

MUSLIM WOMEN LEADERS IN MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITIES: MANAGING IDENTITIES, POWER & INSTITUTIONS

Pemimpin Wanita Muslim di Universiti-universiti Malaysia: Mengurus Identiti, Kuasa dan Institusi

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33102/abqari.vol32no2.670>

Submission date: 2/07/2025 | Accepted date: 14/09/2025 | Published date: 31/10/2025

Abstract

Women leaders face persistent challenges in balancing work-life demands and navigating masculine-centric environments. This study examines women in top leadership positions within Malaysian private higher education institutions (HEIs). It aims to: (1) investigate the gender composition of HEI leadership; (2) explore the challenges and enablers experienced by women leaders; and (3) examine the language and communication skills employed by these leaders. Document analysis of leadership composition was conducted, followed by discourse analysis of the interviews. Findings reveal that their identity as Muslim and their gendered roles (as wife, mother) substantially shape their leadership practices. Effective negotiation with partners, requiring strong communication skills, is crucial for balancing professional and personal lives. This highlights the impact of gender and religious roles on women leaders. The study contributes to understanding women leaders' experiences, best practices, and the conceptualization of specific factors affecting Muslim women leaders. This research contributes theoretically by deepening our understanding of the complex interplay between gender and religious identity in shaping leadership experiences within the Malaysian HEI context. Practically, it offers insights that can inform the design of more inclusive development programs and institutional support mechanisms tailored to the needs of Muslim women in higher education institutions.

Keywords: leaders, women, Muslim women leaders, discourse analysis, language

Abstrak

Pemimpin wanita menghadapi cabaran yang berterusan dalam mengimbangi tuntutan kehidupan dan pekerjaan serta mengemudi persekitaran kerja yang maskulin. Kajian ini mengkaji wanita dalam jawatan kepimpinan tertinggi dalam institusi pengajian tinggi swasta (IPT) Malaysia. Ia bertujuan untuk: (1) menyiasat komposisi kepimpinan IPT berdasarkan jantina; (2) meneroka cabaran dan pemboleh daya yang dialami oleh pemimpin wanita; dan (3) mengkaji kemahiran bahasa dan komunikasi yang digunakan oleh pemimpin ini. Analisis dokumen bagi komposisi kepimpinan telah dijalankan, diikuti dengan analisis wacana data temu bual. Dapatan menunjukkan identiti mereka sebagai Muslim dan peranan jantina mereka (sebagai isteri, ibu) secara signifikan mempengaruhi kepimpinan mereka. Kemahiran perundingan yang berkesan dengan pasangan, memerlukan kemahiran komunikasi yang kuat, adalah penting untuk mengimbangi kehidupan profesional dan peribadi. Ini menyerlahkan kesan jantina dan peranan agama terhadap pemimpin wanita. Kajian ini

menyumbang kepada pemahaman pengalaman pemimpin wanita, amalan terbaik, dan konseptualisasi faktor khusus yang mempengaruhi pemimpin wanita Islam. Penyelidikan ini menyumbang secara teori dengan memperdalam pemahaman kita tentang interaksi antara jantina dan identiti agama dalam membentuk pengalaman kepimpinan dalam konteks IPT Malaysia. Secara praktikal, ia menawarkan pandangan yang boleh memaklumkan pembangunan program pembangunan kepimpinan yang lebih inklusif dan mekanisme sokongan institusi yang dibentuk untuk memenuhi keperluan wanita Muslim di institusi pengajian tinggi.

Kata kunci: Pemimpin, wanita, Pemimpin wanita Muslim, analisis wacana, bahasa

INTRODUCTION

Women leaders in many industries contributed to the nation's progress by driving economic and social advancement. Recent studies have explored the multifaceted roles of women in leadership across various sectors. A study made by Ariffin and Ibrahim (2022) focused on how women leadership influences creative media industries, especially on television, radio and digital platforms. Another study showed Islamic perspectives of women as leaders in political areas (Ramli, Syed Jaafar, Md Ariffin, Kasa, Achmad Qotadah, Achmad & Siswanto, 2024). Meanwhile Isa, Nor and Noor (2021), examined Malaysian women entrepreneurs on their leadership styles and how they conduct problem solving as a leader. Women leaders in higher learning institutions play a pivotal role in shaping and spearheading the educational system that produces the next generation of our nation's human capital. Balancing the dual responsibilities of academic leadership and institutional management presents a formidable challenge.

Malaysia has long endorsed the Beijing Declaration in demonstrating its commitment to achieving gender equality and empowering women in its country. The declaration, which was adopted in 1995, is a global commitment to achieving gender equality and empowering women through strategic objectives across 12 critical areas, including education, health, and political participation. However, according to the yet the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has noted that "progress has often been slow and incomplete" (n. d.). In the 2022 Global Gender Gap Index (n .d.), Malaysia was ranked 103rd out of 146 countries, with a score of 0.681. These indicators highlight the ongoing need for concerted efforts to enhance gender equality within the Malaysian context.

