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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AND THE POLITICS OF POWER

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY

C. MAEVE KENDALL

CHICAGO, IL

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We must carry forward the work of the women who came before us  
and ensure our daughters have no limits on their dreams,  
no obstacles to their achievements,  
and no remaining ceilings to shatter.  
— Barack Obama

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## ABSTRACT

With the use of intimate interviews, this qualitative research study employed an experiential, story-telling approach to gather a more thorough understanding of individual female experiences in leadership positions in the field of education in relation to the literature on female leadership in a gendered workforce. Although this study only included the experiences of several women leaders in the field of education in the Chicago area, the preexisting research on the topic guided the interview questions and divulged the nexus between a culture of systematic gendered hierarchy in the workplace and the strategies and characteristics of success employed by female leaders as they encounter these phenomena in daily life. Although the exact findings of this paper reflect female leaders' experiences in the field of education, the discussion following and the recommendations for future exploration has broader professional implications regarding gender equity in the workplace.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Positions of leadership in the workforce are associated with characteristics such as autonomy, long or irregular work hours, and meritocratic ideals of competitiveness and assertiveness: traits often considered incongruous with the norm of the female gender (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Billing, 2011; Muhr, 2011). Due to opposition from society's norms and gendered organizational structures, women are frequently discouraged from seeking out positions of leadership, power, and control while simultaneously being socialized to feel that they "belong" in traditional roles of femininity and domesticity.

Extensive research has already been conducted to reveal that women who strive to become and act as leaders face a great number of internal and external barriers. Contemporary barriers interfering with women's progress in the workplace appear to be less about individual beliefs and much more about structural impediments that have become deeply embedded in our social structures. Women face issues such as being paid lower salaries than their male counterparts, receiving fewer or more delayed promotions, and obtaining less recognition for their ideas and achievements.

One profession that illustrates gender inequality in a hierarchical system is the field of education. Researchers have long acknowledged and explored the feminization of teaching positions through time. The field of higher education is an ideal focus for this



study to compare with existing literature concerning the gendered, hierarchical workforce as a whole. Deans, department chairs, tenured faculty members, and other leaders in the university are presented with the opportunity to be an important element for change in the institution's efforts to create an environment that encourages equality and growth. Due to their important influence, cultivating women leaders is essential to producing substantial, sustainable change in gender equality in education.

### **Purpose of Study**

Regardless of the existing imbalanced gender representation at the foundation of leadership in the workforce, many women have broken gender expectations and advanced to positions of power. This qualitative research study seeks to gather a more profound understanding of the experiences of female leaders in the field of education and how they responded to adversity. Although this study was limited in participants, the discoveries provide a rich, powerful glimpse into the life experiences of female leaders succeeding in the field of education.

Adding more female voices to the discourse of leadership in education will add to the discourse of complex relationships between gender, attainment, and power not just in the field of education, but also in the workforce as a whole. This study of the personal stories of women succeeding in positions of power in a gendered, hierarchical profession will reveal at least a glimpse of how individuals are affected by a widespread, systematic culture of gender inequities.

### **Research Statement**

Obtaining the innovation, insight, and fairness that only come from a diversified management population requires a comprehensive analysis of women that experience a gendered workforce firsthand. The goal of this study is to incorporate more female leaders' voices through intimate interviews to better understand gender issues and the pursuit of gender equity. This study documents the accounts of women in education who have successfully navigated obstacles and adversities in the progress of their careers and gives insight into why more women are not entering higher levels of leadership and management. The results of this study will touch upon recommendations for how to increase the number of women that enter more influential levels of educational leadership.

### **Research Question**

This research asks the primary question: what makes female leaders in the field of education successful in positions typically dominated by males? Corresponding to this question includes an inquiry of: what barriers or advantages do women experience in their journey to and retention of a position of educational leadership?

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Brief History of Women in Leadership**

Extensive research has been conducted exploring the gendered workforce and the allegedly shattered glass ceiling for female achievement. The conversation regarding lifting women into managerial positions can be traced back for decades. In the 1970's, Billing & Alvesson (2000) noted that leadership has been constructed in masculine terms and according to a "masculine ethic" (p. 145). The "masculine ethic" was seen as elevating the stereotypical traits of the male gender to be necessary for occupying effective management positions (Billing & Alvesson, 2000). This pervasive masculinization of leadership is deeply rooted in cultural structures and organizations that prevent women from seeking managerial positions and create biased evaluations when they ultimately seek out higher-level leadership positions. In other words, the reinforcement of gender stereotypes by both males and females combined with the construction of managerial jobs according to male norms have been largely responsible for creating difficulties and discouragement in pursuing positions of leadership in the workforce.

Of course, considerable progress has already been made, but even with the significant advancements made by women in a variety of fields, the problem of women failing to attain positions of power is still present in our current society. The supposed

conflict between management and femininity has created what many have called “the glass ceiling” that inhibits women from reaching higher positions in the hierarchical workforce (Muhr, 2011). According to Sara Luise Muhr (2011), one predominant way that women have broken through the “glass ceiling” is by rejecting their traditionally feminine characteristics and adopting the conventionally masculine traits that are supposedly needed for successful leadership. For example, Muhr (2011) says that a woman manager will often strive to be “tough, emotionally in control, calculating and she is not the soft, gentle mother character who cares for her colleagues in a maternal manner” (p. 353). Muhr (2011) uses the metaphor of “the cyborg” to describe this new type of woman: a being that must sacrifice much of their identity and work tirelessly for perfection in order to outperform their male peers (p.341). The image of a female leader as part-human and part-machine is a chilling illustration of the consequences of women entering positions that are traditionally occupied by men.

