



## Short Communication

# Cultivating Psychological Safety as a Behavioral Mechanism for Women's Leadership Growth in Higher Education

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## Abstract

Despite increased faculty participation and academic achievement among women, their representation in senior leadership roles within higher education remains limited. Psychological safety, defined as the shared belief that individuals can express ideas, take interpersonal risks, and question norms without fear of negative consequences, is fundamental for enabling women to engage in behaviors essential for comprehensive leadership development [1]. This article explores psychological safety as a behavioral mechanism that supports women's leadership identity, confidence, innovation, and upward mobility in academic contexts. Drawing on organizational behavior and learning theories, it examines how structural barriers, gendered expectations, and institutional cultures undermine women's sense of safety and restrict advancement opportunities. The discussion highlights organizational practices that cultivate inclusive environments, including equitable workload distribution, transparent evaluation processes, and sponsorship-driven leadership development. The recommendations emphasize the necessity for higher education institutions to intentionally create environments that encourage women's risk-taking, visibility, and leadership growth. Positioning psychological safety as a foundational component of leadership development enables academia to advance more equitable and innovative leadership ecosystems.

**Keywords:** Higher Education; Leadership; Women; Psychological Safety

## Introduction

Women in higher education continue to face barriers to leadership, including bias, exclusion from decision-making networks, and organizational cultures that discourage risk-taking and open expression. This article analyzes psychological safety as a behavioral mechanism that facilitates women's leadership

development, identity formation, and advancement within academic institutions. It further addresses structural impediments to psychological safety, proposes pathways for organizational change, and identifies practices that higher education leaders can adopt to foster supportive environments. Psychological safety intersects with broader patterns of gendered organizational behavior, making it a critical framework for understanding women's advancement in academic leadership. Research demonstrates that when institutions lack climates of trust,

inclusivity, and open communication, women are more likely to withdraw from leadership pipelines or experience reduced leadership self-efficacy [2]. In contrast, environments marked by leader inclusiveness, transparent communication, and equitable access to decision-making increase women's engagement in voice behaviors, collaboration, and strategic risk-taking, all of which are essential for leadership development [3]. These findings highlight the crucial role of psychologically safe climates in shaping both individual leadership trajectories and institutional capacity for innovation and equity. Implementing evidence-based leadership development strategies that enhance psychological safety enable higher education institutions to support better women's visibility, influence, and long-term career progression.

### **Gendered Leadership Barriers in Higher Education**

Persistent gendered leadership barriers in higher education result in the continued underrepresentation of women in senior and executive roles, despite their significant presence in the workforce. Research consistently indicates that women are less likely to occupy positions such as provost, president, or dean, a disparity frequently attributed to implicit bias, institutional culture, and structural inequities [4]. Deeply embedded cultural norms in academic settings often penalize women for behaviors that are valued in men, including assertiveness, strategic disagreement, and risk-taking. This dynamic creates a double bind, requiring women leaders to balance expectations of warmth with the need to demonstrate competence and authority [5]. Such norms influence both external assessments and women's self-perceptions, contributing to stereotype threats and role incongruity. Women in academic leadership frequently encounter pressure to validate their legitimacy in roles historically dominated by men, which can heighten self-monitoring, increase psychological strain, and restrict opportunities to exhibit authentic leadership [6].

Women also face limited access to impactful leadership development opportunities, sponsorship, and professional networking resources essential for career advancement in academia. Research shows that informal networks, mentorship, and organizational visibility often determine perceptions of leadership potential, yet these avenues are typically more accessible to male colleagues, thereby perpetuating gender disparities [7]. The cumulative effect of these structural and cultural barriers diminishes the leadership pipeline for women as they progress toward senior roles. Addressing these inequalities requires institutions to implement deliberate strategies, including transparent promotion processes, active sponsorship programs, equity-focused leadership training, and accountability measures to enhance leadership diversity. Without comprehensive structural reform and cultural change, gendered expectations will continue to influence leadership trajectories and limit the complete

representation of women in higher education leadership.

### **Psychological Safety as a Foundational Construct**

Psychological safety is widely recognized as a core concept in organizational behavior and team science. It is defined as a shared belief that the work environment encourages interpersonal risk-taking, allowing individuals to voice concerns, ask questions, seek help, and admit mistakes without fear of embarrassment, exclusion, or punishment [1]. Key aspects include openness, trust, respect, and supportive interpersonal norms. Over time, researchers have increasingly pointed out that psychological safety is not just an interpersonal climate but also a structural and cultural trait influenced by leadership styles, communication practices, and accountability mechanisms [8].

