Review

Women and Leadership in Higher Education: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: The theoretical postulates of gender studies demonstrate that inequality, when it comes to women, is more of a sociocultural construct than the result of nature. Gender inequality is typical of higher education, where inclusion of women was a milestone and where the "female advantage" phenomenon refers to the rise of women at this level. Thus, this study aims to investigate the patterns of action that women take in academia when exercising leadership positions. It aims to understand the social behavior related to this phenomenon based on scientific research. The study followed a quantitative method, systematizing the process based on the PRISMA. 2020 guidelines to work with the bibliographic material identified in the Scopus database, and another qualitative method was used in conjunction for a resulting descriptive documentary analysis of the results obtained. This study concludes that women exercise leadership in higher education in teaching, research, and management roles with unequal participation in each of them.

Keywords: women; leadership; higher education; university leadership

1. Introduction

Both gender studies and the theoretical postulates they are based on demonstrate that inequality, when it comes to women, results from sociocultural construction rather than being established in nature (Samudio 2016). This is derived in part from stereotypes—specifically, gender stereotypes. These relate to beliefs established throughout history that typify male and female characteristics and behaviors to perpetuate the social order established in public and private spheres. The public or productive sphere comprises paid and socially valued jobs, offering social prestige. Traditionally, men have occupied this sphere, allowing them to develop and occupy positions of power and privilege. Meanwhile, the private sphere focuses on generating goods with no remuneration or exchange value in the labor market; this sphere is usually associated with women. In the socializing processes of both spheres, institutions have played a significant disseminating role, since they have reproduced norms and values conventionally considered to pertain to each sex throughout generations, to the point that "the male/female stereotype ends up becoming deeply rooted in subjects, composing a form of apprehension in the environment and in the person" (Moncayo and Zuluaga 2015, pp. 144–45). This process has established numerous obstacles for the incorporation of women into the paid labor sphere.

It is precisely in the paid work environment where gender difference becomes gender wage inequality since, according to the study by Larraz et al. (2019), this is more due to an imbalance in the relationship among the type of work, its value, and remuneration for said activity. In this way, under the principle of "equal pay for equal work and work of equal value, a baseline has been established to contribute to improving the place of women in society" (p. 3). Consequently, salaries and their distribution are unequal between men and women.

Academia is not exempt from the above and indeed, the widespread inclusion of women there was achieved in very recent history. With a progressive increase in female

students, teachers, and administrative and managerial staff, women's participation has increased in relevant positions, as there is a correlation between the higher educational level achieved and the involvement in tasks of greater scope and responsibility in the academic world—a phenomenon called "the female advantage" (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006; Niemi 2017). This is a concept that has been used since 1990 to refer to the phenomenon of women's incursion into the workplace where their talents, skills, and ideas were highlighted (Helgesen 1995); in the academic field, this is manifested by the rise of women to relevant positions and reflected in the ascent of women to this level (Eurostat 2018). This is globally seen in increased female enrollment compared to male enrollment between 2000 and 2018, as the gross enrollment rate of men in higher education increased from 19% to 36%, while that of women increased from 19% to 41% (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2021). Although such a phenomenon predicts an increase in coming years (DiPrete and Buchmann 2013), paradoxically, the female advantage does not go hand in hand with women occupying the majority of academic positions in universities after graduation, participating in relevant research, taking on leadership roles, or even earning competitive and comparable salaries as recorded in the United Nations report (2021) *Women in higher education: Has the female advantage put an end to gender inequalities?* (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2021). Among other reasons, this is due to the aforementioned stereotypes in which scientists and managers are associated with male figures, as Nett et al. (2021) concluded.

According to a report titled Gender Equality: How Global Universities are Performing (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean [IESALC] and Times Higher Education 2022), only 18% of university rectors were women in nine Latin American countries, while only 15% were women in 48 European countries, of which 20 did not have any female leaders. Meanwhile, female researchers at higher education institutions represent 39.7% of the world's total.

Without a doubt, there have been notable changes in women's participation in higher education institutions, and predictions suggest a further increase in the coming years. However, there is still a long way to go, since growth is not equal in all fields of knowledge or in all activities carried out in academia. This is because gender biases that hinder the insertion of women at levels that involve decision making are still observed (Bustos 2012).

This demonstrates that there are still marked differences and discriminatory behaviors in academic participation when it comes to gender relations. In line with this, women face a variety of internal and external barriers in this process. The former is characterized by traditionalist cultural aspects such as a lack of dedication to professional practice and the tension that work roles imply at home, while the latter includes a lack of mentoring, other members' open opposition to promotion, the female quota, gender wage differences, and the absence of female role models to look up to (Zuluaga 2014).

