

# Gender inequality in academic leadership: Bangladesh, China and Finland

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## Abstract

The importance of gender equality in academic leadership has been widely recognised, yet this issue has been underexplored outside the Anglo-Saxon countries. In this systematic review, we analysed 62 academic articles on women's academic leadership in Bangladesh (15), China (17) and Finland (30), published between 2000 and 2021. Our study revealed that research on gender-related academic leadership is still underdeveloped across the three countries, particularly in Bangladesh. Most studies have focussed on the barriers that hinder women from attaining academic leaders' roles. Our review results highlight the role of societal and cultural factors that contribute to the differences in the levels of gender equality in university leadership across the three countries. However, the men-dominated structure and culture in higher education pose the major obstacle for women in reaching leaders' positions in all three countries.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

According to the *Times Higher Education's* recent update, the number of women leading the world's top universities has increased for the first time since 2017, but the percentage of women leaders remains under 20% (Bothwell, 2020). Previously, an analysis of the top 400 universities in the *Times Higher Education's* university

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rankings also indicated that the typical university leader is man, who is 62 years old and a scientist (Baker, 2019). It is not surprising that there is still a notable gender gap in university leadership globally. Even in Nordic countries, which rank highly throughout the world with respect to gender equality, substantial gender imbalances have been found in academia, especially in top university management and leadership positions (Blackmore et al., 2015; Pinheiro et al., 2015).

Difficulties in improving this imbalance result from insufficient scholarly knowledge of gender-related academic leadership. Past studies tended to approach the issue by revealing the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership in Western Europe, North America and Oceania (Ross-Smith et al., 2005; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Wu et al., 2019), as most active researchers were Western women academics from these regions (Blackmore et al., 2015). Recent contribution to gender and academic leadership literature were available from Nordic countries (e.g. Avramović et al., 2021; Froehlich et al., 2020; Peterson, 2016, 2017; Pietilä, 2021), but only very little research attention has been paid to the situation in Asian countries (Ha et al., 2019; Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017; Morley & Crossouard, 2015). Among the limited studies on Asian women academics, Saeeda Shah and her colleagues (e.g. Shah, 2018; Shah et al., 2020; Shah & Shah, 2012) have continually researched the phenomena of unequal career advancement and leadership development among women academics in Pakistani area, revealing multiple factors behind the inequality. Their early-stage studies drew our attention to the socio-religious culture in South Asia, considering it the major obstacle for women to advance in academic careers and leadership positions (Shah & Shah, 2012).

Some other studies have also tried to explore the barriers to gender equality in academic leadership. For instance, according to Redmond et al. (2017) the main barriers to women assuming academic careers include the following: the pipeline pathways of career development, the difficulties achieving work-life balance, the lack of women leaders as role models and insufficient support for women advancing up the career ladder. Similarly, when becoming leaders in university management positions, women face the challenges of masculine culture and a men-dominated leadership structure that do not provide sufficient collegial support for women (Chesterman et al., 2003; Shah et al., 2020). A recent systematic review of the literature on women academics in UK higher education (HE) found similar barriers to women's leadership in the UK and further indicated that support from men partners is an important facilitator for enabling women's leadership (Westoby et al., 2021).

These studies are almost uniformly consistent in indicating that cultural and contextual influences matter for understanding the universal issue of gender inequality (Blackmore et al., 2015). Nevertheless, academic knowledge production on this issue remains considerably limited outside the Anglo-Saxon regions of the world. There has not yet been a study that systematically reviews the relevant research on the topic in those regions. This scarcity of evidence is regrettable because it is the sort of knowledge we need to acquire if we aim to address the issue of gender imbalance globally and reduce inequality in academic leadership. For the same reason, an international comparative perspective is also needed to enhance our understanding of gendered academic leadership in multiple contexts.

Therefore, this study attempts to contribute to the knowledge base by systematically reviewing the past literature on women in academic leadership in the Asian and Nordic region, with Bangladesh, China and Finland as case countries. All three selected HE systems comprise public and private universities. In Bangladesh, universities can be categorised into three types, namely 51 public universities (government-owned and -subsidised), 108 private universities (private sector-owned) and three international universities (funded and operated by international organisations). The Chinese HE system, according to the statistics from the Ministry of Education in China in 2020, consists of 2738 public higher education institutions (HEIs), 233 research institutions, 788 private HEIs and 265 adult HEIs (either public or private). Of the 2738 public HEIs, 1468 are higher vocational colleges that are in the process of transforming into universities of applied sciences (Ministry of Education in China, 2021). The Finnish HE system is a public system that includes two sectors: 13 universities (science institutions) and 22 universities of applied sciences, educating professionals for working life. To some extent, the three HE systems selected can provide us with not only examples of HE systems in

different regions but also systems of various sizes and developmental statuses. Finland has a generally developed yet small system, while China has a large developing system, and Bangladesh has a developing system that is smaller than China's.

