

# The Unfinished Nature of Women's Leadership in Higher Education

Tessa DeLaquil

Development toward achieving the human right of gender equality in the higher education context is not uniform, especially lagging when it comes to positions of leadership and decision-making. Gender equality in higher education leadership may be considered to be “unfinished” or “partial” at national/regional, historical and sociocultural, and individual levels. Thus, addressing this issue and working to achieve this goal requires concerted efforts to provide supports at each of these levels.

While overall access of women to higher education as students has risen in some but not all regions (sometimes reaching over parity), this development is not uniform and is by and large not paralleled in positions of leadership and decision-making, according to the latest [International Brief for Higher Education Leaders](#) from the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Center for International Higher Education (CIHE), titled *Women's Representation in Higher Education Leadership Around the World*.

The Brief reveals the “unfinished” business of achieving gender equality at individual, institutional, national, and international levels. Indeed, the proportion of women in senior leadership positions in the examined country cases ranges from negligible participation at higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ghana (Adu-Yeboah et al.) or public HEIs in Hong Kong (Chelan Li & Chui Ping Kam), to few positions at Islamic and public HEIs in Indonesia (Ferary), to 10 percent in Malaysia (Azman), 19.5 percent in South Africa (Moodly), 24 percent in Kazakhstan (Kuzhabekova), and 28 percent of vice-chancellor positions in Australian HEIs (Di Iorio).

Although the barriers and supports related to the achievement of women leaders in higher education vary by social and historical context, there are certain identifiable commonalities across the country cases that make clear the unfinished nature of the project of achieving gender equality in women's leadership in higher education.

## Understanding the Elements of Women's Leadership in Higher Education

The unfinished nature of the achievement of the human right of gender equality, in terms of representation of women in leadership in general and in higher education in particular, may be understood as partial at three levels in relation to: national/regional context; historical effects and sociocultural foundations; individuals and the complexity of individual identity, including factors of marginalization.

For instance, the general paucity of women in leadership in higher education is visible even in some countries where representation of women in the pipeline (in undergraduate and graduate degree programs) is reaching parity. This phenomenon varies by regional and national context, by institutional type (e.g., by university ranking and classification), and by societal culture, tradition, and the related sociocultural expectations imposed upon women. Intersectionality also determines outcomes, as other markers of marginalization further restrict representation and participation for women in positions of higher education leadership.

## Barriers to Achieving Gender Equality in Higher Education Leadership

Since barriers to achieving gender equality in higher education leadership occur at each of these levels (national or institutional, cultural, and individual), effective supports and structural change must also respond at each level. According to the cases in the

### Abstract

Development in gender equality in higher education is not uniform, especially lagging in positions of leadership and decision-making. It may be considered as “unfinished” or “partial” at national/regional, historical and sociocultural, and individual levels, and thus requires concerted efforts to provide support at each level.

Support and encouragement for individual women to achieve their career goals can be productive, but are generally most useful when accompanied by institutional and national leadership and programming.

*Tessa DeLaquil is a research assistant and doctoral student at the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College, US. Email: tessa.delaquil@bc.edu*

*This piece is an abridged version of a previously published article in University World News, July 24, 2021.*

Brief, we see that when support is lacking at one of these levels, the overall project for achieving gender equality in higher education tends to stagnate or fails to materialize.

While we are unable to address every cause of gender imbalance in leadership, the academic community is not powerless. The so-called glass ceiling is maintained at least in part through structural and cultural complacency within our institutions and our academic communities.

The contributions in the Brief raise certain barriers that reoccur at both institutional and societal levels. At these levels, barriers include culturally and societally defined gender roles, historically and religiously entrenched cultural standards, an unfair division of domestic labor, and a lack of recognition of the effects of intersectionality. Both institutionally and societally, barriers include the evident gender pay gap, gendered stereotypes with regards to leadership competency, the leaky pipeline through the fraught pathway of the professoriate, and the present underrepresentation in leadership positions. A general lack of sex-disaggregated data further limits effective policy decision-making.

The precarity of the gains made in gender equality is palpable in the exacerbation of these trends and barriers during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the persistence of gender inequality in relation to domestic labor and family care is discernible in the decline in academic manuscripts submitted by women during the pandemic period. The idea of the “glass cliff” (that women are overrepresented in leadership during institutional crisis) suggests that taking on precarious leadership positions may discourage other women pursuing future advancement to academic leadership.

### Supports to Achieving Gender Equality in Higher Education Leadership

Effective supports must therefore also address barriers at the three levels of nation or institution, society and culture, and individual. Broad national level policies explicitly supporting gender equality may encourage cultural and structural change. Institutional policies are necessary in order to ensure procedural justice, for instance, around parental leave, workload expectations, and recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices. Sex-disaggregated data collection must be set up both within higher education institutions and national systems of higher education in order to support policy-decision making at each level of support.

At an individual level, targeted programming for leadership development and other forms of mentorship programming have been put into place in several countries. Also, higher education networks, both within and external to institutional or national structures, that include programs for finding, mentoring, and training women in higher education seem to be a highly effective mechanism for supporting women’s leadership in higher education.

However, it is not sufficient to merely support individual women in the navigation of the structures within which they find themselves. Structural injustice must be met by procedural justice through national and institutional level policy. Cultural changes can also begin within HEIs as countercultural spaces, as demonstrated by Renn’s contribution to the Brief on leadership at women’s colleges. As such, justice can be achieved via a cultural change in our approach to women in leadership, e.g., through institutional policy changes championed by vocal leadership.

Support and encouragement for individual women to achieve their career goals can be productive, but are generally most useful when accompanied by institutional and national leadership and programming. Indeed, as Regulska asserts in this Brief, ensuring that the human right of gender equality is met will require both individual and collective action.

In the end, all of the contributions to the Brief imply that the most significant barrier to women’s equality in higher education is a tenacious complacency within our academic communities. We have the tools in hand that are required to effect initial change. What is needed now is the will to work toward achieving true gender equality within our academic communities and our institutions, with the hope that these steps will also build toward the achievement of this human right beyond our universities, in our nations and our world. ▲