

Women in Higher Education Leadership in South Asia: Rejection, Refusal, Reluctance, Revisioning

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Aims

The British Council in Pakistan commissioned the research in response to concerns in the profession about the under-representation of women in senior leadership positions in higher education (HE) in South Asia. The British Council in Pakistan was coordinating a series of high-level strategic policy dialogues for the South Asia region- Global Education Dialogues (GEDS), each of which was framed by research and think pieces to promote debate on critical issues in the region. As part of this research effort the South Asia GEDS wanted to commission a more significant research report into Women, Higher Education and Leadership. The research aimed to seek existing knowledge and baseline data from literature, policies, change interventions and available statistics on the situation for women in higher education leadership in six countries in South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). It also aimed to collect original data via 30 interviews with women and men in the region, and to construct recommendations about what specific future actions and interventions for change could be implemented in South Asia.

Research Overview

Our study discovered an overwhelming absence of any statistical data in the region on women and leadership, with most countries, with the exception of Sri Lanka, not keeping or reporting systematic disaggregated staff data. It also found that gender was an absent category of analysis in most of the higher education policy documentation in the region. When gender was included, it related to students, rather than to staff. There was a lack of substantive scholarship and research on the topic of women and leadership in higher education in the region. The studies that did exist were largely small-scale unfunded postgraduate inquiries.

Our empirical study also found that women are not being identified and prepared for leadership. There is also evidence globally that when women do aspire for leadership, they are frequently rejected from the most senior positions. However, we also found that many women academics are reluctant to aim for senior leadership and perceive it as an unattractive career option.

A key question resulting from our findings is whether women are being rejected or disqualified from senior leadership through discriminatory recruitment, selection and promotion procedures, gendered career pathways or exclusionary networks and practices in women-unfriendly institutions or indeed whether women are refusing, resisting or dismissing senior leadership and making strategic decisions not to apply for positions which they evaluate as unattractive, onerous and undesirable.

We conclude that it is a complex combination of multiple factors. While some women are entering and flourishing in senior leadership positions, they are few in number. There are consequences of women's under-representation including depressed



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employment and promotion opportunities, democratic deficit, under-representation in decision-making fora and the reproduction of cultural messages to students, staff and wider society that suggest that women are unsuited to leadership. Multi-dimensional social, cultural, economic and institutional barriers to women in leadership exist, but there are also enablers including training and development, support and mentorship and international networks and mobility. However, there is an urgent need to revision leadership to make it more attractive and hospitable to women and men, rather than focusing simply on counting more women into existing systems and structures.

Summary of Research Findings

Policy

- ✚ **Poor record on gender equality.** Five of the South Asian countries in the study (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) rank between 68 and 141 out of 142 countries in the Global Gender Gap. Afghanistan is unranked.
- ✚ **Gender is often an absent category of analysis** in higher education policy—unless it refers to participation rates of students.
- ✚ **Quality, rather than equality.** The dominant discourses in higher education leadership are frequently posed in the gender-neutral language of the knowledge economy with the emphasis on quality assurance, good governance, internationalisation, the digital economy, widening participation and concern for development of capacity in science and technology (STEM).
- ✚ When gender policies do exist, there is an absence of attention to **strategic management** of their implementation.
- ✚ There is an absence of **gender-disaggregated statistics** held at country or regional level with which to inform and evaluate effective policy implementation. The absence of gender disaggregated statistics for staff means that progress is not being monitored or managed.
- ✚ The statistics that are available provide **no evidence of any linear trends** in the gender distribution of academic staff in higher education, or in academic leadership. In a context of HE expansion, the numbers of women faculty may have increased, but the low representation of women, particularly in more senior positions, remains substantially unchanged.
- ✚ There is an absence of **research-based evidence** with which to inform policy development on gender and leadership in the region.

Barriers to Women's Leadership

- ✚ **The Power of the socio-cultural:** While there have been some women heads of state in the region (Sheikh Hasina is the current Prime Minister of Bangladesh and in 1960 in Sri Lanka, Sirimavo Bandaranaike was the first female Prime Minister in the world), women are largely still identified with the domestic sphere and with caring/nurturing, extended family roles.