The reasons for the selection of these three countries were twofold. Besides what was mentioned about enriching the geographical consideration on the topic to fill the gap, as Table 1 shows, we believe the three countries could represent three different developmental statuses of gender equality in HE systems worldwide. To be more specific, Bangladesh could represent a HE system with a low women's access rate and low ratio of women in academic leadership, China—a HE system with a high women's access rate and low ratio of women in academic leadership, and Finland a HE system with high women's access rate and relatively high ratio of women in academic leadership. This makes Finland a potential learning model for the other two systems. In Bangladesh, the percentage of women students has been increasing in recent decades; however, according to the Global Gender Gap Report 2021, the women student rate in this HE system is still only 17%. The rate of academic leaders is even lower, as Morley and Crossouard (2015) pointed out that only 0.01% of university leaders were women. Nevertheless, outside academia, women's leadership is more visible in political sphere in Bangladesh. For instance, the current prime minister is a woman. In both Finland and China, the percentage of women students in HE has already exceeded 50%, but the ratio of women academics, especially women academic leaders, remains remarkably low in China. In 2015, the ratio of women rectors in China was 3.7%, and none of the top universities (Project 985 universities) were led by women (Zhang & Suo, 2016).

Finland, a country with well-established equality policies (e.g. Husu, 2005a; Rolin & Vainio, 2011), passed equality legislation in the 1980s to promote gender equity in the HE sector. Finnish universities are required to have equality plans, which are carried over into their institutional policies to avoid discrimination and enhance equality. Furthermore, these plans inform how they deal with discrimination and sexual harassment. Despite its small population (5.5 million), Finland has seen women make up the majority of master's-level graduates since the mid-1980s (Husu, 2005a). Access to HE and equality in HE are national priorities in Finland (Nori et al., 2021), which is reflected in the fact that, by 2018, women made up 12.2% of university leaders (European Commission, 2019). The share of women university rectors was higher before the institutional mergers taking place from 2010 to 2019 (in 2014 the share was 40%). It is also worth mentioning that the oldest and highest ranked Finnish university (University of Helsinki) appointed its first woman rector in 2022. The same year, the Academy of Finland (which corresponds to the National Research Council) first time appointed a woman as the General Director. Both have visible key positions in society and in academia. Moreover, Finland had women acting as a long-term Head of State (President of Finland). When the current study was conducted from 2020 to 2022, the country's prime minister was a woman, while all five parties in the government in 2022 were led by women politicians, also serving as ministers. These examples highlight the potential for women to hold high-level leadership positions in Finland.

TABLE 1 Country differences.

	Bangladesh	China	Finland
Total population (women), millions	163 (81)	1434 (698)	5.5 (2.73)
Women in parliament, %	20.9	24.9	46
Women in ministerial positions, %	7.7	3.2	50
Female enrolment in tertiary education, %	17	55.9	95.8
Women labour force participation rate, %	38.5	68.6	76.6
Women legislators, senior officials and managers, %	10.7	16.8	36.9
Rank out of 156 countries	65	107	2

Source: World Economic Forum (2021). Global Gender Gap Report 2021.

Hence, the study is guided by the research question: How has women's academic leadership been studied in the context of Bangladesh, China and Finland? To answer this research question, we conducted a systematic review of the relevant literature from January 2000 to February 2021 on women's academic leadership in the three countries to find universal concerns regarding gender inequality in academic leadership, as well as context-related differences. For the purposes of this paper, we use 'academic leaders' to mean actors who lead and manage the core academic functions of research and teaching and/or lead and manage the academics carrying out these activities (Kohtamäki, 2019). Thus, by 'women academic leaders', we refer to both women professors at the top of the academic promotion track and women academics in formal leadership positions of universities and associations, such as university rectors, deans and heads of research groups, as well as those in informal leadership positions, such as journal editors and heads of academic associations and networks. In line with this thinking, by 'women's academic leadership',<sup>1</sup> we refer to the leadership performed by these women academic leaders.

