

Social Participation Behavior of Female Leaders in Universities: A Case Study in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China *

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Abstract

This study investigates the social participation behavior of female university leaders in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, focusing on five dimensions: policy support, volunteering and interaction, opinion expression, conference organization, and personal activities. Data were collected using a five-point Likert scale.

The study reveals that female leaders in universities demonstrate high engagement in volunteer activities and personal academic tasks but show lower participation in political activities and opinion expression through formal channels. The findings highlight how societal factors, institutional structures, and role conflicts influence on the social participation behaviors of female university leaders. The study underscores the need to enhance their political and academic engagement while addressing systemic barriers. These findings provide actionable

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insights into promoting gender equity and leadership development in higher education.

Keywords: female leader; social participation; female social participation; social participation behavior; leadership development

1. Introduction

"Everyone who understands history should know that great social change is not possible without the participation of women. The improvement of women's social status can be used as a precise measure of social progress." (Wang, 2016). From the perspective of socialization, as an important element in social groups, women's social participation should cover all social strata and fields. Women's social participation is an important symbol of the vigorous development of women's liberation movement, but also affects the process of political democratization of a country, and plays an indelible positive role in the progress of human political civilization. From the perspective of women, exploring the problems existing in women's social participation will help Chinese women give full play to their social value, improve their enthusiasm for social participation, help build a harmonious socialist society, and promote the continuous development of Chinese society and the smooth progress of women's liberation (Ren, 2020).

Over the years, China has made great achievements in the cause of women's liberation, but Chinese women in the new era still have not reached the realistic equality with men in many aspects. It is still an important and arduous task to realize women's complete liberation and development and promote gender equality in the new era. With the development of women themselves and the progress of society, today's social participation is not only about political participation or participation of a few people, as in the beginning, but also begins



to pay more attention to women's participation in social and public affairs. At this time, female social participation included institutionalized and organized participation in social groups, such as clan associations, religious groups, volunteer organizations, environmental protection organizations, and fellowship organizations, as well as community participation to enhance interpersonal relationships, sense of belonging, and recognition, etc. (Xiao, 2007). Some studies regard women's freedom and right to participate in public life as a necessary condition for the existence of a "participatory society", and propose that enthusiasm for public welfare, having certain political knowledge and rational discussion of state affairs belong to women's social participation (Yu, 2009). China has entered a new era, with the continuous development of society and the gradual awakening of social participation, women's status and social recognition are also constantly improving, and more and more women are participating in the country's political, economic, cultural and ecological civilization construction. From the perspective of women, exploring the problems existing in women's social participation will help Chinese women maximize their social impact and enhance their engagement in public life, help build a harmonious socialist society, and promote the continuous development of Chinese society and the smooth progress of women's liberation (Ren, 2020).

However, in colleges and universities, female leaders are affected by factors such as strong male and weak female ideology, multi-role conflict, male power evaluation system, etc., leading to the realistic dilemma of weak development consciousness, career achievement deviation, and few promotion opportunities, which hinder the social participation of female leaders in colleges and universities. The development of female teachers in colleges and universities "compared with male teachers, the gap still exists" (Yu, 2013). In colleges and universities, although the number of female teachers is growing, the process of social participation and the resources, power and development opportunities of male and female



teachers are not equal. "Most female teachers are almost never in the same central position as men, but always in the marginal state of poor development conditions, low achievements and domination." (Yu, 2009)

The evaluation system of scientific research and teaching in the evaluation of professional titles and the promotion of cadres constructs the gender grade system of colleges and universities, which is essentially a male power evaluation system, forming the grade of women lower and men higher. In order to break this gender hierarchy, female teachers have to make more efforts, on the one hand, to perform their teaching roles well, on the other hand, to achieve the same or even more research results as male teachers in order to be recognized. "The male power evaluation system in university title evaluation and cadre promotion promotes men's strengths (such as highlighting" scientific research "achievements) and avoids women's strengths (such as" teaching "practices), which actually allows women to compare their weaknesses with men's strengths" (Luo, 2013). To a certain extent, family roles have troubled the life attitude and value orientation of current female leaders, affecting their time and energy allocation (for example, the task of raising children will inevitably delay the pace of female leaders' progress). They consciously or unconsciously regulate themselves with traditional gender role models, and regard caring for their husband and teaching their children as the highest pursuit in life. Willingly sacrifice themselves, so that female university leaders pay less in scientific research work, and it is difficult to obtain high-level projects, awards, and high-quality results, etc. Therefore, compared with male university employees, their social participation achievements are biased (Zhu & Yu, 2015).

