

## **Women Leadership in Brunei Darussalam** Challenges and enabling factors

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the experiences of women leaders and their challenges in Brunei Darussalam. Globally, women are underrepresented in leadership positions. Though the Brunei government does not discriminate against any gender in delivering free education, medical facilities and healthcare, women in leadership positions are as well underrepresented. I try to understand the factors that challenge as well as motivate women to become leaders in Brunei. For this research, I conducted qualitative interviews with some respondents selected purposively. The study results show that women leaders in Brunei face challenges in obtaining financial support and accessing resources. Despite the challenges, there are some women who have been assuming and excelling in their leadership roles. The study identified that personal strengths have also been critical in contributing to their successful leadership.

*Keywords: Women leadership; Brunei; financial support; mentors; family/spousal support*

### **Introduction**

Buzzanell and colleagues (1997) define leadership as the process by which an individual mobilizes people and resources to achieve a goal. Leaders motivate others to aspire to achieve them to do so. Leadership mediates others to achieve a certain goal for a team, organization or of a nation (Goleman, 2003). It comprises a set of traits that allows a person to persuade others in order to achieve a given aim (Monjur, 2010). The concept of leadership has a religious dimension too. For example, in Islam, leadership is a symbol of trust<sup>†</sup> that a person acquires to guide the community into the way of Allah SWT (Monjur, 2010). The fundamental sources of Islamic leadership and guidance for the Muslim leaders are Al-Qur'an and Hadith.

Nevertheless, different communities may have different perspectives on women's leadership. We people have an image in our minds about what a male leader looks like. But what about a female leader? Do we have an idea or image

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<sup>†</sup> *Amanah* (Monjur, 2010)

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in mind? Of course, great leaders possess similar leadership traits. There is currently a lack of powerful women leaders; it is difficult to know how female leadership qualities can be used to their best advantage (UN Women, 2021; Ullah, 2013; 2013a). In general, women often take up low to middle positions compared to men, and they face stereotypes that limit their power which prohibits them from holding higher positions (Major and O'brien, 2005). Although some women can reach top leadership positions, they still face the leadership labyrinth (Eagly, 2007).

In Brunei Darussalam, although women are treated equally as men, the number of women leaders in the country is relatively low as compared to men (Yunos, 2011). This is the reality despite the fact that women in Brunei Darussalam surpass more than men in education (Figure 1) (UNESCO, 2018).

Additionally, in Brunei, women holding seats in parliament are only 9.1% compared to men's 90.9% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018). As of 2010 until the present, there have only been three women deputy ministers appointed in Brunei: Datin Paduka Hajah Adina Othman as deputy ministers of Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, Datin Hj Elinda Hj CA Mohamed as the Deputy Minister at Prime Minister's Office and Datin Paduka Seri Dr Hj Romaizah Hj Mohd Salleh as the Deputy Minister of Ministry of Education (Masli, 2010). Unfortunately, as of today, out of all three female deputy ministers, only one still upholds their position.

There is a deficiency of data on women leaders in the private sector. While there

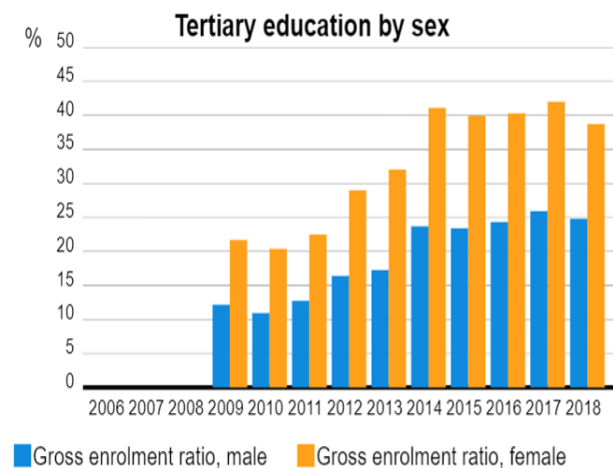


Figure 1. Shows the gross enrolment ratio by sex in Tertiary education in Brunei Darussalam. Source: UNESCO, 2018.

is an estimate that women working in the private sector is 58%, the number of women holding leadership positions is inaccurate (Department of Economic Planning and Development - Labour Force, 2018). This may be because women holding higher positions in Brunei Darussalam are still negligible, and likely that women are sidelined unintentionally, and their full potential is not fully exploited (Low and Zohrah 2013).

