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REFLECTION

Women in Leadership: A Global Mirror and the Bangladesh

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Introduction

Across the globe, the ascent of women into leadership has been steady, visible—and yet stubbornly incomplete. In boardrooms, parliaments, universities and cabinets, women have moved from the margins to the conversation, but rarely to its commanding heights. The global picture today is one of progress tempered by paradox: women constitute nearly half of the world's population and workforce, yet hold barely a quarter of parliamentary seats worldwide, less than one-third of senior management positions, and an even smaller fraction of CEO roles in major corporations. The glass ceiling, much discussed, remains structurally intact. Encouragingly, the evidence is unequivocal: organizations and nations that place women in leadership outperform those that do not. Studies consistently show that women leaders strengthen governance, improve financial performance, prioritize social investment, and foster more inclusive decision- making. Countries with higher female political participation demonstrate stronger outcomes in health, education and social protection. And yet, progress remains glacial—so slow that, at the current pace, global gender parity in leadership is still generations away. The barriers are neither accidental nor invisible. They are systemic: unequal access to education and networks, disproportionate care burdens, gendered expectations of authority, workplace bias, and the persistent double standard that rewards assertiveness in men while penalizing it in women. Add to this the newer frontier of digital harassment and online violence, which disproportionately targets women leaders, and the leadership pipeline narrows further.

Bangladesh: A Study in Contrasts

Bangladesh offers a compelling, almost paradoxical case study within this global narrative. On the one hand, it stands out in South Asia—and indeed globally—for having been led for decades by women at the highest political level. Female leadership at the helm of government has become not the exception but the norm, conferring upon Bangladesh a distinctive symbolic capital on the world stage. Yet symbolism, powerful as it is, does not automatically translate into systemic transformation. Beneath the prominence of women at the apex lies a stark underrepresentation in Parliament, local government, senior civil service, corporate leadership and academia. Women dominate the garment workforce and contribute decisively to the economy but remain underrepresented where decisions about that economy are made. Leadership, in Bangladesh as elsewhere, remains pyramidal: narrow at the top, constricted in the middle, and heavily gendered throughout. Cultural expectations continue to weigh heavily. Women leaders are often required to be

simultaneously strong and self-effacing, decisive yet deferential—a balancing act rarely demanded of their male counterparts. Access to finance, mentorship, political capital and safe digital spaces remains uneven. While policy frameworks and quotas have opened doors, the corridors beyond those doors are still difficult to navigate.

The Way Forward

The lesson from both the global stage and the Bangladeshi experience is clear: women's leadership cannot rely on exceptional individuals alone; it must be institutionalized. This requires deliberate action, gender-responsive education, leadership pipelines, equitable workplace policies, political party reform, digital safety protections, and conscious dismantling of bias in recruitment and promotion. Most importantly, women's leadership must be normalized, not romanticized. It is not a concession, nor a corrective, but a necessity. A world facing climate crises, economic uncertainty, technological disruption and social fragmentation can ill afford to exclude half its talent from the table where decisions are made. Bangladesh, with its unique history of women at the helm, is well-placed to move from symbolic leadership to substantive parity. In doing so, it would not merely reflect global progress, it could help redefine it. For when women lead not as exceptions but as equals, leadership itself becomes wiser, broader, and profoundly more human.

In conclusion, I would like to add the question before us is no longer whether women can lead, for that debate has been settled by history, data, and lived experience. The only question that remains is whether our institutions possess the moral courage and intellectual honesty to make room for leadership that reflects the full measure of human talent. To exclude women from power is not tradition, it is an abdication of reason. When women lead not by indulgence but by right, leadership itself is ennobled--- more ethical in conduct, more attentive in policy, and more humane in purpose. It is sad that women being the architects of the entire civilization still must fight for every little detail of human rights.