- ✚ **Socio-economic backgrounds and socio-cultural belief systems** were reported by participants in the interviews as significant constraints to women pursuing academic careers. Societies have potent messages about what is considered gender appropriate behaviour e.g. women should not be in authority over men.
- ✚ **Social class and caste** intersected with gender to determine which women could enter leadership positions. Women from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds often reported family support and cultural capital that helped them navigate education and employment structures. Opportunities were highly uneven across the region, and most often associated with urban elite families.
- ✚ **Lack of investment in women:** The absence of structured interventions to develop women's leadership was widely reported. Successful senior women discussed how they had had to learn on the job, or seek out their own development - often overseas. There were no formal mentoring arrangements, very few development programmes and no structured capacity-building or career advice.
- ✚ **Organisational culture:** Studies of academic cultures and reports in the interviews point to the patriarchal nature of higher education institutions (HEIs). They are frequently represented as unfriendly and unaccommodating to women. This is experienced as gender discrimination and bias, and in extreme terms, as gender based violence (symbolic and actual) on HE campuses including sexual harassment, and stalking.
- ✚ **Perceptions of leadership:** Many women in this study perceived leadership as a diversion from their commitment to research and scholarship, seeing it as a set of unattractive administrative functions requiring a 24/7 commitment in a globally competitive and performance-oriented academic culture. The few who had entered senior leadership were pleased with what they had been able to achieve, but stressed the lack of formal training and development for the position. It was assumed that their academic skills and competencies would be transferable into leadership.
- ✚ **Recruitment and selection:** Appointment processes for leadership positions were critiqued by 14 people in the interviews and the literature for their political and/ or precarious nature, lacking transparency and susceptible to gender bias. The appointment of leaders was often a political process, explicitly or implicitly, which required lobbying and the construction of highly visible public profiles. This often worked against women who were excluded from influential networks and coalitions because of their sex, domestic responsibilities or codes of sexual propriety.
- ✚ **Family:** Expectations of caregiving were described as constraining the extent that women can engage in HE careers. However, family support was also cited as critical to women academics' career progression.
- ✚ **Gender and authority:** The association of leadership with particular types of



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masculinity (competitive, ruthless and politically networked) meant that many women do not think of themselves as leaders, or resist assuming positions which could leave them isolated and subject to hostility from colleagues who do not recognise their authority).

- ✚ **Corruption**- The construction of leaders as being vulnerable to allegations of bribery and corruption was cited in the interviews. It was also suggested that they would be viewed as having gained leadership positions via corrupt practices.

Enablers

- ✚ **Internationalisation** and opportunities for mobility, networks and research partnerships. These contacts, not only provided resources, but also introduced women to new knowledge, contacts and professional approaches.
- ✚ **Institutional policies** and practices including affirmative action, work/life balance and family-friendly interventions. However, it was thought essential that policies are accompanied by strategic implantation plans.
- ✚ **Women-only** leadership development courses that offer practical support, but are also at an appropriate theoretical and research-informed level for senior women academics.
- ✚ **Mentoring programmes** at formal and informal levels.
- ✚ **Gender sensitisation programmes**- It was thought essential that women and men were made more aware of how gender operates as a verb as well as a noun in academic life. For example, it is not just about counting more women into existing systems and structures, but should include an understanding of how gender differences are produced and maintained by social and organisational practices.
- ✚ **Private higher education** - There is limited and somewhat contradictory literature on how the emergence of private education is affecting opportunities for women academics to enter leadership positions. The significant rise of the private sector (including women-only institutions) is providing complex and contradictory opportunities for women's leadership. For example, the Asian University for Women (AUW) in Bangladesh (a women-only university) and Symbiosis University in India both have female vice-chancellors.
- ✚ **Women-only learning spaces** - The preference for sex-segregated education in some contexts (often associated with religious belief systems) means that some single-sex higher education institutions are emerging. These create some opportunities for women to enter leadership positions. However, these leadership positions can be viewed as less prestigious than those in the co-educational sector.
- ✚ **Professional Development** e.g. opportunities for doctoral study, and regular updating.



Recommendations for Future Action

Policy

- ✚ Gender to be mainstreamed into higher education policy in relation to students and staff, with equality seen as a central constituent in quality.
- ✚ Policies on gender equality and gender mainstreaming need to be developed and accompanied by strategic action plans, resource allocation and reporting mechanisms. These should include time lines, goals/ performance indicators and effective evaluation procedures.
- ✚ Policy needs to be informed by gender-disaggregated statistics that are updated regularly and made readily accessible. These need to be for HE staff across different employment categories.
- ✚ Policies on recruitment and selection of senior leaders need to be reviewed to aim for more transparency and accountability in decision-making.

Developing Women

- ✚ Investment in women's capacity-building is essential in all countries. This includes research-informed, women-only leadership development programmes; access to doctoral degrees; training and continuous professional development opportunities, mentorship programmes and networks.

Research and Teaching

- ✚ More evidence is required from research studies on women in leadership to inform policies and practices in the region. Gender also could be integrated more successfully into research networks in the region.
- ✚ The socio-cultural challenges identified in this study to be addressed via the curriculum e.g. Gender Studies, and also through professional development for staff e.g. gender sensitisation programmes.

Our study suggests that women are not being identified and prepared for leadership. There is also evidence globally that when women do aspire for leadership, they are frequently rejected from the most senior positions. However, we also found that many women academics are reluctant to aim for senior leadership and perceive it as an unattractive career option. There is an urgent need to revision leadership to make it more attractive and hospitable to women and men, rather than focusing simply on counting more women into existing systems and structures.



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