

Gender-Based Motivations for Pursuing Leadership Positions in Education: Exploring Social Conceptions, Barriers, and Facilitators

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Abstract: Despite the increasing participation of women in leadership positions within the education sector, they still remain underrepresented. This study explores the internal and external factors that influence teachers' motivation to pursue school leadership roles, with a focus on gender differences. A sample of 252 Greek secondary school teachers (both male and female) completed an online questionnaire assessing motivation, perceived external barriers and facilitators, personal beliefs about the phenomenon of women under-representation in leadership roles and beliefs about female leadership characteristics. The findings indicate no significant gender differences in overall motivation to seek leadership roles. However, women reported experiencing significantly higher external barriers—such as societal expectations and institutional constraints—compared to men. Furthermore, women placed greater value on leadership traits typically associated with female leaders, whereas men were less likely to recognize the importance of these traits. These results suggest that while men and women may be equally motivated, gendered societal perceptions and structural barriers continue to shape women's pathways to educational leadership.

Keywords: *Motivation, Leadership, Education, External societal barriers, Underrepresentation of women*

1. Introduction

Pasiardis and Savvidis (2002) begin their interpretation of the phenomenon of female underrepresentation in leadership positions in education by investigating the factors that cause women to demonstrate reduced ambitions for professional advancement. Researchers distinguish between two basic categories of factors: internal and external, regarding professional advancement. Internal factors relate to the individual, the personal motivation to advance professionally, the level of self-confidence. External factors relate to those social and institutional characteristics that prevent women from taking on leadership roles. These characteristics stem mainly from stereotypical beliefs about gender roles and are not related to women's abilities and qualifications to take on leadership roles. Among internal factors, Niota (2018) points out that not all female teachers aspire to leadership roles, as some prefer to continue teaching and developing within this field. Similarly, Coronel et al. (2010) argue that many female teachers consider teaching to be more important than administrative work, which leads them to focus more on teaching than on administration. Male teachers, on the other hand, are more attracted to the administrative side of education than teaching (Markopoulos & Argyriou, 2014).

The different interests of women in terms of their professional choices in the field of education stem from their personality, according to Brinia (2012). More specifically, female personality traits reduce women's interest in leadership. Female personality traits are related to women's increased sensitivity compared to men, the low profile they choose to have, as well as their limited self-confidence and self-esteem, factors that act as inhibitors to taking on leadership positions (Blanchard, 2009). In the same frame, Pirouznia (2013) adds that women are characterised by a lack of confidence in their abilities, as well as a lack of dynamism in pursuing their professional advancement. Furthermore, she notes that their limited competitiveness does not motivate them to excel at work, while indecisiveness, submissiveness and dependence on their superiors hold them back professionally. These characteristics increase women's work-related stress, which in many cases overwhelms them, keeping them in the same position for a long time or even for years.

Hansot and Tyack (1981) distinguish three models. The first model focuses on women as individuals characterised by internal barriers. The source of internal barriers is the social belief that women are by nature restrained, and this hinders or prevents their professional advancement. Blanchard (2009) adds that the social oppression of women has led them to strongly internalise specific roles assigned to them, without necessarily embracing them. The second model, also based on the social role of the sexes, argues that the biggest obstacle to the hierarchical advancement of women is male dominance in high-level positions, which prevents women from aspiring to higher positions, keeping them in positions of low prestige and visibility. The third model again refers to male dominance, not only in the workplace, but also in society at large. The predominance of men in society has an impact on the professional sphere, with women taking on secondary roles (Hansot & Tyack, 1981). Athanassoula-Repa (2008) argues that the causes of underrepresentation of females in educational leadership can be classified into two basic categories. The first concerns personal and psychological causes, which may act as a deterrent to seeking senior positions. More specifically, the researcher points out that women are often called upon to choose between family life and professional advancement, which prevents them from calmly considering their options, as

they are often afraid that they will not be able to reconcile the two areas of their lives forces them to choose one or the other. The first category therefore relates to the institutions that prevail in the field of education and the way in which it operates and is organised. The other category concerns socio-political and cultural beliefs that consider women inferior to men. Although gender equality is enshrined in law, the same does not apply when the law is implemented in practice. In other words, women find it difficult to climb the hierarchy, as stereotypically men are the ones who hold positions of prestige, decision-making and power, a view shared by other scholars, as already mentioned.

