

Female academics and shamans face the same glass ceiling

Data on Female Faculty Members

Females among all headcount Faculty (1993-2013)			
	1993 N = 915,474	2003 N = 1,173,593	2013 N = 1,544,060
Female %	38.6%	43%	49%
Females among All Full Professors (1993-2013)			
	1993 N = 142,000	2003 N = 181,000	2013 N = 181,000
Female %	17%	23.7%	31%
Female Full Professors among All Full Time Faculty (1993-2003)			
	1993 N = 545,706	2003 N = 631,596	2013 N = 791,391
Female %	14.6%	15.8%	15.7%

Source: TIAA Institute

It's another International Women's Day and time to reflect on powerful women: what is most noticeable about them is that there are so few of them.

In academia, for instance, we often hear that women have made substantial gains in recent years and [now account for close to half of all faculty members in universities](#). But you know where those gains have been made? [In untenured positions, casual positions, and positions below the Senior Lecturer level](#). According to [Inside Higher Education](#), the rate of full professors – the ultimate prize on the academic career ladder – has remained steady at around 15% of all faculty members in the past twenty years. [Only around 9% of women who become academic staff members achieve full professor status](#) – that's not counting all the PhDs who do not ever become academic staff members in the first place. And even if a woman achieves full professor status, [she can expect to earn less than her male peers](#).

If you think that's bad, look outside academia:

white men make up more than 80% of Congress, 78% of state political executives, 75% of state legislators, 84% of mayors of the top 100 cities, 85% of corporate executive officers, 100% of CEOs of Wall Street firms, 95% of Fortune 500 CEOs, 73% of tenured professors, 64% of newsroom staffers, 97% of heads of venture capital firms, 90% of tech jobs in Silicon Valley, 97% of owners of television and radio licenses, 87% of police departments and 68% of U.S. Circuit Court Judges (Feagin & Ducey, 2017, p. 2)

In addition to these indicators of formal power, it's also worth thinking about informal power. In academia, informal power results from reputation and "impact." [If you google "most famous linguists"](#), for instance, you get Noam Chomsky at number one (no surprise there), and then Pier Paolo Pasolini, Anthony Burgess (why?!), Al-Biruni, Larry Wall (the creator of the PERL programming language), Leone Battista Alberti, Steven Pinker, J.R.R. Tolkien, Edward Sapir, and Mikhail Bakhtin as the top ten.

While the definition of "linguist" used by [ranker.com](#) is, well, "interesting" and while I was surprised to see that the list is [somewhat less Anglo-centric than one might have expected](#), the list is certainly male.

Incidentally, the first woman to appear on the list is Carol Chomsky at #18. Good on her but up until now I did not even know that the wife of Noam Chomsky was a linguist, too. And this gives us a first indication where female power – formal or informal – comes from: rare as it is, female power most often accrues to women who are associated with powerful men.

Women of color are also more likely to hold lower-ranking academic positions³³

Percentage of Women of Color in Academic Positions and Tenure Status in the United States³⁴