Unlike many other industries where men significantly thrive in numbers over women, higher education institutions have emerged as a sector where female employees predominate. According to Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) 2023 statistics, there are a total of 40,897 female academic staff compared to male staff with a total of 29,465 in public universities, Private HEIs, Polytechnics and community Colleges. "The Malaysian higher education system has undergone significant transformation over the past few decades, with women playing a prominent role in both the academic profession and administrative leadership positions in the institutions." (Thien, Lim, Shabudin, Aman, Ismail, Zuharah & Muftahu, 2024). While the significant contributions of women in higher education institutions (HEIs) are widely acknowledged, a persistent challenge continues to hinder progress toward gender equality. Notably, a disproportionate number of senior academic positions—such as Professorships and Associate Professorships—are still held by men, highlighting a gender disparity at the highest levels of academic leadership. In both 2022 and 2023, women outnumbered men in appointments to lecturer positions at public higher education institutions (PHEIs), with 14,378 female appointees in 2022 and 11,752 in 2023, compared to 10,238 and 7,991 male appointees, respectively. However, this gender parity diminishes significantly at higher academic ranks. In the case of associate professorships, male appointees continued to outpace their female counterparts—688 men versus 325 women in 2022, and 1,076 men versus 861 women in 2023. The disparity becomes even more pronounced at the professorial level, where women remain markedly underrepresented: in 2022, only 133 women were appointed as professors compared to 445 men; in 2023, the numbers were 189 and 441, respectively (Statistik Pendidikan Tinggi 2022 & 2023).

Given this reality, one would naturally assume that individuals holding associate professorships or full professorships would be more likely to be appointed to senior leadership roles—a common trajectory within the organizational dynamics of higher education institutions (HEIs). With this in mind, it becomes pertinent to examine the extent to which women, despite their numerical dominance at the entry-level academic ranks, are represented among the upper echelons of institutional leadership. This raises critical questions about the actual number of successful women who hold top decision-making positions within these institutions, and whether academic rank translates equitably into leadership opportunities for both genders.

Thus, in the attempt to understand the current situation of women leaders in higher learning institutions, this study seeks to: (1) investigate the gender composition of HEI leadership; (2) explore the challenges and enablers experienced by women leaders; and (3) examine the language and communication skills employed by these leaders. Given the existing research on women leaders in Malaysian public universities conducted in 2023, this study expands the scope to include private universities, aiming to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Furthermore, this study addresses a significant, yet often neglected, aspect of leadership, which is language skill, that is a tangible aspect of effective leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women as leaders in Malaysia?

In 2006, a significant milestone was reached in Malaysia's higher education landscape. Almost 49 years after gaining independence, Universiti Malaya, the nation's oldest public university, appointed its first woman Vice-Chancellor, Tan Sri Datuk Dr. Rafiah Salim (The Star, 2006). This appointment was followed by the National University of Malaysia (UKM) which appointed their first woman Vice-Chancellor, Tan Sri Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hasan Shahabudin (The Star, 2006). In 2022, Fadhlina Sidek was appointed by the Prime Minister as the first woman Education Minister (New Straits Time, 2022). These significant appointments in HEIs and MoE indicate notable strides achieved by Malaysia in its effort toward gender equality, potentially improving its ranking in the Global Gender Gap Index. While these appointments demonstrate clear progress, various obstacles remain, as extensively documented in recent studies regarding the conditions for women leaders and women academics in HEIs (Moorthy et al., 2022).

A study conducted by Baqutayan and Raji (2021) showed that women leadership styles among Malay respondents are influenced by two factors which are Malay culture and religion influences. Most respondents who are “women leaders from different backgrounds of education organizations who were responsible for significant leadership positions in their educational organizations” (Baqutayan & Raji, 2021, p. 20), agree that Malay culture can enhance leadership style while others claim that it can be a barrier to their leadership style while religion is agreed upon by all respondents that it is a strong influence on their leadership style.

Karim, Mustapha and Zainol (2022) examine the barriers and difficulties faced by Malaysian women in higher learning institutions when pursuing leadership positions. The study's findings centered on 3 core themes : first, their capabilities pertaining to their inherent qualities and skill sets that warrants equal opportunities in leadership. Second, the challenges faced including discrimination, stereotyping and demands of family commitments, and third, the importance of cultivating future women leaders.

A much recent study conducted by Thien, Lim, Shabudin, Aman, Ismail, Zuharah and Muftahu (2025) identified the catalyst and barrier faced by middle level women academics in Malaysia's public universities. Their findings highlighted four catalysts: i. gender-neutral, ii. the ability to manage multiple roles including family situations, iii. core personal competencies, and iv. mentor and role models. While the barriers faced by these women are when i. colliding with traditional women roles, ii. social stigma or stereotype, and iii. individual factors on one's belief, perception and feelings. Although

their research investigates women academics in public universities in Malaysia, our research shares a similar focus but concentrates specifically on women leaders in private universities within Malaysia. While Malaysian based studies are important to understand the context and progress in this field of research, studies carried out outside of Malaysia are just as important and they are discussed next.

Beyond borders (enablers and challenges)

Islam, Hack-Polay, Rahman, Jantan, Mas and Kordowicz (2023) identified three main barriers obtained through investigation between female deans in Bangladesh and deans in Malaysia in public university settings. This study identified individual, social, and organizational barriers. Individual barriers were experienced equally by deans in both Bangladesh and Malaysia. Social barriers were more prevalent among female deans in Bangladesh compared to their counterparts in Malaysia. Organizational barriers were the most frequently encountered by deans in both countries, surpassing individual and social barriers in frequency.

Mbukanma and Strydom (2022) conducted a study with tenured South African University staff. Four key aspects are found namely gender-blind institutional frameworks, workplace harassment, patriarchal models, and unfair recruitment practices. Findings revealed several key aspects which include unfair recruitment processes that happened, appointment of men in charge of the recruitment took place, gender inequality, cultural practices and lack of confidence. However, the research also documented one key finding that is relevant to challenges faced by women academics. In this particular aspect, women academics shared their frustration in cases when men are more preferred during recruitment, they had to face gender stereotypes, and when their promotions were being denied. In addition, inadequate support becomes one of the challenges they face.

