

Promoting Strategies Towards Gender Equality in Private Higher Education in Klang Valley, Malaysia

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Abstract

Gender inequality in higher education, particularly within leadership roles, remains a significant issue globally and in Malaysia. Despite the increasing enrolment of women in higher education, there is a stark underrepresentation of women in academic and administrative leadership positions. This research investigates the factors contributing to gender disparities in private higher education institutions in Malaysia, focusing on institutional policies, cultural and societal norms, and socioeconomic barriers. The study utilizes a quantitative methodology, employing a validated questionnaire distributed to 389 students across private institutions in Malaysia to assess their perceptions of gender equality. The analysis revealed that institutional policies and governance, socioeconomic factors, cultural norms, professional development, and mentorship programs significantly influence gender equality in higher education. Among these, socioeconomic factors were found to have the strongest positive impact, while leadership representation and mentorship programs had a negative correlation, indicating the need for more comprehensive and inclusive support structures. The study highlights the critical role of institutional frameworks and societal attitudes in bridging the gender gap in academia and calls for targeted reforms to foster gender equality in Malaysia's private higher education sector.

Keywords: *Gender Equality, Private Higher Education, Gender Disparities, Institutional policies and governance, Socioeconomic, Leadership Representation, Cultural, Societal Norms.*

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Introduction

Globally, the pursuit of gender equality within higher education institutions has been an ongoing challenge. Despite significant advancements, gender disparities persist, particularly in academic leadership roles. As per the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2020), although women make up a substantial portion of the student population across the globe, they are underrepresented in senior academic positions, including deans, provosts, and other leadership roles. This particular challenges significantly compounded by the continued prevalence of gender stereotypes and institutional barriers that hinder the career advancement of women in academia. From the perspective of global landscape of gender equality in academia it has been recognised that while student enrolment ratios are more

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balanced, female representation diminishes significantly as one progress to higher academic ranks (UNESCO, 2020; Mohammad et al., 2025a; Al-Adwan et al., 2025). This situation is highly corresponded with a complex interplay of institutional policies, socio-cultural influences, and the deep-rooted perception of leadership as a predominantly male-dominated domain, which restricts women's access to key decision-making positions.

The Malaysia Gender Equality Policy focuses on the fact that the government has made significant efforts to encourage greater participation of women in the workforce and educational institutions. However, despite the progressive increase in female student enrolment in higher education, gender imbalances continue to persist, especially in leadership positions within private higher education institutions. It has been found that although women constitute a majority of students in Malaysian universities, they remain significantly underrepresented in academic and administrative leadership roles (Kamaruddin, 2019; Mohammad et al., 2025b; Elmobayed et al., 2024). The UNDP Malaysia Gender Equality Report (2021) reveals that, while women dominate undergraduate and graduate student populations, their representation sharply decreases as one move toward senior faculty positions, specifically in private higher education institutions.

The institutional and cultural barriers are major contributors to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles (Chong and Cheong, 2017; Mohammad et al., 2025c). The gender disparity has been particularly found in the context of private higher education. Furthermore, as underscore by, Zain (2020) while women are visible in junior academic roles and as students, the leadership positions remain largely male-dominated, even in institutions where women make up the majority of the student body.

The National Gender Policy, seeks to address gender inequality across various sectors, including education, the private higher education sector in Malaysia. Kamaruddin (2019) shared a different perspective which showcases that though legislations and policies have been enacted to promote gender equality, their implementation is often inconsistent, leading to slow progress in dismantling institutionalized gender biases. According to consideration of the Gender Equality Report of the UNESCO for the year of 2022, while women constitute a majority of students, the leadership landscape remains dominated by men. As stated by Baker and Spector (2020), private higher education institutions in Malaysia often lack comprehensive gender equality policies, and even when policies do exist, their enforcement and impact are minimal.

It has been recognised that the gender gap in leadership within private higher education institutions in Malaysia is a multifaceted issue influenced by both institutional and socio-cultural factors. While significant progress has been made in increasing female student enrolment, these efforts have not been mirrored in the progression of women to leadership roles. The research aims to address these barriers by exploring how institutional policies, cultural norms, and social structures contribute to gender inequality and by proposing actionable recommendations to bridge the gender gap in private higher education in Malaysia.