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According to Brunei Darussalam's National Vision plan (Wawasan, 2035), the country aims at achieving a sustainable economy in which equal opportunities for women in the workforce and nation-building are encouraged (Department of Economic Planning and Development, 2012). This research contributes new knowledge about women's leadership to the literature. This, in the long run, inspires more women to take up leadership roles in the country. It was until 26 March 2021 that leadership opportunities for women are brought up during the Legislative council in which YB Khairunnisa have agreed that women have the capability to prove themselves (Othman, 2021). Countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and China recognize women's ability to engage in their company's best interest to guide others without the help of men (Bullough, 2013). The growing number of women leaders may also motivate other women to advance in their careers. Schipani et al. (2009) note that networking is essential for women to build up social capital, which is crucial in obtaining a leadership position. Both mentors and their mentee share their experiences and assist each other in times of need. With an increasing number of women taking up leadership roles, they have more influence, power and recognition, giving inspiration for others to do the same.

### **Objectives and methodology**

Given the relative lack of research on women's leadership in the country, this research aims to discover women leaders' challenges and experiences in Brunei Darussalam. Women are often viewed as unsuitable for leadership in Bruneian society. This research aims to investigate the motivation and problems women experience in becoming leaders and examine the societal pressures encountered by these women leaders in the country.

This research is based on a qualitative approach. To collect data, I conducted a semi-structured interview. The respondents were asked about the motivations they had and difficulties they faced as women leaders, and what factors contributed to their success. Tedrow & Rhoads (1999) conducted similar research in a community college in the United States. This research inspired me to do this research in Brunei. Women to be interviewed consist of CEOs and Co-founders of their organizations, including government officials. Unfortunately, out of ten intended participants, the researcher could only interview seven women leaders because some of the interviewees rejected the request due to time difficulties. During the interview, notes were taken, and conversations were recorded via mobile phone. The interviewees have given consent to be recorded and used their names for this study. The interview lasted 15 minutes to 1 hour, and most of the interviewees conversed in English, but some also spoke bilingually (a mixture of Malay and English) for better communication. The data collected from the respondents were analyzed using thematic analysis. Women chosen in the study must be women living in Brunei Darussalam and a citizen of

the country, and they must also be portrayed as leaders in social media and news report. Finally, they must have at least three to five years of leadership experience which may include managing one department or have experience handling big projects and initiatives that have had an impact in Brunei.

Table 1. Background of women leaders interviewed

Participants	Position	Other Organization/s
Nornaqibah Hamid	Chairperson of Lamin Warisan	Committee of Minda Youth Movement
Dewi HK	Chairperson of Sutera Memento	Teacher in one of sixth form in Brunei Darussalam; part-time news reader
Fatin Arifin	President of Young Entrepreneurs Association of Brunei (YEAB)	Founder and convener in Brunei Chevening Youth Forum
Noor Hafizah Hj Rashid	Founder of Big-BWN Project	Founder of womennovation; Co-founder of womenpreneur network
Ain Bandial	Co-founder of The Scoop	Journalist in The Scoop
Pg. Noor Affizan	Founder of YoucanLead.bn	Eye surgeon; deputy head of ophthalmology in RIPAS hospital
Dr Siti Mazidah Haji Mohamad	Lecturer in FASS UBD	Mentor for Young Professional Network (YPN)

Source: Author, 2019

### Factors affecting women leadership

#### *Mentorship*

Mentoring is a professional activity, a trusted relationship, a meaningful commitment (Eric, 1992). Women leaders need mentors for personal growth through learning experiences (Van Velsor and Hughes, 1990). Mentoring may benefit the mentees with experiences, understanding, challenges and support to pursue their own objectives (Johnson 2002). Lo & Ramayah (2011) note that mentoring has a positive relationship with job satisfaction, such as faster promotion, teamwork and helpful supervisors. Hetty van Emmerik (2008) shows that with the help of their mentors, employees enhanced their careers.

#### *Work and family life balance*

Women being able to lead must also strike a balance between work and family life (Jyothi Sree and Jyothi 2012). Women leaders must be able to see themselves multitasking to maintain familial relationships while advancing the cause of the organizations they work for (Cheung and Halpern, 2010). Research by Hewlett & Luce (2006) revealed that women leaders that achieve success in their careers are seen to have a balanced family life as well. In order for them to bring a balance between work and family, they got to prioritize their family while taking up the work responsibly. Almaki et al. (2016) have also supported this that one of the ways to assume a leadership position is by recognizing the role and responsibilities at work and following precise regulations for home.

