

The Global Institute for Women's Leadership

Concept note

KING'S
College
LONDON



UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka addresses the opening of the 61st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women held at United Nations Headquarters in New York

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Background: the representation of women in leadership

50 years ago the invention of the contraceptive pill gave women control over their fertility. More than 30 years ago women began to outnumber men on university campuses across OECD countries,¹ a pattern now replicated in a number of low-income countries.² In addition, public policy in many countries has been developed to support and promote gender equality, with anti-discrimination legislation and measures to enable women to combine work with caring responsibilities now commonplace.

So, is the job of attaining equality for women all but done? The evidence shows the answer to that question is a resounding no. Women continue to be under-represented in positions of leadership, power and responsibility across industries, sectors and countries. Global-level data clearly illustrates this: women make up just 23% of national parliamentarians,³ 26% of news media leaders,⁴ 27% of judges,⁵ 15% of corporate board members,⁶ and 25% of senior managers worldwide.⁷

Even in the face of these highly concerning statistics, it may be tempting to assume that change is simply a matter of time because the right conditions have been put in place to realise equality. Unfortunately, such optimism is misplaced. For example, despite recent increases in the number of women in national parliaments, at the current rate of progress, it will take another half-century to reach parity with men.⁸ Equally concerning, when progress is made, it can also be reversed; women are now more

under-represented in the American cabinet than at any time since the Reagan administration,⁹ and the representation of female ministers in Brazil has slumped from more than a quarter in 2014 to just 4% in 2017. Even the Nordic countries, often held up as beacons of progress, have experienced a 6.2% drop in the number of female ministers since 2015 to 43.5%.¹⁰ And it's not just in the political world that progress has stalled. The number of women in senior management globally has risen just one percentage point in 10 years, from 24% in 2007 to 25% today.¹¹

The reality is that women face significant barriers to progress at every stage of their careers. Explicit barriers, such as rules and laws that act to constrain women's activity continue to exist in today's world. In at least 100 economies worldwide women face gender-based job restrictions, and in 18 husbands can legally prevent their wives from working.¹² More often, though, these barriers are implicit: the informal rules and norms of institutions that act to exclude women. In some cases women may fall foul of them simply by being unaware of their existence.^{13,14,15} Men are also more likely than women to have networks that connect them to high-status others and pull them into leadership opportunities,^{16,17,18} while pervasive gender stereotyping can mean women are simply not as readily associated with competence, decisiveness and assertiveness, and are thus overlooked for leadership roles.^{19,20}

In addition, women are more likely to face the difficulties posed by juggling work and family life and bear adverse career consequences as a result of taking maternity leave and seeking flexible or part-time work options. Women's progress can also be hindered by environments in which it is expected that sexual harassment will be tolerated without complaint.

Globally, women make up:



of national parliamentarians



of news media leaders



of judges



of corporate board leaders



of senior managers

Nor is the battle over for those women who do manage to secure leadership positions. Many face marginalisation, constraints on their power, and overt hostility; 44% of 55 female parliamentarians surveyed from 39 countries by the Inter-Parliamentary Union said that they had received threats of death, rape or violence, and 22% said they had been subject to sexual violence.^{21,22} These hurdles are even higher for women from communities at risk of marginalisation because of ethnicity, race, religion or poverty.

Current action

Working with the Hon Julia Gillard, the 27th Prime Minister of Australia and only woman to ever serve in that role, the Policy Institute at King's College London undertook a broad scoping study to build a picture of what is known about the drivers of women's under-representation in leadership positions, what is known about what works to address this discrepancy, and where major gaps in our understanding exist. What emerged is that many people are working on this issue, in practical and research capacities – academic papers, leadership training, activism and a raft of other initiatives proliferate. However, while there is much activity, there also appears to be little articulation or testing of whether and how this research and activity might be coordinated and combined to contribute to real and lasting change.



Research

Imagine the position of a policymaker, striving to understand why women are so dramatically under-represented in their political system, public service and private sector, and wondering what they can do about it. They look to academic literature for robust, empirical and theoretical insight and clear recommendations for policy action. Instead, they find a vast but hugely fragmented body of literature, with findings generated in disciplines as varied as social psychology, feminist institutionalism, management and behavioural science, but with little or no cross-fertilisation of ideas between them. The same is true across sectors; insights from studies in politics are not frequently translated into business or law, and cross-sector comparative studies are rare. This silo-isation also extends across countries; research conducted in the US and Europe is most common, but findings from other country contexts, not published in English, are frequently ignored.

