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Closing the Gap: A Literature Review of Gender Disparities in Higher Education

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Abstract

This literature review delves into the gender disparities within academia, focusing specifically on the field of Communication and addressing broader trends across higher education. The review highlights women scholars' persistent challenges by analyzing research, leadership, and service dynamics. In research, the Matilda effect and gender bias in citation rates hinder recognition of women's scholarly contributions. Leadership positions exhibit a significant gender gap rooted in institutional biases and inadequate support systems. Additionally, women shoulder a disproportionate burden in service engagements, driven by social pressures and power dynamics. Addressing these disparities requires systemic changes, including reevaluating evaluation criteria, fostering new leadership models, and redistributing service responsibilities. Despite strides toward gender equity, the review underscores the need for further research to inform ongoing efforts toward creating an inclusive academic environment.

Keywords

gender disparities, academia, communication, gender gap, research practices, leadership roles, service engagement, Matilda effect, citation rates, institutional structures

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Introduction

In higher education, gender has significantly shaped institutional structures, influencing attitudes, behaviors, and, most notably, opportunities for women. Research indicates that a gender gap still persists in academia, influencing various facets such as research opportunities, citation rates, teaching roles, leadership positions, and service commitments within the academic sphere. These dimensions of educational expectations collectively serve as the evaluation criteria determining the trajectory of academic scholars' career paths, especially in the context of tenure and rising leadership positions. This literature review aims to analyze existing research by highlighting gender disparities in academia, focusing specifically on the communication field. This gender gap not only affects the experiences of individual scholars but also spreads into the entire knowledge process. The central question guiding this review is: What does the current research indicate about the influence of gender on research practices, leadership roles, and service engagement within the discipline of communication and academia as a whole?

To address this question, this review thoroughly explores studies in the three primary categories utilized for assessing faculty members in higher education: research, leadership, and service. When exploring these three classifications, the specific disparities between male and female gender categories will be addressed. It is necessary to recognize that intersectionality and other gender identities have an additional influence on representation and opportunities present in academia, but the main focus of this paper will be on the male and female classifications because that is where the majority of research is available. The most significant section of research available for the communication discipline pertains to publication and citation rate comparisons between male and female scholars. The statistics indicate a substantial disparity in citation rates, with men being cited nearly five times more than their female counterparts in

communication journals (Knobloch-Westerwick & Glynn, 2013). Further, the findings concluded that in the peer-review process, both men and women exhibit a biased tendency to favor men's submissions over women's (Fox et al., 2017). These statistics will be examined later in the review to address potential biases under the Matilda effect phenomenon.

In the subsequent sections focusing on leadership and service, a significant decline in communication field-centered articles prompted a broader analysis encompassing academia across all disciplines. The gender gap trends in leadership positions demonstrate that regardless of the type of institution, women occupy less than a quarter of university presidencies and experience notable disparities in other leadership roles and boards across educational organizations (Longman & Anderson, 2011; Madsen, 2011). The research attributes this gender position gap to institutional structures, lack of support, and a more male-centered network in higher positions.

Regarding the final section, aspects of service engagement, the findings indicated that women engage far more in extra service hours than men across all disciplines (Guarino & Borden, 2017). The research also underscores that one reason for women's heightened involvement in service is not due to a preferential bias or desire but rather that women often find themselves more inclined to say yes to service requests than men (Misra et al., 2011). The rationale behind this inclination is linked to social pressures and power dynamics, especially when women are asked by their superiors to serve in various projects. Notable, this observation that women are more likely to agree to such requests increases when the requestor is a male in a position of power (Guarino & Borden, 2017).

The following sections of this review will delve into the statistics and overarching themes contributing to and potentially responsible for this gender gap in academia—themes such as

power dynamics, personal family desires, and inadequate support. The examination will also briefly explain how aspects of research, leadership, and service contribute to considerations for the tenure track and how unequal weights in certain institutions often hinder women's advancement. This analysis of the gender divide in higher education aims to discern patterns and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the crucial role gender dynamics play in communication scholarship and opportunities.