Relevant research shows that whether from the macro level or the micro level, the proportion of female leaders in universities decreases with the increase of the level, especially the proportion of female leaders in the high-level team or "core collective" or important leadership positions and their base proportion is



significantly lower, and most of them gather in low titles, low positions and low-income posts (Luo & Wei, 2013). In general, the development of female leaders in universities is at a disadvantage, which not only reflects the unfairness and incongruity of universities and society, but also ultimately reflects the obvious gender differences in the social participation of female leaders in universities, which will seriously affect the reform and development of China's higher education (Zhu & Yu, 2015).

Therefore, it is an important practical topic in the construction of a harmonious socialist society to study the influencing factors of female leaders in the process of social participation, investigate the reasons, and seek corresponding solutions to break through the bottleneck restricting their development, achieve gender equality in the process of female leaders' social participation, and enable them to fully develop in all aspects of life scope, depth, and influence.

2. Research objective

2.1 To analyze the patterns and characteristics of social participation among female university leaders in China.

2.2 To examine the current status of social participation behavior of female leaders in universities and propose actionable recommendations to enhance their engagement in social.

3. Methodology

This study adopts the research method combining qualitative research and quantitative research. The qualitative research mainly uses the literature research method, combined with the quantitative research questionnaire survey method to support this study and its learning objectives.

As the capital city of Yunnan Province and the center city of central Yunnan City, Kunming has 9 universities. The main group of this study is women leaders in



those universities. In this study, 264 valid questionnaires were collected online from female leaders of nine universities in Kunming through the questionnaire research method. It was randomly distributed to female leaders in nine universities.

The questionnaire collected in this study consists of three parts with a total of 15 questions. All data were collected through an online questionnaire. Thirty questionnaires were collected for reliability and validity analysis, and 264 questionnaires were collected for research analysis. The results show that the reliability values of all levels or constructs are greater than 0.8, indicating that the reliability of levels or constructs is ideal. The KMO and Bartlett's Test are greater than 0.7, indicating that the scale is suitable for factor analysis. The all corresponding P values of the Bartlett sphericity test are less than 0.01, Therefore, Bartlett sphericity detection is of great significance, and it is very suitable for factor analysis.

This study analyzed the following modules based on the five-point Likert scale, which mainly covered four modules: social participation, social support, achievement motivation and management ability. This paper analyzes the status quo of social participation, social support, achievement motivation and management ability of 264 university female leaders who participated in this study through the 5-point scale of Likert.

4. Research Results

The 264 sample data collected in this questionnaire were analyzed based on the five-point Likert scale, and the following conclusions were drawn:

The main dimensions and mean values of social participation, Policy support: mean =3.17, standard deviation =1.29, Volunteer and interaction: mean =3.54, standard deviation =0.97, Opinion expression: mean =3.00, standard deviation =1.09, Conference & Organization: mean =3.26, standard deviation =0.79,



Personal Activities: mean =3.95, standard deviation =0.88, Overall mean: Social participation mean=3.38, standard deviation =0.78

The data reveals varying levels of social participation among university female leaders across different dimensions. Personal Activities (\bar{x} =3.95, SD=0.88) and Volunteer & Interaction (\bar{x} =3.54, SD=0.97) show the highest engagement, suggesting a strong inclination toward individualized or community-driven initiatives and collaborative efforts. In contrast, Opinion Expression (\bar{x} =3.00, SD=1.09) scores the lowest, indicating potential barriers to voicing perspectives in formal or public settings, with notable variability among participants. Policy Support (\bar{x} =3.17, SD=1.29) also demonstrates moderate engagement but with the highest variability, reflecting divergent attitudes or inconsistent institutional backing for advocacy roles. Conference & Organization (\bar{x} =3.26, SD=0.79) and the overall Social Participation (\bar{x} =3.38, SD=0.78) fall within a moderate range, highlighting balanced yet unexceptional involvement in structured platforms. These patterns suggest that while female leaders actively contribute through personal and volunteer channels, systemic challenges may hinder their influence in opinion-driven and policy-related spheres, underscoring the need for targeted support to amplify their voices in decision-making arenas.