The most recent study focusing on participants in Mexico's HEIs shows that there are enablers as well as challenges (Maheshwari, Gonzalez-Tamayo & Olarewaju, 2025). The four enablers identified are i. family support, ii. vision to make an impact on society, iii. desire to grow professionally and iii. wanting to become a role model for younger females. There are also four challenges that impacted them which are i. work–life balance, ii. fear factors, iii. lack of institutional support, and iv. social stigma. As can be seen in this section and the previous section, some of the points regarding challenges and enablers are repeatedly found in many HEIs contexts. These will be revisited later in discussion of findings. The next section presents the research methodology used in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

While this paper caters to the empirical aspect, it tends to be more philosophical and thus more space is provided to talk about the philosophical uptake inferred from the empirical findings. As such, discussion about methodology and analysis measures are kept to the minimum due to space limitation.

Qualitative approach

This study utilises a number of qualitative approaches in the investigation of women leaders at HEIs. Namely we use document analysis, interview and discourse analysis approaches.

First, document analysis, touted as an “underused approach to qualitative research” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 in Morgan, 2021, p. 64), is adopted for exploration of the distribution of female and male leaders in Malaysian private universities' top management positions. This method involves “analyzing various types of documents including books, newspaper articles, academic journal articles, and institutional reports” (Morgan, 2021, p. 64). Document analysis can “greatly enrich other methods such as in-depth interviews and observation” and is said to serve as a kind of triangulation means when paired with interviews (Dalgish, Khalid & McMahon, 2020, p. 1424). In the case of this research, we examined private universities official websites, especially the university management organisational chart/information page, page about members of the university’s board of directors, newspaper articles

about appointment of Vice-Chancellors and the Ministry of Higher Institution's (MoHE) reports and data circulation regarding HEIs. The use of a document analysis approach is particularly important to achieve our research objective one (gender composition).

Second, we conducted in-depth interviews with selected women leaders at these HEIs. In-depth interview sessions were conducted to collect narratives from women academics in private universities that are currently or who have held administrative positions, particularly that of DVC or VC. This type of interview is known as an elite interview session where researchers need to be mindful of the procedures in getting access to the interview session with these women leaders (Hazleena Baharun et al. 2023).

All data from the interview sessions alongside existing documents about women leaderships are analysed through discourse analysis methods. This method is a qualitative method that analyses the data by taking into account not only the text level analysis (e.g., the responses by the women leaders, and the word/phrase/language used by the interviewee when they shared their opinions or experiences) but also the discourse level (e.g. how this can be related to identity construction within the discourse and the kind of power dynamics that exists) and sociolinguistic level (e.g. the contexts, time and setting, and other sociocultural factors that affects the interviewee's opinion). Fairclough's method to critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used when conducting discourse analysis. This particular step of the methodology answers research objectives 2 and 3.

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis

In analysing the data, the main steps; description, interpretation and explanation (Fairclough, 1992) were followed. This is shown in the illustration below:

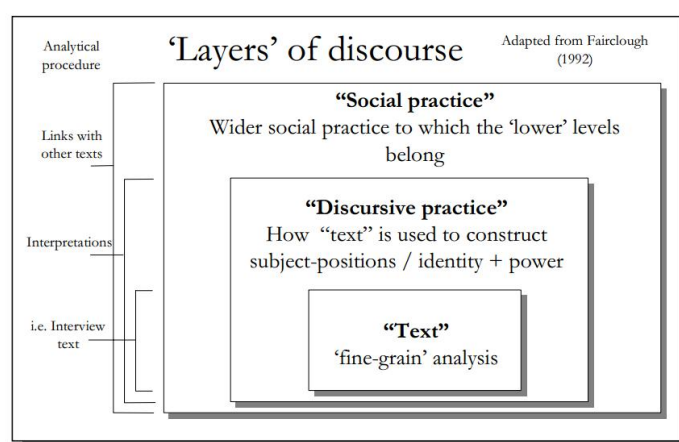


Figure 1. Fairclough's three-dimensional approach to discourse and context for CDA (as presented in Bowen- Schrire, Reid, Ezingear & Birchall, 2004, p. 7)

As mentioned before, the data used for discourse analysis using Fairclough's three-dimensional approach (CDA) includes the interview text, and other existing texts related to women and leadership. No sampling is required because all data (interview data & other documents) is taken into account for CDA. The CDA approach has been used in some studies that also look into women representation (Noor & Hamid 2021, Harun 2021, Tan 2023, Riduansyah et al 2024) and women leaders in universities (Wilkinson & Blackmore 2008).

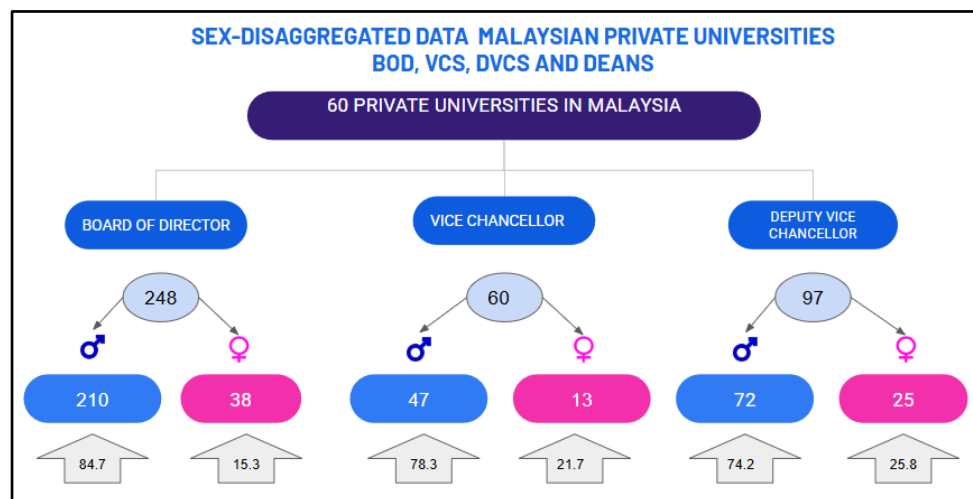
FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