Problem Statement

The problem remains in the context of the government's commitment to making Malaysia a country for gender equality at the national and institutional levels, which is still manifested ineffectively, as evidenced by the subordinate representation of Women in senior academic and administrative roles in Malaysia's private higher education institutions. This makes women often have to face institutional biases, limited career advancement opportunities, and gender stereotypes limiting their path to leadership positions. The gender disparity in academic leadership is evident in the marketability of decision-making roles and the fairness of professional development opportunities for women (Kamaruddin, 2019; Mohammad et al., 2025d). Additionally, there are a great many private universities in Malaysia that tend to have very few clear, consistent policies on gender equality across all aspects, from admissions and faculty appointments to administrative roles. Even with such policies, implementation remains limited, and monitoring is insufficient to demonstrate that these policies yield tangible outcomes for women (Baker & Spector, 2020; Mohammad et al., 2025e). It will focus on the institutional barriers in these cases and will examine how policies, cultural norms, and social structures produce such an imbalance. Aside from institutional factors, social and cultural barriers are a decisive factor in perpetuating gender inequality. Various societal norms in Malaysia restrict women from pursuing academic careers or holding leadership roles (Sahar, 2020; Mohammad et al., 2025f). Regarding the cultural expectations and economic pressures, women in Malaysia are often not able to get access to the resources that are required for them to do well at their academics and careers. It can

be considered a challenging situation for women, especially those from less privileged backgrounds, to balance family responsibilities with academic and professional ambitions. Correspondingly, there are different cultural views on appropriate gender roles for men and women, which may shape the behaviour of male and female academics and how university administrators deploy them in their policies and procedures.

Objective

RO1: To demonstrate the influence of socioeconomic barriers on gender equality in private higher education institutions in Malaysia.

RO2: To explore the influence of institutional policies on gender equality in private higher education institutions in Malaysia.

RO3: To identify the influence of professional development and mentorship programs on gender equality in private higher education in Malaysia.

RO4: To recognise the influence of cultural and societal norms on gender equality in private higher education in Malaysia.

RO5: To investigate the influence of representation on gender equality in private higher education in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Feminist Theory

The Feminist theory provides an analytical approach to exploring gender-based imbalances between men and women. This theory successfully confronts male-dominated power structures, which maintain dominance through promoting gender equality by dismantling patriarchal systems. In this context, Pasque & Nicholson (2023) have demonstrated that Feminist theory requires an academic framework in which women serve as leaders in educational spaces rather than passive participants. This theory also emphasizes that gender inequalities in higher education persist due to academic institutional policies and leadership practices combined with cultural norms. The analysis illustrates that institutional policies should ensure equal educational access while promoting women's advancement into leadership roles. Therefore, this theory focuses on intersectionality by examining how women's identities, including race, class, and sexuality, intersect to shape their educational trajectories.

Social Cognitive Theory

The Social Cognitive Theory developed by Albert Bandura demonstrates how human behaviour and belief systems emerge from the dynamic interactions among mental processes, environmental factors, and behavioural patterns. The framework from Ayanwale et al. (2023) examines how people behave in gender equality settings at universities, focusing on role models, environmental influences, and self-confidence. It has been observed that women tend to avoid pursuing leadership roles, and, as a result, female role models are often absent in those fields. According to Alam (2022), women's belief in their ability to succeed significantly affects their academic and professional development. In this context, mentorship programs that provide training and expose women to role models boost their confidence, thereby increasing their participation in higher education and their advancement toward gender equality.

Gender equality

Gender equality is fundamentally about ensuring all individuals, regardless of their gender, have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities to participate fully in social, economic, and political life (World Economic Forum, 2023; Mohammad et al., 2025g). Within education, this principle entails not only equitable access to learning but also fairness in academic representation, leadership, and professional advancement (UN Women, 2021). In the higher education context, gender equality addresses systemic issues, including gender bias in recruitment, promotion disparities, unequal pay, and underrepresentation in decision-making roles (Kabeer, 2022). It is imperative to recognize that gender equality is not a static target but a dynamic process requiring structural reforms and cultural change within institutions (Acker, 2021). Without deliberate interventions, entrenched stereotypes and institutional inertia perpetuate inequality, adversely affecting women's academic careers and leadership representation (Eagly & Carli, 2023; Mohammad et al., 2025h). Achieving gender equality in academia

yields multifaceted benefits including enhanced innovation, diversity of thought, and improved institutional effectiveness.