Influential Variables

A constant push for excellence exists in academia, and the gender gap poses formidable challenges for women scholars' representation across various institutions and positions. Prior to delving into the observable gender disparities within the realms of research, leadership, and service, it is crucial to have an overview of external factors that contribute to this gap in academia. In order to achieve tenure, faculty members are expected to excel in three main areas: research, teaching, and service (Clark & Simeone, 1989). The expectations vary on how much weight each of these spheres gets based on whether the institution is categorized as Research I or a more teaching-oriented university or college. Regardless of the categorization, succeeding in academia is challenging, and the product of a gender gap is directly intertwined with institutional policies and systemic biases that shape the professional trajectories of women scholars.

Women face significant challenges when acquiring positions in academia and leadership roles and often have to make hard decisions that impact their lives outside their jobs. For those women who do choose to climb the academic ladder, they are less likely than their male counterparts to have children, fearing potential career setbacks (Isgro & Castañeda, 2015). While this review does not extensively explore external factors impacting women, it acknowledges the effects of marriage and children on academic careers, including institutional resources

influencing gender equity. Pursuing career success forces many women to make challenging decisions regarding family and work-life balance. This dilemma is a central overarching theme that may be one reason women are more prevalent in less prestigious institutions and hold less secure positions (Isgro & Castañeda, 2015). Although women in the last thirty years have significantly increased participation in undergraduate and graduate education and are even in the majority of degree recipients, the same cannot be seen in the employment rate of men and women as professors (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Fan & Sturman, 2019).

Despite strides towards increased representation and involvement in higher education, women still remain outnumbered by men in all types of four-year institutions, and the only exception is for two-year institutions where women outnumber men in faculty positions (Monroe, 2016). This gender disparity in faculty positions at two-year versus four-year institutions is one contributor to the statistics on the wage gap, with female faculty often being underpaid compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, horizontal and vertical segregation, where women tend to cluster in lower-paying departments, is also a leading contributor to the distribution of salaries (Monroe, 2016). However, the underpayment of women persists across all disciplines compared to men, according to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).

Sexism is deeply embedded in the overall structures of higher education and the evaluation process for recognition and tenure promotion (Park, 1996). Less than a third of full-time professors in the United States are women, thus resulting in fewer women receiving tenure benefits, meaning that if they are not tenured professors, they lack certain funding and resources (Colby & Fowler, 2022). In the field of communication, female faculty and researchers historically lacked access to facilities and resources, with their careers often determined more by

their positioned gender than intellectual capability. Dorsten's (2012) research emphasizes the structural privilege in academia, particularly rooted in the white male-dominated sector. This longstanding male-dominated lens has led to women's experiences in higher education needing more research, with limited avenues available for female scholars' voices to be heard.

Women encounter considerable challenges in gaining recognition in the field of communication, grappling with obstacles such as a perceived lack of legitimacy, difficulties in securing funding, establishing research lines, and shaping overall discourse due to a disproportionate amount of power through leadership positions (García-Jiménez & Herrero, 2022). According to García-Jiménez and Herrero (2022), female scholars often have to fight the hegemonic lens that leads to specific research ideas being labeled as "soft academia," which can lead to a significant decrease in funding availability and overall perceived credibility. Now that some of the many embedded and overarching struggles women face in academia have been addressed, the focus will shift to the specific examination of the gender gap in research, leadership, and service in the field of communication and, more broadly, the whole institution system.

Research

The academic cycle of knowledge production is impacted by gender, as well as other social characteristics such as race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. The process begins with acquiring funding, in which some women face a gendered bias based on assumptions about the quality of work they will produce, their scholarly merit, and their choice of topic (Lundine et al., 2019). Next, after securing funding, there is the peer-review process that all papers must undergo in order to be approved for publishing. Fox et al. (2017) discovered that when reviewers are accessing submissions through the peer-review process both men and women were more likely

to recommend a male paper submission than a female's submission. Demonstrating that regardless of the reviewer's gender, there is some form of gender bias if the author's gender is revealed during the peer-review process.