Practice

Picture now the situation facing the head of human resources at a large bank. The paltry number of women on the company's board and in the senior management team has been highlighted in the media, and the bank is anxious to protect and improve its image and increase female representation. The head of HR is looking for clear, actionable and effective suggestions for training and other workplace interventions that will help more women to secure top jobs in the firm. What a brief online search throws up is an array of initiatives to support women's advancement in the workplace, and a host of organisations delivering them. Many of these are expensive, and all take time and energy to provide or implement. It is not clear what research has informed

their design or whether they have any evidence base at all. Given how few of them have been rigorously evaluated, it is impossible to know whether they work, whether they might simply be a waste of time and money, or whether they might even actively damage women's prospects.

Engagement and advocacy

Finally, consider the situation of an activist, campaigning to further women's equality and leadership. They know that running a strong and effective campaign depends on collaboration with other like-minded groups, access to data and evidence to present to policymakers, and strong links to the research community and practitioners to share ideas and insight. Their experience is that the activist community is highly fragmented, with little communication between diverse movements. Data is patchy and sometimes of uncertain accuracy, and it is often difficult to connect to the academic community to access the latest evidence and research to sharpen advocacy activities.

What each of these case studies highlights is that while there are examples of high-quality research on gender equality, of effective initiatives and of adept engagement between research communities, politicians and policymakers, the media, advocacy groups and the wider public, that is not the common experience. The barriers to progress for those who want to change things are often insurmountably high. Some of the barriers for those who would like to make changes – such as siloed working; lack of timely, accessible research; and a dearth of evidence about 'what works' – support those who are content with the status quo. Moreover, when programme evaluations are rare, and media and advocacy



movements have limited access to good data, it is difficult to hold decision makers to account when they fall short of their stated goals.

The solution

The Global Institute for Women's Leadership, with a physical base at King's College London, will partner with other academic and wider organisations across the world and have an extensive online presence. The Institute will work to address these shortcomings and seek to maximise its impact through its vision, activities and design.

Vision

To contribute to the creation of a world in which being a woman is not a barrier to becoming a leader in any field, or a factor leading to negative perceptions of an individual's leadership.

The Institute's vision is to create a world in which financial and intellectual resources are no longer needed to advance women in leadership positions, because gender no longer affects their ability to acquire and demonstrate the necessary skills, be selected for, or thrive in leadership positions. Realising this vision will involve systematic analysis, global outreach and tangible action to remove barriers and support those who seek to bring about change. This will be the focus of the Global Institute for Women's Leadership.

Activities

The Global Institute for Women's Leadership will undertake a range of cross-cutting activities designed to:

- ♦ **Strengthen research** – by drawing together existing findings from across countries, sectors and disciplines, and by conducting innovative, multi-disciplinary, solutions-focused research. This will facilitate an understanding of where there are challenges and barriers, where there is better progress for women in leadership positions, and to assess and disseminate 'what works' to improve outcomes. The Institute will synthesise existing evidence on the impact of national policies, organisational-level training programmes and other initiatives, and conduct rigorous evaluations where they do not exist. The work of the Institute will focus on ensuring that research outputs are timely and meet the needs of users.



- ♦ **Strengthen engagement** – by bringing together experts and stakeholders from different disciplines, sectors and countries to encourage the cross-fertilisation of ideas. Data and research findings will be communicated clearly to meet the needs of non-academic audiences, via a high-quality online hub and social media distribution, policy briefings, private seminars, conferences and public events. Successful engagement will involve outreach – to high-impact media to shape and inform public debate, and to the public via a wide range of channels. This engagement will also involve novel, high-profile events and ‘encounters’ in which women and men in senior positions can raise and confront challenges, and discuss evidence-based options for change.
- ♦ **Strengthen practice** – by using research to deliver evidence-based training, executive education and courses for undergraduate and postgraduate students.
- ♦ **Strengthen interconnections** – by ensuring there are engagement and feedback loops between research, policy and practice, to build an ecosystem in which those delivering programmes and activities can focus their time and resources on ‘what works’. This will help identify knowledge gaps and build collaborations and projects that can help address new research questions. This interconnection will also involve policymakers and practitioners in the development of research questions, projects and dissemination activities, to help translate findings into what they mean for those in a position to bring about change.