Socioeconomic Barriers

Socioeconomic barriers such as poverty, limited access to education, inadequate healthcare, and unequal employment opportunities disproportionately affect women and other marginalized genders, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities. In many societies, structural disadvantages prevent women from participating equally in the workforce, owning property, or accessing leadership positions. Additionally, cultural norms and legal frameworks often intersect with economic limitations, further hindering progress toward gender parity (Usman et al., 2021).

Cultural and Societal Norms

Cultural and societal norms play a pivotal role in shaping gender equality within any given society. These norms dictate the expectations, roles, and behaviours considered appropriate for individuals based on their gender, thereby influencing access to opportunities, resources, and rights. In many cultures, traditional norms often reinforce patriarchal values that prioritize male dominance in political, economic, and social spheres, limiting women's participation and advancement (Rahim, 2024). For instance, societal expectations may discourage women from pursuing higher education or leadership positions, while promoting caregiving roles as their primary responsibility.

Representation of Leadership

Representation in leadership roles plays a crucial role in advancing gender equality within organizations and society at large. When women and other underrepresented genders are visibly present in positions of power and decision-making, it challenges long-standing stereotypes and helps break down systemic barriers that have historically limited their opportunities (Chikwe, Eneh & Akpuokwe, 2024). This visibility not only provides role models for aspiring leaders but also ensures that diverse perspectives are included in the development of policies, strategies, and workplace culture.

Professional Development and Mentorship Program

The hypothesis that professional development and mentorship programs have a significant influence on gender equality is grounded in the recognition that access to training, guidance, and career advancement opportunities can help bridge systemic gaps faced by underrepresented groups, particularly women. As stated by Bankole-Alale (2025), Mentorship, in particular, provides role models, fosters confidence, and helps navigate workplace challenges, thereby reducing gender-based barriers.

Institutional Policies and Governance

Institutional policies and governance play a pivotal role in shaping and promoting gender equality within societies. These structures serve as the foundation upon which equal rights and opportunities are either advanced or hindered. When institutions implement inclusive policies such as equal pay legislation, anti-discrimination laws, gender quotas, and family-friendly workplace practices they create an enabling environment for the empowerment of all genders (Gugan, Steward & Subhashini, 2024). Furthermore, governance frameworks that are transparent, accountable, and committed to social justice help dismantle systemic barriers that perpetuate gender disparities.

Methodology

The study employed a quantitative approach and an adapted questionnaire to obtain reliable and relevant data. This study entailed 389 undergraduate and post-graduate students. SPSS was used to analyse the data, including reliability testing, factor analysis, and multiple regression. This study aims to assess the status of gender equality in Malaysia, with particular attention to the role of institutional policies, such as those on leadership, and to socio-cultural factors affecting gender equality in private-sector higher education institutions. The questionnaire has been administered to students currently studying at private higher education institutions throughout Malaysia. The questionnaire included six key sections. Each variable was operationalised using multiple Likert-scale items (strongly disagree to agree strongly) to assess students' perceptions of their experiences with gender equality on campus. It included a Demographic Section at the top of the questionnaire that asked for pertinent participant information (e.g., gender, field of study, and type of university). Measuring these variables has enabled subgroup analysis and interpretation of results, particularly with respect to potential differences in perceived gender equity across groups of students with diverse characteristics.

Data Analysis and Results

Table 4.1 Field of Study of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Arts and Humanities	160	41.1	41.1	41.1
	Education	158	40.6	40.6	81.7
	Engineering and Construction	13	3.3	3.3	85.1
	General programs	11	2.8	2.8	87.9
	Science, Math, and Computers	31	8.0	8.0	95.9
	Social Science, Business, and	16	4.1	4.1	100.0
	Total	389	100.0	100.0	

Response Rate and Demographic Analysis

A total of 389 questionnaires were distributed through digital platforms. Of these, 389 responses were received, yielding a 100% response rate, which meets the minimum requirement for multiple regression and moderation analyses. Among the respondents (n = 389), 59.4% were female and 40.6% male. Field of study showed that 41.1% were in the arts and humanities, 40.6% in education, 3.3% in engineering and construction, 2.8% in General programs, 8.0% in Science, Mathematics, and Computer, followed by 4.1% in the social sciences and business.