The idea of labor market segregation, which differentiates labor positions according to gender from a perspective of horizontal or differentiated segmentation in terms of professions, has historically placed the employment of women in academia in teaching roles and has assigned men to areas such as research and the management or deanship of educational institutions. At the same time, a vertical segmentation perspective, which refers to hierarchical positions in organizational charts, reveals a scarce presence of women in top academic positions, as they face a set of invisible barriers that limit their professional advancement. This phenomenon, known as the "Glass Ceiling" (Morrison et al. 1987), refers to an invisible ceiling that, in the labor field, is difficult to cross and therefore prevents women from advancing. In universities, the glass ceiling negatively impacts the trajectories of female academics and affects their chances of promotion, especially because of work–life balance (Clark et al. 2016; Gallego-Morón et al. 2020; Hernández and Ibarra 2019; Meza et al. 2019; Meza-de-Luna et al. 2022), some institutions' lack of social responsibility (Gaete 2018), and discrimination in hiring decisions (Moss-Racusin et al. 2012), among other factors.

Therefore, in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG), which seeks to achieve gender equality, empower women, and ensure their effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all decision-making levels in political, economic, and public life, this work is relevant because "Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world". (United Nations [UN] 2022). The premise is that if women have equal access to higher education, why are their career paths unequal in terms of achieving leadership academic positions when they graduate?

Hence, a systematic review explored the intellectual structure of a specific domain in the existing literature to decipher and map scientific knowledge on the subject in order to give meaning to a volume of data and advance in this field. The steps consisted of (1) identifying the purpose, (2) choosing the analysis technique, (3) data collection, and (4) result analysis and reporting (Donthu et al. 2021).

Based on the points above and considering that, although women have made progress in academia where men have predominantly occupied certain spaces, they still face difficulties reaching and overcoming different obstacles to maintaining leadership and power positions in adverse environments, this review aims to understand, based on scientific research, the social behaviors surrounding women exercising leadership positions in academia.

2. Materials and Methods

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA, Page et al. 2021) checklist was selected as the analysis technique, which allows for the transparent replication of a study, showing its strengths and weaknesses, and guarantees that the documents included meet the chosen criteria. First, keywords for the search were identified, then eligibility criteria were established, and finally, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established.

2.1. Inclusion Criteria

This study took place in February 2023 and was based on bibliometric indicators obtained from the SCOPUS database, because it is one of the largest resources that is linked to academic literature from a wide variety of disciplines. For identification, the keywords "women", "leadership", and "academia" were determined based on broad concepts involved in the object of study. The search was performed in the title, abstract, and keyword fields using the Boolean operator "and".

For eligibility criteria, documents were first limited to the field of social sciences, as this field covers Higher Education as an object of study. They were then delimited to journal articles in their final version, as this is the highest form of scientific communication. Subsequently, to refine the search, the keyword "Higher Education" was filtered; finally, the English language was chosen, as it is the universal language of research. A total of 54 articles were identified from this process.

2.2. Exclusion Criteria

After completing the above-described steps, the data were collected and the information was exported to Excel to be refined and sorted into the following fields: authors, article title, year, journal title, number of citations, abstract, keywords, and DOI.

Thus, exclusion criteria were established based on a specific review of each article's content, excluding those that (1) did not refer to higher education, (2) did not fit the object of study because they dealt with multicultural curriculum matters, and (3) did not refer to the academic career of women, leaving 47 articles for the study (Figure 1).
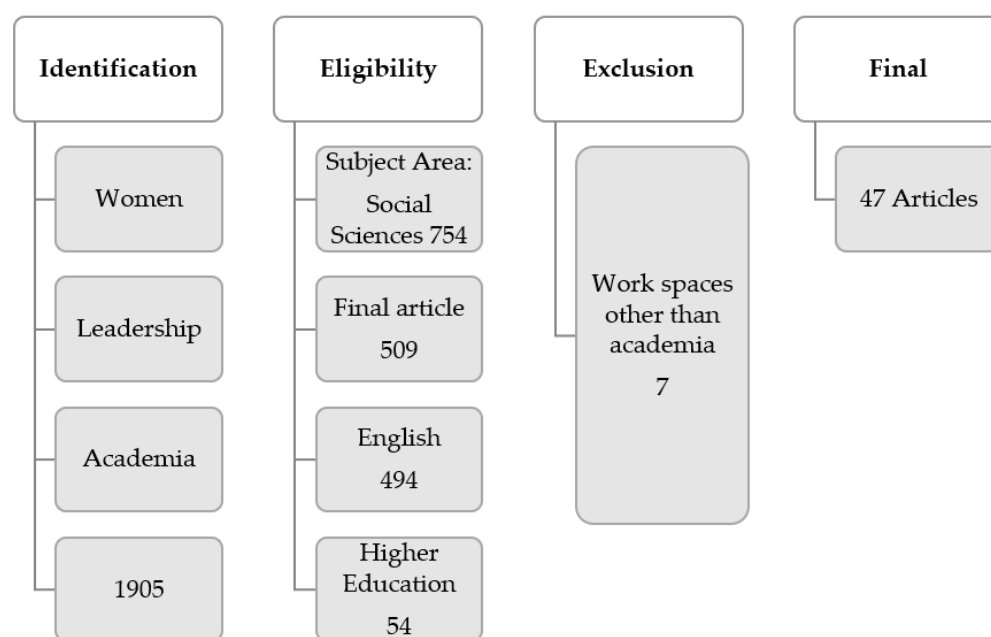
Figure 1. A flow chart of information through the different phases of the systematic review.