Analysis and summary:

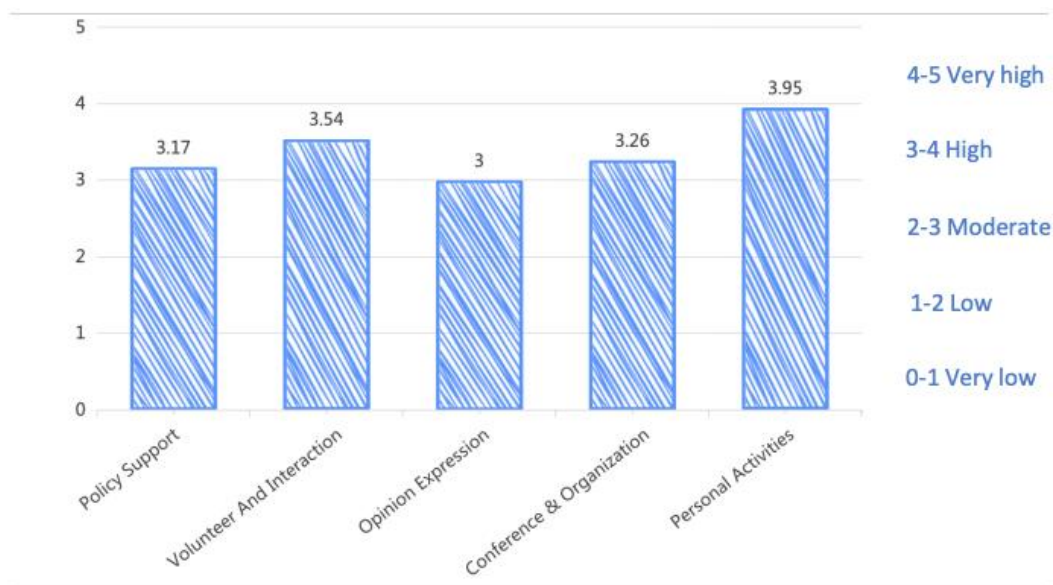


Figure 1. Social participation of female leaders in universities

It can be seen from the Figure1: The relatively low score for policy support (3.17) reflects respondents' lower motivation to participate in political activities such as policy elections. The high scores of volunteer and interaction and personal activities (3.54 and 3.95) indicate that respondents are more willing to participate in volunteer activities and personal academic affairs. The median value of “Conference & Organization“ is 3.26, indicating that the initiative of “Conference & Organization” behavior of university female leaders is not too low. In the dimension of opinion expression, the score was the lowest (3.00), indicating that respondents rarely expressed their opinions through formal channels, which may be the problem of insufficient expression channels or enthusiasm.

This module evaluates individual participation in social activities through five-point Likert scale, which mainly includes five aspects: policy support, volunteer interaction, opinion expression, conference organization and individual activities. The data show that the respondents are more active in volunteer



interaction and personal activities, especially in participation in volunteer activities and private academic related activities, which reflects the high participation of individuals in informal social and volunteer services. However, the low score of opinion expression, especially in terms of feedback questions to the government or the media, indicates that individuals have certain concerns or negative attitudes when expressing public opinions. In addition, the participation in policy support and conference organization is relatively limited, and the participation rate of individuals in formal elections and organizational activities is not high, which may be related to personal motivation or institutional environment. On the whole, the average score of social participation is 3.38, indicating that individual female leaders hold a neutral and positive attitude towards social participation at this stage, but their participation in formal occasions still needs to be improved.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the social participation behaviors of female university leaders in Kunming, Yunnan Province. It highlights the varying levels of engagement across five dimensions: policy support, volunteer activities, opinion expression, conference organization, and personal activities. The findings reveal that female leaders are highly active in volunteer work and personal academic tasks but exhibit lower participation in political activities and formal opinion expression, indicating systemic barriers and personal reservations. Despite China's progress in ensuring women's rights and promoting gender equality, challenges persist in achieving balanced representation in governance and leadership roles.

