







## Exploring Lecturers' Perceptions of Gender Equity in the Educational Management of Private Higher Educational Institutions (PHEIs) in Sabah, Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

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Gender equity in the educational management of higher education in Malaysia is often shaped by structural, operational, and sociocultural factors. While female students and female academic staff dominate in absolute numbers, the highest echelons of executive leadership in higher education remain substantially male-dominated. The primary purpose of this study was to explore lecturers' perceptions of gender equity in the educational management of private higher educational institutions (PHEIs) in Sabah, Malaysia. The sample consisted of 61 lecturers from four PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, who responded to the Gender Equality Questionnaire on Google Forms. Data were subsequently transferred onto a spreadsheet and analyzed using SPSS 29.0. First, percentages of agreement on perceived gender equity were calculated. Second, Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to determine if there were any significant differences in relation to age and job experience, while Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine if there were any significant differences in terms of gender. Third, Wilcoxon signed rank test was conducted to determine if any of the items significantly differed from the hypothesized value of 3.5. Findings imply that only low to average proportions of PHEI lecturers tend to strongly agree/agree that gender equity exists in the educational management of their organization, which are supported by previous research.

On the other hand, Mann-Whitney U test indicated that significant gender differences tend to exist in perceived gender equity at  $p < .05$ . In contrast, Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed nonsignificant differences in perceived gender equity by way of age and job experience. Wilcoxon signed rank test revealed that 25 of the items significantly differed from the hypothesized value of 3.5 at  $p < .001$ , while eight significantly differed from the same hypothesized value at  $p < .05$ . In light of the findings, some recommendations were made on ways to enhance gender equity in the educational management of PHEIs in Malaysia.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study addresses the crucial yet underexplored area of gender equity in the educational management of private higher educational institutions (PHEIs) in Sabah, Malaysia. Its relevance lies in its exploration of gender equity within a critical dimension of higher education where structural gender paradoxes persist. As the first quantitative study that examines lecturers' perceptions of gender equity in private higher education, it adds to the limited evidence base on the extent to which Malaysian PHEIs have (1) formalized gender-sensitive recruitment pipelines to level the playing field, (2) developed remote-inclusive management platforms and family-friendly workplace policies that allow qualified female academics to accept high-level governance roles, and (3) introduced specific programs in line with SDG 5 Gender Equality.

## 1. Introduction

Although gaining increasing representation in academia, women in Malaysia consistently encounter several impediments in securing senior leadership roles. They are underrepresented in strategic roles due to structural, cultural, and institutional barriers, including male-dominated organizational cultures, gender-stereotypes, and challenges associated with work-life balance. Female advancement and retention in leadership roles is further hampered by limited mentoring opportunities, inflexible work arrangements, and an imbalance of professional and familial responsibilities, which restrict women's access to authoritative and influential positions. In the Malaysian context, the lack of female representation in educational leadership roles is apparent despite their ever-growing numbers within academia. For example, in 2022, although the number of female university staff outnumbered men, female vice-chancellors were found in only two out of 20 public universities. Although relatively well-represented at lower and intermediate governance levels, their advancement to strategic and decision-making roles (e.g., vice-chancellors, department chairpersons, deans) is still lagging far behind (Azlan et al., 2025; Badrolhisam et al., 2022; Othman & Hamid, 2023).

As aforementioned, Malaysian higher education has been long dominated by men. Traditionally, male senior academic staff tend to have exclusive access to leadership and management positions (O'Connor, 2020; O'Connor & Irvine, 2020). Underrepresentation of women and differential evaluation between the two genders in terms of leadership often cause gender inequality in higher education institutions. Additionally, the structural dominance of hegemonic masculinity in academic, scientific, and administrative spheres continues to shape the leadership profile structures in every aspect, generally reflecting societal patterns and gender discrimination. Moreover, the

existing body of literature has scarcely highlighted the gender leadership gap within academia (Nyoni & He, 2019) due to the lack of initiatives empowering women to pursue leadership roles.

In a study, Sahin (2014) delved into the significance of gender equity in creating a better educational environment for girls under traditional pressures, besides questioning the effectiveness of an educational system that offers similar opportunities to both genders, educating them at the same time and setting using the same approaches. Traditional models of education often place men in unilateral decision-making roles in both domestic and organizational domains, regimenting women to lower-level positions. The traditional educational system often implies that girls should be trained for wifedom and motherhood, while boys as family leaders, breadwinners, and protectors. In Malaysia, while traditional hierarchies are gradually shifting toward egalitarian, collaborative, and diverse leadership structures, there is still an urgent need to shift to shared responsibility, shared parenting leave, and mutual consensus in domestic and organizational matters to optimize gender equity in higher education.

Gender equity in Malaysia's higher education management is a complex phenomenon. While women form the majority of the student body in higher education and academic workforce, their representation in strategic executive roles is still limited because of intersecting structural, sociocultural, and operational barriers (Azlan et al., 2025; Othman & Hamid, 2023). More quantitative research is essential to identify systemic barriers related to gender equity, ensuring that interventions translate into tangible career advancement, board appointments, and sustained leadership visibility among women. Findings would help policymakers design programs that can provide equitable access and empower women in academia to bridge the leadership gap in line with UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 Gender Equality.

### **1.1. Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for four reasons. First, there is a lack of research that addresses the gender reversal paradox (student/faculty surplus), whereby women outnumber men by significant margins as tertiary students and academics within Malaysia. Second, there is scarce research on the glass ceiling among women in Malaysia; despite a high concentration of female talent at the lecturer level, progression to top executive management (e.g., chief executive officer, vice-chancellor, board of directors) does not scale proportionally for women. Third, there is limited research that highlights the middle-management trap among women in Malaysia; while women are highly represented in mid-level administrative management (head of department, registrar, quality assurance manager), they rarely reach the final institutional decision-making boards. Lastly, findings would promote progress and a strategic path forward for women, providing a framework for local entities to actively push for systematic female empowerment across higher education and leadership.

The primary purpose of this study was to explore lecturers' perceptions of gender equity in the educational management of private higher educational institutions (PHEIs) in Sabah, Malaysia. To dictate the research design, guide data collection, and define the exact problem being investigated, three research questions are formulated to ensure that research is focused, rigorous, and relevant by (1) narrowing down the demographics, variables, and timeframe, (2) providing answers within the given period, budget, and resource constraints, and (3) adding value to the specific academic field

(educational management), while addressing the broader societal issue of gender equity. The three research questions are as follows:

- i. Are there any significant differences in perceived gender equity in educational management among lecturers at PHEIs in relation to age, gender, and job experience?
- ii. What are the descriptive statistics for perceived gender equity in Sabah and what do they imply?
- iii. Are any of the perceived gender equity items significantly different from the hypothesized value of 3.5?

## **2. Review of Literature**

A literature review was conducted to provide a comprehensive overview and critical evaluation of previously published scholarly works on gender equity in educational management, synthesizing existing knowledge, identifying key themes, and highlighting gaps in the research.