3. Bibliometric Analysis: Results

There is an upward trend regarding the years in which articles related to the subject were published, with the highest number of articles being published in 2020. Interest in the object of study is relatively recent. The first publication was identified in 2005, and there were no records in the three subsequent years; the topic was then steadily readdressed from 2012 onward. The following graph illustrates that the constant is three publications over several years (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The frequency of publications per year. The dashed lines show the trend.

Among the journals that published articles regarding women's leadership in higher education, *Gender and Education* stands out with eight research studies. This publication was founded in 1981, indexed in SCOPUS in 1989, and first published an article relevant to this study in 2012. The rest of the journals occasionally published on this specific topic (Figure 3).
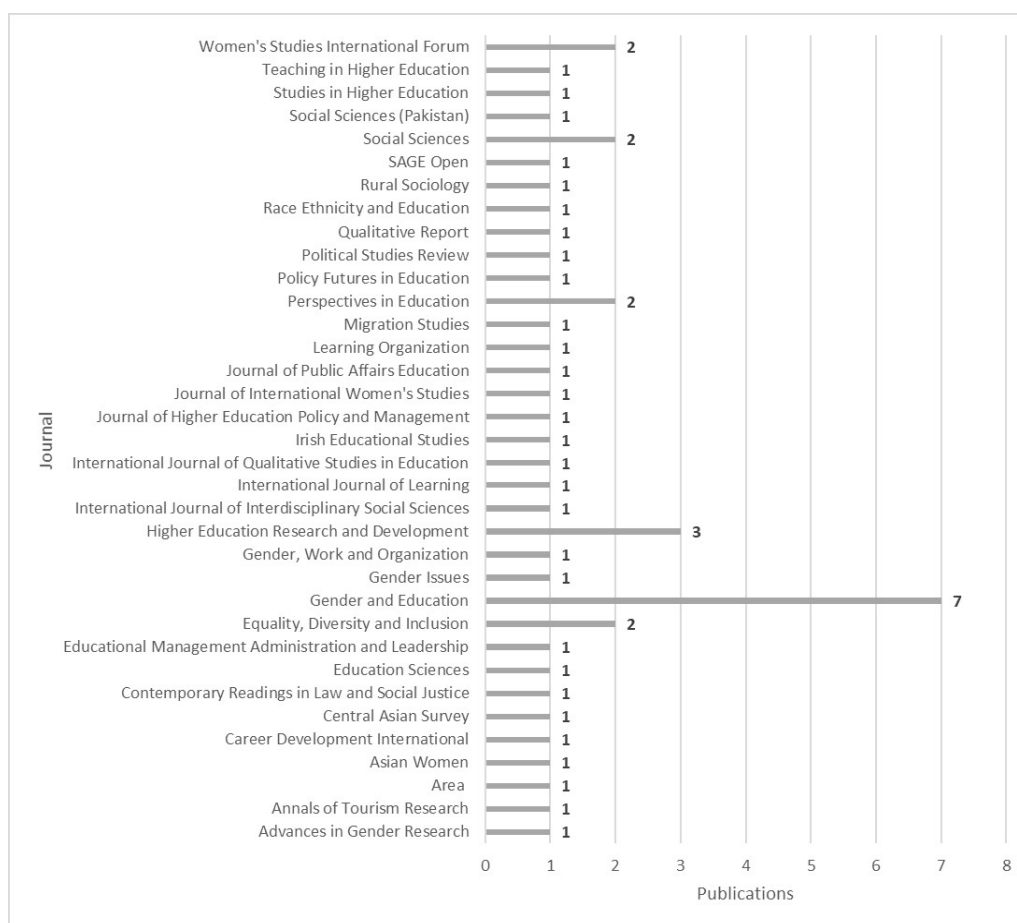
Figure 3. The distribution of articles by journal.