As mentioned before in past studies, one of the areas that could be improved in order to promote equality is having gender segregated data (Neeraja, 2016, Thawaney, 2024). As such, this section focuses on the presentation of distribution of women and men leaders in private universities (private higher education institutions, henceforth PHEIs) in Malaysia, ultimately addressing research question 1. The list of the PHEIs was downloaded from Jabatan Pendidikan Tinggi (JPT) on Senarai Daftar dan Statistik IPT Swasta, managed by the Ministry of Higher Institution (MoHE). Note that, we only consider university level institutions for our analysis of descriptive statistics, excluding those identified as university college, college or community college.

From the list downloaded, some of the universities were branches of the main campus. For example, UCSI Sarawak Campus and UCSI Terengganu Campus are considered part of UCSI university and thus identified as one single institution. With this approach to the categorization the final number of PHEIs identified for the year 2024 is 60 universities.

The position and distribution of men and women leaders in these 60 universities were examined through their official university websites. This was carried out from early April 2024 until November 2024. The focus was comparing the number of women and men holding positions as a member in the board of directors of the university, a deputy Vice-Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors. Considering that the label might be different from one university to the other, we consider the highest position in the university (e.g. president, rector) as equivalent to the position of a Vice-Chancellors (a label commonly used in public universities). Understandably, different labels to the position might come with different sets of roles and responsibilities but this paper will not delve into that argument for now as the aim right now is to examine the distribution of men and women leaders in top management positions. Descriptive statistics or results of distribution between men and women holding the top most positions in private Malaysian universities are presented in Figure 2. The symbol ♀ refers to women, while ♂ refers to men in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Sex-segregated data on Malaysian private universities' VCs, DVs and member of BOD



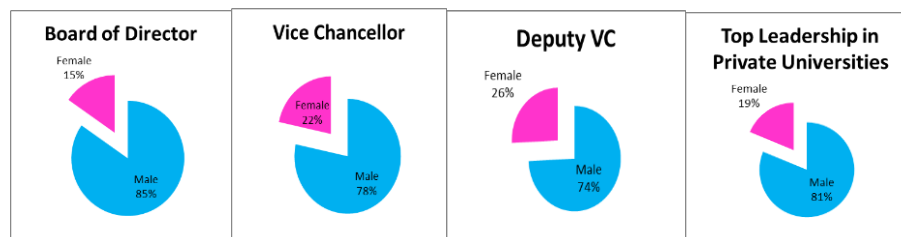
Based on Figure 2, 78.3% of the Vice-Chancellors identified are men while only 21.7% are women. The target of having at least 30% women in top decision-making positions seems far from being achieved based on this data from 2024. This shows a significant gender gap still exists for the position of Vice-Chancellors in PHEIs. Even worse is the distribution of women holding positions as members of the BOD compared to men. Only 15.3% (38) women were appointed as a member of the board whilst a whopping 84.7% (210) is that of men. According to Sunway University's website (2025):

“The Board of Directors has the overall responsibility for setting the strategic direction of the University and appointing the President and Chief Executive, and other Senior Officers of the University. The Board also oversees the effective financial management of the University and has a key role to play in the selection of individuals for honorary degrees, among other high-level responsibilities.”

Looking at how small the composition of women as members of the Board of Directors, it means that women are losing out as being part of decision makers who make significant changes to the direction of the university, the financial structures and appointment of key people for the university management.

Other key positions in universities are deputy Vice-Chancellors positions, and while the data is better compared to that of VCs and BODs, it still has not reached the target of 30%, i.e. just 25.8% or 25 women hold positions as DVCs. Figure 3, shows a better illustration of how small the percentage and space women leaders occupy in the top level of leadership in Malaysian PHEIs.

Figure 3. Comparison of men and women distribution in all three key positions



By looking at Figure 3, it is obvious that the more significant the position moving from Deputy VCs, to VCs and finally member of the board of directors, the least likely a woman will be chosen or appointed for the position. By combining the distribution of the three positions, women leaders only make up a mere 19% (76 people) of top leadership in private Malaysian universities whereas men 81% (329 people).

Figure 4. Women and Men in leadership positions in private universities

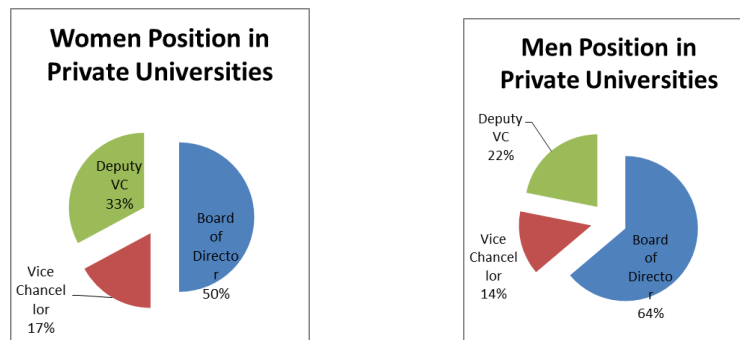


Figure 4 above shows yet another interesting pattern. Despite the low number of women in top leadership positions, when they do get appointed, the pattern of appointment is the same as men i.e. the smallest number as Vice-Chancellors and highest as members of the BODs – most likely because there is only one position as VC at a university unlike the other positions. But compared to men, women are more likely to be appointed as Deputy VCs, compared to being appointed as a member of the BOD. In 2024, it was reported that the number of women appointed as board of directors for 100 public listed companies (PLCs) in Malaysia, has surpassed the 30% target (Ainul, 2024). It seems somehow that the composition of women as members in the PHEIs' board of directors has been overlooked. Going back to Figure 3, only 15% women were appointed as members of BODs when compared to the number of men in PHEIs.