After the introduction, this paper is structured as follows. We outline the research methodology used in the study. Then, we present the analysis of the literature on women's academic leadership in the context of three selected countries and compare the review results across the countries. Finally, we reflect on the findings of the study and its limitations and propose possible avenues for future studies.

## 2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

We conducted a systematic literature review that included three main phases: (1) planning the review, (2) conducting the review and (3) reporting on the review findings. We planned all phases of the review process together. Each of us was responsible for searching, selecting and analysing the literature on women's academic leadership in one country. When searching the publications, we used the databases available in the Tampere University library, covering multiple databases, including JSTOR, SAGE, ProQuest, Emerald Insight, Routledge, Elsevier, ERIC, Taylor & Francis and Springer. When selecting literature, the inclusion criteria applied were publications that analysed gender inequality, gender and academic leadership in publications available in English, Chinese and Finnish since 2000 dealing with Bangladesh, China and Finland.

Altogether, this literature review included 62 publications (see Appendix S1). The research question guided all phases of the analysis. The collected literature was compiled into tables (one table per country) summarising all relevant information, such as the author(s), year of publication, research questions, research approach, theory applied and major findings. Then, through a thematic analysis of the main findings of these literature inputs, we followed the approaches suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2017) and compiled a literature map for each country. Based on the literature map and analysis, we compared the review results of the three countries and summarised the findings.

## 3 | RESULTS OF THE REVIEW

### 3.1 | Bangladesh

Literature related to women's academic leadership in Bangladeshi universities is rather scarce, with only two inputs (Ahad & Gunter, 2017; Morley & Crossouard, 2015). To gain further insight into Bangladesh's situation, we broadened our search scope to the topics of women students and teachers in Bangladesh as well as women leaders in Bangladesh, and we found another 13 articles. This indicates that research on women's academic leadership in Bangladesh remains rather underdeveloped. It was also previously found in Morley and Crossouard's (2015) investigation of women's leadership in HE systems in South Asia. Nevertheless, the

rather limited literature also adds new insights to our understanding of the developmental status of women's academic leadership in Bangladesh.

Morley and Crossouard (2015) examined women in academic leadership in six countries in South Asia, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Through qualitative research consisting of on-desk research into policy documents and 30 interviews with women and men academics in the region, the authors found that gender perspective remained absent from most HE documentation in the region, and the research on women's leadership in HE was lacking. They also found that women in university management had not yet been researched, and most of the studies on women in HE in Bangladesh existed in cross-country comparative studies like theirs.

Ahad and Gunter's (2017) study was the first to specifically analyse the current situation of women in academic leadership in Bangladesh. Using a narrative research approach, their study not only revealed that women have long been underrepresented in organisational leaders' roles within HE but also pointed to another aspect that the improvement of gender equality in academic leadership in Bangladesh was limited to only privileged social classes in society. Their study highlighted that those women academics who could break through the glass ceiling and become academic leaders were usually from higher or elite social classes.

Not limited to the HE sector, the challenges of realising women's leadership in other spheres, such as politics and business, in Bangladesh were discussed. Past studies have identified several obstacles in this aspect, such as sociocultural and political factors, inadequate implementation of constitutional and legal provisions and a lack of proper organisational structures, jeopardising the scope of women's participation in decision-making positions in universities in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2016). In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, social systems, marriage and religious bindings place women in disadvantaged positions.

Men-dominated societies discourage women from becoming involved in activities outside their homes; they are assigned roles primarily in the family, like childbearing, childrearing and homemaking (Jinia, 2016). Within families, cultural norms often restrict women's ability to obtain and control resources, as well as to make independent decisions (Kabear, 1997). These norms are based on stereotypes of women from the traditional society (Hera, 2020). If women pursue leadership, they would be considered as being aggressive and power-obsessive. As a result, women are often underrepresented in decision-making positions (Khair et al., 2017). Besides, the low rate of women's access to education was found to be closely related to difficulties in realising gender equality in HE (Hossain & Tisdell, 2005).

Another minor group of studies on women academics in Bangladesh suggested a low awareness of gender inequality within universities. For example, despite the obvious inequality, women academics in Bangladesh were found to be more satisfied with promotions, fringe benefits and teaching support but less satisfied with interpersonal relations with their colleagues (Alam et al., 2005). Nevertheless, another study found that the young generation of women were more positive about equality in education (Blunch & Das, 2015).