Likewise, *Gender and Education* (UK), which has an H-Index of 68 and is in the first quartile of the Scopus ranking system, published the article with the highest number of citations (67), namely Acker (2012). "Chairing and caring: Gendered dimensions of leadership in academe". By contrast, Figure 4 demonstrates that seven recently published articles have no citations (1 from 2023, 3 from 2022, 1 from 2021, 1 from 2016, and 1 from 2012).
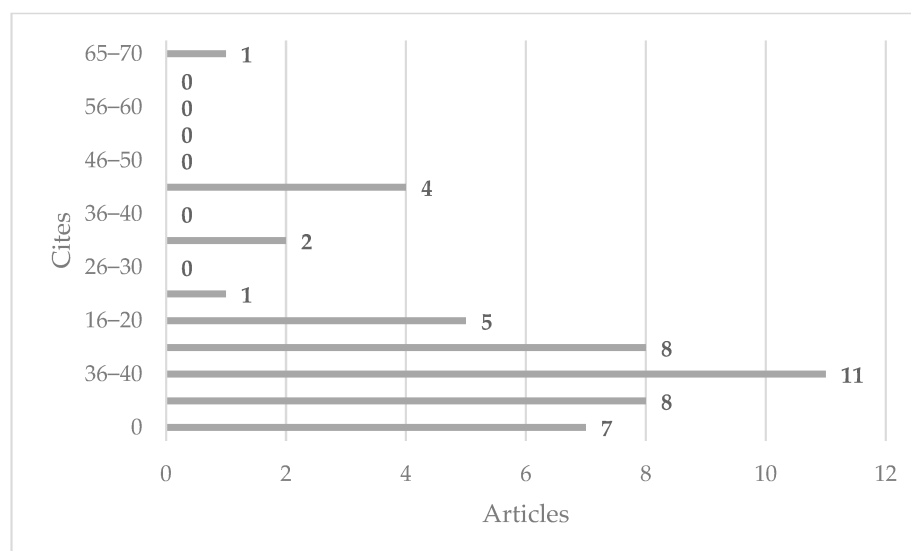

Figure 4. The relationship between the number of citations and the number of articles.

Two authors, one co-author, and one co-authorship produced the most publications on the object of study: namely, Aiston, S. J., Peterson, H., White, K. and Bhatti, A. and Ali, R. The first was published starting in 2014 and the second in 2016. White published papers with other authors starting in 2014 and the latter in 2022. While Peterson's (2016) article is the most cited—with 35 citations—her 2019 article only has 3 citations. Meanwhile, Aiston's (2014) article has 31 citations, her 2021 article already has 19, and her 2017 article has 14. In contrast, Bhatti and Ali, despite having two articles, have no registered citations (Figure 5).
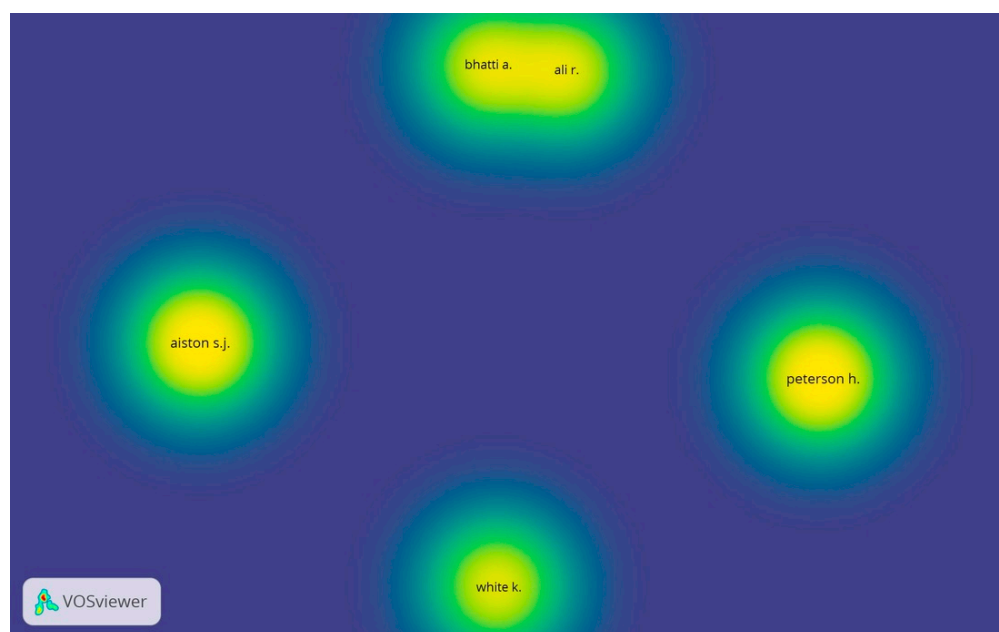

Figure 5. Authors with the most publications.