### **Challenges women leaders face**

#### *Gender Stereotype*

Historically, the idea that men make better leaders than women has gained prominence (Kiamba, 2008). This gender stereotype<sup>‡</sup> has a severe impact in the long run on leadership development. In characterizing leadership, scholars believe that men are more ambitious and risk-takers than women (Apestegua, Azmat, and Iriberry, 2012). Women are seen to be more compassionate, caring and emotional (Weikart et al., 2007). This is, in fact, undermining the capability of women. The roles of gender stereotypes may affect how women lead and result in double binds, in which women are unlikely to receive recognition and undergo specific standards to keep up with men (Chin, 2011). Omar & Davidson (2001) note that in Japan and Singapore, women leaders must display leadership qualities like a man in their organizations. This, in fact forces the potential leaders to adjust to what the organization wants them to be (Heilman, 2001).

#### *Social culture*

Society's perceptions on the role of women are often shaped by their cultural practices, social belief and religion (Chigwata, 2016), which may affect the potential of women who want to climb up to leadership (Lahti 2013). The traditional gender norms still remain strong, as seen by McLellan & Uys (2009), where women must maintain their roles as mothers at home. Although the number of women holding higher positions is increasing, they still have the responsibilities as caretakers of their families (Hughes and Ginnett, 2009). An imbalance between work and family may lead to conflict that can affect the mental health of the incumbent (Fourie, Schurink, and Franks, 2006). Hence, many women leaders may choose not to have children in order to focus on their careers (Welch and Welch, 2006). Achour et al. (2014) found that in Malaysia, female Muslim lecturers are often bombarded with the conflict between work and family life. They are required to work extended hours, and as a result, they cannot take care of their children properly. Family satisfaction and organizational commitment become critical points for their life (Abdullah, Noor, and Wok, 2008).

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<sup>‡</sup>how society sees both men and women should be (Burgess and Borgida, 1999)

### *Current research*

In Brunei's perspective, K. C. P. Low (2008) explained that Brunei Darussalam indeed undergoes a "Father Leadership" style which is referred to as both paternal and maternal leadership. Although now that the social etiquette and gender roles are more open and flexible (Chin, 2011), this kind of leadership may affect society. This includes gender institutions influenced by patriarchal norms and values in which women were denied to achieve the position of power due to male dominance in the patriarchal society (Pengiran, 2017). Although women working in Brunei Darussalam are large in numbers, they still face significant barriers in reaching senior leadership positions (Othman, 2010). In Brunei, the Sultan's leadership is based on the national ideology of *Melayu Islam Beraja*<sup>§</sup> that serves as a beacon for the country's culture (K. C. P. Low 2008). Even though rights were given to women in Brunei in terms of education, healthcare and employment and citizenship (Othman, 2010), they still struggle for a balanced life (Aewon 2014). In many Asian countries, it is obligatory for women to be committed to family responsibilities as prescribed by their gender roles (Abdullah, Noor, and Wok, 2008).

### **Results**

This study has identified several themes. The first one is the motivation to become leaders in Brunei Darussalam (Table 2). Of the seven respondents, two have the same motivation, which is to help the youth and community. The first respondent (A) aims to achieve the 'Wawasan 2035' target of creating a local brand called 'BigBWN' to create more entrepreneurship for local youth. While Respondent B is a lecturer in UBD and a youth Geographer herself, she comes to realize that youth in Brunei needs a certain push to help with their vision. She aims to shape the way youth perceives information by encouraging them to become more mobile and critical thinkers.

Table 2. Shows women leader's motivations to become leaders.

Themes	Motivation/s
Personal Development	Family, Passion, Youth and Community
Professional Development	Finding opportunities
Local Sectors	Developing media sectors

Source: Author, 2019

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<sup>§</sup> Malay Muslim Monarchy

Respondent C is a final year student in UBD. This respondent has been given the responsibility of '*Lamin Warisan*' by her elderly. Although she is faced with doubts, she made the decision to overcome her challenges and prove herself suitable to handle the initiative. Respondent D, while taking the course Drama and Theatre, she was motivated, and she becomes passionate about performing arts and decided to create her own theatre production called '*Sutera Memento*.'

For another respondent (E), motivation comes when her expectation is low. While working as a doctor in Singapore, her life was very strict and regimental. Once she decided to take the time to shape her personal development, she started to see life differently, and she changed her life in a better direction. She started to share what she learned with others and soon realizes her voice can make an impact.

Respondent F is one of the co-founders of her company, 'the scoop'. While working in Brunei, she realizes that news media in the country did not do an excellent job in delivering Bruneians' stories and what interests them. Therefore, she and three of her colleagues took the risk of creating a platform that would reflect thoughtfully on stories in Brunei. Finally, another respondent (G) believes that her motivation came after joining an organization called YEAB<sup>4</sup> in which changed her from being a shy person to the person she is now, more confident and risk-taker. When she was allowed to lead the initiative abroad, she felt it was life-changing to be entrusted with a big decision. From there, it motivates her to keep on going until now.

Table 3. Barriers faced by women leaders in Brunei Darussalam

<b>Barriers experienced</b>	
Financial support	Business sustainability, own financial
Access to resources	Teams, venue

As stated in the table above, the barriers experienced by women leaders are divided into two themes, which are: Access to resources and financial support.

All three respondents faced the same struggle in finding the right team. One respondent's team was mainly her students (as she is also a teacher in a sixth form centre in Brunei Darussalam) who often need parental consent to participate in theatre. Persuading parents is often difficult. This respondent has two permanent members (herself and her boyfriend). The other two respondents faced conflict in delegating tasks within their teams. For example, one is having difficulty for her team to understand her goal, and another finds it challenging to find support from friends, especially when handling events.

In terms of financial support, respondent F struggles to maintain her media business. She and her co-founders started the company with only BND 2,000, and with all from an editorial background and no business background, she faces difficulty in sustaining her business, knowing that media business is decreasing in revenue due to Facebook and Google taking the line of advertising. Respondent D also has issues funding her initiative. To her, people were still skeptical of 'Sutera Memento'. Therefore, the theatre is built from her own financial source. She often faces hardships in creating astounding events but also wanting to save cost, especially in terms of venue. She said, '*Venue I suppose is another challenge. There is a lot of venue in Brunei, but if you want a theatrical venue, there are only a few.*'

**Table 4. Factors that allowed women leaders to achieve their goals**

Scope	Enabling factor/s
Family/ Spousal support	Compromising activities, supportive, time management
Mentors	Experiences, reshape abilities and skills, mentality

Source: Author, 2019

Two factors that enabled women leaders to succeed. These are Family and spousal support and mentors. All respondents agreed that they found it easy to become leaders due to their family and spousal support, but each has different experiences. Most of the respondents said their family supports them in everything they do. As for another respondent (D), she was a single mother, and her family supports her in balancing their time taking care of her daughter while she is busy training. As for another respondent (B), she felt lucky she has her support system to help with her goals. For example, when she travels overseas, her family supports her in taking care of her daughter. She and her husband also agreed to adjust their free time for their daughter.

Ford (F), also agreed her family supports '*The Scoop*'; unfortunately, she also admits she sometimes has no time for her families and friends. She said, '*To be honest, I'm not good at balancing things. I work a lot, and I often don't have a lot of time to spend at home, but I have realized that in the past year, that is not a healthy thing to do just because everybody needs time to switch off and everybody needs time to connect with their family and with their friends. So, I think finding that balance is very typical because you always feel torn, especially you know you start your own business because it's like your baby right. You feel like the sense of obligation to it, and I think a lot of women think that way*



Lastly, (C) agreed that she is very privileged 'Lamin Warisan' is a family initiative, and any events are considered okay. But whenever she needs it, she never hesitates to choose her family first unless given permission otherwise.

As for mentors, most respondents agreed that mentoring is essential; even so, how they seek mentors for their organizations is extraordinary. Most of the respondents had a specific mentor that they look up to in their leadership. One respondent (C) sees her mentor as someone she can count on, especially when organizing events and past experiences shared by her mentor in which she can learn and grow. Another respondent (G) is inspired by how her mentor can stay optimistic even faced with challenges in their life. Lastly, respondent F agreed that her mentor has helped shape her writing skills and ability that have led to her success until now. Although three respondents endorsed mentoring, they also claimed that they did not seek only one mentor.

Another respondent agreed that mentors helped shape her thoughts, but her mentor functions mainly online through podcasts, videos and YouTube. She explained that *"There is no harm in having these online virtual mentors. Most of the stuff made me who I am today, and it is convenient because I can listen to it while driving"* fortunately, another respondent claimed that she does not have any mentor and uses her personal experience to brush up her skills and get better. She often learned from other peers' mistakes and made sure she does not do the same and made improvements. She agreed that *'I feel that we are a work in progress and everything should be taken as a learning step.'*

#### *Personal strength of successful women leaders*

During the interview, time management and determination were recognized in relation to each respondent's personal strengths. Two respondents have claimed that they could manage their time well. One respondent has set her long and short terms priorities. Since she is still a student, she manages her task accordingly, such as assignments first and then manages activities for her initiative. Another manages her time according to her daughter's. She added that her training is always done at night; therefore, it does not disturb her time with her daughter.

As for respondent A, her strong desire towards achieving local and community growth have made her very focus on achieving her task and deliverables. Respondent E also has that same focus. Although she is working as an eye surgeon, she still manages to give talks in schools and universities because she has a purpose of sharing her personal development and inspiring everyone around her.

Lastly, for B, she has both time management and determination as her strengths. She explained that she always manages her time well for her daughter, especially after school and during weekends. She added that she never loses her focus

because she aims to become a professor by the age of 50. Even though she is faced with challenges, her determination is what keeps her going until now.

### **Discussions and Conclusions**

So far, literature that deals with the motivation and challenges experienced by women leaders in Brunei are scanty. According to Goleman (2003), motivation is one trait that all influential leaders must attain. This study found that women leaders in Brunei have different motivations in becoming a leader. Two respondents said that their motivation is to help the youths and community to create critical thinkers. As for others, initially, they were only handling initiatives based on their own interest, such as self-passion for arts, family requests, and personal development, finding other opportunities and developing the media industries. Fortunately, they become motivated when they see a gap to make a change and decided to go with it. They decided that they have a passion for the work itself, seek out new obstacles and opportunities, learn new things, and eventually take great pride in the job they do. Indeed, the persistent energy they show proves that they have the intention to do things better and grow further beyond what they imagined they would be doing.

Despite facing various challenges in reaching leadership positions and carrying out leadership duties, the respondents in the study do not seem to relate to the realities of gender stereotypes. Two reasons may be attributed; one, there is no gender expectation and women leaders are treated the same as men and have the same opportunity. Secondly, and more likely, these women do not realize that it is a fact of their gender that creates these challenges for them in the first place. In Brunei, the challenges identified are only in terms of access to resources and financial support. The majority of the respondent found it challenging to find the right resources they need for their organization, especially the support of teams and venue. Many until now have no permanent members because they are still under the supervision of their parents. Some may have a team but find it challenging to obtain mutual understandings of a specific goal. This can be because there is no proper monitoring of performance in the team. However, the team is not entirely to blame, as the leader can also be questioned. Past research has found that some individuals are more egocentric in preferring to work independently rather than to work in a team (Day, Gronn, and Salas, 2004).

In terms of financial support, as stated by Education Delphi (2019), finance is necessary to acquire physical resources, which are very important to carry business functionalism. In the study, many of the women leaders opened up their organizations using their financial sources. Unfortunately, this limits the expansion of their organization, hence business stability. However, the exciting factor that made them successful is by finding other ways to promote their organization. Due to an increase in technology, many use social media to

promote their productions and content, thus attract people to invest in their business.

The study found that the presence of mentors may lead to successful women leaders in Brunei. The majority of the respondents agreed that their mentors helped reshape and strengthen their skills and ability. In handling certain events, they added that their mentors often shared personal experiences with them. But they also include that they did not have only one mentor but more than one depending on the initiatives they joined. One respondent claimed that she did not have mentors but uses her personal experience to brush up on her skills and get better. She added that everything she did was taking the risk and making sure not to repeat the same mistake.

Studies showed that work-life balance is seen as a way to help female leaders can balance their work and home commitments (Rahman, 2013). Hewlett & Luce (2006) conducted a study that demonstrates that women leaders have successfully employed strategies to make more time for their work and their family. This study found that all women leaders can achieve a work-life balance because of the support from their family and partner. The majority agreed that their family has support for them in taking care of their children while they are busy with their professional work. Their parents never question them on what they are doing, and they would never debate on what initiative they are doing. Some may also add that their partners support them in compromising time in terms of familial relationships, such as sending their daughter to school and helping with the logistic side when creating events. This finding also substantiates the study by Cheung & Halpern (2010) in which most women leaders agreed that the support they receive from their husbands and family makes their life easier. They added they could not achieve their goals without them.

Lastly, the study has identified the fact that that leader obtained certain personality traits or particular skills that make them a leader. In this case, the women leaders have the expertise to manage their time and their determination. Although they are busy at work, with some having children, they would always make it a habit to spend time with their children. Evidently, with compromising time of their family and spouse, these women find it easier to make time for their children. As for their determination, three respondents stayed focused on their aims. Although they are faced with challenges, they always found ways to overcome them.

This paper examines the experiences of Bruneian women becoming leaders in their respective organizations. It studies the motivations they had and barriers they experienced, and how they managed their responsibility at home and work. This study showed that women leaders in Brunei Darussalam are often faced with challenges in terms of business stability, especially when funds were

mainly from their own and in finding the right team for their initiatives. Fortunately, the motivation these women experienced is what keeps them going. The study found that each women leader had different motivations, but when they see the opportunity to make a change, they are willing to do it. Lastly, these women became leaders because of the personality traits they own.

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