By strengthening research, the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership will strengthen practice. By strengthening engagement, the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership will strengthen the interconnections between research, policy and practice.

To illustrate how the Institute will have impact, we return to the ‘users’ introduced earlier:

The policymaker looking for a robust, empirical assessment of what is known about what works to promote women in leadership. The policymaker has heard of the Institute because of its widely distributed short syntheses and policy briefs, which have been designed to draw on academic content but in a form that is easy to use. The policymaker consults the online hub and finds further information and analysis that assists with their thinking on new interventions. In order to deepen understanding, the policymaker contacts the Institute and participates in one of its regularly convened physical and virtual roundtables and seminars. Guided by what has been learned from the Institute, the policymaker designs their new approach. However, in doing so, the policymaker discovers that in respect of one area in which change is desired, the Institute has concluded that the evidence base is thin. The policymaker approaches the Institute to work together on further researching this area, with the policymaker prepared to pilot approaches and have them evaluated as part of the research effort.

The head of human resources wants to know what initiatives to introduce in their workplace to get more women into senior management positions. Through mainstream and social media coverage, the head of human resources is aware of the Institute. Consulting the online hub and accessing the Institute's short syntheses and policy briefs, gives the human resources head clear, usable information on what is already known about the efficacy of interventions such as leadership training, mentoring and efforts to mitigate unconscious bias. This enables the human resources head to proceed with confidence in tackling the challenge of too few women in senior management positions. To further assist, the Institute could also provide its own training, built on the accumulated knowledge of effective practice.

Finally, the activist wanting to connect to other advocacy groups and the research community, and access reliable data. The activist is involved in online forums with like-minded activists and becomes aware of the Institute. The activist can now participate in the work of the Institute through its online hub, events and collaborations, which provide a forum for advocacy groups pursuing common goals to connect and collaborate, as well as linking them with research, policymaking and practitioner communities. The activist's understanding and work is enhanced by being able to draw on the high-quality and accessible resources made available by the Institute via its online hub, supporting the production of accurate and impactful briefings and campaign materials.

Design

The design and set-up of the Institute is important if it is to deliver its activities successfully and realise its ambitious vision. To address the challenges identified in our scoping work, it will be designed with the explicit aim of breaking down silos, fostering collaboration and building an extensive and diverse network. Its physical home will provide a base for researchers from across academic disciplines and across the world to come together to share their findings and methods and to initiate innovative research projects. Its location at the heart of London will facilitate connections with individuals and institutions worldwide working in this field, and provide ready access to global policymaking communities, businesses and advocacy organisations.

The global coverage of the Institute is central to its work. Current inequalities are both context specific and general, so our work will focus on the specifics of particular institutions, processes and sectors, as well as how they play out in different parts of the world. Our understanding of inequality is multi-faceted. Leadership inequalities are a global phenomenon, as are the social and cultural inequalities they reflect.

The Institute's online hub will be integral, helping to build a genuinely global network of research and practice, and reaching out to countries and organisations whose experiences and actions have tended to be overlooked. Through the ready provision of data and online materials, the Institute



will be able to widely disseminate robust evidence and good practice to inform public debate and act as a resource for researchers, the media, activists and advocacy groups, as well as the wider public.

Finally, the governance of the Institute will contribute to maximising its impact. This will include a board and advisory group that brings together representatives of the Institute's research partner organisations and funders with policymakers and globally recognised activists, advocacy organisations and experts. The Institute will attract high-profile ambassadors, both male and female, who are able to communicate and implement the vision, findings and activities of the Global Institute to a wider audience.



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- Front-cover image and image on p. 2 courtesy of UN Women. Image on p. 3 courtesy of the UK Department for International Development. Image on p. 4 courtesy of the World Economic Forum. Image on p. 5 courtesy of Wei-Te Wong.**