### **2.1. Paradoxical Contexts and Informal Learning Framework**

A study conducted by Unin (2014) examined Malaysian female deans' leadership development through an informal learning framework within the nation's sociocultural context. Findings indicated that female higher education leaders tend to function within paradoxical contexts, while learning to navigate the multiple tensions and contradictions related to their leadership roles. One of the paradoxes lies within the largely patriarchal and hierarchical sociocultural milieu that is male-dominated, stratified, and class-conscious, which constrains leadership opportunities amongst women. While not being overtly discouraged from assuming top leadership positions, women often lack unequivocal and explicit support for leadership roles.

Nevertheless, the informal learning framework, which involves powerful socioemotional processes, enables female leaders to negotiate the societal expectations and tensions by constantly "learning to learn" in balancing their professional and traditional roles, which often contradict each another (Unin, 2014). Leadership development amongst female deans is often achieved by trial and error, with them trying to make sense of things along the way. Rather than acquiring specific leadership skills, they strive to master the art that is pragmatic in the context of learning to lead. Moreover, female deans constantly face arduous situations that require a positive attitude toward learning to learn. For example, some people may not favor a woman as their dean due to patriarchy and sociocultural attitudes, regarding men as having customary status in the family and beyond. Lastly, since female deans are a minority among academic leaders, their contributions must be highly impactful to be acknowledged.

### **2.2. Masculine Attributes and Gender Discrimination**

Unin (2014) postulated that female leaders often try to avoid competing directly with their male counterparts; competitiveness and assertiveness are masculine attributes deemed inappropriate for women leaders in the social context. Therefore, female leaders need to be astute and perceptive at balancing the friction between two opposite genders. Besides masculine attributes, female leaders also face obvious contradictions in what it entails for them as leaders, mothers, and wives. The Malaysian society has the value system that, regardless of how capable a female leader is, she needs to be

cognizant that she is not the 'boss' at home. Honoring the unspoken rules and values is a useful way for female leaders to manage multiple roles, while negotiating implicit societal expectations. Leading in a patriarchal society that underscores female gracefulness and nurturance, demanding female leaders to see things from the opposite gender's perspectives, while prioritizing their duty as wives and mothers. Lastly, "learning to lead" amongst female leaders tends to be a relational and emotional process, which often involves navigating incidents that are frustrating, discouraging, taxing, problematic, and disappointing. Nevertheless, these negative emotions often prompt female leaders to persist in learning to lead; for example, female administrators who encounter difficult individuals or situations have learned to vent their aggravation by sharing their grievances with trusted individuals. Lastly, to handle staffing issues and controversial policy initiatives, female leaders often strive to garner support from people at the grassroots, besides adopting a rational approach to convincing the top management.

## **2.6. Factors Affecting Gender Equity in Technology**

In their study, Zeliang and Malakar (2024) explored gender equity and women empowerment in education. Findings showed that several factors tend to persistently hinder gender equity, including enrolment, retention, curriculum, mentoring, implicit bias in promotion, and sociocultural factors. Lower enrolment rates of women in specific fields, such as STEM and IT, restrict the pipeline of qualified female candidates for top leadership positions, while limited access to education caused by poverty, early marriage, or gender-based violence often prevents girls from getting an education, which directly reduces the number of women who can later occupy decision-making roles. Further, curriculum materials and classroom dynamics often reinforce traditional gender roles, which can limit the aspirations of girls to pursue leadership paths. Additionally, a male-dominated culture often creates institutional environments characterized by masculine models of leadership, emphasizing traits of competitiveness and assertiveness; it marginalizes women, resulting in higher turnover or lack of promotion among them.

A scarcity of female mentors and senior role models has resulted in women getting fewer professional networks and less guidance to navigate career progression. Implicit bias in promotion, characterized by gender-biased selection processes, often undervalues women's competence, hindering their professional advancement. Moreover, sociocultural factors, including deep-rooted gender norms and stereotypical beliefs also tend to diminish female education and leadership. Traditional beliefs that prioritize women's domestic roles over public or professional roles often restrict their perceived suitability for leadership. Further, societal beliefs that women are less suited for high-stakes leadership and the perception that females are not as efficient as males also act as a significant barrier. In some cultures, restrictions on women's mobility, such as the need for permission to work or attend training, hinder their ability to pursue prominent leadership roles (Zeliang & Malakar, 2024).

## **2.7. Impact of Competence, Leadership Trade-offs, and Work Experience**

Perceived competence, leadership roles, and leadership aspirations among university students were explored by Sánchez and Lehnert (2019). Findings revealed that women with greater competence and more work experience tend to aspire leadership positions less compared to their male counterparts. In contrast, women with less work

experience tend to aspire leadership positions more compared to their male counterparts. Findings also indicated that, the less favorable women perceive leadership roles, the less they aspire to become leaders, compared to men. However, for both genders, the less competent they perceive themselves as future leaders, the less they want to lead. Findings imply that competent women with more work experience are less likely to pursue leadership positions due to perceived compromises or opportunity cost, besides increased awareness of gender bias. Besides, women are often discouraged by the leadership labyrinth, which depicts the complicated, winding, and non-linear journey that women have to venture to reach top leadership positions. Additionally, women with more experience tend to associate top leadership positions with more unfavorable consequences (e.g., work-life balance issues, intense scrutiny, implicit bias), and therefore, are more likely to forgo a significant promotion. Despite their high competence, they themselves may internalize negative stereotypes about female leaders, leading to diminished self-efficacy and negative self-appraisal of leadership effectiveness compared to men.

## **2.8. Impact of Gender Equality Legislation and Business Administration**

Gender equality in relation to legislation within the educational framework was studied by Nehoda et al. (2024). Findings revealed that that the gender component in contemporary education requires an expanded scientific discourse, particularly in the context of evaluating the implementation of gender equality initiatives within the educational domain. Simply adopting a legislative framework is insufficient; it must be accompanied by public awareness and more efficient statistical monitoring to be impactful. Findings imply that specific gender-related laws should translate abstract equality principles into functional practices within higher educational institutions. Besides focusing on the critical areas for legislative and policy intervention, equal rights and opportunities for both genders should be upheld to counter inequity, while promoting human dignity and inclusivity. Lastly, specific attention should be given to the implications of gender equality in higher education, outlining initiatives and tasks to empower women in leadership.

In their investigation, Ilie, Carlos, and Quintana (2023) analyzed the impact of a Master's program in business administration on gender equality among graduates. Findings showed that the program tends to reinforce women's orientation to execution and personal relationships, and men's preferences for analytical thinking, risk-taking, and strategic thinking. Overall, the program tends to positively impact female graduates' cognitive styles, helping them adopt a more integrative thinking model, while preparing them for top executive roles. Findings imply that Master's programs, particularly those focusing on business leadership, can significantly advance gender equality by underscoring the critical analysis of societal norms, increasing employability for equality-related roles, and empowering individuals to act as agents of change.