2.Method

2.1.Research Goal

The primary goal of this study is to investigate the relationship between motivation to claim leadership positions (MOT) and key psychological and organizational variables, such as personal beliefs about the phenomenon of female underrepresentation in leadership roles (PB), external barriers (B), facilitators (F) and female leadership characteristics (LC), and to examine whether these variables differ by gender. Understanding these dynamics can provide insights into gender-specific factors influencing leadership aspirations and behaviours within the educational fields and specifically the field of educational leadership. The research hypotheses are the following:

2.1.1.Research Hypothesis 1

There is a significant association between motivation to claim leadership positions (MOT) and key psychological and organizational variables, such as personal beliefs about the phenomenon of female underrepresentation in leadership roles (PB), external barriers (B), facilitators (F) and female leadership characteristics (LC). This relationship is expected to differ in strength and direction between men and women.

2.1.2.Hypothesis 2

Men and women differ significantly in their levels of motivation to claim leadership positions (MOT), in their personal beliefs about the phenomenon of female underrepresentation in leadership roles (PB), external barriers (B), facilitators (F) and female leadership characteristics (LC).

A total of 325 Greek secondary teachers participated in the study. Participants completed an online questionnaire that took place during January 2025 and April 2025. All participants provided informed consent according to institutional ethics guidelines. To test **Hypothesis 1**, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated separately for men and women to assess the relationships between motivation to claim leadership positions and the rest of the study's variables. To test **Hypothesis 2**, independent samples *t*-tests compared mean scores on all study's variables between men and women.

2.2.Sample Description

The present study involved a total sample of $N = 325$ participants. They all serve as secondary education teachers in Greece. Descriptive statistics for gender, educational background, age, and professional experience are presented below.

2.2.1. Gender

The sample comprised 38.2% men ($n = 124$) and 61.8% women ($n = 201$), indicating a predominance of female participants.

2.2.2. Studies

In terms of educational qualifications, the majority of participants reported holding a master's degree (68.3%, $n = 222$). Additionally, 18.2% ($n = 59$) held a doctoral degree, while 11.4% ($n = 37$) reported having a bachelor's degree. A small proportion of the sample (2.2%, $n = 7$) had completed postdoctoral studies. These figures suggest a highly educated sample, with over 88% holding postgraduate degrees or higher.

2.2.3. Age

The age distribution of participants skewed toward older individuals. Most respondents (73.5%, $n = 239$) were aged 51 years and above, followed by those in the 41–50 age group (21.5%, $n = 70$). Only 4.9% ($n = 16$) of the participants were between 31 and 40 years old. No participants reported being under the age of 31.

2.2.4. Years of Professional Experience

A significant portion of the sample (77.2%, $n = 251$) reported having more than 21 years of professional experience, underscoring the sample's high level of professional maturity. Participants with 16–20 years of experience accounted for 16.0% ($n = 52$), while 4.9% ($n = 16$) had 11–15 years, and only 1.8% ($n = 6$) had 10 or fewer years of experience.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	124	38.2%
	Female	201	61.8%
Education	Bachelor	37	11.4%
	Master	222	68.3%
	Ph.D.	59	18.2%
	Postdoc	7	2.2%
Age Group	31–40 years	16	4.9%
	41–50 years	70	21.5%
	51+ years	239	73.5%
Professional Experience	≤10 years	6	1.8%
	11–15 years	16	4.9%
	16–20 years	52	16.0%
	>21 years	251	77.2%

3.Results

To examine potential relationships among the study variables, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed. Given that gender was hypothesized to potentially influence the patterns of correlations, the dataset was **split by gender**, and **separate analyses were conducted for men (n = 124) and women (n = 201)**. The following table present the correlation matrices for each subgroup. Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 and .01 levels (two-tailed).

Table 2: Correlations among motivation and all variables, for men and women

Variable	<i>r</i> (Men)	<i>r</i> (Women)
PERSONAL BELIEFS	.20*	.17*
EXTERNAL BARRIERS	-.04	-.20**
FACILITATORS	.10	.30**
LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS	.05	.25**
N	124	201

The results are presented separately for men and women.