Through the examination of descriptive statistics, it is evident that women leaders are still behind in terms of numbers when occupying top leadership positions. The most glaring result is from the composition of women in BODs where women only occupy 15% of the position (men occupy 85%). The more expected but still very disappointing numbers are the composition of women as VCs (only 22%). Delving further into this issue, we present the data from the interview sessions with women leaders and the findings are presented in the next section.

Painting a Similar Story? Of Leaderships' Challenges and Enablers

We interviewed five women leaders, from selected PHEIs, and for the purpose of this research their names and universities are kept confidential. All of them are Muslim Malay women occupying the top positions in their universities. We used the following pseudonyms as shown in Table 1 when we discussed the findings.

Table 1. Pseudonyms and basic information on the women leaders

Private Malaysian University	Pseudonym	Current position (in 2024)	Past positions
A	Prof. Dr. Hafizah	Vice-Chancellors	1. DVC 2. Key positions at important government ministries. 3. VC of a public university
B	Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sofea	Deputy Vice-Chancellors	N/A
C	Prof. Dr. Zalita	Deputy President	N/A
D	Prof. Dr. Kamariah	Vice-Chancellors	1. DVC of a public university 2. BOD of a private university
E	Prof Dr. Suzanah	Vice-Chancellors	1.DVC of a private university

Based on Table 1, it can be seen that most of the women leaders are originally from public universities which later joined private universities (except for Prof. Dr. Zalita). At least three of them have held key positions at public universities, and later been appointed as VC or DVCs at PHEIs. As such their outlook pertaining to women leaders and women academics in general, and the challenges and enablers that exist in the ecosystem, is crucial to furnish our understanding on this issue. From this point on, the findings and discussions are divided into three main sections: i. enablers, ii. challenges, and iii. language as enabler and challenge.

Enablers

We identified two main enablers that these women shared that have helped them become successful in their career. The enablers appear as subsections: i. support at work and ii. family support. A third subsection was also added to include what these women leaders think would help other women in academia, either as a staff or as leaders.

1. People factor as source of empowerment and motivation at work

Interestingly, at least three of the women leaders interviewed mentioned men among the people who motivated them to be the best version of themselves and eventually a great leader. The DVC of university B was a young women leader and stated that the owner of the university trusted her to carry out her responsibilities as a DVC and that gives her confidence and motivation to lead. She also mentioned that her previous Vice-Chancellors, who is a man, supported women leaders in the institution and hence became another contributing factor that made her flourish as a leader. She mentions that as long as one is capable, men leaders would approve of your leadership even though you are a woman. This was also shown in previous studies that one of the enablers is gender-neutral perception (Thien et al, 2025).

Male leaders as mentors were mentioned as one of the driving factors for the DVC of University C where she was actually pushed by her mentors to be a leader. She credited three male mentors for her growth and success. These were her previous deans of her faculty and also her supervisor during PhD

– mentors who have vast experience and good network. She mentioned how one of them taught her the way to lead and communicate with team members. These include the need for communication to be transparent and how a leader should be firm and have good negotiation skills. These learned leadership skills later coloured her leadership style and communication skill with others.

Prof. Dr. Kamariah, the Vice-Chancellors of university D, quoted that her previous Vice-Chancellors (male) supported her to take up her first important role at the university, when she was still a young lecturer. However, she believed merit over gender-based quota has everything to do with securing leadership positions. She shared that at her first university where she served, many leaders were women and were appointed by merit. Quoted from her: "...the mantra or the philosophy is always *tak nampak* gender, it's more of merit" / "...the mantra or the philosophy is always gender-neutral, it's more of merit". As such she developed a perspective that when it comes to women leadership positions, securing them should be based on merit and supposed to be gender blind. Regardless, these women shared challenges that only women would face rather than men when in such a position.

When talking about family and responsibilities that comes with it, Prof. Dr. Kamariah gave credit to her female co-worker who became her best friend for supporting her in her career in a way that she didn't have to worry about her children too much as her friend was always there to support her and her children.

In a similar vein, Prof. Dr. Zalita mentioned how having women as part of her team is really helpful because she can work very closely with these people. Especially since the nature of her position requires her to work long hours and many times away from office for a number of days. Hence, possible conflict with her husband could be avoided as he knows the team members she is working with. This particular point of having women supporting women can be discussed as part of the enablers or support system that empowers women leaders, but at the same time can also be considered as a barrier of some sort. This will be addressed in the section on challenges.

If we summarize the people who supported these women leaders at work, they include: i) Vice-Chancellors (top leaders), ii) mentors (Ph.D. supervisors), iii) Deans of the Faculty (senior-level management), iv) female co-workers/colleagues, and v) female staff/subordinates in the team. Notice that the female co-worker and female staff become an enabler to these leaders when they face challenges related to their gender roles and will be addressed again in the section about challenges.