In terms of citations, the originating author on this topic is Chesterman et al. (2005), who was cited by Acker in 2012 (Acker 2012), becoming a node with 67 citations from then on, as shown in Figure 6. The relationships established among all six authors constitute the block of experts on the subject.
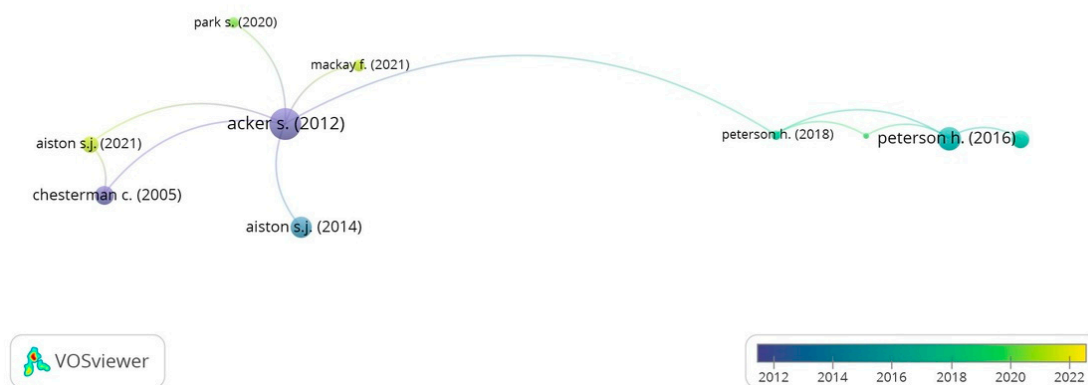

Figure 6. The block of experts on the subject.

Eight clusters were generated from the documents that shared a bibliography (bibliographic coupling), of which the authors with the highest number of links are in cluster 1, with Masika 2014 having 18 links. Cluster 2 is headed by Semela 2020 with 24 links, and Aiston 2021 leads cluster 3 with 24 links. Peterson 2018 leads cluster 4 with 29 links, followed by Acker 2012 leading cluster 5 as the text with the most links (20), while in cluster

6, Aiston 2014 stands out with 22 links. Cluster 7 is led by Bhatti 2021 with 20 links, and finally, cluster 8 is led by Peterson 2016 with 13 links, as seen in Figure 7.
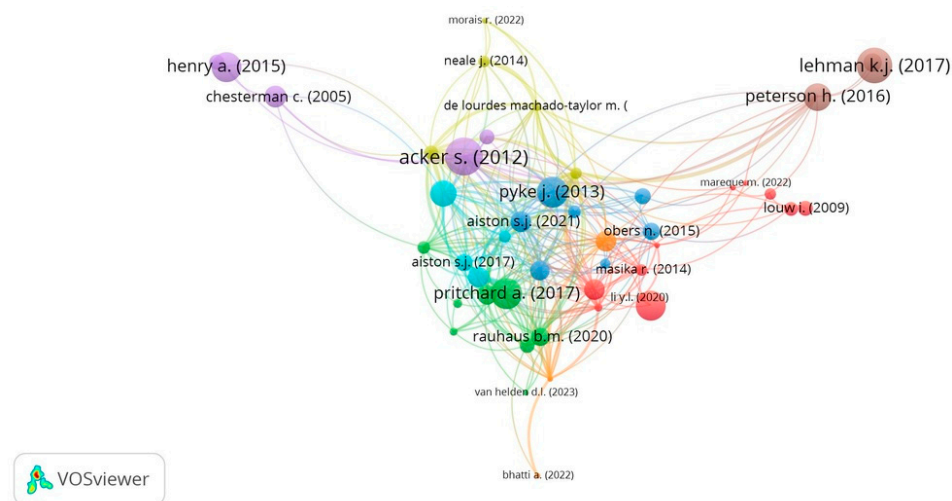

Figure 7. Bibliographic coupling.

