crucial. In addition to limiting women's ability to fully participate in academic work, these norms perpetuate structural inequality by reinforcing the idea that professional aspirations clash with socially assigned responsibilities (El Amrani, 2021; Probert, 2005).

In other words, The "double burden" of juggling work and home obligations results in stress, limited access to conference or travel possibilities, and time poverty. Women may self-select out of leadership courses as a result of these pressures, or they may put off making decisions that might advance their careers, including getting a PhD or applying for grants.

The general public's opinion of women in leadership roles is still conflicted or unfavorable in many societies. Women in leadership positions in higher education frequently suffer from "role incongruity," a situation in which assertiveness and decisiveness are viewed as incompatible with stereotypically feminine features like warmth and empathy (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

### **2.4.Gender Bias and Discrimination in Academic Culture**

Implicit and explicit gender bias continue to be significant obstacles to women's academic advancement. Male academics are more likely to be invited to speak at conferences, receive research funds, and have higher teaching evaluations, according to studies (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). Women's contributions are frequently underestimated or underappreciated, even when they create work of equivalent or superior quality.

Another important way that gender disparity is perpetuated in academia is through bias in hiring and peer review procedures. The persistence of gendered presumptions in supposedly meritocratic systems is demonstrated by empirical evidence that identical CVs are judged

differently based just on whether a male or female name is listed (Steinpreis et al., 1999). Furthermore, because of deeply ingrained normative expectations that uphold gender inequalities in academic contexts, female teachers are frequently exposed to more stringent scrutiny regarding their performance, appearance, and behavior in student evaluations (Boring, 2017). In addition to disadvantaging women in concrete career results, these practices normalize subtle kinds of discrimination as part of the evaluation process.

For many women, the workplace is hostile due to the existence of microaggressions, exclusion from unofficial academic networks, and subtly undermined power. According to Settles et al. (2006), these circumstances frequently result in a feeling of professional isolation and a decline in job satisfaction. These experiences add up over time and cause gifted women to leave academia, which feeds the ongoing "leaky pipeline" issue.

### **2.5. Mentorship and Networking Challenges**

Women's professional development in academia is severely hampered by the lack of or insufficiency of mentorship. In addition to career counseling, mentoring offers networking opportunities, collaboration chances, and funding for significant academic achievements. However, there is frequently a lack of female mentors due to male-dominated senior leadership, and cultural norms or worries about propriety may limit cross-gender mentorship (Etzkowitz et al., 2000).

Additionally, women could be shut out of informal networks where crucial career information is shared, including faculty clubs or after-hours gatherings. Women's visibility and access to opportunities that could improve their academic careers are restricted by these limitations. According to studies, mentoring by itself is insufficient unless it is combined with institutional commitment to gender equity and active sponsorship (Ibarra et al., 2010).

### **2.6. Psychological Barriers and Internalized Bias**

Women may absorb social cues that cast doubt on their authority and ability in addition to exterior structural and cultural constraints; this condition is frequently referred to as "impostor syndrome." By influencing self-perception in ways that deter women from claiming their accomplishments, self-promoting, or pursuing senior academic posts, this internalization perpetuates gendered hierarchies (Clance & Imes, 1978). Rather than being a personal shortcoming, this psychological effect illustrates the widespread influence of cultural norms and systemic bias, showing how structural inequality functions not just through institutional behaviors but also through the internalization of gendered expectations.

This lack of confidence is a consequence of systemic injustices and gender-related cultural messaging rather than a personal shortcoming. Women may also experience increased role conflict, especially when attempting to strike a balance between the demands of being an aspirational academic professional and a loving family member.

In order to overcome these psychological obstacles, systemic adjustments that validate and encourage women's participation in leadership and research are just as important as individual resilience techniques.

### **2.7. Intersectionality and Marginalized Identities**

It is critical to acknowledge the many and intersecting ways in which women encounter obstacles. When gender inequality interacts with other axes of identification, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, disability, and nationality, it creates multifaceted and mutually reinforcing forms of discrimination. For example, women of color or those from low-income or rural origins frequently have more challenges in mostly white, metropolitan, or elite academic settings because they have to deal with both structural and gendered biases at the same time (Crenshaw, 1991; Ahmed, 2012). This intersectional viewpoint emphasizes that approaches to addressing injustice must take into consideration the complex realities of women's varied experiences rather than being one-dimensional.