A significant body of research connects psychological safety to learning effective teamwork, innovation, and better performance. In academic and organizational environments, teams with higher psychological safety show stronger critical thinking skills, more effective knowledge sharing, and greater flexibility [9]. It encourages team learning behaviors by promoting discussion of errors, questioning assumptions, and combining diverse perspectives, conditions essential for innovation and ongoing improvement. In high-stakes settings like healthcare and higher education, psychological safety supports error reporting, collaborative decision-making, and improved outcomes for learners, staff, and service recipients.

A supportive organizational culture is essential for psychological safety to develop and thrive. Leadership behaviors such as inclusiveness, transparency, and responsiveness directly influence employees' perceptions of safety [10]. Organizational norms that promote learning, respect, and shared accountability reinforce psychological safety at a systemic level. Within higher education, where collaboration, experimentation, and reflective practice are central to teaching, research, and institutional growth, fostering psychological safety is vital. Psychological safety strengthens the foundation of high-performing, equitable, and learning-centered organizations.

### **Barriers to Psychological Safety for Women**

Psychological safety is further damaged by microaggressions, implicit bias, and credibility gaps that disproportionately affect women in higher education. Studies show that women, especially women of color, face subtle forms of exclusion such as being interrupted, having their expertise questioned, or being mistaken for support staff. These ongoing behaviors sum up to what scholars call "identity-based undermining," which erodes one's sense of belonging and discourages taking risks. Implicit bias also leads to credibility issues, where women must provide more evidence of

competence to earn the same level of trust as male colleagues [11]. These conditions undermine psychological safety by signalling that mistakes, assertiveness, or innovation may be judged more harshly, leading to unequal emotional and cognitive challenges for women.

### **Punitive Responses to Failure or Dissent**

In academic settings where failure is stigmatized or dissent is punished, women often face increased professional risks due to existing gender stereotypes. Research shows that women are more likely than men to face negative consequences when challenging norms, questioning unfair policies, or proposing unconventional ideas [12]. These punitive environments, whether through formal evaluations or informal social backlash, deter women from engaging in experimentation and conflict management necessary for leadership. Without psychological safety, women may remain silent in meetings, avoid suggesting new initiatives, or decline leadership roles out of fear of judgment. This behavioral restraint prevents women from fully participating in decision-making processes, thus reinforcing gendered leadership gaps and hindering institutional innovation.

### **Movement from Passive Participation to Active Leadership Behaviors**

Psychological safety facilitates a transition from passive participation, such as quietly completing assigned tasks, to active leadership behaviors, including initiating projects, challenging ineffective practices, and advocating for systemic change. Women who perceive support and value within their organizations are more likely to assume leadership roles, offer strategic insights, and influence team direction [7]. Engaging in active leadership behaviors also enhances visibility, which is critical for promotion and advancement. As psychological safety improves, women move from observers to leaders who shape academic environments, illustrating how behavioral freedom directly contributes to leadership development and upward mobility.

### **Role of Relationships, Networks, and Mentorship**

Supportive professional relationships are essential for reducing the interpersonal risks that women face in higher education leadership pathways. Research indicates that when individuals feel supported by trusted colleagues or supervisors, they are more likely to engage in leadership behaviors such as speaking up, taking initiative, and challenging organizational norms [10]. For women, who often navigate gendered expectations and increased scrutiny, supportive relationships serve as psychological buffers that lessen fear of backlash or failure. These relationships strengthen a sense of belonging, confirm competence, and provide emotional and cognitive resources necessary to sustain leadership ambitions. This

buffering effect enhances leadership identity development and boosts willingness to pursue opportunities that involve uncertainty or risk.

Peer support networks, affinity groups, and visible role models serve as powerful catalysts for women's leadership development in higher education. These networks provide shared learning environments where women can exchange strategies, normalize challenges, and validate each other's experiences, key elements that build confidence and resilience [13]. Affinity groups create psychologically safe spaces by reducing isolation and offering collective protection against gendered or racialized microaggressions. Role models, particularly women in senior academic roles, demonstrate what leadership can look like and help challenge internalized beliefs about who belongs in leadership. Altogether, these networks enhance social capital, increase access to information, and foster community structures that support ongoing leadership growth.

