



BREAKING GLASS CEILINGS: WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION ACROSS MUSLIM COMMONWEALTH ASIAN COUNTRIES



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The journey toward gender equality in leadership, especially within higher education, has seen profound progress worldwide. However, in Muslim-majority Commonwealth Asian countries like Malaysia, Brunei, The Maldives, and Pakistan, unique political and socio-cultural dynamics continue to shape the challenges and opportunities women leaders face. This newsletter dives into the realities, triumphs, and strategies of women who are breaking the glass ceiling in these regions, advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). Therefore, the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility (CTEF) is committed to studying women's leadership in higher education, particularly in Muslim-majority Commonwealth countries.

SHATTERING THE GLASS CEILING

Women leaders Malaysia, Brunei, The Maldives, and Pakistan are redefining leadership in higher education. While each country has its unique landscape, common challenges persist:

- **Socio-Cultural Norms:** Gender expectations play a significant role in shaping perceptions about women in leadership. Cultural norms that emphasize traditional gender roles often limit women's aspirations and restrict pathways to leadership.
- **Political Frameworks and Policies:** National policies on gender equality can vary widely across these countries. While Malaysia and Brunei have made strides toward policy-based support for women in higher education, other nations like Pakistan and the Maldives face more complex political landscapes that hinder women's empowerment.
- **Balancing Tradition and Modernity:** Women leaders frequently find themselves negotiating the dual expectations of preserving cultural values while also advocating for progressive change.

FEATURE STORY: OVERCOMING BARRIERS OF WOMEN LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA, MALDIVES, BRUNEI, AND PAKISTAN

In each of these countries, women are entering higher education leadership with a renewed sense of purpose, not just to meet institutional goals but to represent and inspire other women. Their presence in roles such as vice-chancellors, deans, and academic directors signifies a growing acceptance of women as influential leaders in higher education. This transformation aligns with the global movement towards gender equality, particularly in achieving SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).



Unique Challenges and Opportunities

1. **Malaysia:** Women leaders in Malaysia navigate a unique balance of traditional values and progressive policies. Malaysia has seen positive advancements in gender equality in education, yet women leaders continue to face cultural and societal expectations. By cultivating inclusive environments, female leaders are helping redefine the standards for future leaders in higher education.
2. **The Maldives:** In the Maldives, higher education leadership among women remains a developing field. The influence of socio-cultural hurdles that limit women's mobility in leadership. However, the Maldivian government's commitment to educational reforms and the role of women leaders are gradually overcoming these barriers, bringing a opportunity for women leadership.
3. **Brunei:** Brunei's political stability and strong support for education offer a fertile ground for women's leadership. The higher education sector is witnessing a shift, with more women taking up leadership positions. However, conservative societal expectations mean women often need to work twice as hard to prove their capabilities. Women in leadership positions here are increasingly recognized for their contributions to fostering quality education and creating inclusive academic environments.
4. **Pakistan:** Pakistani women in academia are gradually gaining ground in leadership roles despite strong socio-cultural barriers. Progressive policies and international support for female education have empowered many women to pursue higher education leadership, but challenges related to societal expectations remain. Yet, resilient and visionary women in the education sector are setting precedents, showing that transformative leadership is possible through mentoring, policy advocacy, and community support networks.

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Voices of Change: Inspirational Women in Higher Education

Through interviews with prominent women in higher education, we highlight insights and experiences that showcase resilience and innovative strategies for overcoming barriers. These women leaders advocate for:

- **Policy Advocacy:** Building alliances with government agencies and civil society to advocate for gender-equitable policies.
- **Mentorship Programs:** Many women are involved in mentorship initiatives, fostering future women leaders by sharing experiences, strategies, and support.
- **Community Engagement:** Emphasizing the role of community support, these leaders are bringing a collective change by rallying communities around the importance of women in leadership roles.

Strategies for Supporting Women Leaders in Higher Education

- **Enhancing Leadership Training Programs:** Providing tailored leadership training that prepares women to navigate socio-cultural and political challenges specific to their contexts.
- **Encouraging International Collaborations:** Programs that connect women leaders across Commonwealth countries foster knowledge sharing, support, and empowerment.
- **Establishing Safe Networks for Women Leaders:** Safe spaces where women can exchange insights and provide mutual support are essential in overcoming challenges.
- **Expanding Research and Data Collection:** Detailed, context-specific research can highlight gaps and successes, guiding more effective policies and initiatives.

CALL TO ACTION: ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Achieving gender equality in higher education leadership requires a concerted effort across political, societal, and institutional levels. All stakeholders, governments, educational institutions, and communities must work together to support women leaders in breaking traditional barriers.

To support this mission, the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility (CTEF) encourages active participation in mentorship programs, policy advocacy, and gender equality initiatives. Together, we can ensure that the voices of women leaders resonate powerfully in shaping the future of higher education.