All in all, Linguistic hierarchies, colonial legacies, and sectarian conflicts may further restrict women's access to leadership and inclusion in scholarly debate in regions like the Middle East and North Africa. As a result, women's advancement methods need to adapt to these varied and complex situations.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Research design**

The study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the existing institutional and structural barriers that hinder the professional development of female faculty members at the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, Dhar El Mahraz – University of Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah. The qualitative methodology is suitable for capturing the nuanced experiences and authentic perspectives of the participants. This allows for an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of gender inequality.

#### **3.2. Research objectives**

The study aims to:

- Identify the existing structural barriers in the context of Moroccan Higher education that hinder the professional development of female faculty members.
- Explore how the cultural shaped expectations affect women's experiences in academic leadership settings.
- Examine the role of existing institutional promotion structures in terms of criteria and mentorship opportunities in empowering women.
- Propose practical recommendations for improving institutional support systems to foster gender equity in Moroccan higher education contexts.

#### **3.3. Research questions**

To achieve the study objectives, the study is guided by this set of questions:

- What structural barriers do female faculty members encounter in their professional development journeys?
- In what ways do promotion criteria, institutional policies, and mentorship programs contribute to gender disparities in academic career progression?

- What strategies can be implemented to enhance institutional support for female faculty members to promote gender equity?

### **3.4.Sample**

To ensure the inclusion of participants from a wide range of academic departments and professional ranks, a questionnaire was distributed to 100 staff members across three faculties at the University of Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah's Dhar El Mahraz campus: The Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, the Faculty of Laws, Economic and Social Sciences, and the Faculty of Science. The participants of the questionnaire were 54 females from different ranks and occupations from different departments in three faculties, including 46 male participants from various occupations and departments, while a selected sample of 20 high-ranked participants took the semi-structured interviews. The chosen sample contained 6 former and a current male heads of the English department, 3 former female heads of the English department, 3 senior female English studies professors, and 7 senior male professors of the English department. The sample selected for the study was chosen to gain insights into different process areas of female institutional development, and the variety of the sample was incorporated to have different perspectives on the same experience, enhancing the study's depth and validity (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **3.5.Data collection**

The data for this study were collected through a mixed-method approach that combines both semi-structured interviews and a structured questionnaire to gain a comprehensive understanding of the structural barriers affecting female faculty members in Moroccan higher education institutions. This double approach gives room for the triangulation of data, which enhances the depth of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

A structured questionnaire was administered to a diverse sample of 100 participants to gather an insightful understanding of gender barriers in higher education institutional practices. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions, closed-ended questions, multiple-choice questions, and scales. The questionnaire is designed to investigate the participants' views on promotion criteria, gender expectations, and mentorship opportunities within the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, Dhar El Mahraz. The questionnaire was distributed electronically and in person, depending on participants' preferences and availability. Including both academic and administrative staff ensured a wide range of perspectives on the institutional dynamics, enhancing the study's validity (Bradley et al., 2020).

