

WHEEL

Higher **E**ducation



Women

Elite

Leaders

Rationale :

Despite great accomplishments and documented participation of female leaders in higher education, women's sporadic representation in academic leadership positions remains a significantly persisting pattern. Women still remain radically under-represented in academic leadership positions, absolutely and relative to the appropriate group of women in these positions. Stating that the causes behind this paucity of women leaders are found in routine practices surrounding leadership selection as well as in cultural assumptions about leadership potential and effectiveness is deep-rooted evidence. Therefore, it is today a matter of emergency to cultivate interventions that promote the careers of women and set prospects for change in motion.

Both factual observation and scientific research have shown that this is a pervasive difficulty. Gender-based obstructions are plentiful; lower rank appointments, dawdling promotion, scarce or lacking instances of accomplishment recognition... Add to these the fact that women's career paths in academia are chiefly curved by constraints independent from their performance or competence. More often than not, working women have to tune in their career clocks to their biological clocks so that women with (small age) children are more likely than their male counterparts to gear down -or simply pause- their career evolution paths. It is no secret that domestic responsibilities are still considered a female duty nearly everywhere.

The under-representation of women in senior positions is also very often grounded in women's own ideas about leadership roles. Many career trajectories are slowed down because women shy away from leading roles for reasons such as status and fulfillment in the role, or simply because of existing models linked to admired leadership features, but sometimes also because of the very nature, representation and foundation of leadership roles.

Insufficient evaluations

Literature shows that while under-representation of women in senior positions is relatively well documented, academia is still short of qualitative evaluation models investigating occurrences of female leadership positions and exposing the multiple representations senior women faculty leaders might have about the core reasons behind their lagging behind in these positions. These, and other issues, appear to diminish the prospect of access to leadership roles or opportunity of success in such roles, and are perceived by senior women faculty to lead to much weaker interest in leadership roles.



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These, and other issues, still need to be probed as they actually represent a first-rate pointer for the promotion of deeper reflection about whatever undermines women career trajectories in academia. Elements to consider might include the following:

- What are the characteristics that identify a leader in academia?
- What do women need to know about leadership?
- Are women faculty attracted to leadership positions, as currently designed?
- Do women have access to an environment (mentoring and access to information) that is conducive to their growing into leaders?
- What is it about leadership roles in our institutions that could be problematic for women?

Fostering Change

To advance talented women in leadership positions, one has to involve in signals detection of the still sub-optimal situation of leadership by women in academia. This calls for evidence measurements that will guide efforts to address this problem. But the first concrete step, and a much more decisive one, toward their elimination is the identification of the forces that impede leadership. In this respect, it has been established that one major focus essential to institute gender equity at the university is to effectively cultivate women leaders. This goes through the necessary elimination of cultural constructs, that is, the gender-stereotypes which are found in cultural assumptions about leadership potential and effectiveness. These are the most distal but also the most crucial components of a complex web of causation that lead to the under-representation of women in leadership positions. Identifying these subtle aspects and disseminating the information provide a basis for developing successful contributions to expand leadership by women. These are elements of our vision and mission at WHEEL.



WHEEL, Women in Higher Education Elite Leaders

Women in Higher Education Elite Leaders (WHEEL) is a regional women's network established during a meeting of the TEMPUS (Trans-European Mobility Programme for University Studies) programme at Al Fayyoun University in Egypt in January 2011. It is one of Tempus' Leadership in Higher Education Management actions. The network seeks to advance, support, develop and connect existing, aspiring and potential women leaders in higher education across the MENA region. It pledges to act as a 'steering wheel' that channels and enhances women's access to senior positions in higher education.

During the first conference, participants from Egypt, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco (Tunisia and Greece were not represented in this first meeting), all of whom were either current, future or potential leaders in their institutions, agreed that their consortium had to be more than a club where women -and why not men- would meet from time to time to share recriminations about opportunity imbalances between males and females in academia. The actions of the club had to actually steer change. Nearly one year after its foundation WHEEL has come to symbolize the wheel of change and movement forward that we intended it to be.





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The outcomes of Al Fayyoun meeting were numerous. Besides the strong friendships and good cooperation spirit born from this first gathering, some work patterns were figured out in the next few months and many projects were triggered. Information, documentation and networking soon emerged as priorities. Before the next meeting, which was held in July 2011 in Sousse, Tunisia, a preliminary survey on female leadership in academia, that will be developed and extended to all partner universities, was conducted in CADI AYAD University. To facilitate communication between members and to give WHEEL visibility in partner universities, a serve-list was launched, a forum was created on the Università di Bari server and WHEEL information can be accessed on the TEMPUS website.

Another result of AL Fayyoun was that WHEEL definitely had to convey a shared belief in the idea that universities should be a model of social balance; equal opportunity between males and females in respect to leadership in academia being one of its obvious aspects. Its actions had to show the members' commitment to work on making change actually take place across partner universities.

The Sousse meeting in July was, in fact, an occasion for checking intents against deeds. Participants assessed progress, monitored action and devised ways of boosting communication tools, hence the idea of the publication of a WHEEL newsletter on a regular basis and the dissemination seminars that were held in all partner universities between October and December 2011. A key importance was equally given to structural and organizational aspects; a steering committee was elected to ensure action follow-up and monitoring.

Key issues were yet again addressed for success as a basis for concentration on the causes of inequality of opportunity, and to ensure successful and sustainable change in these areas. Assessing whether the appointment of more women in high-level administrative positions impacts the career and satisfaction of women in academia, examining both the informal practices that are inherent in current leadership selection as well as some of the implicit assumptions about the value that women might bring to leadership roles, attending to the cultural changes that establish inclusiveness and equality of opportunity. Such were some of the directions for future study.

On another level, WHEEL members designed objectives that would ensure laying the foundations for female leadership partnerships, by outreaching to other existing leadership networks, in general, and organizations for female leadership, in particular. SMART targets were drawn which prompted workable projects, building on each other's experience and best practices in domains related to female leadership. The WHEEL team is involved in the crafting of e.learning units for leadership management in academia, some of which will specifically tackle female leadership.

However, the most important action that the Sousse meeting prompted was undoubtedly the idea of starting **Equal Opportunity Units** at the ten partner institutions. These centres will provide building capacity trainings to potential and aspiring leaders. They will assist women into reaching leading positions through merit grants, tutorials, mobility fees, exchange programs, etc. They will encourage, follow up and root knowledge production and dissemination practices through research and publication devoted to equal opportunity issues.

To ensure sustainability and broaden its scope of action, WHEEL's most exciting accomplishment so far has probably been the setting up of a transnational non-profit that will support current and future partner universities in their efforts in favour of equal opportunity for all.