The concept of gender and the interconnected web of culture, social interactions, organizational structures, and personal identity necessitate sophisticated analysis from a variety of perspectives. The fluctuating and often subjective definitions of gender and gender issues make it difficult to precisely delineate the boundaries of this study’s discourse. In the following sections, I hope to create a more distinct context for this specific study. First, I will describe the current intellectual discussion circulating on the hierarchical, gendered structures found in one specific area of the workforce: education. Next, I will illustrate how current researchers have chosen to study the advancement to positions of power or lack thereof for women in education. Finally, I will explain why

this existing literature suggests that the overall understanding of this complex, deep-rooted social phenomenon calls for a more intimate examination of powerful women leaders that experience the fluidity of gender and gender constructions every day.

### **Existing Literature on Female Leaders in Education**

The current discussion regarding women in educational leadership uses three primary approaches: (1) exploring evidence of where women are still inhibited in advancements with the motivation to raise public consciousness of the inequality in academic employment, (2) discussing gender differences, the uniqueness of female leaders, and how these differences interact with advancement in the field of education, and (3) identifying the broader societal and cultural structures that form individual identities and may be responsible for inhibiting female advancement in the education workplace. Although this literature reveals the diversity in viewpoints from which this area can be directed, it still cumulatively indicates the need for further studies of female educational leaders.

One approach to the study of gender inequalities in academic employment is to illustrate the areas where women still experience barriers, both internal and external, to reaching higher-level positions in academia. The Director of Research and Public Policy at the American Association of University Professors John W. Curtis (2011) recently wrote about the persistent inequity in educational employment in this manner. Curtis (2011) lays out in detail the objective evidence reinforcing the reality of women failing to achieve the same status as men in educational positions. Even after decades of advancements for women in education, the study notes that as recently as 2011, men were

more likely to be employed as full-time, tenure-track faculty members and more likely to hold tenure or full professorial positions, women comprised less than 25% of all college and university presidents, and women that do advance to full-time faculty positions earned approximately 80% of the salary of their male counterparts (Curtis, 2011, p. 5). From these statistics, Curtis argues that more attention must be given to implementing strategies to create equity in academic employment, primarily through policies designed specifically for that interest.

One of the primary concerns addressed in this first type of research is the common misconception that gender differences in academic employment can be contributed to the active choices women make in journeying career paths. This “rhetoric of choice” as Curtis (2011) calls it can be destructive in an already prejudiced system: by suggesting that males and females “choose” their employment positions disregards the reality of the institutionalized hurdles women face when pursuing higher level academic positions (p. 7). One suggestion for avoiding this negative rhetoric proposed by Curtis (2011) is to focus on “subtle ways in which we act to perpetuate inequalities” (p. 12). In this way, existing studies on female leadership in education using this first lens tend to suggest that it is necessary to take a closer look at females in the academic workplace, particularly from the perspective of individuals experiencing these injustices directly.

A second common approach to gender inequality in academic positions is to focus primarily on the differences between men and women and the inherent barriers that come along with a binary understanding of gender. Several of the key findings of such studies focus on traditional notions of childbearing, the external and self-underestimation of

women, and the lack of female mentors or systems of support for women entering higher-level positions in education (Morley, 2013; Grummell, Devine, & Lynch, 2009).

Grummel *et al.* (2009) display this approach with a focus on the concept of “care” or generally, the idea of emotional attachment and the responsibilities in one’s work and home life that accompany such attachments. In order to adhere to the demands of the ideal managerial worker, a person must essentially be “care-free” in the sense that they should not have interests or responsibilities outside of work (Grummel *et al.*, 2009, p. 192).

However, a man is significantly more likely than a woman to be “care-free” in this sense: traditional gender roles dictate that women should be mothers, housekeepers, and benevolent caregivers both at home and in the workplace (Grummel *et al.*, 2009, p. 8-9). For example, numerous studies have shown that women faculty members spend considerably more time on teaching, student advising, and other service activities than their male colleagues; a potential barrier for women educators that must complete extensive research to achieve higher ranks (Curtis, 2011; Grummel *et al.*, 2009). From this perspective, women in today’s capitalistic society are inherently at a disadvantage to advance in any workplace without sacrificing identity and going against traditional behavior demands (Morley, 2013). Again, the research from this approach leads to the suggestion for future studies to emphasize the ways women have navigated the educational workforce with this disadvantage.

A third principal approach to studying women academic leaders gathers statistical evidence of the movement of women through the education hierarchy in order to

philosophize on the broader societal and cultural structures that may influence female advancement. For example, one study by Sharon R. Bird in 2011 theorized that universities are “incongruous, gendered bureaucratic structures” that “demonstrate how organizational structures, cultures and practices are gendered” (p. 204). By carefully detailing the Bird (2011) leads to the conclusion that, “unless university and organizational leaders perceive and acknowledge the need for change strategies aimed at deconstructing incongruous, gendered bureaucratic structures, they will not be prompted to act on them” (p. 224). In brief, this approach also proposes a need for a more in-depth understanding of the personal experiences of women in the hierarchical academic workforce.