The United States of America with 10 articles, Australia with 6, and Great Britain with 4 are the countries that mention the subject most frequently. Publications are also beginning to appear in some parts of Africa (South Africa 3, Nigeria 2, and Ethiopia 1), the Middle East (Saudi Arabia 2, Pakistan 2, and Iraq 1), Asia (Hong Kong 3), and Central Asia (Tajikistan 1). In addition to Great Britain, other European countries where publications on the subject were published include Sweden with 2, and Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, and Turkey with 1 publication each. Canada is another North American country that publishes regarding the object of this study, with 2 articles. Finally, 2 records were found that do not include a country. See Figure 8.
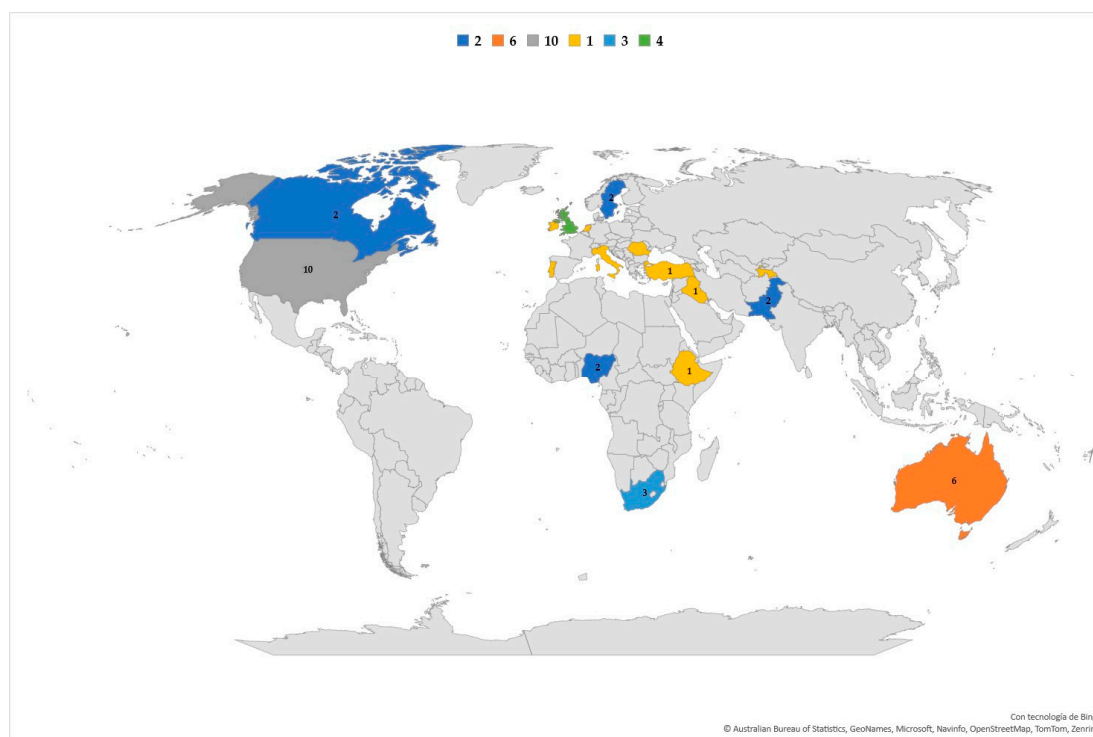

Figure 8. Publications by country.

4. Discussion

After analyzing the articles' abstracts, two categories were identified regarding the exercise of women's leadership in higher education: academia, where teaching and research functions are exercised, and management, where senior management functions are carried out.

4.1. Women's Leadership in Academia

In academia in general, attention to gender issues is dissimilar, as regions such as North America and some European countries have progressed, while a lack of progress is still evident in others, including Africa, the Middle East, and Asia (Spanò 2020) due to cultural issues (Henry 2015; Li 2020), the predominance of a patriarchal system of leadership (Ekine 2018), institutional practices (Masika et al. 2014), sexual harassment attitudes (Bhatti and Ali 2022), and different forms of sexism, which discourage women from seeking senior positions (Edwards 2017). Hence, studies show that the demographic and cultural marginalization of women negatively impacts opportunities to grow and deploy their leadership within university settings (Kataeva and De Young 2017) and even reveals the existing gap in research on the topic, where women are underrepresented in academia in some regions (Aiston and Yang 2017).

Despite greater attention to gender issues in advanced countries, some gaps have yet to close, such as traditionally masculinized areas of knowledge including Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) (Li 2020); Geography, where sustained leadership is needed to address the inequalities experienced in the workplace (Maddrell et al. 2016); Agricultural Sciences, which have historically been a male-influenced field (Niewoehner-Green et al. 2022); and Tourism, in terms of performance indicators (Pritchard and Morgan 2017), among others.