2. Familial support and understanding

Almost all women leaders interviewed mentioned how having a supportive family is crucial for them and for their current success as women leaders. One of the most important pieces of advice from one of the women leaders is that women have to settle everything at home first before they can be successful at work. Familial support comes in different forms, from the earliest nurturing by parents, to that from husbands and children.

The Vice-Chancellor of university A, Prof. Dr. Hafizah, mentioned that her father imbued in her with the right values, and made her a leader as she is now. Quoted from her:

"I think my dad was quite... he has direct values, he even said to me 'no matter what, you must not stop working. I'm a man. I know how life is for women'. He was like telling me to have financial freedom as a woman and before I couldn't really understand, but when you have your own money, you can do whatever you want basically".

She is now in her 60s and was supposed to retire in 2021 but was offered the position and continued to provide her service to the university. She also mentioned family support as one of the driving factors that motivated her as a leader. Being especially close to her children, she mentioned how her children would give pointers about her communicative style, and that from experience, her style has changed from a more strict and direct style to that of more emphatic and democratic.

Prof. Dr. Suzana shared that she asked her son's opinion about her as VC and her son said "My mother is a rare species. She gets things done the way she wants, when she wants, how she wants by doing it gentle". She credited who she was today by the influence of her late father who was a teacher. Never, especially with daughters, he raised his voice. So, she said that since her father never raises his voice at her, why would she do that to others? In some ways, her upbringing influenced her leadership style and communication style.

In this section, we learn that some women leaders interviewed had good father figures that influenced many aspects of the leaders' life whether the outlook on life or leadership style. Similarly, they engaged closely with their children, perhaps looking for some reassurance and reflection on how they fair as leaders. In passing some of these women also talked about how their husbands gave their blessings for them to be leaders, but that comes with some nuances of challenges that comes with it hence, it will be discussed in the section of challenges.

3. Paving the way forward for more women leaders

As mentioned before, whilst this subsection is parked under enablers, rather than discussing the enablers that these women leaders received, this section will discuss the things that the women leaders think would help support future women leaders and women academics in general.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sofea and Prof. Dr. Hafizah mention how women leaders and staff could be supported in HEI's environment. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sofea believes that training should be given to women leaders and potential successors. And she believes that women leaders should support each other. It was a conscious effort on her side that she would promote identified women staff whom she believed had merit, and she would promote these talents. "... *in one organization tu kita dah boleh tengok siapa successor...so perempuan ni, women leaders ni kena support each other. Sebab kita je tau kita punya cabaran dengan family dan sebagainya*, so if we can get along and support each other..." / "... in an organization, we can identify who the successor is... so as women, women leaders need to support each other. Because only us as leaders know the challenges we face whether related to families and all, so [it would be good] if we can get along and support each other..."

As for Prof. Dr. Hafizah, when she identified women leaders or women staff who she thinks are capable, she would support them as shown from this quote: "...Once I've given the person the mandate, I will support". To aspiring young women leaders, if they feel unmotivated to certain challenges, she would ask this question to them and try to accommodate their needs: "What does it take for you to accept [this position/job]?"

When asked about the type of policy or environment that might be helpful to empower women leaders Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sofea mentioned how important work-life balance is to women leaders. She believes that women should be given more flexibility and should be allowed to work from home for a certain time. Quoted from her: "I emphasise more on to give work-life balance *kepada* women leaders especially flexibility, *kadang-kadang yang baru bersalin atau yang mengandung contohnya*, if they can work from home for certain time, *kalau boleh bagi* that kind of freedom or flexibility to women especially *sebab* they are not only leader but also mother, a wife..." / "I emphasise more on to give work-life balance towards women leaders especially flexibility, sometimes postpartum or during pregnancy for example, if they can work from home for certain time, if women can be given that kind of freedom or flexibility especially, because they are not only a leader but also a mother, a wife..."

According to Prof Dr. Zalita, nurturing women leaders is a continuous process. As such women staff should be given experience and training. For Prof Zalita, women must settle everything related to family matters first, before she can actually be successful at work and as a leader. And hence she emphasizes that they need to be given a skill set that helps them to divide between work and family matters.

Challenges

1. Unspoken truth : Of Power and obedience: Regulating identity

Prof. Dr. Suzana said that even as a leader, she asked her husband's permission before going on meetings or going wherever she needed as a leader. She also added that she always asks her husband to accompany her wherever she goes. She added that most of her female counterparts won't follow her way of respecting her husband. She said if she wants to sustain her position as a leader and a wife, she needs to follow the right path. She cannot be successful if no one blessed her as she mentioned “...*restu dan berkat tu sangat penting*”/ “approval and blessing are really important”.

In a similar vein, Prof. Dr. Zalita shared that she and her husband have clear rules and regulations, and these are discussed and agreed upon together. When familial matters are settled at home, she feels it's easier to be the leader that she needs to be. She also mentioned that blessing, support and permission from her husband are really important. While people know her at the university as a leader, she upholds her image as a wife at home and among relatives. She also believes that communication at home must be effective to manage home-work commitment. She mentioned home should be taken care first then when that is taken care of, work would naturally be settled.

“Understanding with your spouse is important. Not demanding too much and not expecting too much from you is also important. *Itulah yang paling penting. Kalau tidak you tak akan boleh pergi . Dia akan tarik you ke bawah ...*To me, my priority is my husband. *Kalau dia tak bless on what you are doing, you cannot go anywhere*” / “Understanding with your spouse is important. Not demanding too much and not expecting too much from you is also important. That's what is important. If not, you cannot go further. It will pull you down... to me, my priority is my husband. If a husband does not give blessings on what you are doing, you cannot go anywhere”.