### **Case Studies of Gendered Educational Leadership**

As summarized above, each approach tends to lead to the suggestion that future studies should look at the way women personally experience the gendered educational workforce. Existing case studies exploring individualized ideas of female leaders in education have included surveys and personal accounts with sample populations ranging from one to several hundred. Surveys are a useful tool in gathering data from a larger sample size and the recent studies that have used this research method extract compelling theories on the barriers women leaders in education face daily. For example, one survey of 206 women in managerial positions in primary schools conducted by Coronel, Moreno, and Carrasco (2010) identified that a persistent difficulty referenced by many of these women is finding a balance between her work life and her personal life. In a similar study, researchers Airini, Collings, Conner, McPherson, Midson, and Wilson (2010)



used the survey technique to gather data from twenty-six women leaders in higher education. Several of the questions on the survey asked the subjects to identify times when work or non-work related situations either aided or impeded their advancement to positions of leadership in the educational workforce. From their findings, Airini *et al.* (2010) found that the complex interaction between personal, professional, and organizational factors played a significant role in aiding or hindering a woman's career progression in academia. While existing studies using surveys are invaluable to the present discourse, they may not be the most ideal methodology when seeking a more detailed and intimate reflection of women in academic leadership.

On the opposite end of the spectrum for sample sizes, other studies such as those by Eveline (2005), Lord & Preston (2009), and Acker (2012) conduct in-depth interviews with and observations of only one specific female subject. Although there is simply one perspective given in these studies, they provide a rich exploration of the personal experiences of women in the educational workforce. Eveline (2005) portrays the story of Gale, a female geography professor seeking the position of vice-chancellor of the university at which she worked. Viewing the struggles of Gale breaking new ground in the gendered hierarchy of education from a detailed narrative helps humanize the statistics and theories being expounded by researchers. Lord & Preston (2009) also employ an auto-ethnographic storytelling approach to connect personal experience with existing literature on the gendered organizational structure in educational employment. Most recently, Acker (2012) uses the single-subject case study method to tell her own story of struggling with gender, power, and advancement in the educational workforce.

All three of these studies focus on specific experiences and incorporate specific language and thoughts expressed by the female subjects. Although this rich input into the discourse of women educational leaders contributes to the most thorough understanding of such complicated issues, the single subject case studies are difficult to apply to broader populations.

One study based on interviews with a number of female teachers most closely resembles the data collection proposed in the present research. Moreau, Osgood, and Halsall (2007) interviewed 44 female professors to inquire into how these women experience the “glass ceiling” in between them and leadership positions. The women teachers interviewed came from preschool, middle school, and secondary school and a diversity of urban, suburban, and rural schools. The uniqueness of this particular study concerns the apparent conflicting viewpoints presented by the women in their interviews. On the one hand, most of the women felt that gender inequalities in the education profession are becoming non-existent and are largely the result of individual choices men and women make in their careers. On the other hand, most of the women also detailed specific instances in their career progressions when they felt discriminated against or experienced unexpected hurdles due to being a woman. In this way, Moreau *et al.* (2007) illustrates that both men and women contribute to the perpetuation of male leadership, the subordination of women, and a society in which an individual’s gender (along with his or her race, age, socioeconomic status, and other distinctive characteristics) impacts the opportunities he or she will encounter along the educational career path.

The Moreau *et al.* (2007) study is an intriguing balance among personal narrative, objective trends, and awareness development. However, the study focuses on the opposite side of the “glass ceiling”: in other words, further research of this kind should be conducted from the perspective of women that have shattered gender barriers and entered the positions primarily occupied by males. The most knowledgeable individuals on the experience of the gender inequalities in education’s hierarchical workforce are arguably those women who have gone against the pressures of societal structures. Personal accounts of women educational leaders will help uncover the realities of gender disparities in educational career attainment. In short, additional female voices, particularly those of educational leaders, are critical to a thorough comprehension of the perceived “glass ceiling” keeping women from attaining the higher, more prestigious levels of educational employment.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

The research I conducted was a phenomenological, qualitative study that explored the experiences of successful female leaders in the field of education. I was able to gather interest from eight women in educational leadership positions, but, due to scheduling difficulties, was only able to conduct interviews with six. The focus of the interviews was to explore how these women approach the specific expectations of their positions, what barrier (if any) they encountered in achieving their current roles, and what qualities they consider necessary or helpful for success. The questions coincided with my examination of women's roles in society and the apparent conflict of demands in and out of the workplace.

Using intimate interviews was the most appropriate data collection method for the purpose of seeking personal experiences of females in positions of power and what areas or opportunities were open or closed off to them. As discussed above, much of the present research on female leaders in education explores objective statistics of the successes or absences in female leadership and the gendered bureaucratic structures keeping females out of higher-level positions. Despite the substantial evidence of the many barriers women experience in the pursuit of leadership positions, the discourse is missing a personal, interpretive framework involving individual stories and experiences. These voices are necessary to supplement the existing research so that we may better

understand why more women are not occupying positions of power and management in education.

### **Participants**

This comparative case study consisted of interviews with six women occupying senior leadership positions in the field of higher education in Chicago, Illinois. The six women are from a variety of educational positions, both public and private, in the Chicago area. Due to the difficulties in gathering a vast sample population, I used what is often called “snowball sampling”: a process whereby future subjects were recruited by the connections of the existing study subjects. Clearly, this sort of subject gathering causes inherent biases in the sample population due to its vague parameters, lack of randomness, and the limited overall diversity. Nonetheless, this process was most appropriate given the limitations on time, resources, and personal connections. Individuals in positions of power in a large urban area can be difficult to contact much less acquire for a detailed interview. This form of sampling allowed doors to be opened to new subjects that may not have previously been available.