As has been seen, there is still a long way to go to improve gender equality in Bangladesh in both research and practice. The review results show an urgent need for research-based evidence to inform policymaking on gender equality and leadership in this country. There is also a clear absence of gender's statistics at the national or regional level with which to inform and evaluate effective policy implementation. Furthermore, as women have long been underrepresented in organisational leaders' roles within HE, such a salient structure and culture may even discourage women from pursuing gender equality, not to mention leaders' position. Without changing the cultural conceptualisation of women as homemakers and even as an affiliation to men in a family in Bangladesh, it is hardly possible to enhance the gender equality in academic leadership development in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the existing policy needs to be revised significantly to make it more transparent and gender-neutral for both women and men. Gender equality promotion events, gender-neutral leadership training programmes and workshops, research grants and scholarship are all essential to transform the conceptual role of women academics in Bangladesh.

### 3.2 | China

We found 17 relevant articles on women's academic leadership in China. While quantitative, qualitative and mixed methodological approaches were all found in the past studies, qualitative methods were more commonly used, with an emphasis on interviews and documentary data. Furthermore, most past studies investigated the issue at the individual level. Only recently did Tang and Horta (2021), for the first time, reveal the historical development and current prospects of women academics in the Chinese HE system, providing a macro perspective on the issue. Overall, previous studies tended to examine the topic in the following four subthemes: women's academic productivity, women's leadership in university governance and management, women's academic promotion and women leaders in the disciplinary sphere.

The first small group of studies analysed women's academic productivity, raising doubts about the assumed gender gap in research outputs. Aiston and Jung (2015), through a gendered analysis of the Changing Academic Profession Survey, revealed a gender gap in research productivity from an international perspective. In contrast, more recently, Tao et al.'s (2017) comparative study of women academics in science and engineering in America and China showed that women academics in China do not differ from their men counterparts in publication productivity in science, and they publish even more in engineering. To settle this discrepancy, we need a more comprehensive study of the research outputs of women and men academics covering different disciplines and types of universities.

The second group of studies analysed the features of women academic leaders in university management and governance and tried to explain why their presence was limited. Prior studies have depicted Chinese women academic leaders as 54 years old on average, highly educated, with strong academic achievements and being promoted internally, mostly to a deputy position or in a leading position in the Communist Party of China (CPC) committee in the university or faculties (Wang et al., 2013, 2014). The current institutional governance of universities in China constitutes of three parts, namely the university CPC system, led by the university CPC Committee Office; the university administration system, led by the University Rector Office; and the academic power system, led by the University Academic Board. CPC members may gain support from the university CPC committee and benefit from career advancement and academic promotion, but usually in an implicit way. Compared with university rectors and deans who exert actual decision-making power on university administration, the leaders of the CPC committee at the university and faculty levels assume a more supportive, safeguarding and monitoring role to ensure the university remains accountable to the government and the public. In this sense, the nature of such positions is a deputy leadership position. Furthermore, Zhao and Jones' (2017) in-depth analysis of qualitative interviews with nine women academics in Chinese universities revealed a striking fact that women academics in Chinese universities refused further promotion to top leadership positions and preferred to settle in the middle-level management positions. The reasons behind their avoidance of leadership could be the negative social stereotype of seeing women standing out as leaders to be aggressive in the Confucius culture, which will be further explained below.

The third relatively larger group of studies understood women's academic leadership as professorship and tried to analyse the barriers to women becoming professors. Their studies indicated that women academics in China currently face challenges in academic promotion at multiple levels. At the societal level, the barriers come from the social environment (Rhoads & Gu, 2012) and the Chinese Confucian tradition, which results in a negative stereotype of socially active women (Zhang, 2010). The Confucian tradition portrays a woman as an affiliation to a man, such as a 'wife', 'daughter' or 'mother' of men, which implies that women should rely on men and be family-oriented (Li, 2021). Women's pursuit of careers was considered aggressive and power-obsessive. Even though such stereotypes have been criticised in contemporary Chinese society, their subconscious influence leads not only to gender discrimination in academic career (Zhang, 2010) but also to women's low motivation to seek academic promotion (Lu, 2020; Tang & Horta, 2021). While societal-level barriers exert their impacts indirectly, barriers at the institutional level have direct impacts. Previous studies have identified many institutional barriers

to women's academic promotion, such as the organisational culture that silenced women, gender discrimination in promotion, and the men-dominated institutional structure (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Lu, 2020; Rhoads & Gu, 2012; Tang & Horta, 2021; Zhang, 2010). Furthermore, individual characteristics, such as physiological and psychological characteristics (Huang et al., 2014), gender consciousness (Gaskell et al., 2004) and struggle to maintain work-life balance (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Huang et al., 2014; Zhang, 2010), can also discourage women from becoming leaders.