Likewise, global neoliberalism trends intensify a neutral scope in academic work where such neutrality blurs gender equity (Brabazon and Schulz 2020). A case in point is a study by Rauhaus and Carr (2020), who comment that in the division of academic labor, female faculty members assume a disproportionate amount of advising and mentoring responsibilities, which reduces their likelihood of rising to leadership positions in their institutions. Due to the impact of neoliberal values and underlying systemic structures, male academics are often favored or privileged. For this reason, Gouthro et al. (2018) propose incorporating a critical feminist perspective into the concept of organization as a model in the higher education sector, and authors like Acker (2012) suggest understanding the experience of female academic leadership based on differentiated analytical frameworks.

Notwithstanding the above and despite neoliberal trends, some women have managed to overcome certain crises and barriers inherent in the academic trajectory and in being a woman, and they have reconciled their personal and professional lives, which has allowed them to prevail (Van Helden et al. 2023; Hacifazlioglu 2010). The social predictors that help women establish their professional trajectory include parental influence, spousal support, and collegial support from male academics (Oti 2013), among others.

At the same time, gender is also identified as an inequality factor when it comes to the attribution of positions of power in research activities (Morais et al. 2022). These positions are predominantly occupied by men, who tend to lead research activities and decision-making processes, thus relegating women (Hakiem 2022) to other roles and making them invisible in high-impact research projects (Davies et al. 2019).

Given the above, female academics experience the profession differently than their male colleagues, as they experience microinequities and small events that cause them to remain silent or be directly silenced, as in the case of Asian countries where the hierarchical culture forces women to assume dutiful attitudes and relegates them to traditional household tasks (Aiston and Fo 2021). As females, they are less likely to be tenured, tend to publish less, receive less external funding, have fewer indicators of research prestige, and spend more time teaching (Aiston 2014), even though women are more likely to be authors and leaders in publications in bold/innovative and resistance spaces (Acai et al. 2022).

Among the proposals that address the different inequities, we highlight the ideal institutional transformation model that establishes how to implement innovative context-sensitive strategies to promote gender equity, inclusion, and leadership from female academics at all levels (Bilimoria and Singer 2019). Similarly, action research is a resource for developing leadership through programs and training that raise awareness of these phenomena and pivot professional development in higher education beyond teaching and mentoring (Louw and Zuber-Skeritt 2009; Edwards 2017).

4.2. Women's Leadership in Management

Female representation has successfully increased—but only in academic tenure-track positions and not in leadership positions of greater responsibility such as deanships and presidencies (Park 2020) due to the disproportionate workload of women compared to that of men, as women take on more hours teaching, advising, and mentoring. This makes them less likely to access leadership positions (Rauhaus and Carr 2020), and results in the perception of women as being poorly prepared to hold leadership positions in higher education (Sayler et al. 2019), among other. Some gender studies indicate the low representation of women in advanced professional ranks (Nica 2014) and the delay of their growth toward positions of greater responsibility, as Pyke already stated in 2013 (Pyke 2013).

Following the above, Neale and White (2014) conclude that a stereotypical male culture causes problems for women in senior management positions for reasons such as structural constraints, competitive work imperatives, demanding hours, and efforts to balance family life, which are aggravated in situations of turbulence and problematic organizational circumstances in which status, merit, and prestige are prominent factors. This makes it difficult and challenging to combine management with a successful academic career (Peterson 2016).

Other factors have to do with the formation of a culturally structured self-concept, from gender beliefs, deliberate exclusion during selection, employment and promotion, political implications, and human resource management practices, which are generally constricted and limit progression to higher leadership positions (Alexander 2010; Semela et al. 2020). It should also be noted that not all women aspire to higher leadership positions due to the heavy demands these jobs place on them, as Chesterman et al. (2005) state.

The factors above lead to the question proposed by Mackay (2021) regarding how to provide a feminist approach to managerial levels in higher education institutions. Peterson (2019) suggests modifying self-perception in the conception of gender equality. Bhatti and Ali (2021) state that women must learn to foster peer mentoring networks to direct their professional careers toward leadership positions and increase representation in senior management. Those who have succeeded have used their ingenuity to seek career guidance and social support from multiple sources, including male and female mentors, role models, colleagues, friends, and family (Hill and Wheat 2017; Obers 2015).