### **How Collaborative Environments Foster Collective Agency**

Collaborative academic environments are crucial for developing collective agency among women pursuing leadership roles. When organizations promote shared decision-making, transparent communication, and interdisciplinary teamwork, women experience greater psychological safety and empowerment [3]. This collective approach shifts leadership from individual rivalry to shared influence, enabling women to leverage group dynamics to drive change, innovate, and challenge unfair norms. Collaborative settings also support distributed leadership models, opening more paths for women to lead without needing hierarchical authority. Ultimately, encouraging collaboration not only boosts individual confidence and leadership identity but also enhances institutional capacity for more inclusive and equitable leadership environments.

### **Organizational Culture and Structural Supports**

Leadership accountability, explicit communication norms, and transparent decision-making are essential components of organizational cultures that promote equity and psychological safety. Research shows that when leaders demonstrate accountability by admitting mistakes, clarifying decisions, and encouraging input, employees perceive the environment as fair and trustworthy, thereby enhancing organizational engagement and reducing fear of speaking up [2]. Transparent communication helps address informal, exclusionary networks that often hinder women from advancing to leadership positions in higher education. Additionally, when leaders establish consistent expectations for respectful dialogue and open information sharing, organizations reduce ambiguity and create more predictable paths for leadership development. These practices collectively boost women's

confidence in organizational procedures and motivate them to pursue or accept leadership roles.

Robust reporting systems and anti-retaliation policies are crucial for promoting psychological safety and protecting individuals who report discrimination, harassment, or unfair treatment. Research indicates employees are much less likely to report misconduct or bias when organizational responses are inconsistent or when retaliation seems possible, which tends to silence women and underrepresented groups disproportionately [14]. Effective reporting systems ensure confidentiality, provide multiple avenues for submitting complaints, and have clear procedures for follow-up, ensuring concerns are addressed quickly and thoroughly. Anti-retaliation policies encourage individuals to speak up without fearing career setbacks or personal conflicts. These protections foster trust in organizational systems and help create environments where women feel supported in seeking fairness and leadership opportunities.

Leadership training that emphasizes inclusive behaviors is crucial for fostering equitable environments in higher education. Inclusive leadership practices such as active listening, equitable participation, openness to feedback, and recognition of diverse perspectives have been proven to increase psychological safety, strengthen team cohesion, and boost innovation [15].

Training programs that include bias awareness, cultural humility, and behavior-based leadership strategies help leaders understand how their actions affect women's access, opportunity, and visibility within their organizations. By integrating inclusive leadership into professional development, institutions not only support women's leadership development but also transform organizational culture to value collaboration, equity, and shared responsibility. These programs prepare leaders to create and maintain environments where women can thrive and advance.

## Recommendations

Establishing psychological safety is essential for advancing women's leadership in higher education, fostering an environment where women can speak up, take risks, and challenge norms without fear of retaliation. Leadership development programs should intentionally integrate principles of psychological safety, including training in inclusive communication, constructive feedback, and conflict resolution. These programs must also address the impact of gendered expectations on perceptions of assertiveness and decision-making, equipping women with strategies to navigate and reshape these dynamics. Institutions can further strengthen psychological safety by shifting cultural norms from risk aversion to experimentation, prioritizing innovation, learning from failures, and fostering openness to new ideas. Recognizing and rewarding

behaviors such as advocacy, increased visibility, and the sharing of professional opportunities also contribute to a safer environment that supports women's leadership growth.

Together, these behavioral and structural strategies create conditions in which women can lead authentically, innovate confidently, and participate fully in institutional decision-making.

## Conclusion

In summary, psychological safety is critical for empowering women in higher education to take risks, share ideas, and pursue leadership roles with confidence. When institutions deliberately cultivate supportive, non-punitive environments, women are more likely to develop robust leadership identities, enhance their visibility, and feel empowered to advocate for themselves and others. However, substantive progress requires more than encouragement; it demands the active dismantling of structural barriers that sustain inequity. This process involves implementing intentional policies, equitable practices, and inclusive leadership behaviors that confront systemic bias and advance fairness.

Supportive relationships are equally vital for sustaining psychological safety and fostering leadership development. Sponsorship, mentorship, and robust peer networks cultivate trust, resilience, and confidence, thereby strengthening pathways to leadership. Prioritizing psychological safety benefits not only women but also institutions. When women feel valued, respected, and supported, higher education organizations experience increased innovation, improved performance, stronger leadership pipelines, and higher retention rates, advancing both institutional success and equity-driven excellence.

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