The fourth group of studies analysed the strategies adopted by women academics in the informal academic leadership development. In this stream, Ruan (2020a, 2020b) discovered that women academics in different disciplines may adopt different strategies to accumulate resources for pursuing leadership. Similarly, Ha et al. (2019) interviewed six Chinese women academic leaders, including communications journal editors and academic association leaders, on their experiences as elite women in academia. They found that these groups of women academic leaders tended to adopt more collaborative, consultative and service-oriented leadership.

As shown above, past studies have examined women's academic leadership in China over a broad array of issues including research productivity, academic promotion, university governance and scholarship formation. These studies showed that gender inequality still prevails in academic leadership development in Chinese universities. The evidence also points out the need for further exploration of the issue. For example, there is a need to further examine whether there is a gender gap in research productivity and whether it depends on the discipline. The scarcity of information on the challenges of women academics performing leadership roles also calls for further study of their leadership styles and experiences in the men-dominated institutional structure.

### 3.3 | Finland

Altogether, it was identified that 30 studies and reviews dealt with gender equality and leadership in the context of Finnish HE system. Most applied qualitative research designs, while the minority of studies used quantitative methods or mixed methods. Studies of gender equality in the context of Finnish HE can be categorised into five main groups. This grouping includes a rich set of different theoretical and empirical approaches and nuances regarding gender within academia. The research perspectives of studies vary from individual experiences to the contexts in which gendered practices and cultures emerge. The societal significance of gender has also been addressed.

First, previous studies have focussed mainly on describing, reviewing and analysing national trends and policies (Husu, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2011, 2019; Pietilä, 2021; Pinheiro et al., 2015; Siekkinen et al., 2016). They reported awareness of gender discrimination, slow progress in women's career development specifically at the top level, and the well-institutionalised status quo of career development which benefitted men academics.

Second, studies on actions and the course of actions and policies inside universities revealed the current state, practices and efforts taken in relation to gender equality and gender discrimination (Brunila, 2009; Husu, 2004; Tanhua, 2020). The national and institutional long-term efforts to promote gender equality have been identified.

Third, department-level studies have looked at equity and gender at the operating level inside academia (Avramović et al., 2021; Husu, 2005b; Husu et al., 2011; Kantola, 2008; Rolin & Vainio, 2011). They revealed both blatant and covert discrimination and gendering practices and policies across study fields. Gendering processes (concrete activities) also emerged through symbols and images and cognitive processes (e.g. Lund, 2015; Rolin & Vainio, 2011).

The fourth group of studies dealt with experiences of academic leaders and academic careers from the perspective of gender (Husu, 2005a; Lund, 2015; Paalumäki et al., 2009), survival strategies in academia (Husu, 2001a), working as a woman in an entrepreneurial university (Nikunen, 2014) and working as women junior researchers from the point of view of career plans (Lund, 2015; Nikunen & Lempiäinen, 2020). The strategies women adopt to respond to and deal with formal and informal rules and norms indicate the complexity of social situations and rules framing organisational behaviour, practices and gender relations. Discourses or practices

surrounding women academics are not fixed but change based on situations in both private and public spaces (Katila & Meriläinen, 2002). Following the ideological code of 'the ideal academic' (mirroring constructions of world-class universities and success in tenure-track careers) is common among early career academics reproducing the social relations of academic work.

The fifth group of studies covers a specific set of challenges. Husu (2005a) discussed the scarcity and lack of social support for women academics. Meanwhile, Sannino and Vainio (2015) analysed the gender imbalance, obstacles to academic careers and prevailing hegemonies in a specific academic field from the viewpoint of academics.