### **Data Collection Design**

In-depth interviews with the six participants were conducted in Chicago, Illinois throughout the month of October, 2013. Each interview lasted between twenty and forty-five minutes. Guided by a semi-structured script, the participants were asked to recount specific experiences in their career advancement and given the opportunity to reflect upon those experiences and their meaning. The semi-structured form of the interviews required open-ended questions that allowed the interview subjects to speak freely

and candidly about their thoughts, experiences, and responses to what accounts for their success as leaders in education. The questions focused on the extraction of stories concerning these women's professional aspirations and paths, the choices and experiences they have encountered over time, and how they have or have not correlated those life events to understandings of gender and personal identity. All interviews were audio-recorded directly onto my personal computer for analysis and supplemented by hand-written notes that were taken during the interview process.

### **Limitations**

The topic of this study is quite broad and required that I leave out important aspects of the gendered workforce. Most obviously, I have excluded the male voice from the discussion of female leaders in education. While this is largely intentional due to the study's focus, a more thorough study may be able to include the experiences and ideas of males in conjunction with those of females. The study is also limited by the small subject population that is comprised of women from the same city in one Westernized country. Moreover, issues of memory reliability and personal biases of the subjects likely impacted the discussion and application of the research. Finally, my own personal interests and perspective likely had a significant influence on the study, despite any efforts to remain objective.

The ideal design and sample population, if funding and time were unlimited, would include a number of important additions. First, the sample population would ideally be much larger and include women from more diverse backgrounds and different parts of the world. Second, race is a factor closely intertwined with gender that should be

included in the discussion of women leaders in any field. Third, I would suggest that the study be paralleled to interviews with female teachers. The insight from the women at the traditional, ground level positions in education can be helpful in fleshing out the personal experiences of women in education's gendered hierarchical structure. While these are not all of the changes and additions that could be made to the study given more time and resources, they are perhaps the most important factors neglected by the current study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DISCUSSION

#### **Analysis**

In general, the participants in this study recalled adverse experiences, if any, in an overall positive light. However, their internalization and interpretation of that adversity varied greatly. In particular, the participants recounted differing emotional reactions, coping methods, understandings of relationships, and general worldviews while discussing their career progression. Nonetheless, certain themes arose from the interviews that I will discuss in detail in the following sections.

As a researcher, I was particularly surprised by the fact that all but one of the six participants answered an immediate, “no” to my question about whether they had ever encountered a time in their career when they felt that their gender acted as a barrier or impediment to their advancement. Even when I asked for the participants to recount other women they may know who have encountered such issues, the same five women again responded, “no.” These two preliminary questions were to act as somewhat of a launching pad for my further questions, and I initially felt concerned that either I had conducted insufficient research or that my questioning was presented in a manner that prevented the women from sharing any real-life experiences. I also began to wonder whether somehow, these particular women that succeeded in reaching high positions of



leaderships at their universities never did in fact experience gender issues, thus contributing to their attainments.

After reviewing our conversations a number of times, I began to notice that this sort of “detachment” from gender issues may actually be the quality that assisted these women in reaching their leadership positions. Nonetheless, I hope to reign in this discussion to focus on the major findings of my study and how they could be interpreted without over-speculating or over-interpreting the results.

Overall, I found three major points woven between the participants’ responses that warrant further examination:

1. Despite their straightforward understanding of the gender disparities in educational leadership positions, these women did not find their gender to ever have made a negative impact over the course of their career progression. In this way, each woman expressed that she felt her experience was “unique,” “different,” or “fortunate” in the sense that they advanced smoothly into their positions in the face of the statistics that appear to be against them. Many times, the participant attributed this good fortune to the field of education today and how much more progressive it is for human rights than other organizations may be.
2. Mentorships acted as an essential element to each of the participants’ ability to navigate their professional careers. Networking, or forming relationships within and outside of their institutions, was considered by all participants to be the most crucial factor to reaching positions of leadership.

3. Whether or not it was explicitly stated by the participants, the interviews made clear that each of these women actively chose paths that were more challenging or went against expectations.

The following sections discuss these three observations and analyze their possible meanings in relation to the existing literature discussed previously. To protect the privacy of the interviewees, I will refer to the six women as “Participant A” through F. All six women have positions at well-established institutions of higher education in Chicago; some occupying administrative roles, some heads of departments or schools, and some both leaders and educators at their universities.

### **Being “Fortunate,” Perhaps Due to the Field of Education**

All participants, at some point during their interviews, acknowledged or brought up the fact that universities have yet to reach gender equity in leadership positions and that more must be done to help promote women’s advancement to those positions. Meanwhile, nearly all of the participants responded rather confidently that they had never experienced barriers or adversity due to their gender over the course of their career progression. Many of them explained that they felt “lucky” or “fortunate” that they have not had to experience gender issues.

I found that the participants did not necessarily believe *they* were special in any way, but rather that outside forces played the part of placing them in these fortunate positions. This supports the findings from existing research that suggests that women often attribute their personal achievements to external factors. Many of the participants also expressed that the field of education is different in regards to gender issues and more

conducive to allowing females to advance to higher positions. The women tended to bring up gender inequities in other areas of education or other fields to explain how much worse off it can be in terms of gender inequity.

