

HILLARY CLINTON and Madeleine Albright have more in common than just being former U.S. secretaries of state. Both are graduates of Wellesley College, a Massachusetts women's college.

And they're in good company—such notables as actress Meryl Streep, television journalist Diane Sawyer, astronaut Pamela Melroy, and the first female prime minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto, graduated from women's colleges in the United States.

Women's Universities Around the World

“Women's institutions in the United States are enabling environments for young women,” says Susan Buck Sutton, senior adviser for international initiatives at Bryn Mawr College in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. “It really gets you ready to go out in the world with confidence. Women that come out of women's colleges aren't shrinking violets. They're the opposite.”

At women's universities in the United States, “something important, impactful, yet intangible happens,” says Kamal Ahmad, founder of the Asian University for Women (AUW) in Chittagong, Bangladesh, which opened its doors in 2008. “They tend to produce a greater number of leaders. The exposure to other women leaders and the space to express their views and aspirations makes a difference.”

Despite their impact, the number of women's colleges and universities in the United States has dwindled, from 230 just five decades ago to 45 today. Meanwhile, in places such as Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, the number of women's universities is on the rise, playing a vital role in educating women in those sections of the world—where other opportunities for higher education may be limited—and helping to prepare them to be global leaders.

“For a lot of families, even wealthy families, the choice is often to send their daughter to an all-women's college or to not send them to college at all,” says Ahmad, who is chief executive officer of the AUW Support Foundation, which generates funding for AUW. The young women who attend the university usually lack financial resources and receive scholarships to cover their costs.



Develop

BY SUSAN LADIKA





Global Leaders





AUW has about 500 students from 15 countries in Asia and the Middle East, and instruction is in English. “The young women are hearing, perhaps for the first time in their lives, that they are leaders,” Ahmad says. “There are great expectations of them changing their community and changing the world.”

That vision is personified by Saren Keang, a 24-year-old from Cambodia who graduated from AUW with a degree in Asian studies. In January 2016 she started in the master’s degree program at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, and is enrolled in a dual-degree program in sustainable international development and conflict resolution.

She’s the third of four daughters from a family with little money, and her parents were urged not to continue the girls’ educations. “The normal feeling is girls don’t need to go to higher education like boys,” she says.

But Keang was top in her class, even though she also had to help her mother and sisters support the family by selling food in front of their home.

She learned about AUW from a nongovernmental organization. The university’s mission is to “empower women and equip them to be future leaders. That mission and goal just spoke to me,” says Keang, who has a keen interest in gender issues and migration.

Even though her English skills were limited, she passed the entrance exam and interview for admission to the university, and received a full scholarship to attend. “I passed because they saw my passion.”

She spent one year in a preparatory program at AUW, called Access Academy, through which students hone their English language, critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership skills in order to prepare them for an American-style liberal arts education. Students also are required to take part in community service projects and are encouraged to join in extracurricular activities.

Because of the rigorous education both inside and outside the classroom, “I have this confidence that I developed at AUW,” Keang said, and it has prepared her to succeed at Brandeis.

It also has encouraged her to pursue her dream—to one day become head of the United Nations. “You need to dream really big. Getting a little bit below that is still high,” she says.



Saren Keang

A key role of women’s universities around the world is to foster those kinds of dreams for their students, and prepare them for leadership positions in today’s world.

“We’re all about women’s leadership,” says Susan Mumm, principal at Brescia University College in London, Ontario, Canada. The school was founded by the Ursuline Religious of the Diocese of London in 1919. “We’re a university designed by women for women.”

Three-quarters of the faculty are women, so leadership “isn’t just taught. It’s modeled and mentored everywhere our students look,” Mumm says.

Recruiting a Challenge in North America and Europe

Despite the role women’s universities play in creating leaders, Sutton acknowledges there have been questions about the continuing need for women’s colleges in North America and Western Europe in today’s world.

Sutton attended Bryn Mawr in the 1960s, at a time when women weren’t allowed to attend Ivy League schools such as Harvard and Yale universities. Women-only colleges developed in response. The Ivy League schools began to go coed in the late 1960s.

Perhaps the best known women’s colleges in the United States are the Seven Sisters—seven prestigious women’s East Coast liberal arts colleges. The group once included Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, Mount Holyoke College, Vassar College, Smith College, Barnard College, and Radcliffe College. Now Vassar is coed and Radcliffe has merged with Harvard.

Most women’s colleges provide a rigorous academic education, Sutton says, and students don’t succeed without working hard. They also hold all the leadership positions at these schools, such as in clubs and in student government, which helps them to hone their leadership skills.

It also provides the students with “a network of highly educated, motivated women,” she says.

