

Exploring the Workplace

Inclusivity

Navigating Bias and

Microaggressions and Cultural

Assumptions



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CITY RESEARCH SERIES

Associate Professor Shehnaz Tehseen
Sunway University, Malaysia

current topics >>>

Muslim Women Leaders
Navigating Bias,
Microaggressions
and Cultural Assumptions

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Introduction

Global conversations on equity increasingly acknowledge the layered challenges faced by women leaders, especially Muslim women navigating both gender and cultural barriers. While many narratives focus on struggle, Associate Professor Shehnaz Tehseen offers a powerful counter-story, one shaped by passion, grit, and inclusive support. Her journey defies stereotypes and reveals what is possible through determination and a strong, empowering ecosystem. This academic reflection builds upon her presentation on "Understanding Bias, Microaggressions, and Cultural Assumptions," examining how these factors intersect in the leadership trajectories of Muslim women. In contextualizing her personal and professional development within the broader framework of SDGs and inclusive leadership, this narrative offers a grounded, humanized lens into how meaningful inclusion transforms potential into purpose.

Understanding Bias, Microaggressions, and Cultural Assumptions

Bias, microaggressions, and cultural assumptions often limit opportunities for underrepresented groups, especially Muslim women. Bias may unconsciously favor identities like Western-educated candidates, yet Associate Professor Shehnaz Tehseen's excellence and leadership challenge such norms. Unlike many, she reports no *microaggressions*, crediting Sunway University's inclusive, culturally aware environment. Her journey also defies *cultural assumptions* that Muslim women lack leadership ambition. Empowered by her family, community and institution, she reclaims agency and reshapes what leadership can look like. Her story highlights how inclusive systems can counter stereotypes and enable authentic, empowered leadership for marginalized voices.

Reframing Inclusivity: Beyond Representation

Inclusivity goes beyond diversity; it requires structural and cultural commitment to equity, belonging, access, and participation. She exemplifies this through her leadership as a Pakistani Muslim woman in senior academic role. Her journey reflects fair access to opportunity, emotional safety, and active participation in research and mentorship. By bridging systems across Pakistan, Malaysia, and Canada, she highlights how inclusive environments empower underrepresented voices and enable true access. Her story demonstrates how inclusive values translate into meaningful, sustainable impact.

Dimensions of inclusivity align with several UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

Her leadership journey powerfully reflects key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) focused on equity and inclusion. *SDG 5: Gender Equality* aims to eliminate discrimination and expand opportunities for women, embodied in her role as Assistant Head at Sunway Business School. *SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth* promotes inclusive employment; her advocacy for flexible work and equitable policies empowers diverse talents, especially Muslim women. Her success also exemplifies *SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities*, breaking barriers linked to gender, ethnicity, and religion. *SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions* comes to life through Sunway University's inclusive, accountable culture that enables leaders like her to thrive.

Personal Motivation and Leadership Philosophy

At the heart of Associate Professor Tehseen's journey is a powerful triad of values: *passion, grit, and commitment*. *Passion* fuels her purpose, turning academic work into a meaningful mission rather than just a career. *Grit* gives her the strength to persevere through setbacks, viewing obstacles as opportunities for growth. *Commitment* grounds her, keeping her focused even without external recognition. Her leadership is not performative but deeply authentic anchored in values, driven by purpose, and dedicated to empowering the next generation of Muslim women scholars and leaders.

The Role of Support Systems

No leader thrives alone, and Associate Professor Shehnaz Tehseen's journey highlights the power of a strong support system. Her parents' belief and her husband's steady support allowed her to balance academic excellence with personal well-being. Guided by supportive PhD supervisors and backed by grants like the Excellence Graduate Assistantship, she gained international exposure. Sunway University's inclusive leadership and her industry collaborations have made her research both impactful and socially relevant.

Contextualizing the Malaysian Experience

Malaysia's multicultural setting offers both challenges and opportunities for Muslim women leaders. Associate Professor Shehnaz Tehseen proves that inclusive leadership can thrive locally through equity-driven policies and cultural empathy. She defied the idea that success requires going abroad. She champions inclusivity, flexible work, diverse leadership and inclusive communication, showing how institutions can move beyond tokenism to truly empower diverse leadership.

Conclusion: Building Inclusive Ecosystems, One Leader at a Time

Associate Professor Shehnaz Tehseen's journey shows what inclusive systems can achieve when they support capable, committed individuals. Her story challenges stereotypes about Muslim women, highlighting dignity, opportunity, and shared progress. Backed by strong representation and institutional inclusion, she has thrived at Sunway University, excelling in teaching, research, and mentorship. Her path offers a roadmap for creating authentic, inclusive leadership spaces.