For example, when Participant A was describing the environment of her coworkers and workplace, she said,

I think the environment I am in is pretty gender-neutral. I think when they are bringing people in they are just looking for the best for the position. It's interesting when I look at my peer group from other schools, and the people that I interact with are primarily all men. However, there are still a lot of women that I've interacted with at conferences and things, so I have never felt like I am in a male-dominated or either-gender dominated peer group... I haven't felt that this is really an industry that really looks at [gender] as a barrier or impetus to advancement. I think maybe it is different from a faculty perspective in that there just aren't many women on the faculty, at least in our school, but in general, in administration, I have never felt that way.

It is interesting to note the seemingly incongruous remarks Participant A makes in that she does not think there are gender issues in her workplace, yet she states that she interacts primarily with all men. By bringing up the more extreme lack of females on the faculty at her school, Participant A seemed to be using the example to justify her belief that her workplace is "gender-neutral." Although Participant A also stated that she did not know other women in her field that have experienced obstacles due to gender, she mentioned at the conclusion of her interview that she had an old manager that "was called a 'bitch' by her coworkers when she was tough," but the field of education was different because "it is aware of issues concerning women and always has been."

Participants C, E, and F also responded "no" to whether they had ever experienced barriers due to gender, and attributed this "unique" career to having a wonderful boss or work environment when first starting their careers. Participant C said,

I think my career started at a time that was really the most opportune time for women to be coming in to the workforce. I graduated in 1970; I think the women before me had a much harder time... So my timing was impeccable and I had a terrific first job... I think they were definitely looking for women when they hired me. It had pretty much been all male and I was the highest woman in the organization... I feel like I had a very fortunate career...I felt very welcome and very lucky...I think I was in that first wave of women at a time where people were really eager to get women into their organizations. So people would see me and say, "Let's get her involved." But I think it is still like that today. The women before me I think had a much harder time.

Participant C went on to explain how much progress has been made in the past forty years or so. She noted, for example, "I started as the only woman on this one board, and now we have four women in the board. So you definitely see changes." She later acknowledged the statistics concerning women in educational leadership positions is "still pretty thin." She nonetheless completed her thoughts stating, "yes, there is still work to be done, but I do think it is getting better. There used to be none [women leaders in education]!"

Participant E stated that in her first workplace was an all-girls institution and, "there wasn't a gender bias, or at least if there was, it was biased in my favor...but I think I may be unique in that setting...When I would go to other meetings with professionals in Catholic high schools, there was definitely a gender bias." She discussed the important influence of her first boss: a man that was "very gender-neutral" and "realized that ability and dedication trumped gender." Participant E then discussed how women are much more common in administrative and leadership positions in higher education institutions than other corporate settings.

Participant F spoke of several experiences when men had been promoted over her or over another qualified individual. In regards to one of these experiences, Participant F

stated, “you get to a point in an organization where you’re at the next step up and you run into a lot of factors that are not solely about your competence or experience.” She proceeded to explain,

My observation is that I think higher education is liberal enough that people are usually sensitized enough to diversity and equity that if there’s a gender bias, I don’t think people are smart enough to make it not overt. So I think that I think it is pretty hard to find it and label it as “gender.” Most higher education institutions acknowledge that we do need more diversity or gender representation in the upper levels of management and I think there are relatively fewer women on the academic side. I guess there are certain pipelines in certain fields of higher education that are stronger for women than others...but certainly it has gotten better during my time. I think—and this is a very general statement—that there is a general openness in higher education to the professional development and promotion of women and people of color and diversity and people feel serious enough about it that, from a process standpoint, there are certain values that need to be upheld.

Participants C, E, and F felt fortunate in having avoided encountering gender issues. Each described why education was more conducive to female leaders and mentioned other professional organizations that have a “worse” representation of women by comparison.

The youngest interviewee Participant D said that although she did not believe that her gender had ever acted as an obstacle in her professional advancement “so far,” she felt that she might have seen this occur to another woman in her peer group. Participant D said that her first boss was a female and that,

[E]ven though she was very high up and had an incredible education background, I think she wasn’t as much a part of the inner circle of the administration, and I think her gender may have played a role in that. And that is just my personal impression. I got the sense that it was the ethos of that office: that they wanted people to tow the line. And I think she had such a robust background that if she thought something was a wrong move or policy or agenda, she would make that clear. And I don’t think that fit with the ethos.

I found Participant D's observation particularly intriguing. She told this story of her old boss immediately after stating, "I've actually found, in my experience, that [education] is pretty hospitable to women." She went on to discuss how before entering the field of education, she had worked in a law firm and she "really couldn't make the transition to the billable hour" and that educational institutions do not have the same gender issues as law firms that are "hemorrhaging women." Participant D felt that education was where her heart was and that it is "a very accommodating environment of starting families or adding to families...It is really hospitable to women, at least certainly in comparison to big law."

I did not anticipate that all but one woman would respond affirmatively to my question regarding whether she had ever felt her gender acted as an obstacle to her advancement. Participant B said,

No matter how we do it, I think the male eardrum doesn't always hear the female voice the first time around. Sometimes they hear things that women say and then they repeat it fifteen minutes later as if it is their own idea. I have experienced those types of things.

I proceeded to tell Participant B, who happened to be my last interviewee, that none of the women I had spoken to had responded yes to the question. She was shocked and said, "Do you think they just don't get it?" I had actually been wondering the same thing.