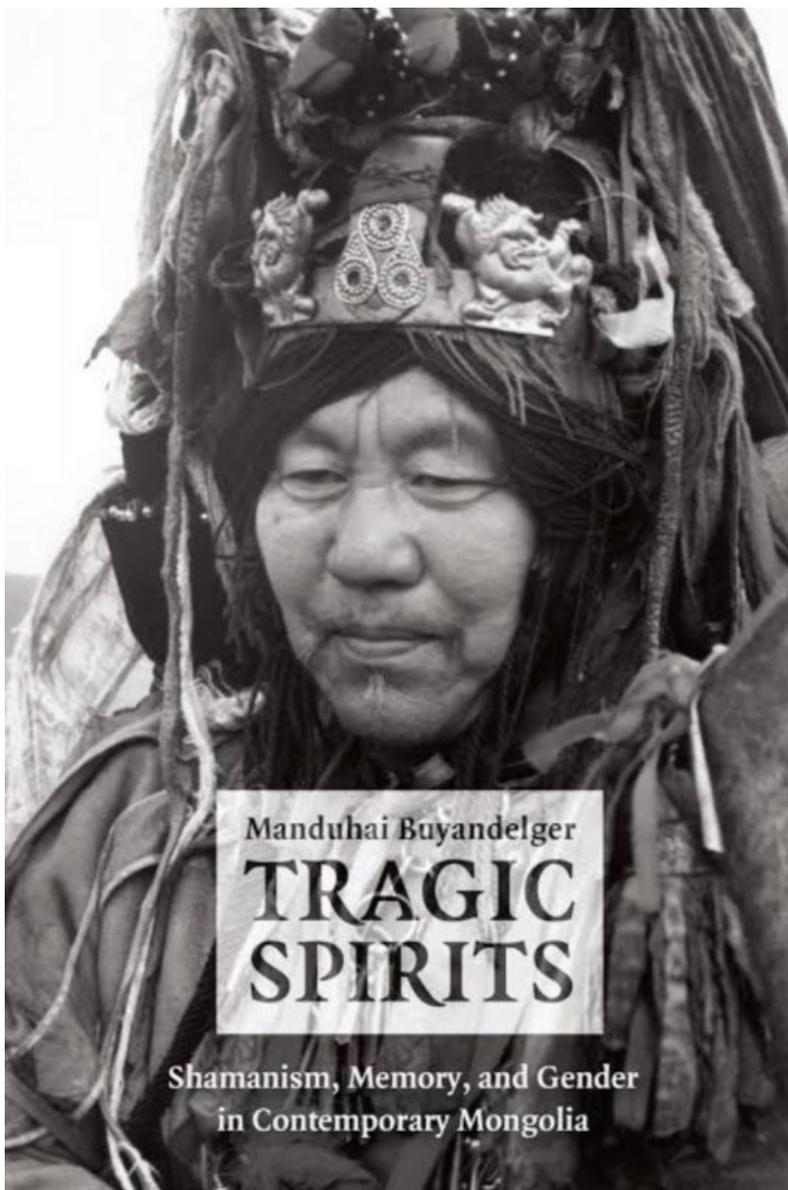
	Tenure-Track	Tenured	Professors	Associate Professors	Assistant Professors	Instructors
Asian Women	5.3%	3.5%	2.8%	4.8%	5.8%	3.3%
Black Women	3.8%	2.3%	1.6%	3.0%	4.0%	4.8%
Latinas	3.1%	2.6%	2.1%	2.6%	2.9%	4.7%

The [top ten linguists according to Google Scholar](#) (which only ranks those with a Google Scholar profile) are also exclusively male and, now, white and Anglophone: George Lakoff, MAK Halliday, James Paul Gee, Steven Pinker (the only one on both lists), Stephen C. Levinson, Ray Jackendoff, Douglas Biber, JR Martin, Dan Jurafsky, and Harald Baayen. Anna Wierzbicka is the first woman at #11 – just a little too late to show her on the first page of search results ...

In this day and age, this continued male dominance is puzzling, seeing that men and women are formally equal in most societies around the globe, and have been so for a while. Continued white male dominance is particularly puzzling in western academia, which has embraced a rhetoric of gender and racial equality. In fact, valuing diversity is high on the mission statements of most universities. Despite all this, the rise of white women to power has been painfully slow and that of women of color even more so ([in the USA, 3.5% of full professors are Asian women, 2.6% Latinas, and 1.6% Black women](#)).

A comparison with shamanism might provide an explanation.

Just like academia has its hierarchy of casual tutors, postdocs, associate lecturers, assistant professors, senior lecturers, associate professors, readers, full professors, and distinguished professors, shamanism recognizes a hierarchy formally marked through initiation and progression rituals.



Also like academia, shamanism embraces an egalitarian rhetoric and, theoretically, male and female shamans have an equal chance to reach the most powerful shamanic rank of zaarin or duurisah. In fact, it is widely assumed that women are spiritually more talented than men and connect to the spirit world more easily, as [Manduhai Buyandelger](#) describes in [Tragic Spirits](#), an ethnography of shamanism in Mongolia.