Data Analysis and Results

Factor Analysis

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value was 0.860 indicates a high level of sampling adequacy thereby ensuring positive levels of intercorrelations among the variables that are connected to institutional policies, socioeconomic factors, and cultural norms, leadership representation, and professional growth. Moreover, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity provided the Chi-square value of 332.005, but its significant level of Chi-square is 0.000, which is much less than the 0.05 level. This establishes the fact that there are significant relationships amongst the measures in the constructs. This supports the idea that the selected variables constitute a consistent, mutually supported set of dimensions affecting gender equality in privately run institutions of higher education in Malaysia.

Reliability Test

The analysis of reliability yielded a value of 0.962 on Cronbach Alpha of the 18 items, which is very high in internal consistency. This shows that everything contained in the questionnaire measures the same underlying construct- factors that can affect the gender equality in the higher institutions of the private sector. The alpha values above 0.90 mean excellent reliability and indicate that the instrument used is consistent and reliable (Kullan et al., 2022).

Table 4.2 Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.962	18

Multiple Regression Analysis**Table 4.3 Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.930 ^a	.865	.863	1.02150

The model summary shows that the R is 0.930, which indicates a robust positive correlation between institutional policies, socioeconomic factors, cultural and societal norms, professional development and mentorship programmes, and leadership representation and the dependent variable, which is perceived gender equality in higher education. This is reflected in the value of R^2 , which was 0.865, meaning that the model explains the reported gender equality fairly (86.5) using these five factors. The Adjusted R^2 is 0.863, indicating low overfitting and high predictive accuracy in capturing gender equality perceptions. The standard error of estimation, 1.0215, is also small, implying that the estimates were accurate with minimal variation in the residuals. All these results confirm that the regression model is of high quality and valid for explaining the variables that affect gender equality in the Malaysian domestic higher education setting.

Multicollinearity Check**Table 4.4 Coefficients**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.177	.264		.670	.503
Institutional Policies and Governance	.222	.054	.227	4.138	.000
Socioeconomic Factors	1.116	.062	1.072	18.106	.000
Cultural and Societal Norms	.092	.039	.095	2.367	.018
Professional Development and Mentorship Programs	-.109	.042	-.112	-2.609	.009
Representation in Leadership Roles	-.361	.060	-.371	-6.061	.000

Dependent Variable: Perceived_Gender_Equality_in_Higher_Education

The Coefficients table determines the individual effects of each of the predictors on perceived gender equality. The strongest positive predictor ($b = 1.072$, $p = 0.000$) turned out to be Socioeconomic Factors that imply that economic access, affordability, and social class substantially influence the outcome of equality in private institutions. The presence of positive effects can be also identified with respect to the Institutional Policies and Governance ($b = 0.227$, $p = 0.000$) and Cultural and Societal Norms ($b = 0.095$, $p = 0.018$), which underline the importance of favourable institutional background and progressive culture in the promotion of equality. On the other hand, Professional Development and Mentorship Programmes ($b = -0.112$, $p = 0.009$), Representation in Leadership

Roles ($b = -0.371$, $p = 0.000$) have negative coefficients. This suggests that the mentorship systems and leadership may be insufficient or gender biased, whereby women may not necessarily get empowered even after they are included. All these findings indicate a multifaceted interrelationship between the institutional, economic and social determinants of gender equality.

The multiple regression analysis proved that the factors identified such as institutional policies, socioeconomic factors, cultural norms, mentorship programmes, and leadership representation are significant factors that influence the gender equality in the Malaysian higher education institutions in the private sector. It is significantly justified through the exceptionally high R^2 (0.865) as a way to confirm that the combination of these factors explains the majority of variations in perceived gender equality. This matches Objective 1 and 2 that undertook to determine the impact that institutional barriers and policy frameworks have on gender parity. The positive significant influence of socioeconomic factors ($b = 1.072$) confirms Objective 3, as the fair access to financial and education opportunities directly increases gender equality. At the same time, the strong inverse correlation between the leadership representation and mentorship programmes implies that the currently offered programmes are either incomplete or at a structural disadvantage. This successfully aligns with Objective 4 and 5 since it provides the key events gaps hindering the progress made by women. These results align with those of Chikwe et al. (2024) and Gudan et al. (2024) which emphasise the role of economic empowerment and institutional support in the realisation of gender equity. Hence, the regression results confirm that the idea of gender equality in the Malaysian higher education sector on the side of the private sector requires a systematic change of the socioeconomic, institutional, and cultural state of affairs to support the application of the feminist and social cognitive theoretical concepts.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from the data analysis indicate that gender equality is influenced by a complex interplay of institutional policies, socioeconomic barriers, cultural norms, mentorship programs, and leadership representation

Institutional Policies and Governance: The study revealed that the presence of clear institutional policies and gender-sensitive governance frameworks positively affect gender equality in private higher education institutions. Effective policy implementation, transparency in recruitment, and promotion processes contribute to more inclusive academic environments.