There are several reasons that I can imagine would account for the fact that five of the six women interviewed reported that they had never felt their gender acted as an obstacle in their career progression. The first, most straightforward reason is that they truly did not experience any such obstacles. Based on the fact that each participant described their experience as "unique," "lucky," or "fortunate" in comparison to other

women's experiences with the pursuit of leadership, I find it difficult to agree that these women did not experience at least subtle forms of gender issues.

Second, it could be that the women had experiences where their gender had played a role, but they do not think of the experience in those terms. In some instances, the interviewees would seem to speak of an example that sounded like a gender-related issue, but they quickly found a way to attribute the issue to something other than gender. For example, Participant F described a time when her supervisor recommended her for a higher position and she felt that the president of the institution was wondering, "Who is this person and is she able...or is she too young?" Participant F said that she didn't "remember it really as a gender issue" and didn't "think it was gender per se" that was at issue. In essence, it appeared that Participant F and most of the other participants were able to identify forms of bias or discrimination in their workplace, but were unwilling to label it as a gender issue. This could be due to the fact that they believe gender was not an important factor, or it could be that these women did not want to imagine that gender discrimination was occurring to them or within their institution.

Third, it could be the case that these women did not even view their experiences as "obstacles" or "barriers" at all, much less specifically gender-based issues. Regardless of what the exact explanation is for this particular finding, it is a crucial aspect of the interviews that I did not expect. It is encouraging that all but one of these women said that she has experienced gender discrimination or issues firsthand in the workplace, but I am concerned that this may be due to the way gender issues have become more subliminal and systematic in today's world. Even if these women actually did encounter

obstacles due to their gender, they did not attribute the issues to gender discrimination, and perhaps it is this quality that helped them advance as far as they have.

### **Finding a Balance Through Mentorships and Networking**

All interviewees explained that a woman pursuing leadership in education must have someone that understands her experience and can also offer advice and act as a role model: someone from whom she can learn by example. Building mentorships and diverse professional networks was a strong point of every interview and often considered by participants to be the key to a successful career in education leadership. Unfortunately, mentors of either sex are not always available in particular fields or willing to act as a support for women entering leadership roles.

Several participants described mentorship programs that are already available at their specific educational institutions while others emphasized the informal relationships people make in the course of their career progression. Participant E stated that,

This probably goes across sectors, but some of it goes with the role model. Like, “Is there a—let’s call her ‘trailblazing’ or whatever you want—woman ahead of you who has already been through some of this and can help navigate the ropes of how you might overcome an issue or helping navigate the route or helping with the prioritization of which events are important to go to and which are not and things like that. I think for all women, finding strong mentors is a positive way to potentially overcome a barrier in your career. The challenge, of course, for many women is that there isn’t one. There isn’t a more senior woman ahead of them that they can look to and they can aspire to be like. And those are the women that are left on their own...The role model thing is a big part.

The other interviewees iterated similar sentiments towards mentors. Participant D said, “I think you can get a lot from a mentor, generally. Someone who has worked in the field for a long time and knows players and things like that.” Participant A stated, “having allies is always important...people who you feel comfortable with and that you can build



a really trustworthy relationship.” The participants explained that these mentors not only can assist women as they navigate their career, but the connections can also be crucial to further advancement as these are the people that will support you and your work.

Participants C and F took a more generalized approach to professional relationships. Participant C advised young women seeking to be leaders in education to “network and build your linkages in the organization so that people feel tied to you and want to help you.” Participant F described in detail that

One of the great things about higher education is that there are such great informal networks. There is such great peer sharing with other institutions so I think it’s possible to meet other mentors beyond just your direct reporters. I think the great thing about higher education is that we are pretty decentralized and you can find those resources yourself. You can reach out to people pretty easily and there are not a lot of organizational barriers preventing you from doing that... Having success in a career in higher education requires you to build that network of supporting relationships. So you have to build your network both up and down and then inside and outside the organization with your peer relationships.

It is evident from the participants’ responses that forging strong, trustworthy relationships with peers is an essential element of success.

Most of the interviewees stated that it would not necessarily matter whether someone’s mentor was male or female. However, as evident from some of the preceding quotes, the participants also emphasized the importance of having a relationship with someone that understands your personal journey and challenges. One interviewee, Participant A, had an interesting story that related to this concept. Participant A described having a staff member a number of years ago that was under her management who was constantly taking off time from work in order to stay home with her kids because they were sick or some other thing was happening in her family. Participant A explains,

I remember thinking to myself, ‘She is taking a *lot* of time. Her kids are sick a *lot*.’ And now, later on, now that I am a parent, I look back on that situation and I feel embarrassed about how I felt towards her because I had never been in her shoes. So I didn’t understand how often kids really do get sick, especially when they’re really little. And that you need flexibility.

This does not necessarily mean that only a female peer or boss can understand another female’s concerns, but Participant A’s story reveals the benefit of forging relationships with other female leaders in particular due to their success at balancing work and family.

Additionally, the participants offered advice at times to suggest how younger women can form these special relationships in the workplace. In some ways, the advice seems somewhat common-sense such as acquiring the ideals of patience and being a kind individual. However, I found that the wording used by some of the women indicated an encouragement for young women to remain passive when encountering difficulties in their personal advancement.