The study also emphasizes the dual responsibilities faced by female university leaders, balancing managerial duties and scholarly pursuits. While their active participation in informal social activities and academic knowledge sharing showcases their commitment, constraints such as traditional gender roles,



institutional biases, and inadequate opportunities for structured political and organizational involvement hinder their full potential.

These insights underline the importance of addressing structural and cultural barriers to promote greater inclusivity and effectiveness in leadership. Enhancing the social participation of female university leaders is not only crucial for their professional growth but also essential for fostering a more equitable and dynamic higher education system.

5. Discussion

According to the data analysis, the social participation of female leaders in Chinese universities, in order from high to low, is as follows: participation in personal activities (3.95), participation in voluntary activities (3.54), participation in conference organization (3.26), policy support (3.17), and opinion expression (3.00).

Combined with China's national conditions and historical factors, to a large extent, it restricts and reduces the enthusiasm of university female leaders to participate in political discussions and respond positively to difficulties and problems. Although China has entered a new era and fully guaranteed women's political rights, and the scope of women's participation in politics and deliberation is constantly expanding, when implemented in real life, men are still the majority in national governance and decision-making, and a small number of women have entered the state power organs, but they are still in an auxiliary position, unable to give full play to women's role in political participation. Due to the unreasonable structure of political participation, women have less influence in national political life. In the long run, some women will fall into a state of complacency or confusion, which will hinder women's career development and improvement of political participation level to a certain extent (Ren, 2021). Although the people have been given open and legal channels to express their opinions, in fact, in the case of social stability, petitioning and other means to reflect social problems are



to some extent their last choice, and they are also the means to seek rights protection and redress when their rights and interests are damaged or treated unfairly (Ren, 2020).

Female leaders of universities have both the role of managers and the role of research scholars. Due to the achievement needs and job requirements, most female leaders can still voluntarily participate in academic exchanges, academic conferences and other social activities. The particularity of academic knowledge sharing determines that the sharer must have certain scientific research ability. For university teachers with certain achievements in the field of scientific research, they are encouraged to give full play to their academic influence, actively share knowledge, establish a smooth knowledge sharing mechanism, and improve the influence and communication power of their knowledge sharing, so as to drive the sustainable development of the whole research field (Yu, Yan, Fan, & Chen, 2024). Therefore, it is very necessary to enhance the social participation ability of female leaders in attending and communicating.

The question of what category of social participation of female groups is covered has been continuously discussed, and the final analysis is that there are always differences in the cognition of social participation in the Chinese social context. In a broad sense, social participation means that all social classes in real life should participate in all aspects of social affairs and fields that can promote the healthy operation of society through various forms of participation (Zhou, 2017). It refers to various political, economic, social, cultural and community public affairs activities that social members can participate in, intervene and intervene in a certain way, thus affecting social development (yang & wang, 2013).

In this study, it is found that university female leaders are more active in participating in individual activities and voluntary activities. The main reason is that these two types of activities are less limited. Studies have shown that women have a higher incidence of participating in volunteer social activities and are more



likely to exert their own value through volunteer social activities. However, married women with more family life problems are more likely to participate in volunteer social activities (Li & Ren, 2022). With the development of women themselves and the progress of society, today's social participation scholars begin to pay more attention to women's participation in social and public affairs. At this time, women's social participation included institutionalized and organized participation in social groups, such as associations, religious groups, volunteer organizations, environmental protection organizations, and fellowship organizations (Wang, 2012), as well as community participation to enhance interpersonal relationships, sense of belonging, and recognition (Xiao, 2007). In this aspect, social participation allows female leaders to actively respond to problems and express their opinions.

Moreover, in this study showed the behavior of female university leaders participating in some academic seminars and academic reports, administrative organization meetings and political party organizations. In the context of knowledge transformation, the relationship between universities and society is becoming more and more inseparable. The direction of teachers' scientific research activities has changed from promoting the development of knowledge to promoting the development of economy and society, and the objects they serve have changed from the scientific community to their social life (CPC Central Committee State Council, 2015).