Kristen Renn, a professor of higher, adult, and lifelong learning at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan, studied women’s universities around the world. One common thread for women’s universities in North America and Europe is “a very strongly articulated agenda for women’s leadership,” she says.

They also have a role to play in serving women outside the college through such efforts as hosting feminist authors and doing community outreach, she says.

The U.S. women’s colleges were founded before women’s suffrage, Sutton says, and have been involved in such actions as fighting for women’s right to vote and improving labor conditions for women and children. That concern for society has continued today, and the schools

are “involved with tackling women’s issues in the United States.”

“I don’t think women have achieved the level of equal standing with men as we would like to see,” says Eva Paus, director of the McCulloch Center for Global Initiatives at Mount Holyoke, in South Hadley, Massachusetts.

Yet just 2 percent of high school students say they’re interested in attending a women’s college, Paus says.

Elaine Meyer-Lee, associate vice president for global learning and leadership development at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia, acknowledges that it can be a challenge to interest female high school students in the United States in attending women’s colleges because of concerns about their social lives.



Eva Paus

“Most students don’t choose it because it’s a women’s college, but despite it. Once they get there, they become completely converted to the value,” of an education at a women’s only school, Meyer-Lee says.

On the flip side, young women from other countries are flocking to U.S. women’s colleges. At Bryn Mawr, the percentage of international students has jumped from 10 percent to 27 percent in just four years. Sutton says that increase is “spontaneous,” and doesn’t

come from the college increasing its international recruiting.

She thinks international women are coming to the schools for their high academic standards, and because women from certain countries may feel safer at a women-only school. Many of the students come from China and

Mount Holyoke Produces a Champion for Human Rights

By Susan Ladika

KAVITA RAMDAS has spent her adult life championing human rights.

She’s now senior adviser at the Ford Foundation, which aims to fight inequality and advance social justice, after spending 14 years as president and CEO of the Global Fund for Women, which stands up for the human rights of women and girls.

She’s a 1985 graduate of Mount Holyoke College, where she graduated with a degree in politics and international relations. She then went on to Princeton University, where she received a master’s in public policy and international development.

The native of India says her time at Mount Holyoke “was completely liberating at every level. It gave me the courage to think beyond any traditional boundaries.”

Not that Ramdas had a traditional start to life. Her father was once head of the Indian navy, and as a child she lived in Myanmar, Germany, and India.

She readily recounts that she started college in India and had a “breakdown” during

her second year, when she felt overwhelmed and exhausted, and didn’t eat or sleep properly.

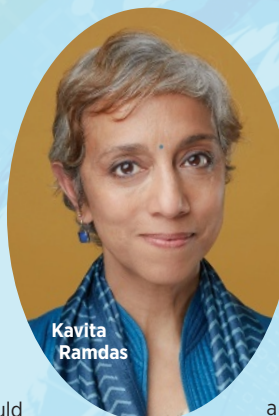
She dropped out of school and her “therapy” was to work at a nonprofit organization so she could be of service to others. “It helped get me out of myself.”

Then she met family friend Mary Jacob, then dean of international students at Mount Holyoke, who convinced her to apply to the college. “She seemed to have so much confidence I could do this, I believed it myself.”

Ramdas passed her exams and started at Mount Holyoke as a junior in 1983. “I felt Mount Holyoke was the first time in my life I really was able to be myself and nobody’s daughter, nobody’s granddaughter.”

She saw women head up student government, the newspaper, sports teams, and other activities. “It very much shaped my sense that women could excel in every field.”

She also became friends with many other international students, including those from



Kavita Ramdas

Pakistan. “That was a great gift. We really unlearned a lot of hateful stereotypes.”

Through her friends she met and married Pakistani Zulfiqar Ahmad, a peace activist.

After graduation she worked at the MacArthur Foundation, which supports organizations aiming to create a more peaceful world. She later moved to the Global Fund for Women,

which has invested in nearly 5,000 grassroots organizations in 175 countries to defend the rights of women and girls. She now serves as senior adviser to Ford Foundation President Darren Walker.

Despite advances in the world, it’s “still dominated by a worldview that’s very masculine,” she contends. She says that the recent U.S. election shows, “misogyny is so deep. Patriarchy is alive and well. Women have also internalized these lessons. The space for unlearning patriarchy is so limited in a world so dominated by it.”

She adds: “Women’s universities are little petri dishes of freedom. It’s perfectly normal as a woman to do anything, to be anything.”

And she says of her time at Mount Holyoke: “I think it had a very profound effect on me. Without it I wouldn’t be the person I am today.”



other countries in Asia, as well as from the Middle East.

At Mount Holyoke, which won NAESA's 2015 Senator Paul Simon Award for Comprehensive Internationalization, the McCulloch Center launched an initiative in 2004 to internationalize every student's education, Paus says, and the recruitment of international students rose. As a result of those efforts, the percentage of international students jumped from about 12 percent then to 27 percent today.