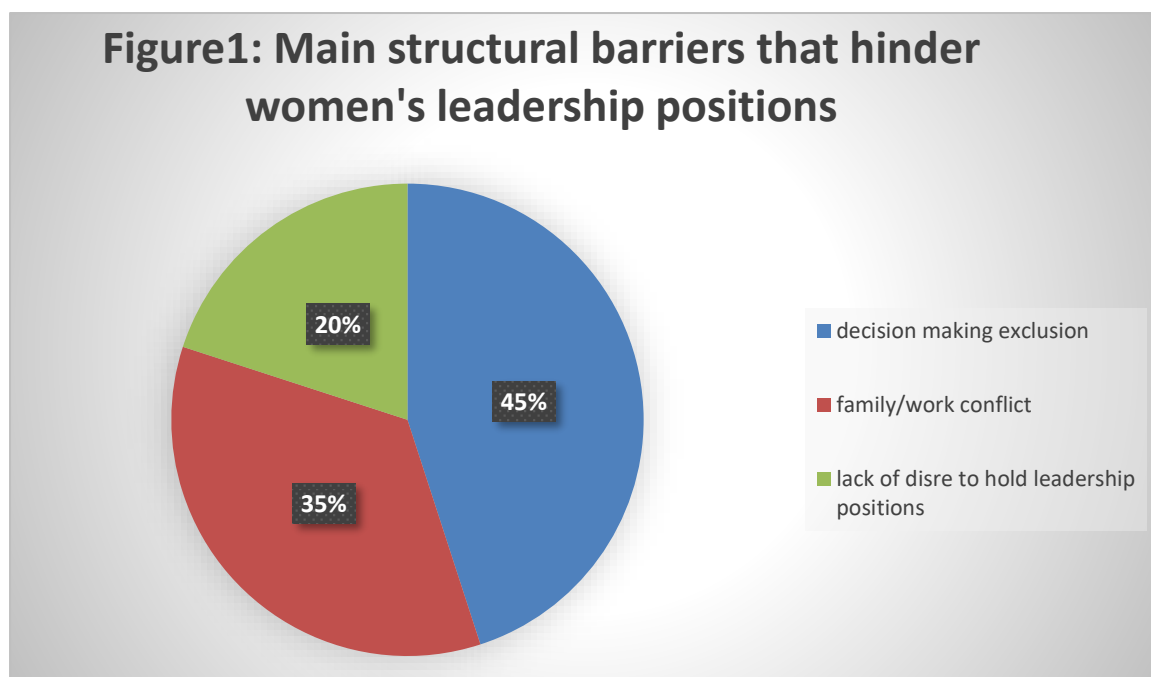
In addition to the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a purposively selected subsample of high-ranked participants to delve into nuanced personal experiences and institutional processes. The subsample includes 6 former and 1 current male head of the English department, 3 former female heads of the English department, 3 senior professors of the English studies, and 7 male senior professors of the English department. The interviews focused on the participants' authentic experience with leadership roles, mentorship, promotion criteria, and cultural expectations related to gender. Each interview took between 30 to 40 minutes and was conducted in English, as preferred by participants, to ensure comfort and clarity. The interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for



analysis. The semi-structured format allowed more friendly and flexible answers to spot emergent themes across interviews (Bradley et al., 2020).

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Main barriers to women's professional development



The study's data revealed three main obstacles that women's professional development and advancement to formal leadership positions struggle with. First and least common answer was "lack of desire to hold leadership positions" with 20% of the answers expressing satisfaction with current employment positions. The second most common answer among the participants has dealt with family/work conflicts, with 35% of the participants believing that the pursuit of leadership positions will result in a neglect of main family obligations. While the majority of 45% believed that there are structural and managerial exclusions that keep women outside of the decision-making process.

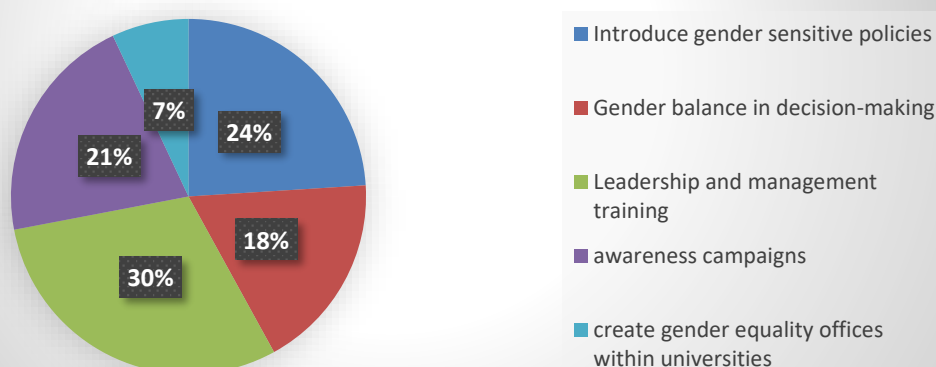
The exclusion from the decision-making process, as expressed by the participants, is often male-dominated, making the councils, the promotion committees, and the recruitment boards reinforcers of the patriarchal norms. Participants believed that even when women are included in committees or boards, their roles are merely symbolic. As a senior female lecturer illustrated this point by stating, "*I was nominated to join a recruitment board, but I quickly realized my role was symbolic. The final decisions were taken by male colleagues who barely acknowledged my input.*" Another administrator addressed the impact of this exclusion by stating, "*Exclusion from decision-making makes you feel invisible. It's not just about being left out of meetings—it's about being denied the power to shape policies that affect your career.*" These accounts highlight that exclusion is not simply an accidental omission, but rather a deeply rooted cultural and psychological assumption that questions women's potential to have legitimate authority.

