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**The Challenges faced by
Women Legal Academics (Panel
Discussion)**

Eshan Dauhoo

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Arno Dal Ri Junior

The Challenges faced by Women Legal Academics (Panel Discussion)*

Eshan Dauhoo**

On 21st May 2021, UNICEUB organised an important panel discussion entitled ‘The Challenges faced by Women Legal Academics’. Given the COVID-19 context, the event in question was held online. This also created the possibility and benefit of bringing together distinguished female academics from across the globe (Brazil, UK, Uruguay, Mexico, India, South Africa, Kuwait, Bangladesh, Argentina and Columbia).¹ This brief summary report revisits the core themes that emerged from this critical conversation.

The principle aim of the event was to provide a space and platform for these academics to have a conversation and share their personal stories, perceptions and understanding of the challenges faced by women legal academics. It also offered an opportunity to explore these issues beyond the statistics of gender representation and composition; which might somewhat limit understanding to a mere snapshot of reality. Here, the intention was to access and understand the lived experiences of women legal academics. A particularly interesting observation to emerge from the conversations was that despite differences in countries, cultures and contexts, their experiences were largely connected by certain common characteristics and challenges.

The panel consisted of participants who had demonstrated a high level of success in their careers as legal academics. Yet, their stories highlighted how, as women, they faced a number of unnecessary challenges. Participants expressed frustration and disappointment at still having to prove themselves and overcome typical gender stereotypes. One particular challenge that seemed to emerge as a dominant theme related to culture. More specifically, a patriarchal culture which persisted, produced as well as reinforced instances of gender inequality, bias and discrimination. The conversations demonstrated that these were manifested in both strong and direct forms as well as more subtle and indirect forms.

A rather powerful illustration of how cultural practices could hinder female participation and progression within academia was shared by one participant who described how the practice of *dimaniya*² in her culture meant that women often missed out on key opportunities to socialise in a space where often important connections and decisions were made. Other examples related to stereotypes such as being perceived as the secretary of a male colleague, comments on appropriate professional attire and being denied opportunities for late evening duties.

There were participants who described not being seen or treated as equals by their male colleagues. They described their students as also holding this perception. Participants reported being subject to various forms of microaggression as well as inappropriate humour. It was felt that in some

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¹ Patrícia Perrone Campos Melo (Brazil); Magdalena Bas (Uruguay); Carolina Olarte (Columbia); Virginia Georgieva (Mexico); Leila Choukron (United Kingdom); Bashayer Al Majed (Kuwait); Ranjana Ferrao (India); Rumana Islam (Bangladesh); Afton Titus (South Africa).

² A social gathering in a private setting

cases there was a glass ceiling for women legal academics when it came to opportunities to further progress in their academic careers. Other issues raised were those of double standards, where participants felt women academics had to tick more boxes and that their success was not being fully recognised and acknowledged, including within their own institutions.

The focus of the workshop was particularly on the challenges faced by women legal academics. There was also, however, a general level of recognition and agreement of evidence of a positive change in relation to the growing number of female students studying law at universities and progressing to academia and legal practice. Panellists also put forward suggestions for overcoming challenges faced by women legal academics. These included encouraging more female academic mentors and role models to come forward as well as building networks to help support and guide new female academics to break into the field and those with experience to further grow. Networks could help create relationships and spaces to not only overcome the sense of isolation felt by some women legal academics, but also make the success of women academics more visible to female law students; increasing their awareness of, and connect with, inspirational role models. It was expressed that a level of positive action, including legislative changes, was required to help fast-track necessary changes. One panellist, raised some thought-provoking questions by urging women legal academics to move beyond the statistics and instances of discrimination. Whilst she acknowledged that the statistics and negative experiences were detrimental, she pushed for women legal academics to not feel boxed by the 'women' label but instead explore their identity and sense of belonging to this category.

In summary, this discussion brought a level of awareness of the extent to which the challenges faced by women legal academics seem to cut across countries, cultures and contexts. There were inevitable variations in the form or degree of these challenges, but the instances of gender discrimination and bias went beyond being individual or isolated. They were particularly reflective of issues associated with patriarchy. Critical conversations, such as the one organised by UNICEUB, can help understand the causes and consequences of such unequal power structures by listening to the voices of those most directly impacted by it: women legal academics.

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