As mentioned before, Prof. Dr. Zalita kept women staff as part of her team - For example, if she was appointed as a director, her deputies are usually women. Then, the second layer of the team will consist of men. This is a conscious decision made based on her identity as a Muslim woman and a wife, that should the opposite gender be part of her closer knit if she is required to work long hours, conflict might happen. As such she is not only navigating her identity as a leader when choosing team members, but also as a Muslim and a wife.

“You must know what you are looking for. If you want to have concrete new things to develop, you need to have someone that you can work all the time. So I must find someone that I can bring wherever I go. *siapa lagi kalau bukan perempuan. kalau I bawa lelaki nanti jadi gosip. Nanti jadi masalah kepada orang lain, masalah dengan my husband*” / “You must know what you are looking for. If you want to have concrete new things to develop, you need to have someone that you can work with all the time. So, I have to find someone that I can bring wherever I go. Who else if not a woman. If I bring a man, it will be gossip. It will lead to a problem with other people and my husband”.

From our observation, many of these women leaders uphold their role as a Muslim wife and diligently tries to regulate both identities as leader and wife. This comes with it, a few challenges and some of these leaders point to some practices that they use to manage this challenge. Some of which we could learn from.

2. Navigating leadership at HEIs

Prof. Dr. Sofea mentioned that as a young women leader, she faces barriers in the form of handling senior, experienced academics – many are retired academics that join the university on contract basis. Some of her male subordinates might feel challenged by receiving orders from her because of her gender. In this case she experiences bias not only due to the fact that she is a woman but also because of ageism, due to her age (young, rather than old which is more expected for a leader). Quoted from her:

“...kebanyakannya kita ambil lecturer *pencen*. So bila lecturer *pencen* yang dah professor atau associate professor datang sini, so dia tengok kita muda lagi, so memang kena makan la. Memang kena sindir dan sebagainya... sebab dia kata you are belum cukup umur lagi dan sebagainya dan perempuan pula tu...”/ ...mostly we hired retired lecturers. So when these retired lecturers who already hold a professor or associate professor title came here, they look at me and undermined me. I received sarcastic remarks and such... they made all sorts of remarks, including how you are not mature enough and even more so that you are a woman...”

When asked how she manages this particular challenge she said the key is to remain calm and composed. She also mentions that politics at universities are still ruled by men, and as such most are skilled with the political play. Unlike men, most women academics will not say “I want to lead”. These are one of the drawbacks when it comes to nurturing future women leaders.

3. Keeping women in the workforce & policy for the future

This particular section discussed their observation as women leaders rather than their own personal experience handling the challenges. When asked about their opinion about policy and recommendations to improve the working conditions for women and women leaders, these leaders gave their insights and shared some meaningful experience.

Perhaps the most poignant advice from the leaders was from Prof Kamariah who said that first we need to keep women in the workforce, then naturally they will become leaders. This was mentioned due to the fact that women are leaving academia despite the high number of early career women academics to men academics that can be seen in MOHE 2023 statistics where female academic staff in Private HEIs with a total of 16,566 compared to male with a total of 12, 170. A study made by Ling and Rasdi (2018) showed how Malaysian women in the professional field faced challenges and factors that caused them to leave their job. The findings showed that most women are having pushed-out factors such as inflexibility in the workplace, having to work for long hours and high workloads instead of opt-out such as motherhood and family role when leaving their job. This is not unprecedented and can be seen in the study made by Wenzel and Hollenshead (1998) where they conduct an interview in order to better understand why women with tenured and untenured faculty positions in a research university leave their positions voluntarily. A recent article in Forbes magazine (2024) showed an alarming pattern where female scientists with high achievement leave their career because of never ending limitations such as gender inequalities and discrimination to further their careers.

Another point raised by Prof. Dr. Kamariah is the absence of policy or improvement of existing policy that would support women at work and eventually women as leaders. The human resource policy in labour law was mentioned as one of the biggest factors that could create a better working environment for women. For women, family consideration is crucial, and it is not easy to find support when it relates to family matters and as such women employees struggle in making decisions whether to prioritise family or work. In terms of daily tasks, companies/universities can improve women staff working experience, but this must be looked at further, whether the need is in terms of facilities (for women or working parents) or having trained personnel on site to assist. In terms of gender biases at the workplace, the ESG framework for sustainability rating and ranking, might be something to think about especially when it comes to formulating policy to remove biasness. Quoted from her:

“...when we talk about the SDG, of course that is that equality framework and the, I mean as part of the framework *ada* the equality and some part of equality there’s also gender... all universities in general there should be a policy to indicate transparency and a non-biasness, *kalau nak ikut SDG la*” / “... when we talk about the SDG, of course that is that equality framework and the, I mean as part of the framework there is the equality and some part of equality there is also gender... all universities in general, there should be a policy to indicate transparency and a non-biasness, that is if we really want to follow SDG”.

She also mentioned that if family is the challenge for women, then what kind of policy could make them remain in the workforce – this she said is actually the main challenge i.e. to keep women in

the workforce. Which goes back to her first point mentioned earlier. A recent research found that only 60% women of the age 45 and above participate in the workforce which is a stark difference from the 77.4% who are aged 25-29 in the workforce in 2023 (Muzafar, 2024). Interestingly similar trends were recorded in 2015 where those aged 45-54 were only 57.28% in the workforce whilst those between 25-34 of age are about 70% (Ortiz-Ospina, Tzvetkova & Roser, 2024). Older Malaysian women chose not to work due to family commitment (Muzafar, 2024). It was not revealed however, whether these women worked when they were younger, but we could compare the statistics from 2015 and 2023 and might infer that some of them did work when they were younger and left as they aged. However, these are from the general workforce statistics. To our knowledge, no study in Malaysia has delved deeply into the statistics of and the reasons why women academics leave their positions at the universities. Regardless, one particular study by Nair and Jayabalan (2022) explored the reason behind why married female academics choose to stay at their positions where the reasons are family work-based support facilities, extended maternity leave and family supportive supervisor/superior.