Socioeconomic Factors: Socioeconomic status was found to be one of the most significant factors influencing gender equality. Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face additional barriers to accessing higher education and professional advancement. Financial constraints, limited access to mentorship, and the prioritization of male education in certain communities exacerbate these disparities.

Cultural and Societal Norms: Deep-rooted cultural and societal norms, particularly the expectation that women prioritize family responsibilities over career aspirations, significantly hinder women's progression into leadership roles in academia. These societal attitudes perpetuate gender stereotypes and impact women's self-perception and career advancement.

Professional Development and Mentorship Programs: While professional development and mentorship programs are crucial for supporting women's academic careers, the study found that these programs are often insufficient or underutilized. Women's participation in leadership programs and networking opportunities needs to be enhanced to ensure their successful progression in academia.

Representation in Leadership Roles: The representation of women in leadership roles within private higher education institutions is still limited. The study highlights that the underrepresentation of women in senior positions contributes to a cycle of exclusion, where women lack role models and mentors who can guide them toward leadership roles.

Implication and Recommendations

Implication of Study

This study provides important insights into the challenges and barriers faced by women in private higher education institutions in Malaysia. The findings suggest that while policies and programs promoting gender equality exist, they are often insufficiently enforced or inadequately designed to address the deeply entrenched societal norms that limit women's opportunities in academia.

Policy Implications: Policymakers should prioritize the development and enforcement of gender-sensitive policies that address institutional biases, ensure equal access to career advancement opportunities, and promote work-life balance for female academics.

Institutional Implications: Universities should adopt comprehensive gender equity strategies that include clear recruitment and promotion policies, as well as the establishment of mentorship and leadership training programs specifically designed to empower women.

Cultural Implications: A cultural shift is necessary to challenge traditional gender roles and promote women's participation in leadership roles within academia. This can be achieved through advocacy, gender awareness programs, and greater representation of female leaders in decision-making positions.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to enhance gender equality in private higher education institutions in Malaysia:

Strengthen Institutional Gender Policies: Universities should strengthen their gender equality policies, ensuring that they are not only present on paper but actively implemented and monitored. This includes developing gender quotas for leadership positions, implementing family-friendly policies, and ensuring equal access to resources and professional development for both genders.

Enhance Mentorship Programs: Universities should develop structured mentorship and professional development programs that specifically address the unique challenges women face in academia. These programs should be made accessible to women at all career stages and should provide leadership training, career advice, and networking opportunities.

Increase Representation of Women in Leadership Roles: Universities must take proactive steps to increase the representation of women in leadership roles. This can include providing leadership training for women, fostering inclusive leadership practices, and ensuring that decision-making bodies reflect gender diversity.

Address Socioeconomic Barriers: To support women from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, universities should offer more scholarships, financial aid, and resources aimed at reducing financial barriers to education. Additionally, outreach programs could be designed to encourage women from lower-income communities to pursue higher education.

Promote Gender Sensitivity Training: Institutions should implement regular gender sensitivity and bias training for both faculty and staff. This will help raise awareness of unconscious biases and foster an inclusive environment that supports women's academic and professional advancement.

Limitation and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The research focused exclusively on private higher education institutions in Malaysia, and the findings may not be applicable to public universities or other countries with different cultural and institutional contexts. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data from students, which may have been subject to social desirability bias. Future research could expand the scope to include public institutions and longitudinal studies that track the effectiveness of gender equality initiatives over time.

Future studies could explore the impact of gender equality policies on academic performance and career progression over a longer period. Research could also examine the role of male allies in promoting gender equality in academia and explore the effectiveness of specific mentorship programs in fostering women's leadership. Comparative studies between private and public higher education institutions in Malaysia or other countries could provide a broader understanding of the global dynamics of gender equality in academia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of addressing institutional, cultural, and socioeconomic factors in promoting gender equality in private higher education institutions in Malaysia. While progress has been made, much remains to be done to create an inclusive academic environment where women can thrive and reach leadership positions. By implementing the recommendations

outlined in this chapter, private higher education institutions can play a key role in advancing gender equality and fostering a more equitable academic landscape for future generations.

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