Quantitative studies of women's experiences as academic leaders have been rare so far because the number of women academic leaders is relatively low in Finland. Departmental-level men domination and hierarchies hinder the development of a gender-neutral culture and organisation (Paalumäki et al., 2009; Rolin & Vainio, 2011). Furthermore, various studies indicate that while men continue to dominate top-level academic and management positions, slow progress towards decreasing gender disparities in the academe can be identified. Because women make up the minority of full professors, they are also the minority (25%) in academic dean positions (Pinheiro et al., 2015). In addition to the above research perspectives, a few studies apply cross-country perspectives specifically in the Nordic country's context (Avramović et al., 2021; Froehlich et al., 2020; Pinheiro et al., 2015). Moreover, Husu and Koskinen (2010) conducted a qualitative study that included 13 European countries.

Despite gender discrimination in Finland being prohibited by the Act on Equality between Women and Men and the Non-Discrimination Act, the institutional-level gender equality plans do not guarantee equity or gender-neutral procedures in staffing or academic career development (Husu, 2005b; Rolin & Vainio, 2011). On the contrary, university equality and nondiscrimination plans have much room for improvement, as suggested by a recent review (Tanhua, 2020). Most of these plans require updating and monitoring to determine whether the planned gender equity-promoting measures have been implemented and to what extent. Actions and policies inside universities have been shown to be ineffective in changing the prevailing imbalance-driven trends, although some improvement has occurred in prior years.

Hidden discrimination and gendered structures work together, generating gender inequalities, for example, at the department level. Participation in department-level decision-making processes is higher among men than their women colleagues. Acknowledgment from peers or unit-level managers as a motivational factor does not differ between genders (Avramović et al., 2021). Men-dominance is institutionalised specifically in disciplines representing business, technical and natural sciences (Husu & Koskinen, 2010; Husu et al., 2011; Paalumäki et al., 2009; Sannino & Vainio, 2015). During the 2000s, gender equity policies were somewhat inactive, while other global competition-driven HE policies dominated (Husu, 2019). Survival as a woman in academia, invisibility, being an outsider, carrying marginal positions inside academia and lacking status among the top academic ranks have been unchanging barriers to career development in a men-dominated leadership environment (Nikunen, 2014; Sannino & Vainio, 2015). Academic women faced attempts to marginalise and silence them; and their viewpoints have often been ignored on both small and large matters inside the university. Science, internal rules and symbols also have gendered dimensions generating hierarchies and culture, expanding the meaning and significance of gender inside academia (Koski & Tedre, 2003). Gender neutrality appears to be an illusion and an ideal without sufficient realisation.

### 3.4 | Cross-country analysis

The comparative analysis of the review results on women in academic leadership in the three countries points to the following four major findings. The first is related to the status quo and developmental trends of research on the topic. It seems obvious that the existing literature on the topic is still limited, especially in Bangladesh. While relatively rich literature can be found on women academics in Pakistan (e.g. Shah et al., 2020), which has a



similar socio-religious culture to Bangladesh, one would wonder why there is so little research in the context of Bangladesh. Past studies across the three systems have mainly approached the issue from a qualitative research approach and have focussed on the micro level. In the Finnish country context, researchers used micro, meso and macro gender perspectives.

The second finding is that, across different contexts, research attention has mainly focussed on the barriers to women becoming academic leaders in the academic promotion system. This study also shows that there is a limited understanding of women in the role of academic leaders. Most studies only consider this issue from viewpoint of academics' advancement in academic title ladders, neglecting gender and academic leaders in management positions in universities. As seen, the major obstacle currently across China and Bangladesh is the men-dominated structure of university management, which often results in silencing the women's voices or their decreased motivations to pursue leadership. Our findings support the argument by Tang and Horta (2021) that the patriarchal structure of the HE system hinders women from improving their status.

The third finding concerns the influence of contextual differences on the barriers to becoming women academic leaders. The studies conducted in China and Bangladesh, found that women academics often refused pursuing academic leadership. This may be related to the longstanding influence of Asian traditional cultural and societal gendered stereotypes on women's values and cognition of their roles and identities. On the contrary, the Nordic welfare system, which included a more established legislation system in Finland that emphasises equality, has brought awareness and further development of gender equality.

The final finding is that the increase in the women population in HE does not indicate that gender equality in academic leadership has been, or necessarily will be, improved. One reason for the underrepresentation of women in university leadership, and the lack of attempts to increase it, especially in Bangladesh, could be the low rate of women's participation in HE (Ahad & Gunter, 2017). However, as seen, Finland and China both have high rates of women studying in the HE system, yet they still represent a minority as academic leaders (senior level in Finland) in universities. This echoes a similar argument from previous research (Tang & Horta, 2021; Westoby et al., 2021) that an increase in women academics in universities does not mean that the barriers for them entering academia and advancing in the academic promotion track have been removed.