After the peer review process and once the submission is approved for publication, the final piece is gaining visibility, which is done through associated recognition and citations. Some general studies in all academic publishing fields have shown that women are less likely to be cited overall than men (Lundine et al., 2019). When looking at citation rates specifically in communication scholarly work, women still receive far less recognition for their articles (Knobloch-Westerwick & Glynn, 2013; Lutz, 1990). A study looking at the most cited authors in prominent communication journals between 2000 and 2019 found that in 2019, 71 percent of what they call the communication citation elite (CCE) was male (Freelon et al., 2023). This means that as of 2019, more than two-thirds of the most cited authors in the field of communication were men; of those men, 91 percent were white. Freelon's et al. (2023) study found that not only are women of all ethnicities being cited less often than men, but it also indicated that of the twenty-three elite communication scholars who were not white, only six were women. These statistics represent the disproportionate power that females and, more specifically women of color hold in shaping academic discourse.

There is immense pressure to frequently publish high-quality work in academia, driven by the desire to establish oneself and gain recognition through publications in prestigious journals or scholarly book publishers. One's ability to publish is directly linked with the power to shape one's respective field, achieve personal progress, and advance in academic ranks. The more recognition achieved, the more doors will open—reflecting the sentiment scholar Merton (1968) inspired through the phenomenon he called the 'Matthew Effect'. This term was coined

based on the Gospel of Matthew in the Bible and illustrates the uneven recognition of scholars' work based on their status.

Merton (1968) believed that the more well-known scientists were, the more visible their new contributions would be compared to less well-known scholars. In some cases, the work of lesser-known scientists might even be attributed to more prominent names, even if they did not contribute to it. Years later, a new term took shape based on Merton's work; scholar Rossiter (1993) dubbed it the 'Matilda Effect,' which is the phenomenon where women's achievements often receive less recognition than their male counterparts for similar research. The Matilda effect was researched to demonstrate the historical and systemic omission of women's accomplishments in the scientific field. Since Rossiter studied the Matilda effect, similar investigations have been replicated to apply this effect to other disciplines like communication.

Research specifically examining citation rates in the field of communication has been limited, but over the past two decades, two key studies have shed light on the pressing issue of the gender gap in citation rates. The first study by Knobloch-Westerwick and Glynn (2013) investigated the Matilda effect by examining 1,020 published articles from 1991 to 2005 in the *Journal of Communication* and *Communication Research*. The study found that male authors were cited, on average, 17.73 times, whereas women were cited only 12.77 times, indicating that men were cited almost five times more than women scholars in these two communication journals. Additionally, the authors hypothesized that the Matilda effect would weaken over the fifteen-year span of their study. However, they found no significant improvement in gender equality in citation patterns, indicating that the Matilda effect did not decrease over time (Westerwick & Glynn, 2013). The second foundational research paper that explored the Matilda effect was conducted by Feeley and Yang (2021) over ten years from 2002 to 2006 and then

again from 2012 to 2016, and they analyzed eight journals and over 3,000 articles. Their research found that in some of the journals, there was also a gender gap in citations and that overall men tended to self-cite more than women (Feeley & Yang, 2021).

In the realm of publication, research, and citations, findings have consistently shown that women are being cited far less frequently than their male counterparts. A perpetuating cycle of exclusion is being performed through phenomena like the Matilda effect when deciding to cite a female author. Additionally, the majority of scholars publishing in the field of communication are male, and in tandem, men tend to cite other men more frequently (Mayer et al., 2017). When examining the research, there is a significant gender disparity in citation recognition, which highlights a broader problem women face in their ability to secure tenure jobs and gain future success (Knobloch-Westerwick & Glynn, 2013; Freelon et al., 2023). Overall, it appears that communication scholars exhibit a gender bias or at least a gender implicit bias when examining and deciding to cite female scholars' work.

Leadership

This section will highlight prevailing trends and leadership statistics across various academic institutions. Unfortunately, there is not enough research focusing specifically on trends related to communication leadership positions, thus underlining that further studies are needed to foster a more nuanced understanding of leadership dynamics within this field. While progress has been made in diminishing the gender gap among university faculty members, as previously discussed, women remain outnumbered by their male counterparts. Furthermore, this pronounced gender imbalance extends to leadership roles across diverse academic fields within colleges and universities, with women of color facing an even more pronounced underrepresentation (Van

Ummersen, 2023). This leadership gender gap persists despite evidence showing no significant differences in leadership capabilities between men and women (Morris & Laipple, 2015).