Even so – and that’s the final parallel with academia – male shamans progress to the highest ranks and female shamans don’t:

The [shamans] who had achieved the highest rank were almost exclusively male, whereas a disproportionate number of female shamans were stuck somewhere in the middle, having performed

only three or four shanars [=initiation and progression rituals] out of the seven needed to reach the [top] title of duurisah. (Buyandelger, 2013, p. 172)

The careers of female shamans stall for a variety of reasons. To understand those, one must keep in mind that achieving the highest rank in any career is expensive, labor-intensive and time-consuming.

To start a career – be it as academic or as shaman – certainly requires individual talent and gift but it also requires a material investment: access to higher education in one case, access to performance spaces, shamanic paraphernalia, and livestock in the latter.

To advance their careers, shamans need to gain followers. This is achieved particularly through travel and hosting.

By travelling, shamans learn more about the spirit world and also expand their networks. However, travel is easier for men than for women. The latter are tied down by care obligations at home and, if they travel, the threat of sexual violence is ever present.

Hosting ceremonies and after-ceremony parties is another way for shamans to further their careers. Again, hosting is easier for men than for women. The powerful male shamans featured in [Tragic Spirits](#) controlled large rural households: that meant space to stage a performance for large numbers of people, the material resources to host them, and the support cast to have them well looked after.

Female shamans, by contrast, might only have access to a tiny apartment where few guests could be accommodated; they might not have the financial resources to acquire provisions; and they were dependent on their husbands and in-laws for permission to host guests. Even with permission, they might face the double burden of staging a ceremony and looking after their guests' well-being.

Like shamanic careers, academic careers are advanced by mobility and performance. Like for shamanic women, mobility and performance raise conundrums for academic women, as they often bring professional and personal lives in conflict.

To succeed as a shaman – and, I would venture, in any career – professional and personal lives have to be in harmony, as Buyandelger (2013, p. 190) explains:

In order to achieve the status of a full-fledged shaman and then to maintain that status successfully and continuously, a person must be free from daily household and family duties while still receiving services and benefits from their family members and utilizing the domestic space and the household money. To some extent, a shaman, whether male or female, needs a “wife” – a virtuous and nurturing individual who is versed in shamanic knowledge and who voluntarily structures her life around the unpredictable life of a shaman.

It is, of course, not difficult to guess that male shamans are much more likely to have a “wife” in their lives than female shamans.

Not only are female shamans less likely to have a “wife” in their lives, there is something else in the professional-personal tension that holds them back. In order to be successful in any career, professional expertise is not enough. To reach the top of your career, you also need the right kind of personality.

What the right kind of personality is differs for men and women. Top shamans need a spotless reputation. For women that includes marriage and motherhood. However, marriage and motherhood then become precisely the personal obstacles that make shamanic advancement difficult.

Even if in slightly different forms, the double bind that pits professional proficiency against gender proficiency is the principle obstacle to the advancement of women to top positions in any field.

Furthermore, in order to succeed, the conflict between professional and personal success that many women experience must be silenced. There are no heroic narratives of overcoming challenges resulting from not having a “wife”, and women’s stories about such challenges sound disfluent and whining. To articulate the conflict between the professional and the personal is to admit failure and, hence, constitutes a career obstacle.

Ultimately, as long as institutions claim gender neutrality it will always only be a minority of women who advance to positions of power:

The conflict between the public expectations that female shamans can become as powerful as male shamans and society's unwillingness to recognize the concrete obstacles that limit women's quest for power results in a double disadvantage for female shamans.

(Buyandelger, 2013. p. 200)

Just substitute "academic" for "shaman"!

References

Buyandelger, M. (2013). *Tragic Spirits: Shamanism, Memory, and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Feagin, J. R., & Ducey, K. (2017). *Elite White Men Ruling: Who, What, When, Where, and How*. London: Routledge.

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