For example, Participant F encouraged women “to forge a relationship with the people to whom you’re reporting and delivering results to that are willing to listen and help give visibility to those results so that they get recognized.” She seemed to imply from our conversation that a woman with the opportunity to present ideas for change in a leadership position needs others to help champion her ideas and ensure they get noticed. Participant C stated that “there will be times and challenges and colleagues that you don’t love and are really hard to work with and my posture on that is to just stay professional. Don’t let anything show. Just do the job the best you can and let it speak for itself.” She went on to advise that “having a positive attitude helps. People like nice people and want to work with you if you’re nice.” These participants seemed to suggest that a woman’s

success requires being friendly and declining to be aggressive when dealing with challenging people or issues or even when presenting her own ideas.

Participant B had perhaps the most interesting statement along the lines of active passive in order to succeed. After explaining several experiences she has had with male peers that refuse to listen to her or attempt to take credit for her ideas, I asked Participant B how she was able to cope with or overcome those issues. Her answer was,

I don't think I set it out to be a strategy, but I befriend them. I am super, super nice and befriend them. And pretty soon they start to give you credit... I think women have to work harder and I don't think we naturally talk about our accomplishment, so we often get overlooked... I think in education, women think that we may have a little leg-up because we have been in it for such a long time, but we never act like we know a lot more and I think we have to do that.

Participant B went on to explain that although ambitious men are seen as “heroes,” “ambitious women are looked down upon.” Therefore, being a great female leader requires dedication not to yourself or your work but to “the people you serve.” In education, those people are the students, and Participant B says that “you must be loyal to the students... then people will understand that you always put the students first and they will trust you and follow you. You can't be a leader without followers.”

The information gathered from these participants corresponds with the analysis of a recent study conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE) about women leaders in education. Gennie Lynn (2012) from Texas A&M University noted that according to the ACE report, female presidents of university are generally “more interactive, consultative and relational, restrained, patient, and able to handle frustration” than their male counterparts (p. 28). Lynn (2012) refers to this as “servant leadership” because the female leader is more concerned with supporting the overall organization and

its members rather than promoting their achievements or pursuing personal goals. The interviews I conducted for this study clearly support the idea of women as servant leaders: focused on the individuals being served by education and remaining passive when encountering difficulties in the workplace.

### **Choosing the More Difficult Path**

The most significant thread that I discovered woven among the six interviews was the concept of these women actively choosing to pursue the more challenging road in order to pursue their passions and succeed as leaders in education. Choosing the more difficult path means placing yourself in an uncomfortable position, rejecting traditional gender roles, and being determined to work extremely hard when it feels that everything is working against you. Indeed, choosing a traditionally female role can give women a sense of security, peace, ease, and fewer obstacles. Being the “outsider” or “pioneer” in a field can be intimidating and challenging.

Participants E, C, and B provided the most detailed accounts of why women in educational leadership encounter unique barriers and why they chose to face those challenges. Participant E explained that, “very often women have the specific challenge of the fact that your most productive years work-wise end up being your most productive years from a child-bearing standpoint.” In this way, she says that women feel that they must make a choice between fulfilling a career or creating and supporting a family; a process she refers to as “self-inflicted.” Participant C said that women tend to choose the roles that conventional wisdom dictates as “female,” namely being a wife and mother. She says that “people work within their comfort zone” and that they must be “really

resilient” to withstand the inside and outside pressures and stereotypes. In short, women are placed in a sort of “lose-lose” situation where working mothers feel chastised for not staying home and raising her children while stay-at-home mothers are marginalized as incapable of organizational leadership.

As Participant B put it, when work and family conflict, “women tend to give up the fight.” She explained,

There’s a myth that women can have it all, but really what that means is they have to *do* it all. And they have to be skinny and do it in high heels. And be the perfect mother and head of their company. And I think where we [the older generation of women] made the mistake was that we talked about equality and we really wanted it but I don’t think that’s possible. If you actually give birth to a baby... We should have talked more about equality in that realm and what does that mean instead of just wanting equal rights. But it is tough right now. Women have to work, manage children, some are getting better husbands—they really are—but, the fact of the matter is that we shouldn’t have made it worse...The women that try to do both still feel like they are giving something up.

In other words, the women that entered the workforce about thirty or forty years ago felt that equality meant having a choice. However, once women actually felt that they could make that choice, they realized “choice” might not have been the most important part of gender equality.

Even if this form of choice may not be the key to gender equality, the interviews with these six women leaders revealed that part of their success was attributed to their choice to face adversity and take the more challenging road to success. Most often, the participants attribute this resilience to an inward dedication to and passion for education.

### **Recommendations**

Research to further understand why women are underrepresented in leadership roles in education is an important step toward eliminating gender obstacles to clear the

path to success. Issues surrounding the work-family conflict must be more thoroughly addressed and the cultural assumptions about leadership potential or effectiveness must be further challenged. Our society needs special, specifically-designed social policies and programs guided towards gender equality at home and in the workplace. We must question existing policies and brainstorm ways to improve them. We need more egalitarian relationships at home and more flexibility in the workplace to encourage equal family and work responsibilities.

Additional research should be conducted to gather the personal experiences of more female leaders in the field of education and beyond. In contrast to this research, future studies may benefit from interviewing women that did not succeed at becoming leaders in education or those who chose to remain in lower-level or non-administrative positions. Furthermore, future research should incorporate race relations into the discussion of leadership equity, as race brings an entirely new dimension to the existing issue.