## 4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The underrepresentation of women in academic leadership positions has been identified in various countries (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Shepherd, 2017; Westoby et al., 2021). Surprisingly, rather limited research has focussed on non-Western countries or studied the issue from a cross-country perspective. Our literature review and cross-country analysis show that academic environments are men-dominated at the top in Bangladesh, China and Finland, which is an obstacle to achieving equal academic leadership. In the literature, this is often referred to as a glass ceiling (e.g. Blackmore et al., 2015; Husu, 2000, 2001a; Morley, 2013; Westoby et al., 2021). The underrepresentation of women and the related men dominance of academic leadership are explicit. The recent narrative review of Westoby et al. (2021) rigorously addressed the current state of women academics in the British HE. Women's leadership capacities and skills cannot be ignored (Morley, 2013). However, the gender bias inside academia is universal (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Blackmore et al., 2015; Morley, 2013), and it has also been discussed recently from various perspectives in the three countries. Gender-related academic leadership studies do not form any solid research traditions in our sample countries. The relatively small number of studies over the past few years does not mean that the importance of gender-neutral academic leadership is not recognised in research as an unsolved societal problem.

Based on the systematic literature review and cross-country analysis, we found similarities and differences in what and how women's academic leadership has been studied in the three countries. In Finland, previous research discussed academic leadership from a rich set of angles: contextual issues, HE policy-level issues, university-level

policies and practices, unit-level policies and practices and individual experiences. Further discussion on individual-level obstacles would benefit from acknowledging their embeddedness in and influence by organisational structures and cultures as demonstrated in several Finnish studies (e.g. Lund, 2015; Sannino & Vainio, 2015). In China, the topic has mostly been analysed from the perspectives of individual academics and in Bangladesh at both the national and individual levels. A policy-level discussion similar to that in Finland has not yet been covered in China's literature. Only one recent study (Tang & Horta, 2021) from China is available that discusses women's academic leadership development at the national level from a historical perspective. Studies from China and Bangladesh suggest that one of the key obstacles to one's academic career advancement in Asia is the traditional cultural stereotypes of women (Aiston & Fo, 2021). A similar negative influence to women's career development can be seen in Finland but in a more subtle way, resulting from hidden discrimination and strong men-dominated academic leadership conventions (Husu, 2000, 2004; Lund, 2015; Nikunen, 2014; Sannino & Vainio, 2015). In Finland, abundant gender discrimination legislation has existed for more than 30 years (Tanhua, 2020), but it seems that gender inequality has long-lasting culturally and structurally embedded characteristics, including hidden discrimination. Taking this into account, long-term progress is slow and comprehensive solutions cannot be reached by legislation alone (Blackmore et al., 2015; Husu, 2001a, 2002; Lund, 2015; Nikunen & Lempiäinen, 2020; Sannino & Vainio, 2015).

This study identified two common gender research themes across the three countries. The first is country-specific studies referring to cultural, historical and structural obstacles and contexts. The second is practical individual-level obstacles to becoming academic leaders. All three countries can be said to tackle similar issues. Against this backdrop, a couple of critical questions arise: In what conditions and contexts do women prefer not to pursue leadership positions? In what kind of conditions do they choose to pursue leadership positions (see for more in (Shepherd, 2017))? In China and Bangladesh, it seems that such leadership avoidance was more obvious, echoing Aiston and Fo's (2021) finding that women academics in Asia felt they were usually silenced, but ironically, they considered 'silencing' a useful strategy to advance their career (cf. Westoby et al., 2021). In Finland, this occurs when women academics prefer to behave like men to avoid conflicts with their men colleagues (e.g. Sannino & Vainio, 2015; also Nikunen, 2014). Gendered conventions inside academia are not sustainable pathways because universities are crucial examples for wider society. Furthermore, individual senior leaders are examples to the young generations of academics. Following past gendered academic conventions would imply dividing academic work between potential researchers, from whom will grow future academic leaders, and teachers (usually women), who do tasks that do not provide enough necessary merits to advance their careers. Academic leaders frame the ways of academics and future academic leaders. The worst scenario is that women prefer not to become academic leaders or, after achieving such a post, prefer to leave it (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Blackmore et al., 2015; Shepherd, 2017).