Interestingly, the second most common barrier, as reported by 35% of participants, was the possible conflict between family obligations and professional responsibilities, which is a common issue within patriarchal societies. One assistant professor expressed frustration with this embedded thinking within the Moroccan higher education institution by stating, *“Even when my husband supports my career, the institution itself assumes I will not be fully committed. It’s frustrating because men with families are never questioned about their ability to handle responsibilities.”* Thus, some women’s family situations don’t allow them to ascend to formal leadership positions, as another respondent explained, *“Leadership requires travel, late meetings, and constant availability. For women, this often clashes with family duties. I know many colleagues who declined promotions because they felt it would harm their family life.”* This shows how institutional expectations and norms intersect with pre-determined cultural norms that limit women to the classic role of caregiver.

Furthermore, 20% of the participants expressed a lack of desire to attain leadership positions. At face value, this may appear to reflect personal and individual preferences, but participants link this issue to the existing systemic discouragement and limited support structures. A lecturer explained, *“Leadership in my institution seems like a lonely battle. There is little mentorship or support, so many of us don’t aspire to those positions.”* In addition, a senior academic similarly observed, *“When you rarely see women in top positions, you start believing it’s not a space meant for you. It feels like trying to enter a room where you are not welcome.”* This shows that the lack of aspiration for leadership positions is mainly a result of the negative experiences of exclusion, lack of mentorship, and the underrepresentation of female role models in high leadership positions.

#### 4.2. Proposed strategies to improve

**Figure2: How can Moroccan universities create a more inclusive environment for women to integrate them into leadership positions**



The participants were offered a range of strategies that could be adopted by the Moroccan universities to create a more inclusive environment and foster equitable opportunities for all genders. The responses emphasized the need for leadership and management training with 30% of the answers, while the adoption of gender-sensitive policies was the second proposed



strategy with 24% of the responds, in addition to awareness campaigns within campus and within administrative contexts with 21% of the responses, while 18% of the responses opted for gender balance in decision-making, and the least favorable answer was the creation of gender equality offices with 7%.

During the interviews, quality training was the most frequent solution, since it has a great impact on women's professional development. As stated by a participant who attended a leadership workshop, *"Leadership training gave me confidence. Before, I doubted whether I could manage committees or budgets. Now I feel more capable and assertive."* This shows how employees and workers -hence the gender- need real-life guidance and mentoring.

Introducing gender-sensitive policies was highlighted within the responses. Since an administrator explained, *"Policies matter. Without them, decisions depend on goodwill, and goodwill often favors men."* This lack of confidence in the existing policies shows how structural and systemic criteria can indirectly affect women's professional development and hinder their careers.

Awareness campaigns are seen as a significant way to challenge pre-existing stereotypical patriarchal norms. As another female participant observed, *"I often hear colleagues say women are too emotional to lead. Awareness sessions could help dismantle these outdated views."* These views can have a devastating impact on the efforts made by women just to be judged on the basis of their gender. Awareness campaigns can have a significant role in the mindset of the male leaders.

Participants have valued the assurance of balance within decision-making bodies, since it not only impacts women, but also the institute. Since women's exclusion from decision-making can result in the exclusion of competent participants in the decision-making process. As a senior academic stated, *"When decision-making spaces are all male, women's issues simply don't come up. Gender balance ensures that these perspectives are part of the discussion."* – Senior academic." This directly affects the quality of the decisions by limiting the scope of decisions to the male-oriented policies and decisions.