In the 1970s, women occupying senior academic leadership positions constituted less than 5 percent at all colleges and universities (Baker, 2012). Although representation has increased since then, it has plateaued in the last few decades. According to the White House Project Report (2009), women constitute 57 percent of all college students but only 26 percent of full-time professors and a mere 23 percent of university presidents, with these statistics remaining relatively unchanged in the past decade. The report also found that women comprise less than 30 percent of college and university leadership board members (2009). These findings were consistently seen a few years later by The Almanac of Higher Education in 2013, indicating that in the USA, women accounted for 22 percent of all university presidents, 40 percent of chief academic officers, and 43 percent of other senior administrators. Despite women constituting a majority of individuals pursuing higher education, they occupy less than a quarter of university presidencies and remain a minority in other senior administrative positions.

Narrowing the scope to specifically Christian institutions, a study by Longman and Anderson (2011) focused on a comprehensive 12-year analysis of gender trends in senior-level leadership positions within the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). They found that at the end of their study in 2010, the mean number of male senior leaders was 4.9, while in contrast, the mean number of women in senior leadership positions was 0.99, clearly revealing the lack of female representation. Even more surprisingly, Longman and Anderson (2011) found that of all the Christian institutions they looked at, 78 percent had just one or no women on their leadership teams, with a mere 2 percent having more than four women in senior leadership positions. These statistics illuminate the magnitude of the gender disparity within

Christian institutions, emphasizing the urgent need to examine the systemic factors that contribute to this underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles.

Many factors hinder the advancement of women in higher education leadership, a few key ones being the university environment, personal circumstances, and a lack of women role models in leadership positions. Regarding university and college environments, authors Moody and Toni (2015) argue that organizational biases against women exist in many institutions and the concept of similarity attraction when it comes to employing people in leadership positions. This means that during the hiring process if a man held the previous leadership role or the hiring board is made up of predominantly men, they are more likely to hire a successor they feel is similar to them, which continues this cycle of male higher-up leadership (Moody & Toni, 2015). These practices continue the status quo of gendered organizational cultures that place value on the male-centered network (Gallant, 2014).

Another possible reason for the leadership gap is that women tend to self-select career paths that will not interrupt their personal choice of raising a family, so women tend to gravitate towards less leadership-driven positions (Acker, 2010). Not only are women less attracted to leadership paths for the complications it can have on their personal lives, but also because, according to Ackers (2010) interviews, they find the work demanding and extremely stressful with little to no support networks that cater to women. Due to this lack of support, one way to improve and increase the number of women in leadership positions would be to develop stronger networks for women in higher education. If proper mentorship, resources, and organizational change can occur in academia, women will continue to take strides and break the glass ceiling.

Service

When faculty members are hired at institutions, it is expected that they participate in service engagements, with the degree of attention depending on the type of the institution, whether it be a Research I, comprehensive, or teaching-focused establishment. While professors are informed that service is a key component of their job description, caution is advised against taking on an overwhelming amount of service commitments, as it may interfere with their teaching and scholarly pursuits (War, 2003). This mindset conditions faculty to engage in service out of obligation rather than recognizing it as a vital aspect of their career development. This poses a potential concern when addressing the disproportionate amount of service engaged between male and female faculty.

In academia, service can be categorized into three key areas: service to the institution, service to the discipline, and community engagement (Ward, 2003). While faculty members assuming defined administrative roles are compensated for their service, the majority do not receive extra compensation for institutional service and community engagement. However, faculty performance reviews often acknowledge their contributions to the institution (Guarino & Borden, 2017). Even without the additional compensation, women often take up service roles beyond their academic responsibilities, driven by a strong sense of good citizenship, altruism, and civic obligation (Pyke, 2011). Research indicates a gender imbalance in faculty service loads across each service category in all fields of academia (Link et al., 2008; Misra et al., 2011).

According to Guarino and Borden (2017), women are more likely to undertake service roles than men, with women in disciplines such as liberal arts and public policy engaging in more service projects than female faculty in fields like STEM and business. Data from Guarino and Borden's (2017) study was based on a survey intended to track the academic performance of

service engagement of male and female faculty members at over 140 institutions in all disciplines in 2014. It revealed that, on average, female faculty members allocate 0.6 more hours per week to service activities than their male counterparts. Specifically, the communication discipline exhibited an even higher disparity, with women contributing 0.8 more hours each week than men. It is also important to note that this disproportionate workload was also seen when accessing women of color, who are often overextended in various committees and service engagements (Harley, 2008). Despite women's greater involvement in service, their contributions are often overlooked and considered purely voluntary and goodwill-based.

Guarino and Borden (2017) propose two potential explanations for this gender-service differential: women are either voluntarily choosing to engage in greater service acts than men, or women are less likely to refuse service requests from their superiors than male faculty members. However, the research strongly suggests the latter, with studies showing that, while women, on average, devote more hours to service than men, they do not inherently show a greater preference to engage in more service than research (Misra et al., 2011). This indicates that most women are not engaging in service activities solely out of preferential biases but rather that a fundamental issue is influencing their involvement. Pyke (2011) suggests that women may be unable to refuse service requests due to the underlying gender inequity structure built within the leadership boards in academia. Additionally, Guarino and Borden's (2017) study reveals that women are less likely to decline service requests from male departmental chairs compared to female chairs, indicating that social pressures and power dynamics contribute to the gender service gap. When administrators ask women to serve in various extra projects, it invokes a sense of confusion on whether they have the liberty to say no. Therefore, bridging the gender divide requires a

profound emphasis on leadership development to ensure an equitable distribution of service responsibilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this comprehensive literature review highlighted the persistent gender disparities that permeate across all academic disciplines, with a particular focus on the communication field. The examination of research, leadership, and service within higher education reveals multifaceted challenges that disproportionately impact women. The gender gap is not confined to only individual experiences but extends to the broader knowledge production process, shaping the trajectory of scholars' careers.

In the realm of research, it is clear that the Matilda effect, gender bias in citation rates, and the peer-review process continue to hinder the recognition of women scholars. Since academic publishing is essential to being hired as a faculty member and promoted, the underrepresentation of women as authors in academic publications and more prestigious authorship positions potentially affects the overall representation of women faculty in academia (West et al., 2013). Studies have found that one way to improve journal gender biases is to conduct a double-blind review process to alleviate the discriminatory tendencies against female authors (Conklin & Singh, 2022). Efforts to address these issues in research involve reconsidering evaluation criteria, an anonymous peer-review process, and a commitment to promoting diverse voices in scholarly discourse.

As the review reported, leadership positions within academic institutions display a persistent gender gap as well, particularly at senior levels. This imbalance is rooted in institutional structures, biases in hiring processes, and the absence of adequate support systems for women. Unfortunately, women leaders in male-dominated contexts must deal with gendered

aspects of their self-presentation, such as dress and language, which leads people to evaluate women's credibility on a different scale than men. Institutions must promote systemic changes by fostering new leadership models as they reevaluate hiring practices and renew old policies such as family leave (Moody & Toni, 2015; Ackers, 2010). Also, establishing mentorship programs and peer networks can help increase the community's development, particularly for women striving to advance academically in leadership roles.

The final section of the review revealed that women often shoulder a disproportionate burden when it comes to service engagements within institutions. This gendered service gap is not a result of women's inherent preferences but rather a manifestation of social pressures and power dynamics. Department chairs must be aware of the overall service projects their staff is already involved in to avoid adding additional projects to faculty who are already over-extended. Leadership development becomes crucial in addressing this imbalance, ensuring service responsibilities are equitably distributed and enhancing mentorship programs to empower women faculty to make informed and selective choices in their service commitments.

Addressing the gender gap in academia requires a holistic approach that acknowledges and confronts systemic issues. From challenging biases in research practices to reevaluating leadership structures and redefining service expectations, institutions must actively work towards creating an inclusive environment. The solution is not to go "gender-blind" because institutions need to acknowledge the structural hurdles that women face in faculty advancement and opportunities; if they do not, then it places blame on women and their ability to achieve rather than on the structure as a whole (Pyke, 2015). Moving forward involves reviewing and revising institutional policies and peer-review processes fostering mentorship programs, peer networks, and supportive work environments.

After conducting this review, it is clear that there is a notable gap in available research and data on this topic, particularly in the discipline of communication. This lack of information highlights a substantial need for further research. Conducting additional studies would help facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the current gender gap and help assess trends and progress in years to come. Therefore, a commitment to further research is essential to help promote gender equity, not only within communication but across all academic disciplines.

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