"Having women from 70 countries has enormous impact on everybody's educational experience," Paus says. "There's a greater understanding of shared humanity, rather than stereotyping. The impact is profound."

It's a similar situation at Agnes Scott, which launched the SUMMIT program in the fall of 2015, through which it reinvented its global learning and leadership development program. Every freshman now takes part in a faculty-led, eight-day immersion experience in another country. There they study such topics as economic systems in Cuba, the

environment in Croatia, and Islamic art in Morocco.

SUMMIT has helped attract more international students to the college, and they now make up about 13 percent of the student body. The school now is drawing more students from across the country, rather than just the South, as the college aims to "prepare effective leaders for global society," Meyer-Lee says.

Keener Interest in the Developing World

While women's universities in the United States generally must compete for students, that's a contrast to the situation in places such as China and India, where students compete for places in universities, because there are more students interested in receiving a university education than there are seats available, Renn explains.

Young women in many countries can apply to both coed and women's universities, increasing their chances for admission, Renn says. And in many countries, single-sex schools at all educational levels are far more common than in the United States, so they have wider acceptance.

In some countries, women's colleges are the only way young women can get an education. "There's so much hostility to getting women educated in some places," Renn notes.

In 2013, for example, a bomb on a Sardar Bahadur Khan University bus killed 14 women in Pakistan, and gunmen then killed 11 more people while attacking a hospital that was treating the wounded.

The year before, then-15-year-old Malala Yousafzai, an advocate for girls' education in Pakistan, was shot by the Taliban while traveling to school. Two years later she won the Nobel Peace Prize.

AUW graduate Fatima Sabri, a 26-year-old from Kabul, Afghanistan, credits her time at the university for helping her develop her advocacy skills. She cofounded the Speak Up Club at AUW, designed to help women speak up against injustice and gender-based violence. "I think I found myself as a leader at that time."

She graduated with a degree in Asian studies in 2014 and is now enrolled in a master's degree program at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont, studying sustainable development in policy advocacy, leadership, and social change. It's quite an accomplishment for a young woman who began her education as a refugee in Pakistan.

Sabri lived in Pakistan from age 3 to 11, and got her early education at a coed school for Afghan immigrants. The school closed in 2002; the family had no money to send Sabri to private school, and the government-run school wouldn't accept refugees.

Her family returned to Afghanistan so she wouldn't have any gaps in her education. She graduated from high school in 2009 and took the entrance exam for admission to Kabul University. There were far more applicants and just a limited number of places, and Sabri was told to wait until the following year to attend. "I cried my eyes out. I was really upset."

Then her father saw an ad for AUW, and urged her to apply. She was just 17 years old, and was among 94 Afghan girls who took the entrance exam. Only nine passed. She didn't know how to use a computer and says she "spoke bad English," but she was admitted into AUW's Access Academy, allowing her time to improve her skills.

"The hardest parts were being away from my family and not being able to speak the language," she recalls.

She says she was an introvert until the 2011–2012 school year, when she helped found Speak Up and then helped organize a conference focused on combatting violence against women.

Her hope is to one day open a women's learning center in Afghanistan, where women can learn leadership skills and work to combat gender-based violence.

In Rwanda, a women's college was founded to help women develop their economic potential. The Akilah Institute for Women opened its doors in Kigali, Rwanda, in



Fatima Sabri

2010, and is the only all-women's college in the country, says Executive Director Karen Sherman.

Founder Elizabeth Hughes, a Vanderbilt University graduate, "was really struck by the need for women's education," Sherman says, and wanted to "make a difference on the ground."

Nearly 1 million people were killed during Rwanda's genocide in 1994, and women "really carry the responsibility for rebuilding the country and families," Sherman says. "They need to be empowered to take on leadership roles."

In such an extremely patriarchal society, women are accustomed to taking a back seat in society, so it's a major change to attend a single-sex college, where they run for office, head clubs and activities, and learn to take a leadership role, she says.

At Akilah, the majority of a student's tuition is deferred until she graduates, and then each student must pay back that money. The repayment rate is 98 percent, Sherman says. "We want to make sure the program is accessible to women of all different socioeconomic backgrounds." In Rwanda, less than 5 percent of the young women in rural areas graduate from secondary school, but at Akilah, 55 percent of the students come from rural areas.

The students can major in hospitality management, information systems, or entrepreneurship, representing the fastest-growing sectors of the economy in East Africa. Along with academics, the young women learn skills such as leadership, team work, communication, and higher-order thinking.