The least frequent answer was the creation of gender equality offices. Yet, it was suggested as a form of materializing the reforms within the institution. As a researcher argued, *"If universities had equality offices, it would send a strong message that gender is not just a side issue but a core value."* For the participants, creating equality offices is not the main goal, since the offices can be male-dominant and portray women as weak and needy. Interestingly, many participants saw the equality offices as symbols of the seriousness of the issue.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The findings highlight the dominance of structural, cultural, and personal factors that limit women's advancement in Moroccan higher education leadership. The findings suggest multiple-layered solutions, yet the barriers are consistent with the existing literature surrounding women's professional development. Thus, the barriers also reflect the specificities of the Moroccan socio-cultural context.

The first existing issue was the exclusion from the decision-making process, which was highlighted by almost half of the participants, revealing the deeply rooted male-dominant mindset within university governance. Interestingly, similar patterns have been found within other contexts and regions, where male-dominated committees perpetuate gender inequalities (Amrani, 2021; Bailyn, 2003). However, Moroccan women are present in several leadership positions, but their roles are mostly symbolic and lack any real authority or impact on the made process. This keeps women's professional development in leadership positions limited to "honorary" positions that have no legitimate impact.

The second issue concerns the prevalence of family-work conflict. This issue is one of the most prevailed within the international research regarding women's leadership. Since women are obliged to bear disproportionate domestic and caregiving responsibilities (Morley, 2013; UNESCO, 2021). In the Moroccan context, these challenges are often intensified, as women are often expected to prioritize family care over career development. In return, the institutions often reinforce these expectations by assuming women cannot fully commit to responsibilities, thus limiting their leadership roles. This shows how social norms can affect institutional structures and policies and vice versa. This form of cultural expectations puts a different form of pressure on women's aspirations and efforts, which can lead to the hindrance of their professional development.

These pressures, cultural, structural, and familial, can have a severe impact on women's aspirations. The findings suggest that 20% of participants expressed a lack of desire to pursue leadership positions. This can have multi-faced interpretations, since it's not only limited to the personal choices and willingness of women, but it can be evidence of systemic discouragement, lack of social support, and absence of appropriate mentorship. As Amrani(2021) argues, the absence of mentors, role models, and supportive networks reduces women's motivation to pursue leadership positions, especially in a context like Morocco, where women are significantly underrepresented in senior positions, which creates a self-reinforcing pattern where underrepresentation fosters disengagement, which in turn feeds the underrepresentation.

There are several strategies to address these obstacles, as participants proposed. Participants emphasized the need for multiple-level reforms, especially on the training level. Leadership training programs should not be limited to academics in formal leadership positions; they should also include representatives from diverse backgrounds and genders to build self-confidence and sharpen competencies. In addition, adopting a gender-sensitive policy addresses structural inequalities in promotion and work-life balance. Thus, awareness campaigns are crucial for changing the traditional, stereotypical view of women as unfit for leadership. This shift in governance can bring diverse perspectives to leadership and decision-making, reducing the risk of tokenism. All in all, these proposals are consistent with UNESCO's (2018) recommendations for advancing gender equality in higher education, which can serve as an opportunity to improve individual capacity-building through cultural and structural transformation.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The professional development of women in Moroccan higher education institutions remains constrained by a constellation of structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. Despite growing awareness and incremental policy shifts, the path to leadership for women in academia is still marked by unequal access to opportunities, limited representation in decision-making roles, and persistent gender biases.

Our findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions. Leadership and management training emerged as the most prioritized strategy, reflecting a widespread recognition that capacity-building is essential for empowering women to navigate and challenge institutional hierarchies. Equally important are gender-sensitive policies and awareness campaigns, which can reshape organizational cultures and dismantle stereotypes that hinder progress. The relatively low emphasis on establishing gender equality offices suggests a gap in institutional accountability mechanisms that must be addressed to sustain long-term change.

Creating inclusive academic environments is not merely a matter of equity—it is a strategic imperative for the intellectual and social advancement of Moroccan society. By embracing a multidimensional approach that combines policy reform, capacity-building, and cultural transformation, higher education institutions can become catalysts for gender-inclusive leadership and innovation.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently, without any financial or personal relationships that could inappropriately influence the work.

### **Ethical Approval**

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and gave their voluntary consent to take part. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the study.

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