The current study has its limitations. The first limitation lies in the coverage of the status quo of academic leadership in the three countries. Our literature review does not cover the full spectrum of gender and the underrepresentation of women as academic leaders or the state of academic leadership in all universities. Various previous studies implicitly or explicitly applied a binary view to gender (Westoby et al., 2021), and this can misguide findings and interpretations. This is to say that gender meaning women and men, the binary view on gender, should be challenged also when studying women academic leaders. Second, the terms 'women' and 'men' are restrictive because they refer to biological sex only and are limited approaches when the international advanced literature is aiming to look at academic leadership in context rather than through individual characteristics and choices. Gender discrimination is intertwined in a complex way with many other forms of discrimination (Husu, 2002). To include three distinctive country contexts in this review, we approached the topic from women's perspective only. Third, the findings are explorative and not generalisable. It is necessary to be cautious in interpreting the cross-country findings. Bangladesh, China and Finland are not often compared with each other. It is challenging to compare the gender bias and discrimination in these three countries due to national variations and significant societal and cultural-historical differences. Fourth, due to the limited database available from the libraries in our based universities, our search of the literature may not have covered all

the existing literature. As we mainly searched and collected the literature in English and in the first national language of the selected countries, the study has its limitation in including all related literature in other languages, such as Finland-related literature in Swedish, China-related literature in traditional Chinese (usually published in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau) and Bangladesh-related literature in local dialects.

Despite these limitations, the literature review in this article points to the following six future research venues and targets that need further development globally:

First, the organisation of universities is influenced by hidden cultural–historical traditions that might reinforce gender bias in organisational structures and procedures. The gender disparities in universities might also be underpinned by current senior leaders and managers or unconsciously even by the wider society and academic community. Therefore, further global qualitative research is needed for an in-depth analysis of this issue including intersectional perspective.

Second, open and transparent selection and recruitment procedures for leadership positions should be considered (Blackmore et al., 2015; Husu, 2002; Nikunen & Lempiäinen, 2020). The tenure-track model, for example, may easily block academic career advancement based on gender when applying external evaluations that are not transparent enough for applicants or potential applicants. The direction of this track cannot be easily changed if the ideal academics (men) are preferred for upper-level career stages.

Third, more global research is needed to shed light on the gender-related challenges that academics face after achieving leadership posts and working as academic leaders. Individual efficient managers are strong stereotypes that are realised in current public management-oriented governance systems, for example, in Finland (Nikunen, 2014). In China, women acting as political party committee leaders are more typical than administration and management leaders. In Finland, administrative and education-related management and leadership positions (such as vice-rectors responsible for education) tend to be more readily available to women, while senior research-related leadership roles and positions are more available to men.

Fourth, gender-related hierarchies stimulate both vertical and horizontal segregation, which needs further research attention. Gender-related hierarchies are identifiable between junior and senior leadership roles. This is to say that the gender split increases according to the level of academic post (e.g. Blackmore et al., 2015; Husu, 2002; Pinheiro et al., 2015; Shepherd, 2017). Junior-level academic posts are more available to women than senior-level posts in their academic careers. Horizontal segregation takes place at the senior-level academic posts, which are men-dominated. This, in turn, generates gender-related hard responsibilities (such as financial issues and formal decision-making) and soft responsibilities (group well-being and group cohesion) in management (e.g. Blackmore et al., 2015; Nikunen, 2014). More research is needed on why and how horizontal and vertical segregation emerges inside academia.

Fifth, we suggest further qualitative research to review how previous studies applied the underlying assumption of heteronormativity. This is related to unsettling the binary view of gender and to advancing our knowledge of the nuances of gender and gendered academic leadership as they are discussed in the literature.

Finally, we suggest to develop gender and leadership programmes in Finland and Asian countries based on the advanced global research knowledge that we have so far. Two Nordic countries, Sweden and Norway, have already tried and run such women's leadership programmes nationally and university based. The gender and leadership programmes would advance understanding and awareness of the complexity of gender and leadership in academic contexts to create a cohort of future leaders and to achieve incremental long-term improvements and sustainable changes.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that supports the findings of this study are available in the supplementary material of this article.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> We are aware that in some literature reviewed in this article, researchers used the term 'female academic leadership'. As to maintain coherence of discussion, we apply the terms 'women's academic leadership', 'women' and 'men' throughout this article despite the terminologies used in the reviewed studies.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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