Prof. Dr. Hafizah shared her experience of watching young women engineers leaving their profession. Quoted from her: "Our young women engineers, these are Malay, Chinese, Indian, they are doing very well... but the moment they got their kids, the first baby, they leave the profession.". She mentioned that she noticed now women leaders struggle to be a mother, to be a wife, to be a professional academic and at the same time struggle to afford a house and a maid. She said that this is unlike in the past, when hiring a maid was still affordable and women academics can focus on her role at work. She believes that the policy should be improved in terms of increasing women leaders to achieve the 30% target for women leaders in universities. And she also mentioned that the policy for the 90-day maternity leave should be extended as the time allocated might not be enough for some. Some flexibility and support should be given by allowing mothers to stay at home, and giving allowance for housing or otherwise these women won't be able to contribute.

Language skills as both enablers and barriers

Prof. Dr. Hafizah feels that one of the challenges is in terms of communicating with her people, to make sure everybody in the circle feels included. She also reminisces that she was more direct and stricter in terms of communication and language style when she was younger but with time her style has changed to be more democratic and softer. Partly, she acknowledged that responses from her children also affect how she changed her approach to communicate over time. She mentioned negotiation skills and persuasion in these quotes: "sometimes, the best approach to negotiation is to make them say things that you want but they say it. So, it sounds like it comes from them, it sounds like that person is smart. I don't believe in ego, when you work you have to put your ego in your pocket".

For Prof. Dr. Sofea, she mentioned that to be a good leader "you have to be a good listener". A good repo needs to be built with staff and for this one should allocate some time to see them and to know their current well-being. The generational gap should also be taken into consideration. For instance, millennials need to be given freedom to do their work and they are not comfortable with micromanaging. Language style should be changed depending on the groups. While she is more straightforward with her language, she also mentions the importance of being respectful. Quoted from her "... I'm dealing with millennials, *dia tak suka ayat arahan...* we have to change the way we communicate..." / "...I'm dealing with millennials, they do not like command... we have to change the way we communicate...".

Prof. Dr. Zalita also mentioned the importance of listening skills. Her character is firm and strict. In meetings she treats everyone as an equal, where agreement and disagreement are welcomed. She is very direct with her language and at times applies negotiation skills.

Prof. Dr. Kamariah is someone who is conscious about language use. She mentioned that she is direct but does not put people down. In a crisis, she aims to mitigate or get an agreement through negotiation not by force but using a communication strategy where she always uses facts rather than

solely using her own argument to back her point. She mentioned that one needs to know the objective and aim to achieve it through communication.

Prof. Dr. Suzana said there's an advantage to someone who knows how to communicate. Affected by her training in the United States, her style of communication/language is concise. She appreciates it if she receives text that is straight to the point, simple and concise and would reply in a similar way. She mentioned how the new generation do not like to call, but use email instead. She said "my generation *suka bersemuka. Kita boleh rasa, betul kan. Yes atau yea. Kalau dalam text kita tak tau yes yang mana yang betul, yes mana yang okay la.*" / "my generation loves conversing face to face. We can feel it, right. Yes or yea. If communicating via text, we cannot confirm, which yes is the most correct, which yes is just acceptable".

Apart from the language skills and communication skills, the importance of manners were also highlighted by some of these leaders. Quoted from Prof. Dr. Suzana "*menjaga adab itu sangat penting* because especially in a higher education university, orang semua memang berilmu. So mereka kena berakhlak sebenarnya. *Whether* ada ke takde tu (akhlak) is a *barrier*" / "maintaining proper manners is important because especially in a higher education university, everyone is knowledgeable. So they need to actually have good manners. Whether you have it or not is a barrier". The point about having *adab* or manners was also raised by Prof. Dr. Sofea, in which she said: "... *tak kisah la you sangat excel in your academic tapi adab takde, sampai mana you nak pergi...*". The notion of *adab* is very much rooted in the Islamic tradition, and it shows how again religion is a factor taken into account in leadership practices. This topic on Islamic tradition brings us to the last discussion section.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, women visibility in terms of numbers is still the biggest problem of achieving gender equality in terms of women representation in leadership positions – at least it is still the case for women leadership at private Malaysian Universities. At this point, achieving 30% women as leaders in these institutions feels more like a pipe dream rather than something achievable in the near future.

The interview carried out among the women leaders at the private universities tells us that women leaders that we have today are there for the support that they receive both at home and at work. Some of these leaders were brought up with father figures that lifted them up as a child and later as a leader. These leaders acknowledge that many colleagues or staff in their surroundings are in need of support, pinpointing the challenges that they must have observed throughout their years of serving and leading.

Future studies might want to explore the role of men and women in universities' board of directors. Whilst many studies were carried out regarding the role and contribution of both men and women as members in BODs in the corporate world, hardly any study was carried out in the context of universities. The scarcity of women as members of BODs in Malaysian Private universities as highlighted in this study should be used as a turning point and create interest for further exploration in this area. Another area for exploration might be examining the women academics who left academia, both in terms of numbers and reasons. It would be best to examine this alongside their male counterparts who left and compare the reasons too.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by the USIM Matching Grant (research code: P2-3-251-71253-LUAR-UPTM-FPBU provided by Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM).

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