For **men** (N = 124), only one statistically significant correlation emerged: MOTIVATION was positively correlated with PERSONAL BELIEFS, $r(122) = .20, p < .05$. All other correlations were not statistically significant: MOTIVATION showed weak, non significant associations with EXTERNAL BARRIERS, $r = -.04$, FACILITATORS, $r = .10$, and FEMALE LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS, $r = .05$, all with $p > .05$.

In contrast, the pattern for **women** (N = 199) revealed statistically significant positive correlations in all variables. Specifically, MOTIVATION was positively correlated with PERSONAL BELIEFS, $r(199) = .17, p < .05$; with FACILITATORS, $r = .30, p < .01$; and with FEMALE LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS, $r = .25, p < .01$. A significant negative correlation was found with EXTERNAL BARRIERS, $r = -.20, p < .01$.

These findings suggest that among women, motivation to pursue leadership roles is more systematically linked to both facilitators, perceptions and negatively with barriers. In contrast, among men, the same motivation appears more weakly and inconsistently related to these factors.

T-test of independent samples

Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine gender differences across the six study's variables.

Motivation

There was no statistically significant difference in motivation to claim leadership roles between men ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.75$) and women ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.73$), $t(323) = -1.91$, $p = .057$, 95% CI $[-0.33, 0.01]$ which underlines that both gender equally aspire leadership roles.

Personal beliefs

Women ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.87$) reported significantly stronger personal beliefs regarding the phenomenon of female under-representation in leadership position than men ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 0.85$), $t(323) = -5.80$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-0.77, -0.38]$, which can be interpreted that for males this phenomenon is significantly less visible.

External barriers

A small but significant difference was found, with women ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.77$) perceiving external barriers for women in a stronger way than men ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 0.68$), $t(323) = -2.18$, $p = .030$, 95% CI $[-0.35, -0.02]$.

Facilitators

Women ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.55$) perceived facilitators in a significantly stronger way than men ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.61$), $t(323) = -5.47$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-0.49, -0.23]$.

Female Leadership characteristics

There was a large and statistically significant difference, with women ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.68$) scoring higher regarding female leadership characteristics than men ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 0.68$), $t(323) = -11.72$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-1.06, -0.76]$, meaning that women value female specific leadership traits more than what men do.

Table: Independent Samples *t*-Test Results by Gender

Variable	M (Men)	SD (Men)	M (Women)	SD (Women)	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI [LL, UL]
Motivation	3.73	0.75	3.89	0.73	-1.91	323	.057	$[-0.33, 0.01]$
Beliefs	2.40	0.85	2.97	0.87	-5.80	323	<.001	$[-0.77, -0.38]$
External barriers	2.41	0.68	2.59	0.77	-2.18	323	.030	$[-0.35, -0.02]$
Facilitators	3.93	0.61	4.29	0.55	-5.47	323	<.001	$[-0.49, -0.23]$
Female leadership characteristics	2.54	0.68	3.45	0.68	-11.72	323	<.001	$[-1.06, -0.76]$

4. Discussion

The findings of the present study reveal notable gender differences in the correlations of motivation to pursue leadership roles in education with almost all study's variables. Specifically, for the male subjects in the study, no significant correlations were identified between motivation and external barriers, facilitators, or female leadership characteristics. Conversely, for women, motivation was found to be significantly associated with all the examined variables of the study. The findings indicate that, in comparison to men, women's propensity to pursue leadership roles is more significantly related to external societal factors and contextual influences, including perceived support structures or barriers. This underscores the significance of comprehending how social and cultural expectations uniquely influence women's leadership aspirations.

Furthermore, the study revealed that female participants exhibited significantly higher ratings compared to their male counterparts in terms of perceptions regarding underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, identification of external barriers to female leadership, acknowledgment of external facilitators, and valuation of leadership qualities traditionally associated with women. The findings of this study indicate a heightened awareness among women concerning the systemic and structural challenges that give rise to gender disparities in educational leadership. This awareness has the potential to both inform and complicate their motivation to pursue leadership roles, reflecting a nuanced internalization of gendered experiences in professional settings. These findings underscore the necessity for leadership development programs that are responsive to gender-related issues. Such programs must address both individual motivation and the broader social context that differentially influences men and women in education.

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