6. Knowledge of Research

This study represents a pioneering exploration of the social participation behavior of female leaders in Chinese universities, a research topic that has received limited attention in existing academic literature, particularly in China. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on general leadership roles or the challenges faced by women in higher education, this research uniquely examines the interplay between social participation and management capabilities,



emphasizing five dimensions: policy support, volunteer and interaction, opinion expression, conference organization, and personal activities.

The innovative aspect of this study lies in its comprehensive integration of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, combined with the application of the five-point Likert scale to assess nuanced social behaviors. It provides a rare and detailed understanding of how societal, institutional, and individual factors interact to shape the leadership and participation dynamics of female university leaders in a specific Chinese context. Moreover, this research identifies gaps in political engagement and formal opinion expression, offering insights that challenge traditional gendered frameworks in academic and administrative leadership.

Given the scarcity of similar research in Chinese academic journals, this study not only fills a critical gap in the literature but also sets a foundation for future inquiries into gender equity, leadership development, and the role of social participation in higher education. Its findings and implications are particularly valuable for shaping policies and practices aimed at empowering female leaders and optimizing institutional governance.

7. Suggestions

According to the positive degree of social participation behaviors of university female leaders obtained by this study, the following suggestions are put forward to improve the initiative of university female social participation behaviors:

7.1 Policy support

More opportunities for direct participation in the development and implementation of public policy should be provided for the political participation of women leaders in universities. Governments and universities can establish special policy support platforms for women leaders to provide channels for them to participate in decision-making processes such as local or national education policies and innovation policies. Groups or committees of female leadership



representatives can be set up within universities to encourage their participation in school management decisions, such as school councils or resource allocation meetings, to increase political expression and influence. At the same time, according to the characteristics of work and life of female leaders, flexible time arrangement and policy guidance can be provided to help them balance the needs of family responsibilities and political participation, so as to enhance their activity and contribution in political occasions.

7.2 Volunteer and interaction

Volunteer and interaction activities are an important way for female leaders to expand their social influence, and universities should encourage female leaders to participate in volunteer projects related to education, poverty alleviation, and scientific and technological services. Volunteer service centers can be set up on campus to organize customized volunteer activities targeting the expertise of female leaders, such as education poverty alleviation, rural teacher training, etc., to give full play to their professional advantages. Universities can also incorporate volunteer activities into the performance evaluation index system, give corresponding honors and rewards, and stimulate the enthusiasm of female leaders for volunteer service. In addition, the government and universities jointly organize large-scale social welfare activities, which can provide more social practice opportunities for female leaders, help them enhance social participation and expand social resources.

7.3 Opinion expression

In terms of the expression of opinions, the ability of female leaders to offer suggestions on public affairs, school management and social issues should be strengthened. Colleges and universities can organize training to improve the confidence and skills of female leaders in public, such as speech ability, issue analysis and logical thinking ability. Build platforms for diverse opinions inside and outside the school, such as educational forums, social media and policy



workshops, to provide more opportunities for female leaders to express their opinions. At the same time, government departments and universities should set up feedback mechanisms, so that the suggestions of female leaders can be effectively adopted and implemented, and enhance their confidence and enthusiasm to express their personal opinions.

7.4 Conference & Organization

Academic conferences are an important channel for female leaders to improve their professional ability and social influence. Universities should actively support female leaders to participate in high-level academic conferences at home and abroad, especially interdisciplinary and cross-field forums and exchange activities. Special funds can be set up to encourage female leaders to publish high-quality papers, chair academic forums, or serve as judges and mentors at academic conferences to further enhance their academic status and influence. In addition, universities should also promote the participation of female leaders in policy academic conferences, establish contact with government decision-makers through academic discussions, make their opinions more socially influential, and enhance the comprehensive participation of female leaders at the academic and social levels.

7.5 Personal Activities

Personal activities are an important part of female leaders' efforts to strengthen social networks and increase social influence. Universities should support female leaders to expand cross-field and cross-industry cooperation opportunities through individual activities. For example, through regular alumni associations and inter-university leadership exchange activities, female leaders are helped to establish deep social connections in leisure activities. For female leaders with special interests in their work and life, they can be encouraged to enhance their interaction with off-campus social organizations and high-level talents through interest groups or social clubs. Enhancing the sense of social participation



of female leaders through individual activities can not only improve their career flexibility, but also inject more external resources and new thinking into university management.

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