Finally, the view of female leadership has changed from competitive, bold, and strong leadership to transformational leadership (Machado-Taylor and White 2014), which consists of these five categories: vision and goal setting, accountability, role model, encouragement, and empowerment (Almaki et al. 2016). From a gender perspective, this change implies that the ideal of masculine leadership has decreased in influence while the feminine transformational leadership with these categories acts as a counterweight (Peterson 2018).

Undoubtedly, women's inclusion in higher education leadership—both in academia and in management—has transformed this space mainly due to their commitment to and valuing of educational institutions (Wallace and Wallin 2015). This does not exclude the fact that, in academia, some women truly prefer teaching and research roles over positions of greater responsibility and hierarchy (Harford 2020) because they value these activities more than senior management roles (Privott 2012).

5. Conclusions

In the analyzed research, one relevant finding was a discovery of the fact that the approach to this study's objective seeks to understand the subjective realities of women. In this sense, studies have been reviewed that highlight the experiences that female academics have had in their professional careers where they face various difficulties and challenges, primarily because they operate in cultures where positions of power and decision-making are predominantly held by men, which hinders their full participation in research, decision-making processes, and other activities in higher education beyond teaching and management. Therefore, it is a constant theme in these studies to recommend that universities pave the way for female academics to attain high-level positions and increase their representation in university leadership, eliminating gender bias obstacles that waste talent and miss opportunities for women to contribute to the future development of higher education.

Although the situation of women has changed in recent years in the university and academic environment, there is still an unequal distribution of social rewards valued on the basis of stereotypes in general. For this reason, the subject continues to be of interest for gender studies because the participation of women in management positions is still scarce, which is a phenomenon known as the glass ceiling. Despite this, women continue to make their way through universities, overcoming the gender stereotypes of sociocultural construction that replicate the social order in organizations, which has slowed their process of promotion to senior management roles or positions of greater responsibility in institutions of higher education.

The study also highlights arguments questioning the prevalence of the instrumental values and cultural styles of policies stemming from neoliberalism that have permeated academia, turning it into a space where competition is the primary regulatory mechanism. This transformation includes the establishment of a culture of accountability and the development of sophisticated accreditation and measurement instruments for work processes, hyperproductivity, and constant evaluation, among other indicators. This has transformed universities into neoliberal academies where women have developed points of resistance to the system, such as the creation of support networks that promote equality (sorority), but also reproduce the strategies of the same systems they wish to rebel against: masculinization, perfectionism, and harassment, among others.

Thus, the harmonization of work and family life within higher education institutions presents a significant challenge for female academics seeking to balance both worlds: work and home. This challenge is especially pronounced because university structures often do not provide guidelines that address the reality of gender-related responsibilities. As a result, female academics experience a "double workload" in their daily lives. Specifically, aspects such as the "time" factor are fundamental but often unquestioned elements that determine the type of relationship that women establish between work and home: harmonious, tense, or challenging. It would be advisable, for this reason, for reconciliation policies to aim for reducing the tension that arises for women when reconciling their everyday, private, and work lives, as well as the consequences of this tension in all areas.

Affirmative actions that higher education institutions can implement are those that create mechanisms that accelerate substantive and factual equality between women and men. Reducing injustices, inequalities, and gender-based discrimination will contribute to making schedules more flexible, opening up opportunities, and preventing academics from being hindered in their aspirations to pursue certain projects, such as motherhood or caregiving responsibilities. This highlights gender inequality within the university, as in no case will a male's career advancement be conditioned by his parenthood or caregiving roles. This would involve a modification of norms in order to achieve the transformation of hierarchies between women and men, as well as the establishment of institutional policies in academic spaces that are responsive to gender perspectives.

Women's leadership has mainly been developed in teaching activities where women have historically been more active than in other university areas such as research, where

they have encountered obstacles to lead projects, obtain fundraising, or serve as principal and/or correspondence author. At the same time, there are still gender biases that manifest, which horizontally segment knowledge fields and professions and vertically segment jobs in the hierarchical position of organizational charts according to gender.

This systematic review of the literature contributes to a reflection on the progress made by women in the field of Higher Education, but it also helps us to identify the challenges we face in relation to equality, empowerment, and female leadership. In this way, the scope of Objective Development Sustainable 5 (ODS) is better understood.

This review definitely sought to examine the gender patterns of action in academia when it comes to leader positions and in so doing, identified issues to consider for future studies, including expanding research on this phenomenon in underserved regions and fields of knowledge, strengthening public policies that promote gender equity not only in teaching but also in the areas of research and management, and empowering women by changing their self-perceptions toward occupying positions traditionally held by men, which also implies working across the cultural structure of academia.

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