

Mapping the Landscape of Women's Academic Leadership and Management in Iran and Italy: A Scoping Review of Comparative Perspectives

SeyedehGolafruz Ramezani¹, Flavia Stara²

¹Finnish Institute for Educational Research (FIER), Jyväskylä, Finland. ²University of Macerata, Macerata, Italy

Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract

Women's underrepresentation in academic leadership remains a global challenge, shaping institutional equity and governance. Despite increased focus on gender disparities, comparative research across Global North–South contexts remains scarce. This study systematically maps and compares literature on women's academic leadership in Iran and Italy. Using a scoping review methodology, 134 studies published between 1994 and 2024 were analyzed, drawing on feminist institutionalism, intersectionality, and the micro–meso–macro framework. Findings reveal fragmented, nationally confined research in both contexts, with a dominant focus on structural barriers and limited attention to micro-level dynamics, disciplinary diversity, and intersectional analysis. Italian studies are more accessible but methodologically narrow, while Iranian studies are largely in Persian and globally isolated. The review highlights the need for more inclusive, cross-national, and transformative approaches to gender and leadership in higher education. It offers a novel comparative perspective that challenges Eurocentric assumptions and informs future scholarship and policy reform.

Full paper

Women's underrepresentation in academic leadership remains a persistent challenge globally, shaping institutional governance, academic cultures, and the pursuit of equity in higher education. While a growing body of literature addresses gender inequality in academia, most studies focus on single national contexts, with limited comparative work that bridges Global North–South divides. This scoping review responds to that gap by mapping and analyzing existing research on women's academic leadership and management in **Iran** and **Italy**—two countries that, while culturally and institutionally distinct, reflect shared patterns of exclusion and fragmentation.

This study is guided by three objectives: **(1)** to systematically map and synthesize existing studies on women’s academic leadership in Iran and Italy; **(2)** to identify thematic trends, methodological patterns, and disciplinary gaps within this body of research; and **(3)** to explore how structural, institutional, and cultural factors shape gendered leadership experiences in higher education. The research questions ask:

What are the key themes of current literature on women’s academic leadership in Iran and Italy, and how have these themes evolved over time?

What methodological approaches and types of evidence are used in these studies?

Adopting a **scoping review methodology** (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005; Peters et al., 2020), the study screened **134 publications** published between 1994 and 2024. These included **96 studies on Iran** (81 in Persian, 15 in English) and **38 studies on Italy** (all in English). Data sources included academic databases, grey literature repositories, and institutional publications. No date limits were imposed in the initial search; inclusion criteria focused on studies examining gender, leadership, or management in higher education contexts. A four-step screening process was applied: English and Persian language filtering, title and abstract screening, full-text review, and final inclusion based on thematic relevance. A final dataset of **43 studies** was identified as specifically focused on academic leadership—27 from Iran and 16 from Italy.

The findings are organized across eight thematic areas. First, **literature in both countries is temporally fragmented and nationally bounded**. In Iran, research emerged slowly after 1994, with most studies published in Persian, limiting international accessibility and cross-contextual relevance. Italy’s engagement grew notably after 2015 and was published in English, yet still lacks international collaboration or comparative framing.

Second, **women’s academic leadership is treated peripherally** within broader discussions of gender and employment. In both contexts, studies often focus on public sector leadership or general workforce participation, overlooking the specific institutional, epistemic, and symbolic dynamics of academic leadership.

Third, the literature **overemphasizes macro-level structural barriers**, such as underrepresentation and institutional inertia, while neglecting micro-level (individual experience) and meso-level (organizational culture) factors. Very few studies explore leadership pathways, mentorship, or professional identity formation.

Fourth, **there is limited research on strategies or solutions**. Iranian literature is nearly absent on this point, while Italian research often focuses on individual adaptations rather than structural change—such as women delaying motherhood or increasing workloads to navigate exclusion (Cannito et al., 2023).

Fifth, **intersectionality is underutilized**. While a few Italian studies touch on regional disparities (e.g., North vs. South), broader analyses of class, ethnicity, or linguistic identity are largely missing. This is especially critical in Iran, where ethnic and linguistic diversity shapes access to academic opportunity (Hassanpour et al., 2023).

Sixth, **methodological limitations** persist. Iranian studies are primarily qualitative with small, non-representative samples. Italian studies rely heavily on quantitative metrics, with limited use of mixed methods or participatory approaches. Few studies include stakeholder voices such as male academics or policymakers.

Seventh, there is a **notable disciplinary imbalance**, with most Italian studies concentrated in STEM, medicine, or economics. Humanities and social sciences are underrepresented. In Iran, most studies do not specify disciplinary context at all, limiting their transferability and impact.

Finally, both countries lack **comparative and cross-national research**, despite the relevance of transnational policy frameworks and shared equity challenges. Iranian studies are isolated by language and scope, while Italian work is confined to domestic discourse, despite being situated within broader EU structures.

In conclusion, this review offers a **novel comparative synthesis** that bridges Global North–South divides, critiques Eurocentric assumptions, and maps the knowledge gaps in current gender and leadership research. It calls for **cross-national collaboration, intersectional inquiry, and multi-level policy engagement** to better understand and reform the gendered structures of academic leadership. Future work should incorporate longitudinal designs, engage underrepresented voices, and attend to both systemic reform and everyday institutional dynamics.