Lastly, leadership strategies (transformational versus distributed) for advancing gender equity in higher education administration were explored by Okoro (2025). Findings revealed that gender disparities in leadership tend to stem from cultural biases, structural barriers, and inadequate policies. Findings imply that transformational leadership tends to foster empowerment and inclusivity, while distributed leadership tends to strengthen shared governance and equity. Lastly, challenges to promote gender equity in higher education include resistance to change and work-life imbalance. Key

strategies, including gender-sensitive policies, mentorship, and leadership training, are identified as crucial for promoting female leadership in higher education.

### *2.1.1. Lack of Support and Overloading*

Challenges and opportunities among female departmental heads (DHs) in education were analyzed by Nhlumayo and Ngubane (2025). Findings revealed that DHs tend to experience various obstacles, ranging from job welfare to functional roles. They tend to receive minimal support, which is indicative of the ingrained and deep-rooted gender biases and prejudices against women. Their lack of support can be attributed to the traditional relegation and stereotyping of women to non-leadership positions. Like many organizations, schools often assign senior leadership roles to male staff, besides situating female staff as subordinates even though they are as qualified, if not more, as their male counterparts. Consequently, female DHs often sacrifice their promotion opportunities for the sake of professional acceptance, which ultimately leads to emotional fatigue and stress. With meager empowerment, female DHs are often subjected to negative perceptions, which portray them as inefficient or overly emotional leaders. Lack of support also limits leadership development among female DHs, which again results in them being perceived as incapable to lead. Besides the lack of support, female DHs often carry much heavier workloads compared to their male counterparts. Inevitably, work overloading often adversely impacts their general welfare, psychological wellbeing, work-life balance, and job performance. Lastly, female HDs also experience role ambiguity, whereby they end up overstepping others' roles and functions. It occurs because they are unclear about their job responsibilities, expectations, or performance criteria, which can have more serious impact on female leaders due to various social, organizational, and gender-specific factors.

### *2.1.2. Gender Differences in Leadership Attributes*

In a study, Kairys (2018) investigated perceived leadership skills in senior management at vocational education training (VET) institutions. Findings revealed that both genders tend to identify cognitive, interpersonal, business, and strategic skills as crucial for senior management. However, they tend to rank the importance of these skills differently, with men ranking business and strategic skills as most important, while women perceiving cognitive and interpersonal skills as most crucial. Findings imply that gender tends to influence higher educational leadership, with men focusing on task-orientated roles, and women on relationship development. Being task-oriented, men tend to underscore structure, prioritizing the creation, maintenance, and improvement of organizational systems and processes. Further, being goal-driven, men often define specific roles, set clear deadlines, and focus on achieving objective outcomes for the organization, using direct, command-based communication and focusing on work outcomes. Moreover, they also tend to use reward/punishment systems based on performance metrics to motivate their teams, primarily focusing on good performance and optimal productivity. In contrast, women often integrate cognitive and interpersonal skills for leadership excellence; they strive to enhance decision-making by being mentally strong and socially aware to make analytically sound decisions that have greater human impact and higher buy-in. Further, compared to men, women demonstrate greater resilience because their cognitive skills help them adequately analyze crises, while their interpersonal skills (emotional regulation and communication) help maintain team morale during challenging circumstances. Lastly, they also display higher adaptability by combining analytical assessment of market

changes with the ability to lead the team through necessary, often complicated, transitions.

### *2.1.3. Lack of Gender-responsive Pedagogy and Technology-enhanced Learning*

The impact of gender-responsive pedagogy on teacher education at a university was analyzed by Miralles-Cardona (2025). Findings revealed that gender-related topics tend to be moderately integrated into coursework, with content primarily focusing on gender-based violence and equal opportunities; however, foundational gender concepts receive little attention. On the other hand, pedagogic methods at the university largely rely on traditional approaches, such as lectures and project-based learning, rather than interactive or inquiry-based strategies. Nevertheless, pre-service teachers with adequate gender training tend to demonstrate higher perceived self-efficacy in pedagogy. Findings imply that institutional commitment to gender mainstreaming in teacher education is limited, underscoring the need for comprehensive reforms, including curriculum revision, faculty training, and stronger institutional accountability to advance meaningful gender equality in higher education.

In their study, Berezhna et al. (2025) explored the impact of educational technology for gender mainstreaming in project management. Findings revealed that, while blended learning approaches and virtual learning environments tend to show promise, significant challenges remain in designing culturally appropriate, accessible technology-enhanced learning (TEL) experiences that can promote gender equality in project management. Core problems in designing accessible TEL for women include (1) gender bias in AI and technology, whereby algorithms often rely on data that reinforce gender stereotypes (e.g., associating scientific roles with men and nursing with women), which can limit opportunities for women in STEM, (2) technological and socioeconomic barriers created by the digital divide, affecting women in low-income or rural areas, (3) inaccessible content and design, whereby many digital platforms lack basic accessibility standards, alternative text for images, captioning for videos, or proper keyboard navigation, (4) the lack of tailored content that is culturally appropriate and gender-sensitive, and (5) sociocultural constraints (e.g., household duties, limited mobility, cultural taboos) often restrict women's access to, and participation in, higher education and technology-enhanced learning.

### *2.1.4. Gender-related Challenges and Gender Bias in Financial Administration*

Gender-related challenges faced by female heads of department (HoDs) were explored by Shava et al. (2023). Findings showed that only male staff tend to perceive female HoDs as competent and capable. In contrast, female staff tend to undermine female HoDs because of the entrenched culture of male dominance. University community members tend to lack confidence in women assuming management roles, especially where the previous leader was male and high-performing. Findings imply that female HoDs are often adversely affected by internalized sexism, whereby female staff may subconsciously hold "think manager–think male" stereotypes, leading them to view female leaders as less competent or less legitimate than their male counterparts. Further, female leaders affected by the queen bee syndrome often distance themselves from junior women or withhold support to protect their own hard-won positions, which often occurs in a competitive, patriarchal system. Additionally, female leaders who experience backlash and peer pressure are often subjected to a "likability paradox," where they are expected to be both nurturing and authoritative. Besides, female leaders

who defy gender norms by showing greater independence or assertiveness, may be rejected by both male and female subordinates, who view them as authoritarian. Lastly, female leaders often encounter structural bias because both genders in some cultures still display biases toward women in leadership roles.

On the other hand, Chakanyuka and Gono (2025) analyzed the barriers dissuading potential female leaders from assuming top leadership roles. Findings revealed that aspiring female leaders tend to face persistent obstacles, including limited access to financial training, gender bias in resource allocation, work-life imbalance, and systemic institutional constraints. Mathematics and accounting skills, required in financial management, often have gendered connotations because they are often aligned toward the masculine gender. Societal, and often teacher-reinforced, beliefs falsely equate the male gender with superior mathematical ability, leading to lower confidence and reduced participation of women in STEM fields. Moreover, children as young as second grade are often led to believe that math is for boys, while teachers may unconsciously reinforce the stereotype through their own actions and choice of materials. The stereotype causes girls to underperform because of the internalized belief that they are less capable than boys.

#### *2.1.5. Sociocultural Factors, Perceived Feminist Traits, and Structural Bias*

The relationship between gender and leadership at research universities was examined by Kaur (2019). Findings showed that, although female participation rates have increased significantly in terms of the academic labor force, a chronic gender gap tends to persist in top leadership roles, whereby women often face unique impediments. Female leadership is limited by the cultural context, whereby sociocultural settings and perceived feminist traits often obstruct women's career advancement at university. Sociocultural factors and perceived feminist traits include (1) the double bind effect, whereby female leaders must demonstrate assertiveness and decisiveness without appearing too aggressive or "bossy", (2) backlash against assertiveness, whereby female leaders with agentic (assertiveness, independence) traits often encounter harsher judgment, social penalties, and decreased likability, (3) benevolent sexism, whereby female leaders are treated in a condescendingly protective manner that limits their access to high-profile, challenging projects, and (4) internalized constraints that cause female leaders to doubt their own abilities, avoid taking risks, or underestimate their own performance.

In a study, Nchaga (2025) investigated the current disparities in leadership and issues faced by female leaders. Findings revealed that, despite progress in gender inclusivity, women remain underrepresented in top leadership positions due to structural biases and institutional barriers. Structural biases include (1) the broken rung that occurs early in the career ladder, whereby women are less likely to be promoted to their first managerial role, creating a shrinking pipeline of female talent, (2) old boy networks that allow men to dominate informal networks, mentorship, and sponsorship opportunities that are crucial for career acceleration, limiting women's access to these power networks, and (3) gendered perceptions of ability, whereby women often face higher performance standards and more critical evaluations than their male counterparts. Institutional barriers include (1) the lack of transparency, whereby opaque recruitment, promotion, and retention processes often lead to unconscious bias in decision-making, (2) rigid work structures, whereby traditional corporate environments rarely provide flexibility for women, making it difficult for them to

balance between work and family life, (3) scarcity of role models, whereby the lack of women in senior positions makes it harder for younger women to visualize themselves in top leadership roles.

#### *2.1.6. Norms, Institutional Practices, Familial Expectations, and Personal Factors*

Perceptions and experiences of female academics on barriers in securing and continuing leadership roles at higher education were surveyed by Ghundol and Muthanna (2025). Findings revealed that a complex interplay of sociocultural norms, institutional practices, familial expectations, and personal factors tend to collectively hinder female academics from procuring and continuing leadership roles at higher education. Sociocultural norms rooted in traditional gender roles, characterized by conservative values and patriarchal structures, often limit women's primary responsibilities as homemakers, with society constantly demanding them to prioritize their roles as spouses and mothers over prominent positions outside, resulting in skepticism about women's leadership capabilities and resistance to women attaining positions of authority.

Finally, Ghundol and Muthanna (2025) added that female academics constantly face the challenge of balancing between professional obligations and familial responsibilities, highlighting the predicament of managing leadership roles alongside expectations of being primary caregivers and homemakers. Due to the lack of institutional support, such as flexible working hours or on-campus childcare facilities, women often find themselves overburdened, leading to stress and burnout, which deter them from pursuing or continuing leadership roles. Some women are even discouraged or even forbidden by their husbands from accepting leadership roles, compelling them to choose between their professional aspirations and family harmony. Third, negative personality factors, including diffidence, apathy, and indifference, also discourage female academics to pursue or continue leadership roles. Feelings of self-doubt, fear of failure, and concern about increased scrutiny and criticism associated with leadership roles often prevent qualified female academics from ascending to higher leadership positions despite their stellar qualifications.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Design and Approach**

This study adopted a quantitative research design, focusing on systematic, objective data collection and statistical analysis. Its primary strengths include high reliability through a replicable standardized survey, broad generalizability across a large population of academics, and the ability to isolate specific variables related to gender equity in educational management. Additionally, the research design is objective and accurate because the standardized metrics minimize researcher bias, yielding hard, numerical data that is reliable and easily verifiable. Because it utilizes a representative sample of lecturers, findings can be accurately applied to the broader population in Sabah. Moreover, the research design allows for efficient data analysis utilizing SPSS 29.0, which can process and summarize large datasets visually and succinctly. It also promotes replicability because it contains structured research parameters and questions, allowing future researchers to reproduce the study to test and confirm the findings.

### 3.2. Research Location

The capital city of Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah was selected as research location. It has the highest concentration of PHEIs in East Malaysia; hence, it provides a sufficiently representative sample of the PHEI lecturers in Sabah, thus allowing for a relatively fair assessment of staff's perceptions of gender equity in the educational management of local PHEIs.

### 3.3. Sample and Justification

The sample consisted of 61 lecturers ( $n = 61$ ) from four PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, who have at least a basic degree and teach full-time at their institutions. Initially, administrators of 10 randomly selected PHEIs were invited to participate in the study via email and phone, but eventually, only four agreed to share the survey link with their staff. To get a realistic and contextually relevant sample, voluntary participation and convenient access were emphasized.

The sample was culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse and its size was justified according to the central limit theorem, which states that a minimum of 30 respondents is enough to ensure statistical power and generalizability for basic survey research (Roscoe, 1975; RUBIKTOP, 2023). Therefore, the current sample size meets the minimum requirement for quantitative research in the social sciences, particularly in terms of gender equity in educational management, while ensuring a reasonable margin of error and sufficient power to identify modest effects in the nonparametric tests that used to interpret data in the present study.

The sample consisted of 45.9 percent males and 54.1 percent females. Age-wise, 31.1 percent are 24 to 34 years old, 37.7 percent are 35 to 45 years old, 23 percent are 46 to 56 years old, and 8.2 are above 56 years old (see Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Profile	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	28	45.9
	Female	33	54.1
Age (years)	24-34	19	31.1
	35-45	23	37.7
	46-56	14	23
	Above 56	5	8.2
Job experience (years)	1-5	13	21.3
	6-11	8	13.1
	12-17	15	24.6
	Above 17	25	41

### 3.4. Instrument

The Gender Equality Questionnaire was used to collect data. It consists of 34 Likert-scale items derived from the literature (European Trade Union Committee for Education, 2009; Nevada Commission for Women, n. d.; The Equileap Team, 2019). To determine

its reliability, it was pilot tested on 20 lecturers, and SPSS 29.0 was used to analyzed the data. Results showed that its Cronbach's alpha is .891, which indicates excellent internal consistency, implying that the survey items are highly correlated and reliably measure the same underlying construct (gender equity in educational management).

### 3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

The Gender Equality Questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms, which was highly scalable, cost-effective, and easy to distribute. Responses were automatically recorded, speeding up data analysis. Informed consent in relation to the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, and the possibility to withdraw at any time without any repercussions was emphasized. All lecturers were anonymized and the data were kept strictly confidential. Only general information was solicited and would be solely used for scholarly purposes. Data were subsequently transferred onto a spreadsheet and analyzed using SPSS 29.0. First, percentages of agreement on perceived gender equity were calculated. Second, Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to determine if there were any significant differences in relation to age and job experience, while Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine if there were any significant differences in terms of gender. Third, Wilcoxon signed rank test was conducted to determine if any of the items significantly differed from the hypothesized value of 3.5.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Percentages of Agreement

For each item, percentages of agreement (strongly agree/agree) were combined to gain an overall view of perceived gender equity in educational management. First, findings showed that a very low proportion (37.7 to 49.2 percent) of lecturers tend to strongly agree/agree that their organization (1) has provisions for facilitating gender equality when promoting staff, (2) has undertaken an independent assessment and certification for gender equality, (3) has a strategy, or has acted, to close any identified gender pay gap, (4) has provisions for facilitating gender equality when recruiting staff, and (5) has similar percentages of men and women in senior management. Similarly, a very low proportion (37.7 to 49.2 percent) also tend to strongly agree/agree that (1) there is an equal number of men and women in the national Ministry of Education at the decision-making (leadership) level, (2) there are recent surveys/reports related to the distribution of males/females within the field of education at national level, and (3) their organization needs to do more to increase gender diversity (see Table 2).

Second, findings showed that a low proportion of lecturers (50.9 to 55.8 percent) tend to strongly agree/agree that (1) their organization has published figures showing that it provides equal pay for equal work (2) both genders are treated equally in all fields in their country, (3) the amount of effort currently being adopted to increase gender diversity is about correct in their organization, (4) currently, there is a national orientation to promote gender equality within educational leadership, (5) their country has an overall national policy and/or legal framework on gender equality, and (6) there are actions aimed at supporting work-life balance in their country's national policy on gender equality, (7) their country has a national policy on the promotion of gender equality in the education sector, (8) their organization has an employee protection policy (e.g., whistleblowing or anti-retaliation policy), (9) there are affirmative actions aimed at promoting women in decision-making (leadership) in the education sector in

their country, and (10) women candidates for educational leadership positions are taken seriously in their country (see Table 2).

Third, a below average proportion of lecturers (60.6 to 68.9 percent) tend to strongly agree/agree that their organization (1) offers flexible working hours and/or flexible work locations, (2) has an Equal Opportunity Policy or equivalent to ensure fair treatment of all demographic groups, including women, (4) offers employees paid primary carer leave (maternity leave), (5) has a fair remuneration policy or equivalent (6) has a human rights policy, (7) has an employee health and safety policy, and (8) does not allow gender to influence getting a raise, promotion, key assignment, or chance to get ahead (see Table 2).

Fourth, only an average proportion (70.9 to 80.4 percent) of lecturers tend to strongly agree/agree that (1) both genders work equally hard to attain leadership positions in their country, (2) their organization has a training policy that covers all employees regardless of gender, (3) their organization has an anti-sexual harassment and anti-gender violence policy, or equivalent, and (4) men and women are treated equally in their organization (see Table 2).

Table 2: Percentages of Agreement on Perceived Gender Equity

Item	1	2	3	4	5	4+5 (collapsed)
In my organization, men and women are treated equally	4.9	1.6	13.1	36.1	44.3	80.4
In my country, men and women are treated equally in all fields	4.9	9.8	32.8	29.5	23	52.5
In my organization, promotions are only based on individual employee performance	4.9	8.2	31.1	27.9	27.9	55.8
In my organization, women have equal opportunities to advance as men	1.6	4.9	18	36.1	39.3	70.9
In my organization, gender has NO influence on getting a raise, promotion, key assignment, or chance to get ahead	4.9	6.6	19.7	32.8	36.1	68.9
My organization needs to do more to increase gender diversity	6.6	9.8	37.7	27.9	18	45.9
In my organization, the amount of effort currently being used to increase gender diversity is about correct	3.3	4.9	37.7	36.1	18	54.1
In my organization, there are provisions for facilitating gender equality when recruiting staff	6.6	13.1	37.7	23	19.7	42.7
In my organization, there are provisions for facilitating gender equality when promoting staff	4.9	13.1	44.3	24.6	13.1	37.7
At national level, there are recent surveys/reports related to the distribution of males/females within the field of education	3.3	4.9	45.9	26.2	19.7	45.9
Currently, there is a national orientation to promote gender equality within educational leadership	0	9.8	37.7	32.8	19.7	52.5
In my organization, the percentage of men and women in senior management is similar	8.2	26.2	27.9	21.3	16.4	37.7
My organization has a fair remuneration policy	1.6	3.3	26.2	44.3	24.6	68.9

or equivalent						
My organization has a strategy, or has acted, to close any identified gender pay gap	1.6	8.2	47.5	24.6	18	42.6
My organization has published figures showing that it provides equal pay for equal work	6.6	6.6	36.1	36.1	14.8	50.9
My organization offers employees paid primary carer leave (maternity leave)	0	9.8	23	23	44.3	67.3
My organization offers flexible working hours and/or flexible work locations	9.8	11.5	18	34.4	26.2	60.6
My organization has a training policy that covers all employees regardless of gender	1.6	1.6	23	42.6	31.1	73.7
My organization has an anti-sexual harassment and anti-gender violence policy, or equivalent	0	1.6	23	27.9	47.5	75.4
My organization has an Equal Opportunity Policy or equivalent, to ensure fair treatment of all demographic groups including women	1.6	4.9	31.1	32.8	29.5	62.3
My organization has an employee health and safety policy	0	1.6	29.5	37.7	31.1	68.8
My organization has a human rights policy	3.3	3.3	29.5	32.8	31.1	63.9
My organization has an employee protection policy (e.g., whistleblowing or anti-retaliation policy)	1.6	3.3	36.1	31.1	27.9	59
My organization has undertaken an independent assessment and certification for gender equality	1.6	4.9	52.5	14.8	26.2	41
My country has an overall national policy and/or legal framework on gender equality	1.6	3.3	39.3	34.4	21.3	55.7
As far as I am informed, there is an equal number of men and women in the national Ministry of Education at the decision-making (leadership) level	3.3	11.5	37.7	26.2	21.3	47.5
My country has a national policy on the promotion of gender equality in the education sector	0	4.9	41	29.5	24.6	54.1
In my country, there are actions addressing gender roles and combating stereotypes in education	0	9.8	41	29.5	19.7	49.2
In my country, there are affirmative actions aimed at promoting women in decision-making (leadership) in the education sector	1.6	8.2	39.3	31.1	19.7	50.8
There are actions aimed at supporting work-life balance in my country's national policy on gender equality	3.3	4.9	34.4	39.3	18	57.3
There is a national policy aimed at tackling the gender pay gap in my country	1.6	6.6	50.8	23	18	41
Women candidates for educational leadership positions are taken seriously in my country	3.3	1.6	39.3	34.4	21.3	55.7
Women in my country are encouraged to seek leadership positions	3.3	3.3	29.5	32.8	31.1	63.9
Men and women work equally hard to attain leadership positions in my country	1.6	3.3	21.3	42.6	31.1	73.7

*Strongly Agree = 5, Agree = 4, Neutral =3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1*

## 4.2. Nonparametric Results

Mann-Whitney U test indicated that significant gender differences tend to exist in perceived gender equity at  $p < .05$ . In contrast, Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed nonsignificant differences in perceived gender equity in by way of age and job experience (see Table 3).

Table 3: Kruskal-Wallis H and Mann-Whitney U Test Results

Variable	Nonparametric test	p-value
Gender	Mann-Whitney U	0.046*
Age (years)	Kruskal-Wallis H	0.713
Job experience (years)	Kruskal-Wallis H	0.533

\* $p < .05$

## 4.3. Wilcoxon Signed Rank Results

Findings revealed that 25 of the items significantly differed from the hypothesized value of 3.5 at  $p < .001$ , while only eight significantly differed from the same hypothesized value at  $p < .05$  (see Table 4).

Table 4: Wilcoxon Signed Rank Results on Perceived Gender Equity

Items	Sig. <sup>a,b</sup>	Conclusion
In my organization, men and women are treated equally	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
In my country, men and women are treated equally in all fields	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
In my organization, promotions are only based on individual employee performance	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
In my organization, women have equal opportunities to advance as men	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
In my organization, gender has NO influence on getting a raise, promotion, key assignment, or chance to get ahead	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My organization needs to do more to increase gender diversity	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
In my organization, the amount of effort currently being used to increase gender diversity is about correct	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
In my organization, there are provisions for facilitating gender equality when recruiting staff	.002*	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
In my organization, there are provisions for facilitating gender equality when promoting staff	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
At national level, there are recent surveys/reports related to the distribution of males/females within the field of education	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement

Currently, there is a national orientation to promote gender equality within educational leadership	.008*	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
In my organization, the percentage of men and women in senior management is similar	.100	No significant difference
My organization has a fair remuneration policy or equivalent	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My organization has a strategy, or has acted, to close any identified gender pay gap	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My organization has published figures showing that it provides equal pay for equal work	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My organization offers employees paid primary carer leave (maternity leave)	.002*	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My organization offers flexible working hours and/or flexible work locations	.011*	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My organization has a training policy that covers all employees regardless of gender	.002*	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My organization has an anti-sexual harassment and anti-gender violence policy, or equivalent	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My organization has an Equal Opportunity Policy or equivalent, to ensure fair treatment of all demographic groups including women	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My organization has an employee health and safety policy	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My organization has a human rights policy	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My organization has an employee protection policy (e.g., whistleblowing or anti-retaliation policy)	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My organization has undertaken an independent assessment and certification for gender equality	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My country has an overall national policy and/or legal framework on gender equality	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
As far as I am informed, there is an equal number of men and women in the national Ministry of Education at the decision-making (leadership) level	.004*	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My country has a national policy on the promotion of gender equality in the education sector	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement

In my country, there are actions addressing gender roles and combating stereotypes in education	.005*	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
In my country, there are affirmative actions aimed at promoting women in decision-making (leadership) in the education sector	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
There are actions aimed at supporting work-life balance in my country's national policy on gender equality	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
There is a national policy aimed at tackling the gender pay gap in my country	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Women candidates for educational leadership positions are taken seriously in my country	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Women in my country are encouraged to seek leadership positions	.002*	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Men and women work equally hard to attain leadership positions in my country	.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement

\*\* $p < .001$ ; \* $p < .05$

## 5. Discussion

The discussion section interprets the findings, explains their significance, and connects them back to the original research questions. It explains why the findings occurred and what they imply, besides comparing them with previous studies. Lastly, it acknowledges the constraints of the study, besides recommending how future studies can address the limitations.

### 5.1. Implications

Findings imply that only low to average proportions of PHEI lecturers tend to strongly agree/agree that gender equity exists in the educational management of their organization, which are supported by previous research. In Malaysia, the lack of female representation in leadership roles is apparent despite their growing numbers within academia. According to the Ministry of Higher Education (2020), female academics with PhD qualifications comprise 53.4 percent compared to 46.6 percent of male academics with the same qualifications at Malaysian public universities (Azlan et al., 2025; Badrolhisam Omar, & Achim, 2022; Othman & Hamid, 2023). However, very few of them hold top management positions in higher education.

Additionally, systemic challenges often hinder Malaysian women from progressing to top management in higher education. Traditionally, men have long dominated higher education, where full professors and senior academic staff often have exclusive access to higher leadership and management positions. Moreover, perpetual underrepresentation of women in senior positions and the different appraisal practices between the two genders exacerbated gender inequity in the higher education landscape. Lastly, masculinizing higher education continues to influence the leadership structures and power concentrations in Malaysia, reflecting societal patterns and gender

discrimination in many aspects of higher education (Azlan et al., 2025; Badrolhisam Omar, & Achim, 2022; Othman & Hamid, 2023).

Similarly, Syahirah et al. (2026), who explored the representation of female leadership at Malaysian public universities, discovered grim gender disparity in decision-making. Female underrepresentation in senior leadership positions is flagrant although women comprise the majority population as academics and tertiary students in Malaysia. Findings imply that certain factors tend to impede women's representation at the top leadership level and achievement of SDG 5. Women often bear unpaid care burden, spending significantly more time on unpaid domestic and care work than men, which limits their time and opportunities for career advancement, network building, and leadership development. Besides, women often encounter organizational biases and stereotypes. They frequently encounter unconscious bias in hiring and promotion processes that evaluate females according to previous performance, while appraising their male counterparts based on potential. Lastly, the motherhood penalty compels many married women to dismiss their career aspirations, leading to missed leadership opportunities.

Additionally, current findings imply that significant gender differences tend to exist in perceived gender equity among PHEI lecturers, which are supported by previous studies. Mustofa, Karya, and Halim (2021), who explored students' perceptions of gender equity in education, found that significant gender differences tend to exist, with female students displaying stronger support for gender equity across access, learning processes, and achievement, while male students often maintained a preference for the traditional status quo. Male students, often shaped by deeper societal and cultural conditioning, tend to be more conservative in their views, often desiring to preserve patriarchal norms within academic spaces.

In the same vein, Sherazi and Khalid (2024), who explored university students' perceptions of gender equality in education, found significant gender differences, with female students demonstrating stronger support for gender equality than their male counterparts. Besides, locality tends to influence gender perceptions, with urban students displaying a greater understanding of, and support for, gender equality compared to rural students, which is likely due to urban exposure to more progressive ideals and diverse social norms.

In a study, Wang (2025) examined the psychological mechanisms of gender differences in higher education and their impact on educational policy making. Findings revealed that, despite increased gender awareness in recent years, gender differences in subject choice and participation tend to persist, often shaped by sociocultural factors and individual psychological characteristics. In brief, structural differences persist between the two genders in terms of major selection and the job market, further affecting the gender structure in higher education.

Lastly, Barnacle et al. (2026), who examined the capability of higher education leaders to create respectful workplaces, discovered that leaders often understand the problem of gender inequality narrowly, as numeric, with few recognizing its systemic and structural drivers. STEM leaders tend to more likely than those in humanities, externalize the problem and treat it as a pipeline issue.

## 5.2. Recommendations

### 5.2.1. *Female Mentorship and Sponsorship and Intersectionality*

First, finding appropriate mentors is essential for women who aspire a career in educational administration (Diaz, 2024). PHEIs need to hire mentors who understand the specific challenges faced by female administrators, have navigated similar terrain, and are willing to share strategies to overcome obstacles. Female mentors who have already navigated the male-dominated milieu of educational administration not only can provide invaluable guidance, but also offer sponsorship. They do not just furnish advice, but they also recommend promising female leaders to hiring committees, asserting their mentees' ability and giving them the platform to demonstrate their skills. PHEIs should emphasize the intentional cultivation of networks of female leaders; women helping other women ascend in educational leadership can create a ripple effect that benefits not only individuals, but also the communities they serve.

Second, professional development for women in educational administration must address the intersectionality of race, gender, and class (Diaz, 2024). Malaysian women often encounter unique trials and tribulations in higher education, including implicit bias and systemic discrimination, which can stifle their career advancement. Therefore, PHEIs should implement professional development programs tailored to ameliorate these crossroads, eliminating a universally applicable or standard that overlooks the distinct needs of women. They should offer tailored leadership programs that foster inclusive environments that acknowledge and embrace diversity in leadership. Women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds can bring unique perspectives that enrich higher educational administration. Nevertheless, many women are still isolated within their schools and districts, without access to the professional networks available to their male counterparts (Diaz, 2024). Therefore, PHEIs need to allocate specific spaces where aspiring female leaders of diverse backgrounds can share their experiences and strategies for success in higher educational management.

### 5.2.2. *New Leadership Narrative, Transformative Action, and Re-definition of Success*

First, women's professional development should not focus on merely fitting them into male-dominated structures (Diaz, 2024). PHEIs should redefine leadership itself, underscoring emotional intelligence, collaboration, and empathy as essential leadership skills. They should emphasize that leadership is about empowering others, which is a collaborative approach that many women tend to embrace. Collaboration not only improves staff morale, but it also increases community trust, which results in improved student outcomes. By focusing on the very qualities that are sometimes undervalued in women (e.g., emotional intelligence, open communication, empathy), PHEIs have the potential to redefine leadership effectiveness and what it entails.

Additionally, professional development for women in educational administration must be transformative (Diaz, 2024). PHEIs should empower women to succeed in their roles, besides challenging and reshaping the status quo. They should provide training that affirms women's strengths, develops their leadership style, and offers real-world strategies to overcome barriers. They should invest in targeted development programs that focus on mentoring, networking, sponsorship, and intersectionality of race, gender, and class, aiming to increase the number of women in senior leadership positions, while ensuring that they are empowered to lead with authenticity, integrity, and strength.

Lastly, PHEIs should align professional development with the real needs of women in educational leadership to change the trajectory of individual careers and redefine the future of higher educational management itself. The future of educational leadership lies in diverse voices, authentic leadership, and a deep commitment to inclusive practices. While women are poised to lead this change, they need the tools, mentorship, and support to transform leadership. While women are ready to lead, PHEIs should be prepared to embrace a new kind of leadership defined by equity, empathy, and excellence (Diaz, 2024).

### *5.2.3. Sponsors and Promotional Opportunities*

Compared to men, women represent the vast majority of higher education graduates, tend to drive better business outcomes, and possess the emotional and social awareness needed to assume high-ranking leadership roles, they hold less than 40 percent of the executive leadership positions at higher educational institutions. There are two ways that higher educational institutions can recruit more women into leadership roles and create a productive work environment in which both genders thrive (Jones, 2024). PHEIs should employ sponsors to champion promising female leaders toward success in their next job opportunity or promotion. For star performers who have not yet applied to a leadership-level role, PHEIs should open up a dialogue on their career goals, letting them know that their strong performance is noticed, and supporting them in taking the next steps when they are ready. If they are not prepared, the top management should identify possible barriers and offer ideas for professional development, staff support, or other guidance to illustrate a pathway to promotion. Since women tend to self-rate their performance less favorably than men, PHEI sponsors should provide external affirmation of high performance to enhance their confidence to apply for senior leadership roles. Besides acting as referees, sponsors can also coach women through the job application process and network with internal or external stakeholders to get information on leadership positions.

Additionally, promising female leaders should not let time off or leave of absence hinder their promotion opportunities. Research shows that female college presidents tend to be twice as likely to have altered their career to care for others compared to their male counterparts (Jones, 2024). While there are many leadership-level opportunities at PHEIs, women who are bearing a disproportionate amount of care-related responsibilities are often deterred to climb the leadership ladder. PHEIs seeking to improve promotion opportunities for women should consider developing leadership opportunities with options for majority- and part-time employment, support workplace acceptance of late arrivals or early departures for caretaking when needed, and establish and promote the availability of dependent care programs. By establishing intentional promotion policies and practices, PHEIs allow for flexibility for female employees with a caretaking role to seek career advancement. Besides, women with certain sociocultural characteristics tend to experience more issues of bias and hostility as they climb the ranks, which can negatively impact hiring decisions and retention for them in prominent leadership roles. Therefore, PHEIs should use staff engagement surveys to determine if organization-wide efforts, or measures to improve a department- or unit-level subculture, are needed.

### *5.2.5. Emphasis on the Qualities of Female Leaders*

Eyüpoğlu (2024) reiterated that, through their management styles, female leaders can bring a lot to higher education by creating more supportive and inclusive environment that is conducive to making the academic world more resilient. PHEIs should allow aspiring female leaders to display a more collaborative approach to communication by encouraging participation and dialogue. Female leaders prefer to encourage faculty members to share their perspectives so that they feel that they are being heard. This helps to bring a sense of being valued, which is especially important with quieter and more reserved staff members. Besides, female leaders tend to be concerned about maintaining relationships among faculty members; therefore, they regard conflict resolution as a priority. To build respect and trust among colleagues, they encourage open dialogue and constructive conversation, allowing for everyone involved in a conflict to reach a satisfactory compromise, as well as understanding the underlying causes of the conflict.

Additionally, female leaders prefer to reward performance through simple, but influential methods (Eyüpoğlu, 2024). For instance, they appreciate staff's efforts with a simple "thank you" and "keep up the good work" – which contributes to encouraging continuous improvement and indicates their support toward constant contribution, bringing a sense of recognition and engagement. PHEIs should allow female leaders to support and mentor academics right at the beginning of their careers, which brings a sense of belonging. While new academics tend to be enthusiastic and often want to bring new perspectives and innovative ideas to their fields, female leaders can actually enhance their innovation and creativity, which increases the likelihood of staff retention. Lastly, PHEIs should allow female leaders to emphasize a satisfactory work-life balance. They prefer to rearrange work schedules for academics with young children, giving them the flexibility to carry out personal as well as workplace commitments. This allows for a healthier balance between work and personal lives, enhancing job satisfaction, staff retention, and a sense of wellbeing.

### *5.2.6. Structured Mentorship and Sponsorship Networks*

Women's leadership can be strengthened through structured mentorship and sponsorship networks, targeted leadership development and skill building, and inclusive cultures (Academik America, 2026). First, structured mentorship is a powerful catalyst for leadership advancement, ensuring consistent engagement and quantifiable outcomes. Therefore, PHEIs should employ experienced leaders to guide, advice, and advocate for emerging talent to help women navigate professional complexities with clarity and self-assurance. Besides, they should also provide sponsorship, which goes a step further by actively championing women for promotions, high-visibility projects, and strategic opportunities. PHEIs that intentionally connect aspiring female leaders with influential mentors and sponsors often strengthen their self-assertiveness, widen their professional networks, and accelerate their leadership readiness.

Second, PHEIs should implement formal leadership development programs to equip women with the pragmatic tools needed to excel in management and executive roles. For instance, they should offer workshops that augment strategic thinking, negotiation, financial literacy, and decision-making, which can help women bridge skill gaps and establish executive presence. Moreover, PHEIs should emphasize continuous learning by ensuring that women have access to certifications, conferences, digital courses, and

hands-on projects. By encouraging women to participate in cross-functional assignments, PHEIs can strengthen their adaptability and innovation capacity, while creating a leadership pipeline grounded on competence and preparedness (Academik America, 2026).

Third, PHEIs need to overcome systemic bias that continues to limit women's advancement through intentional sociocultural change. They should provide training programs that increase public awareness of unconscious bias, transparent promotion criteria, and equitable pay policies, besides underscoring diverse leadership styles. Lastly, female leaders at PHEIs should be allowed to lead collaboratively, empathetically, or strategically, which enriches decision-making processes. PHEIs that actively recognize varied leadership strengths rather than conforming to outdated stereotypes, can cultivate a more balanced and high-performing environment (Academik America, 2026).

Additionally, women's leadership can be strengthened through professional networks and visibility, work-life integration and wellbeing, innovation, risk-taking, and leadership ownership (Academik America, 2026). First, PHEIs should emphasize that networking is more than exchanging contact information; it is about cultivating meaningful professional relationships. Therefore, they should establish internal women's networks, peer forums, and leadership circles to create safe spaces for sharing experiences, discussing challenges, and celebrating achievements. By building external networks, PHEIs can further broaden women's exposure to industry trends, partnerships, and career opportunities. To enhance women's visibility and influence, PHEIs should encourage them to participate in conferences, professional associations, and digital communities. By increasing women's representation in panels, industry events, and thought leadership platforms, PHEIs can reinforce their self-efficacy and position them as authoritative voices in higher education.

Third, since balancing professional growth with personal responsibilities remains a significant challenge for many female leaders, PHEIs should provide flexible work arrangements, parental leave policies, and supportive caregiving options to remove barriers that disproportionately affect women's career progression. By promoting staff wellbeing, PHEIs can reduce burnout and improve long-term retention. To enhance leadership sustainability, PHEIs need to create an environment where individuals can excel without sacrificing health or personal commitments. By embedding flexibility and empathy into their organizational structures, they can create conditions where women can pursue ambitious leadership goals without compromise (Academik America, 2026).

Lastly, to empower women to step into top leadership, PHEIs need to instill confidence in them with regard to decision-making and innovation. They should encourage women to lead projects, propose new ideas, and take calculated risks. By allowing women to view setbacks as learning opportunities, PHEIs can create a culture that supports growth and experimentation. By providing platforms for idea-sharing sessions, innovation labs, or collaborative problem-solving workshops, PHEIs can foster courage and creative thinking. By trusting women with responsibility and recognizing their contributions, PHEIs can strengthen their individual capability and organizational performance (Academik America, 2026).

### 5.2.7. Clear Career Pathways, Equitable Hiring Practices, and Built-in Audience

According to Superville (2023), school districts can increase the share of women serving in top leadership roles by creating clear career pathways, revamping hiring practices, and leveraging the built-in audience. First, PHEIs should develop leadership pipelines that clearly communicate to female academics how they can progress from the classroom to top management, besides providing training opportunities and professional development to help them improve their skill levels. Since staff are constantly busy, and many are focusing on classroom instruction, PHEIs must continue to tap promising and talented female academics, while highlighting potential leadership opportunities. Besides, PHEIs should practice succession planning to help increase the number of female leaders. They should include female staff in high-level discussions, policy-making, or strategic decisions, signifying that their voice and perspectives are valued, while holding the authority to influence final outcomes rather than just being followers.

Second, PHEIs should revamp their hiring practices to eliminate bias and ensure equity. They should avoid asking female candidates inappropriate questions centering on whether they can manage professional duties along with their personal commitments. PHEIs should carefully scrutinize the language used in job postings to avoid gender-biased words that discourage women from applying, while interview panels for key leadership positions should be diverse both in gender and backgrounds. PHEIs should also ensure that (1) they have structured protocols for hiring and (2) their job postings are inclusive, as women's conviction and poise can be affected by how job postings are conveyed (Superville, 2023).

*a.*

Lastly, to increase female leadership, PHEIs should start with their built-in audience; one of the advantages is that they already have a large potential workforce, including their own academics and students. PHEIs can start with female students by encouraging them to explore whether they want to pursue educational leadership, while letting them see themselves as highly capable and worthy (Superville, 2023).

### 5.3. Final Thought

This study has some limitations that limit generalizability of findings. It used a questionnaire, characterized by self-reported data, inflexibility, and vulnerability to biases. Since lecturers might dictate their perceptions, results could easily skew due to misunderstood questions, low response rates, or a lack of deep, contextual insight. They might be influenced by social desirability bias, censoring themselves to answer in a way that was socially acceptable or culturally normative. Besides, their recall and recency bias might influence their perceptions; they might forget past events, misremember details, or were disproportionately influenced by the most recent occurrences. Further, lecturers might demonstrate acquiescence bias, agreeing with the statements rather than providing a true, critical opinion. Besides lecturer bias, the questionnaire itself might be limited by closed-ended questions that might be too rigid, failing to capture the complex, nuanced reasons behind lecturers' thoughts or behaviors. To increase generalizability of findings, future studies on gender equity should adopt a larger, diverse, and representative sample to ensure that conclusions can be related to real-world scenarios and wider populations, rather than just a specific group of lecturers. Further, true random sampling should be adopted to minimize selection bias, guaranteeing that the sample accurately reflects the demographics and traits of the

broader population. Lastly, a diverse and geographically dispersed sample should be recruited to prevent findings from being skewed by local, cultural, or highly specific contextual factors.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

This study has strictly adhered to all ethical procedures involving the use of human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents who were ascertained of their anonymity, with their responses kept strictly private and confidential. They were also informed that the study was of low risk and that they could stop participating any time without any repercussions.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors report no potential conflict of interest regarding this study in terms of the research or publication of this article.

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