### **Conclusion**

Increasing the number of women leaders in education can help create an environment that is more equitable for men and women. Female leaders in education can assist in encouraging practices such as more gender-neutral forms of recruitment for faculty or decision making for tenures. Feminism as a whole may not simply be a matter of giving women a “choice” to opt in or out of work or take care of children: we must establish a greater vision for gender equality and justice that incorporates all types of people and families.

APPENDIX A  
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**Project Title:** *Women in Leadership and the Politics of Power*

**Researcher:** C. Maeve Kendall, Graduate Student

**Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Noah Sobe, CEPS Graduate Program Director

### **Introduction:**

You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by graduate student Maeve Kendall for a master's thesis under the supervision of Noah Sobe in the Department of Cultural and Educational Policy Studies (CEPS) at Loyola University of Chicago.

You are being asked to participate because you are a successful female leader in the field of Education and have some degree of control or management over similar peers. Your unique position and the process of attaining such advancement will be invaluable to this study in gathering experiential, first-hand contributions. In total, approximately 6 to 8 women in positions of power in education will be interviewed for this project.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

### **Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to gather a more thorough understanding of individual female experiences in leadership positions in the field of education in relation to the literature on female leadership in a gendered workforce. Although this study will only include the experiences of several women leaders in the field of education in the Chicago area, the preexisting research on the topic guides the interview questions and divulges the nexus between a culture of systematic gendered hierarchy in the workplace and the strategies and characteristics of success employed by female leaders as they encounter these phenomena in daily life.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a 20 to 30-minute interview at a time and location most convenient for you. The subject matter of the interview will concern your personal thoughts and experiences as a female leader in the field of education. The questions in the interview will ask you to recount specific instances when gender has played a role as a barrier and/or advantage to your or others' advancement in education. The researcher may also inquire into the presence or absence of support systems for women in education. All interviews will be audio-recorded directly to the researcher's computer.

### **Risks/Benefits:**

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.



Although there are no direct benefits to you from participation, the results of this research will contribute to present discourse concerning female leaders in education. Adding individual voices and experiences to this area of study will help our society better comprehend and confront the gender disparities found in education and a great number of other professions around the world.

**Confidentiality:**

- Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest possible extent of the law. All information that you provide will be held in complete confidence and, unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research.
- Audio-Recordings: An alias will be used to identify you on the audio recording of the interview and any transcripts or subsequent productions of the interview dialogue.
- All data will be stored only on the researcher's personal computer that will be securely in the researcher's physical possession or in a locked facility at all times. Immediately after the project's completion (anticipated August 2013), all data and records of the interview will be eliminated to protect your privacy.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have questions about this research project or the interview, please feel free to contact Maeve Kendall via email at [cmaevekendall@gmail.com](mailto:cmaevekendall@gmail.com) or phone at (847) 347 – 3229 or the faculty sponsor Noah Sobe at [nsobe@luc.edu](mailto:nsobe@luc.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

**Statement of Consent:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

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**Participant's Signature**

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**Date**

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**Researcher's Signature**

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**Date**

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW SCRIPT DRAFT

1. *Can you recount an instance in your career when you felt that your gender acted as a barrier to your professional advancement?*
2. *If yes to (1), were you able to overcome or get around that barrier? How?*
3. *Now that you have achieved the position you currently occupy, is there anything that you would have done differently from how you dealt with issues in the past?*
4. *Can you describe another woman or women that you know in the field of education that were not able to overcome certain barriers to advancement? If so, what sort of barriers did they encounter?*
5. *If yes to (4), why do you think that these women were not able to overcome the barriers they encountered?*
6. *Are there support systems that can make a difference in these situations? What kinds of supports are needed (if any)?*
7. *Do you think that these barriers, support systems, etc. are different in the field of education than they are in other professions? Why or why not?*
8. *Thinking of the most successful male colleague(s) that you know, what attributes do you think he has that make him so successful?*
9. *If a woman had the same attributes you listed from (7), do you believe she would attain the same success? Why or why not?*

APPENDIX C  
SAMPLE RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Prospective Subject,

My name is Maeve Kendall and I am a graduate student at Loyola University of Chicago in the department of Cultural and Educational Policy Studies. My Master's thesis will be a research study of the experiences of women in the field of education and the gender barriers they have encountered throughout their careers and how such barriers have or have not been overcome.

You have been selected due to your unique position of leadership in education and success in a gendered workforce. If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 20 to 30-minute interview. The Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of any subject that chooses to participate. Please find the attached consent form for further information.

If you are interested in participating, please email me at [cmaevekendall@gmail.com](mailto:cmaevekendall@gmail.com) or call at (847) 347 - 3229 so that we may discuss the project further and/or set up an interview at a time and location most convenient for you.

Thank you,  
C. Maeve Kendall

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## VITA

C. Maeve Kendall was born and raised in Glenview, Illinois. Before attending Loyola University – Chicago (LUC), she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy with a certificate in Global Cultures from the University of Wisconsin – Madison in 2009. From 2010 to 2013, Kendall was enrolled in LUC’s dual degree program in Law and Cultural and Educational Policy Studies. She received her Juris Doctorate from LUC School of Law in May, 2013 and became a member of the Illinois Bar on October 31, 2013.

While at LUC, Kendall served as Vice President of the Student Bar Association and was an active member of the Thomas Tang and National Moot Court Teams. Currently, she lives in Chicago, Illinois and works as a law clerk to the Honorable William J. Bauer on the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals.