

Gender Equality in Higher Education: A Comparative Analysis of Policy Implementation in Southeast Asian Universities

Maricel Bautista Dela Cruz ¹, Nor Aishah binti Hassan ², Pranee Thongnopnua ³

1 Department of Women and Development Studies, University of the Philippines Diliman, Quezon City 1101, Philippines

2 School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang 11800, Malaysia

3 Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University, Salaya 73170, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Citation

Maricel Bautista Dela Cruz, Nor Aishah binti Hassan, Pranee Thongnopnua, (2026), Gender Equality in Higher Education: A Comparative Analysis of Policy Implementation in Southeast Asian Universities. International Journal of Society, Culture and Human Sciences, 01(01), 24-34.

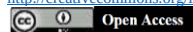
Vol.01, No.01, 2026

*Corresponding author:

m.delacruz@up.edu.ph

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CCBY4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Gender disparities in higher education persist across Southeast Asia despite formal policy commitments to gender equality. This study examines the implementation of gender equality policies in twelve universities (four each in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand) using a comparative case study design that integrates policy document analysis (n = 78), key informant interviews (n = 60), and a faculty and student survey (n = 2,100). Findings reveal that women constitute approximately 47.3 per cent of academic faculty in the sampled institutions but only 18.1 per cent of full professorial positions, with the steepest attrition occurring at the associate-to-full professor transition. Survey data indicate that 38.6 per cent of respondents had observed gender-based misconduct at their institution but only 11.2 per cent reported it through formal channels, citing concerns about confidentiality, career consequences, and limited confidence in institutional remedies. Qualitative analysis identifies four overarching themes: (1) the gap between policy formality and substantive implementation; (2) the intersectional differentiation of gender experiences by class, religion, and ethnicity; (3) the role of informal institutional culture in sustaining or eroding formal gender equality commitments; and (4) the emergent leadership of student-led collectives and external civil society in driving change. The study contributes to scholarship on gender mainstreaming in higher education by providing comparative evidence across three Southeast Asian contexts and by elaborating an intersectional analytical framework appropriate to the region. Policy recommendations include strengthening of confidential reporting mechanisms, transparent promotion criteria, paid parental leave reform, and structured leadership pipelines for women academics.

Keywords: Gender equality; higher education; Southeast Asia; policy implementation; intersectionality; women in academia; gender mainstreaming

1. Introduction

Higher education systems in Southeast Asia have undergone substantial expansion over the past three decades, with gross enrolment ratios rising from approximately 12 per cent in 1990 to 47 per cent in 2023 across the region (UNESCO, 2023). Women's access to higher education has improved markedly: in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand, women now constitute a majority of undergraduate enrolment in most disciplines. Despite this access expansion, persistent and patterned gender disparities continue to characterise the academic profession and the gendered division of leadership within higher education institutions. The phenomenon, often described as the 'leaky pipeline' (Pell, 1996), is global but takes culturally distinctive forms in different national contexts.

The political commitment to gender equality in Southeast Asia has been formalised through national legal frameworks and international commitments. The Philippines enacted the Magna Carta of Women in 2009 (Republic Act 9710), Malaysia adopted the National Policy on Women in 2009 and the National Action Plan on the Elimination of Violence against Women in 2014, and Thailand passed the Gender Equality Act of 2015. All three countries are state parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and have integrated Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) into national development planning. Yet the translation of legal

commitments into institutional practice within universities has been uneven, and a growing body of scholarship has documented the gap between formal policy and substantive change.

Three research questions guide the present study. RQ1: How do gender equality policies in higher education compare across the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand in scope, design, and institutional anchoring? RQ2: What patterns of faculty representation, student experience, and institutional response characterise the implementation of these policies in 12 sampled universities? RQ3: How do informal institutional cultures and intersectional considerations shape the practical effects of formal policy commitments? The study contributes by providing one of the first directly comparative empirical analyses of gender equality policy implementation in Southeast Asian higher education, by integrating policy, key-informant, and survey data within a single design, and by elaborating an intersectional framework attentive to the regional cultural context.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews theoretical frameworks for gender in higher education and prior empirical work. Section 3 presents the comparative case-study research design. Section 4 reports findings across the three policy comparison, representation analysis, student experience, and institutional response domains. Section 5 discusses theoretical and policy implications. Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Feminist theoretical frameworks in higher education

The analysis of gender in higher education draws on a diverse feminist tradition. Acker (1990) introduced the influential concept of the 'gendered organization', arguing that organisations are not gender-neutral structures into which gendered individuals enter, but are themselves constituted through gendered processes that produce systematic advantages and disadvantages. Bourdieu's (1988) analysis of academic capital and the symbolic violence of academic hierarchies has been productively combined with feminist analysis to examine the gendered distribution of academic recognition. Connell's (2005) framework of masculinities, applied to academic settings by Bagilhole and Goode (2001) and others, has analysed the gendered dynamics of leadership and career progression. hooks (1994) and Mohanty (2003) emphasise the importance of intersectional and decolonial analysis, particularly for non-Western academic settings where gender intersects with colonial legacy, class, religion, and ethnicity in complex ways.

Within this theoretical lineage, the present study foregrounds the concept of substantive equality articulated in CEDAW general recommendation 25, which distinguishes formal equality (equal treatment in law and policy) from substantive equality (equal outcomes in practice) and transformative equality (the transformation of underlying gendered structures). The empirical questions of the study probe each of these dimensions and consider the conditions under which formal commitments translate into substantive and transformative change.

2.2 Empirical evidence on gender in academia

Empirical evidence on gender in higher education has accumulated rapidly in recent decades. Studies in Europe and North America have consistently documented the persistence of vertical segregation (under-representation of women in senior ranks), horizontal segregation (concentration of women in particular disciplines), pay gaps, and disparities in resource allocation and recognition (Husu, 2001; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012; Morley, 2014). Studies in Latin America (Hernandez Truyol, 2005), Africa (Mama, 2003), and Asia (Lihamba et al., 2018; Morley and Lugg, 2009) have extended this base while highlighting context-specific dynamics.

For Southeast Asia, a body of work has documented both progress and persistent inequalities. Lim (2018) analysed Malaysian women's academic leadership, Sangthong et al. (2021) examined Thai

women in STEM, and Quimbo (2020) explored Filipina women in academic administration. These studies provide important national-level evidence but rarely permit direct cross-country comparison, motivating the comparative design of the present study.

2.3 Research gap

Three gaps motivate the present study. First, directly comparable cross-country evidence on gender equality policy implementation in Southeast Asian higher education is scarce. Second, the integration of policy analysis, faculty representation data, and student experience evidence within a single research design is uncommon. Third, explicit attention to intersectional dynamics — the ways in which gender intersects with class, religion, ethnicity, and discipline — is less developed in regional empirical literature than in global theoretical scholarship. The present study addresses these gaps through a comparative case-study design with mixed-methods data integration.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design and case selection

The research design is a comparative case study of twelve universities, with four institutions selected from each of the three countries to capture variation in type (public/private), size, and disciplinary profile. In the Philippines, the selected institutions were the University of the Philippines Diliman, De La Salle University, Ateneo de Manila University, and Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology. In Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia, International Islamic University Malaysia, and Universiti Teknologi MARA were selected. In Thailand, Mahidol University, Chulalongkorn University, Khon Kaen University, and Prince of Songkla University were selected. Selection was purposive rather than random, with the aim of capturing institutional diversity within each country.

3.2 Data sources

Three principal data sources were used. First, policy document analysis of 78 institutional documents (institutional gender equality policies, sexual harassment policies, parental leave policies, promotion criteria, anti-discrimination policies) collected between June 2022 and September 2023. Second, 60 key informant interviews (5 per institution), conducted between October 2022 and June 2023, with senior managers, designated gender officers, faculty representatives, and student leaders. Third, a faculty and student survey administered between March and August 2023 to 2,100 respondents across the 12 institutions (175 per institution on average), capturing demographic information, perceived institutional climate, observation and reporting of misconduct, and attitudes toward institutional gender policies. Survey questions were adapted from validated instruments where available and translated into Filipino, Bahasa Malaysia, and Thai using standard forward-and-back procedures.

3.3 Analytical strategy

Policy documents were coded along ten dimensions using a structured rubric: existence and scope of policy, coverage of staff and students, procedural detail, designated implementation authority, confidential reporting mechanisms, mediation procedures, sanctions, monitoring and reporting requirements, parental leave provisions, and explicit anti-discrimination clauses. Each dimension was scored on a 0-3 scale; a composite gender policy maturity index was constructed for each institution. Interview transcripts were coded in NVivo 14 using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019), with two independent coders for a 12-transcript subsample (Cohen's kappa = 0.83). Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and logistic regression with robust standard errors. Mixed-methods integration followed Fetters et al.'s (2013) joint display logic.

4. Results

4.1 Policy landscape comparison

Table 1 summarises the policy landscape across the 12 institutions. All sampled institutions had a written sexual harassment policy at the time of data collection, but coverage and procedural detail varied substantially. The composite gender policy maturity index ranged from 14 to 28 out of a maximum 30, with median 22. Filipino institutions exhibited the highest median maturity (24), reflecting the influence of the Magna Carta of Women and the Safe Spaces Act of 2019. Thai institutions scored second (median 22), with Chulalongkorn and Mahidol exhibiting the most elaborated policies. Malaysian institutions scored slightly lower (median 20), with variation across public and private institutions and across the secular and Islamic universities.

Key gaps identified in the policy analysis included: limited mention of intersectional discrimination (only 4 of 12 institutions mentioned the intersection of gender with class, religion, or ethnicity); absence of formal protection for gender-diverse students and staff in 8 of 12 institutions; partial parental leave provisions, with paternity leave often unpaid or limited to 5-7 days; and limited public reporting of policy implementation outcomes.

4.2 Faculty representation

Table 2 presents faculty representation data aggregated across the 12 institutions. Women constituted 47.3 per cent of all academic faculty in the sample, with the highest share in the Philippines (51.2 per cent) and the lowest in Malaysia (44.1 per cent). However, women's share declined substantially with rank: 56.4 per cent of lecturer/instructor positions, 47.1 per cent of senior lecturer/assistant professor positions, 31.0 per cent of associate professor positions, and 18.1 per cent of full professor positions. The steepest attrition occurred at the associate-to-full professor transition, where the share of women dropped by 13 percentage points. Disciplinary variation was substantial: women were over-represented in education, health sciences, and humanities, and under-represented in engineering, computing, and physical sciences.

Institutional leadership data showed similar patterns. Across the 12 institutions, women occupied 22 per cent of dean positions, 14 per cent of vice-presidential positions, and 16 per cent of presidential or vice-chancellor positions. Filipino institutions had the highest share of women in senior leadership (28 per cent of dean positions and one of four institutions led by a woman at the time of data collection), while Thai and Malaysian institutions exhibited lower shares.

4.3 Student experience and misconduct

Survey results revealed significant gender differences in the perception of institutional climate. Female respondents rated their institution's responsiveness to gender concerns at a mean of 3.21 on a 1-5 scale, compared with 3.84 for male respondents ($p < .001$). 38.6 per cent of all respondents reported having observed gender-based misconduct (broadly defined to include sexual harassment, gender-based bullying, and discriminatory commentary) at their institution in the past two years. Only 11.2 per cent of those who observed such incidents reported them through formal channels. The most common reasons given for non-reporting were concerns about confidentiality (cited by 67 per cent of non-reporters), fear of retaliation or career consequences (54 per cent), perceived lack of credible institutional remedy (49 per cent), and the procedural complexity of reporting (38 per cent). Reporting rates were significantly higher in institutions with confidential third-party reporting channels (mean 18.4 per cent) than in those without (mean 6.2 per cent), pointing to a clear policy-design implication.

4.4 Institutional culture and informal dynamics

Qualitative analysis of the 60 interviews identified four overarching themes. The first, the policy-implementation gap, captured the recurrent observation by interviewees that formal policies often exist on paper but receive uneven institutional attention in practice. A faculty member at one Thai institution

put it succinctly: 'The policy is in the handbook, but the dean's office runs on different rules.' The second theme, intersectional differentiation, captured the ways in which gender experiences differed across class, religion, ethnicity, and discipline. Working-class students described particular constraints on participation in extracurricular activities, while students from minority religious backgrounds in two institutions described feeling doubly visible. The third theme, informal culture, captured the role of unwritten norms, mentoring networks, and after-hours practices in sustaining or eroding formal policy commitments. The fourth theme, change leadership, captured the emergent role of student-led collectives, women faculty associations, and external civil society in driving institutional change beyond what formal policy alone delivered.

5. Discussion

The empirical evidence assembled in this study confirms persistent gender inequalities in Southeast Asian higher education even as formal policy commitments have expanded. The 47 per cent share of women in academic faculty, declining sharply to 18 per cent at full professor rank, broadly tracks the global 'leaky pipeline' pattern but is shaped by region-specific institutional, cultural, and religious dynamics. The policy landscape comparison reveals meaningful national-level variation, with Filipino institutions on average exhibiting the most elaborated policies, followed by Thai and Malaysian. However, the policy-implementation gap noted in the qualitative material indicates that the existence of policies is necessary but not sufficient for substantive equality.

Theoretically, the findings extend Acker's (1990) gendered organisation framework into Southeast Asian higher education by demonstrating the patterned ways in which institutional structures, evaluation criteria, and informal cultures produce systematic disadvantages for women academics even in formally egalitarian contexts. The intersectional findings align with the longer feminist intersectional tradition (Crenshaw, 1989) while highlighting the specific intersections most salient in the regional context: class (particularly relevant in the Philippines and Thailand), religion (particularly relevant in Malaysia), and ethnicity (relevant across all three countries, with distinct local manifestations). The role of student collectives and external civil society in driving change, captured in the fourth qualitative theme, points to the importance of looking beyond formal institutional structures when analysing change dynamics.

Policy implications follow directly. First, confidential reporting mechanisms should be designed and implemented as a priority across the region, with attention to procedural confidentiality, independence of investigation, and protection against retaliation. The substantial difference in reporting rates between institutions with and without confidential third-party channels (18.4 vs 6.2 per cent) provides empirical support for this priority. Second, transparent promotion criteria, with explicit attention to the gendered effects of evaluation factors such as international mobility, large grant capture, and visibility-conferring activities, should be a focus of institutional reform. Third, paid parental leave provisions, including substantive paternity and shared parental leave, should be expanded and harmonised across institutions. Fourth, structured leadership pipelines for women academics, including formal mentoring, leadership development programmes, and active succession planning, should be established and resourced. Fifth, integration of intersectional analysis into institutional planning and reporting would strengthen the targeting of interventions to those facing compounded disadvantages.

Limitations include the limited sample of institutions (12 out of hundreds in the region), the urban bias of the sample, and the cross-sectional design. Self-reported measures of misconduct observation and reporting are subject to known biases. The qualitative material provides depth but cannot be straightforwardly generalised. Despite these limitations, the convergence of policy, representation, and qualitative evidence provides a coherent comparative account of gender equality policy implementation in Southeast Asian higher education.

A further set of findings concerns the intersection of gender with religion in Malaysian institutional settings. Three of the four Malaysian institutions sampled have substantial Muslim student and faculty populations, and one (International Islamic University Malaysia) operates within an Islamic framework. Interview material captured the ways in which gender equality discussions in these settings are conducted alongside, and sometimes through, theological discourses about gender. Women academics at the Islamic institution described both the constraints they encounter and the resources they draw on, including the work of Muslim feminist scholars who articulate gender equality from within Islamic ethical traditions. The interplay between secular and religiously inflected feminisms in Malaysian higher education represents a distinctive feature of the regional landscape that warrants continued scholarly attention.

In Thailand, the structural conditions of higher education include both progressive features (relatively gender-balanced enrolment, the Gender Equality Act, and a tradition of women holding positions of formal authority in education) and persistent inequalities (under-representation in senior management, gendered division of disciplinary specialisation, and limited paternity leave provisions). The Thai government's establishment of the Gender Equality Promotion Committee under the Gender Equality Act represents a formal infrastructure for monitoring and complaint resolution, but the volume of complaints received and resolved remains modest relative to the size of the higher education system. Interview material suggested that the cultural emphasis on harmony and indirect communication shapes both the way grievances are surfaced and the institutional response.

In the Philippines, the Magna Carta of Women and the Safe Spaces Act provide a relatively elaborated legal framework that institutions are required to implement. The mandatory Gender and Development (GAD) budget, which allocates at least 5 per cent of agency budgets to gender-related activities, has supported the development of GAD focal points and offices in higher education institutions. However, the GAD framework has been critiqued for emphasising programmatic activities at the expense of structural reform. Interviews with GAD focal points across the four Filipino institutions revealed both achievements (training programmes, awareness campaigns, scholarship initiatives) and frustrations (limited authority, perception of being marginal to core institutional decision-making).

Comparative cross-national reflections highlight the importance of national legal frameworks but also the centrality of institutional implementation. The same legal framework can produce different institutional outcomes depending on leadership commitment, resource allocation, and organisational culture. Several interview participants emphasised the role of individual senior leaders — both women and male allies — in driving institutional change beyond what compliance alone would deliver. The contingency of progress on individual leadership underscores the importance of institutionalising commitments through governance structures rather than relying on personal advocacy.

Student-led collectives emerged across all three countries as drivers of change. In the Philippines, organisations such as Gabriela Women's Party-affiliated campus groups have raised institutional concerns and advocated for policy reform. In Malaysia, gender-focused student clubs at several institutions have organised forums and campaigns. In Thailand, the feminist organising visible in the broader political environment after 2020 extended into university spaces, with student-led initiatives demanding gender equality reforms. The leadership of student collectives is consistent with the broader Southeast Asian pattern of youth-led political innovation and constitutes an important resource for the next phase of higher education reform.

The mental health dimensions of gender experience in higher education deserve mention. Survey responses included items on perceived institutional support and on stress related to gender-based experiences. Female respondents reported significantly higher levels of academic stress associated with sexist commentary, exclusion from informal networks, and concerns about safety in campus

environments, particularly during late evenings. These findings, while not the central focus of the present study, point to important intersections with university mental health services and with broader institutional climate work.

From a measurement standpoint, the present study illustrates both the value and the limits of quantitative indicators. Faculty representation by rank is relatively well captured by administrative data, although disciplinary breakdowns require careful definition. Climate perception measures are more fragile and depend on the design of survey instruments and the conditions under which they are administered. Outcomes of formal complaint procedures are sometimes recorded but rarely published, limiting external assessment of institutional responsiveness. Future research and policy work would benefit from the development of regionally harmonised gender equality indicators that combine representation, climate, and procedural outcomes in a coherent framework.

6. Conclusion

This study has provided a comparative analysis of gender equality policy implementation in twelve Southeast Asian universities in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand. Drawing on policy document analysis, key informant interviews, and a faculty and student survey of 2,100 respondents, the analysis has identified persistent gender disparities in faculty representation and leadership, significant gaps between formal policy and substantive implementation, and substantial intersectional differentiation in gender experiences. The findings contribute to scholarship on gender mainstreaming in higher education by providing rare comparative evidence across three regional contexts. Policy recommendations include strengthened confidential reporting mechanisms, transparent promotion criteria, expanded paid parental leave, structured leadership pipelines for women academics, and integration of intersectional analysis into institutional planning. Future research could extend the analysis longitudinally to track institutional change over time, deepen attention to gender-diverse populations whose experiences this study only partially captures, and integrate quantitative impact evaluation of specific policy interventions.

In closing, the project of gender equality in higher education is necessarily long-term and multi-faceted. Formal policy is an essential foundation but must be accompanied by reform of evaluation criteria, transformation of informal institutional culture, and meaningful participation of those most affected by current arrangements. The cross-country comparison offered here suggests that no single national model fully realises these conditions, but each of the three countries studied provides examples of partial success that, considered together, point toward a productive policy and research agenda for the region.

Detailed institutional vignettes illustrate the patterns observed in the aggregate data. The University of the Philippines Diliman has operated an Office of Anti-Sexual Harassment since the late 1990s and has progressively expanded the scope of its policies. The University's Center for Women's and Gender Studies has provided research and training infrastructure that supports policy development across the system. Faculty interview participants emphasised the influence of long-standing women academic leaders who have, over decades, built coalitions with student organisations, with feminist legal scholars, and with civil society. Despite these strengths, women academics at UP Diliman continue to face the differential burden of service work, mentoring, and institutional citizenship that is widely documented in gender and academia literature globally.

Universiti Malaya offers a contrasting case. The institution operates within the broader Malaysian higher education governance framework and has progressively developed gender equality structures, including a women's affairs unit and a sexual harassment policy. The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education's Strategic Plan for Gender Equality in Higher Education 2022-2025 provides a system-level framework that informs institutional planning. Interview material at UM reflected the negotiation of

gender equality work alongside the institutional emphasis on national and religious frameworks. Women academics described a strategic approach in which gender equality advocacy is articulated alongside broader institutional priorities to build durable coalitions.

Mahidol University in Thailand has invested in gender equality infrastructure, including a designated office and a clearly articulated sexual harassment policy. The institutional emphasis on health sciences has shaped some of the gender equality work, with significant attention to women's health, reproductive rights, and gender-sensitive medical research. Interview participants emphasised the role of senior women academic leaders, the medical-school tradition of women's representation at mid-rank positions, and the persistent under-representation at the most senior positions.

International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) represents a distinctive case because of its explicit Islamic framework. The institution's gender equality work is articulated within Islamic ethics, drawing on the work of Muslim feminist scholars and on the integration of gender concerns into Islamic legal and ethical discourses. The Islamic frame is not a barrier to gender equality work but a productive context that, several interview participants emphasised, can be more rigorous about substantive equality than secular frames that sometimes substitute formal access for transformative change. The IIUM case illustrates the diversity of frameworks within which gender equality work can be effectively pursued.

Cross-cutting reflections on parental leave provisions reveal both progress and persistent gaps. All twelve institutions sampled provided some form of maternity leave consistent with national requirements (typically 90-105 days in the three countries, with variations by sector and seniority). Paternity leave provisions were more limited, ranging from 5 days unpaid in some Malaysian private institutions to 15 days paid in Filipino public institutions. Shared parental leave provisions, which have become an important policy lever in some European systems, were largely absent. Adoption leave, leave for the care of dependants other than children, and gender-neutral framing of parental responsibilities were also largely absent. The reform of parental leave provisions is a productive policy lever for institutions seeking to support gender equality and warrants systematic regional attention.

The role of metrics and accountability in gender equality work also merits emphasis. Of the 12 sampled institutions, only 4 publicly reported annual gender equality indicators (representation by rank, complaint outcomes, parental leave uptake, training participation). The remaining 8 institutions collected internal data but did not publish it routinely, limiting external accountability and the capacity for benchmarking. National regulatory frameworks could productively require routine public reporting of gender equality indicators by all higher education institutions, with comparable definitions to enable cross-institutional comparison.

Civil society partnerships emerged as an important enabler of policy implementation across all three countries. Filipino institutions worked with the Philippine Commission on Women, Gabriela, and feminist legal organisations; Malaysian institutions partnered with the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality, Sisters in Islam, and AWAM; Thai institutions engaged with the Women's Health Advocacy Foundation, the Friends of Women Foundation, and various academic feminist networks. These civil society partnerships provided expertise, advocacy support, and external accountability, complementing the formal institutional structures.

Discipline-specific dynamics shape gender outcomes in distinctive ways. In engineering and computer science departments across the 12 institutions, women's share of faculty was 22 per cent on average, with the highest share in Filipino institutions (28 per cent) and the lowest in Malaysian institutions (16 per cent). In education and humanities departments, women's share averaged 64 per cent, with the highest concentration in Thai institutions (71 per cent). These disciplinary patterns reflect both the wider gender segregation of labour markets and the specific gendering of academic disciplines. Interventions to address horizontal segregation in higher education, including curricular reform, role

model interventions, and structural changes in evaluation and recognition, are needed alongside vertical-segregation interventions.

Survey respondents were also asked about their perceptions of the trajectory of gender equality at their institution over the past five years. Across all twelve institutions, 42 per cent of respondents perceived modest improvement, 31 per cent perceived no significant change, 18 per cent perceived improvement, and 9 per cent perceived deterioration. The pattern varied by country, with Filipino respondents most likely to report improvement (52 per cent reporting modest to substantial improvement) and Malaysian respondents most likely to report no change (38 per cent). Female respondents were significantly more likely than male respondents to perceive insufficient progress (mean 'pace of progress' score 2.71 vs 3.34 on a 1-5 scale, $p < .001$), a pattern consistent with prior findings that men and women experience and assess gender equality progress differently.

Open-ended survey responses identified policy and programmatic priorities for the next phase of institutional reform. The most frequently mentioned priorities, in descending order, were: stronger and more confidential reporting mechanisms for misconduct (mentioned by 38 per cent of respondents); transparent and bias-aware promotion criteria (29 per cent); expanded parental leave including paid paternity leave (24 per cent); leadership development programmes for women academics (22 per cent); flexible work and childcare arrangements (19 per cent); awareness and training programmes for managers and supervisors (17 per cent); structured mentoring (15 per cent); and improved campus safety, especially during evening and weekend hours (13 per cent). These respondent-identified priorities broadly align with the policy recommendations advanced in this study and could form the basis of an evidence-informed institutional reform agenda.

Institutional change strategies that emerged from interview material include a small number of distinct theories of change. The first emphasises legal compliance and procedural rigour, treating gender equality as a regulatory expectation to be implemented through specialised offices and clear procedures. The second emphasises cultural change, treating institutional culture as the principal lever and working through training, leadership development, and norm reform. The third emphasises representation, treating the under-representation of women in senior positions as a priority addressable through hiring, promotion, and leadership pipeline interventions. The fourth emphasises intersectional inclusion, treating gender as one axis among several that requires coordinated attention. The most effective institutional change efforts observed in the present study combined elements of all four theories, with the specific balance shaped by institutional context and leadership.

A final observation concerns the role of regional and international networks. The Asia-Pacific Women in Universities Network, the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning Gender Equality Working Group, and various UNESCO and UN Women programmes provide infrastructure for cross-institutional learning. Active engagement with these networks was associated with stronger institutional policy frameworks in the sampled institutions, although the causal direction (do strong institutions seek out networks, or do networks strengthen institutions?) is not fully resolved by the present design. Continued investment in such networking infrastructure represents a productive complement to institutional-level reform.

Reflections on methodology suggest several refinements for future comparative work in this area. First, longitudinal designs that track institutional gender equality outcomes over five to ten years would enable assessment of the cumulative effects of policy reforms. Second, integration of administrative data on hiring, promotion, retention, and compensation by gender (and where possible by intersectional category) would strengthen empirical analysis. Third, comparative survey instruments standardised across countries would enable rigorous regional benchmarking; the Athena SWAN framework in the United Kingdom and analogous instruments in other settings offer useful starting points for adaptation

to the Southeast Asian context. Fourth, partnership with regional civil society organisations and human rights institutions would ground academic research in the broader social movement for gender equality.

The implications for graduate programmes in gender studies, public administration, and education policy across the region are also worth noting. Few Southeast Asian universities offer graduate concentrations specifically focused on gender and higher education policy, despite the importance of the topic for institutional governance and national development. The establishment of such concentrations, perhaps through inter-university consortia, would build the human capital needed to support the next phase of institutional reform.

In conclusion, gender equality in Southeast Asian higher education stands at a juncture. Substantial progress has been achieved in access, formal policy commitments, and institutional infrastructure. Persistent inequalities in representation, leadership, and substantive outcomes call for continued reform. The comparative evidence assembled in this study suggests that the next phase of progress will depend on combining formal policy with cultural change, addressing intersectional dynamics, strengthening accountability mechanisms, building leadership pipelines, and sustaining the engagement of student collectives and civil society. The future of higher education in the region will be shaped, in significant part, by the success or failure of these efforts.

Cumulative regional initiatives have begun to amplify the impact of national reform efforts. The ASEAN Committee on Women, the SAARC Gender Policy Advocacy Group, and the Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development together provide platforms for cross-national exchange of practice and policy advocacy. Higher education institutions can productively engage these regional bodies as venues for sharing both successes and challenges. The forthcoming review of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2025 provides an opportunity for the higher education sector to articulate its gender equality contribution and to commit to next-phase reforms. Engagement of Southeast Asian higher education institutions in the global Beijing+30 review process would strengthen both regional voice and the alignment of institutional reforms with international human rights commitments.

A final reflection concerns the relationship between gender equality and broader educational quality. Recent scholarship has documented the positive correlation between substantive gender equality in higher education institutions and indicators of educational quality such as research productivity, teaching innovation, and student learning outcomes. The mechanism appears to operate through diverse leadership and decision-making perspectives, more equitable allocation of resources, reduced talent waste, and stronger institutional legitimacy among student and stakeholder constituencies. From this perspective, gender equality work is not a parallel project to educational quality but a constitutive component of it. Higher education leaders who frame gender equality as competing with educational quality misread the empirical evidence; the two are mutually reinforcing when pursued with rigour and commitment.

References

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139-158.
- Aiston, S. J., & Jung, J. (2015). Women academics and research productivity: An international comparison. *Gender and Education*, 27(3), 205-220.
- Bagilhole, B. (2002). *Women in non-traditional occupations: Challenging men*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bagilhole, B., & Goode, J. (2001). The contradiction of the myth of individual merit. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 8(2), 161-180.
- Bagilhole, B., & White, K. (Eds.). (2013). *Generation and gender in academia*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bourdieu, P. (1988). *Homo academicus*. Stanford University Press.



- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597.
- Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139-167.
- David, M. E. (2014). *Feminism, gender and universities*. Ashgate.
- Fetters, M. D., Curry, L. A., & Creswell, J. W. (2013). Achieving integration in mixed methods designs. *Health Services Research*, 48(6 Pt 2), 2134-2156.
- Hernandez Truyol, B. E. (2005). Building bridges: Bringing international human rights home. *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, 36, 503-543.
- Husu, L. (2001). *Sexism, support and survival in academia*. Helsinki University Press.
- Lihamba, A., Mwaipopo, R., & Shule, L. (2018). The challenges of affirmative action in Tanzanian higher education. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 67, 26-33.
- Lim, S. (2018). Women in higher education leadership in Malaysia. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 24(4), 491-510.
- Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education. (2022). *Strategic plan for gender equality in higher education 2022-2025*. Putrajaya.
- Mama, A. (2003). Restore, reform but do not transform: The gender politics of higher education in Africa. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, 1(1), 101-125.
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practising solidarity*. Duke University Press.
- Morley, L. (2014). Lost leaders: Women in the global academy. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(1), 114-128.
- Morley, L., & Lugg, R. (2009). Mapping meritocracy: Intersecting gender, poverty and higher educational opportunity structures. *Higher Education Policy*, 22(1), 37-60.
- Ng, R. (2011). Decolonizing teaching and learning through embodied learning. *Discourse*, 32(2), 343-355.
- O'Connor, P. (2014). *Management and gender in higher education*. Manchester University Press.
- Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development of Thailand. (2023). *Annual report 2022*. Bangkok.
- Pell, A. N. (1996). Fixing the leaky pipeline: Women scientists in academia. *Journal of Animal Science*, 74(11), 2843-2848.
- Philippine Commission on Women. (2023). *Annual report on the implementation of the Magna Carta of Women*. Manila.
- Quimbo, M. T. (2020). Women in academic administration in the Philippines. *Asia Pacific Journal of Higher Education*, 7(1), 45-67.
- Republic of the Philippines. (2009). Republic Act No. 9710 - Magna Carta of Women. Manila.
- Republic of the Philippines. (2019). Republic Act No. 11313 - Safe Spaces Act. Manila.
- Sangthong, M., Pongkijvorasin, S., & Suwanteep, N. (2021). Thai women in STEM: Pathways and barriers. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 27(2), 158-179.
- Schiebinger, L. (2008). *Gendered innovations in science and engineering*. Stanford University Press.
- Thailand. (2015). Gender Equality Act B.E. 2558. Bangkok.
- Tienari, J., & Vaara, E. (2017). Diversity in higher education: A view from the South. *Journal of Management Studies*, 54(7), 1099-1115.
- Tlostanova, M., & Mignolo, W. (2012). *Learning to unlearn: Decolonial reflections from Eurasia and the Americas*. Ohio State University Press.
- UN Women. (2023). *Progress of the world's women report 2023*. New York: UN Women.