Students graduate in two years with a diploma, which Sherman says is comparable to an associate's degree. If they continue their studies another year, they receive a bachelor's degree. The shorter course of study is designed so they can enter the workforce sooner.

At AUW, one of the goals is to provide young women with a way out of poverty. Under the Pathways to Promise program, which recently began, women working in garment factories in Bangladesh have been admitted to the university. Admission tests were administered on the shop floor when the factories were closed, Ahmad says. More than 650 applied for admission, and 22 were chosen, based on test scores and interviews.

Perhaps surprisingly, the factory owners have agreed to keep paying the women's wages for the five years they're attending the university. "We often underestimate the hearts of other people," Ahmad says.

The university also works to draw other young women from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as the Rohingya,



Fatima Sabri speaks about injustice and gender-based violence





Students at the Akilah Institute for Women in Kigali, Rwanda

a Muslim minority group. “They’re one of the repressed groups of people in the world,” Ahmad says. Many of their rights, including the right to an education, have been taken away.

“We’re probably the largest single educator of ethnic Rohingya women from Bangladesh and Burma,” with more than 50 students enrolled, he says.

The school also is trying to increase outreach to the Hazara, one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Afghanistan.

For such women “in most cases they don’t have access to high-quality secondary education,” Ahmad says. That’s where Access Academy comes into play, improving their skills before they start university classes.

“We look for unusual women. We look for women who demonstrate some potential for leadership and for making a difference for themselves and for the community,” he says.

One of those women is Savitri Kumari, who grew up in a remote part of India. The AUW graduate this year began her studies at Oxford University in Oxford, England, participating in a master’s degree program in environmental change and management.

Kumari, who received a full scholarship to AUW, wanted to attend the university for the exposure to new experiences, the opportunity to learn English, and the opportunity to learn about different cultures. During her time there, she was coordinator for the Math Center, where students can

turn for assistance with mathematics. She also helped the garment workers from Bangladesh with their math studies. “I always was supported by someone so I could do my studies. I feel a lot of responsibility now to give back to society.”

Women’s Colleges’ Importance Persists Around the World

And it’s not just the developing world where women’s colleges and universities have an important role to play.

“We don’t have gender equality in the world,” says Dame Barbara Stocking, president of Murray Edwards College, a college for women at the University of Cambridge in Cambridge, England. At the college, students “have a place where they can really focus on women, on their life skills, and on personal confidence.”

Unlike many women’s colleges, Murray Edwards is part of a larger university, and students from all of Cambridge’s colleges can attend lectures together. But for supervisions, or tutorials, which involve small groups of students, the supervisors for Murray Edwards’ students are usually women. “There’s a real focus on women’s learning,” Stocking says.

Murray Edwards’ students live and engage in social activities at the women’s college campus. They also work on study skills and career preparation there.

Stocking, the former CEO of Oxfam, an international confederation of charitable organizations, is herself a Murray Edwards alumnae. She returned to be president

of the college in 2013. When she attended Murray Edwards, it was very unusual to be a woman studying at Cambridge. "It did give me confidence about going into the world," she says.

At Ochanomizu University, a women's university in Tokyo, the Institute for Global Leadership offers lectures, workshops, and events designed to foster students' knowledge and cultural awareness to help prepare them to become global leaders, says Noriko Watanabe, a lecturer at the university's Global Education Center.

Women's colleges and universities had been waning in Japan, due to the country's declining birth rate, Watanabe says. That changed after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told the U.N. General Assembly in 2013 that his country would actively support women, who have the greatest power to grow the Japanese economy, and would help assist developing countries to improve their gender equality and empowerment. She says some women's colleges in the countryside may close, but the country's major women's universities, such as Ochanomizu, will continue to thrive.

She says Japanese studies show that students who attend women's institutions in that country "tend to be more outspoken and are likely not to hesitate to make their opinions known."

At Brescia in Canada, which is the country's only women's university, students can study in the School of Leadership and Social Change. It's one of the few universities with an undergraduate degree in leadership, Mumm says.

She says the young women who study at Brescia "want to become well-educated women who have the potential to lead in a community or a country."

The college is affiliated with Western University, and Brescia students can take up to two-fifths of their classes at Western, which is coed. But the women's college remains a "haven from the wider undergraduate culture, which can be quite blokish," Mumm says.

Gabby Gibbs, a third-year honors student at Brescia who is studying nutrition and dietetics, said she came to Brescia from Barbados because she couldn't find a similar program in her native land.

She said she wasn't seeking out a women's university, but "I really do love it. You're surrounded by women who make you feel empowered. You can express yourself as you want. You're encouraged to speak up."

Brescia also works to reach younger girls, operating Girls LEAD (Leadership, Education, and Development) camps in Canada and Hong Kong, which aim to empower teens. They focus on self-discovery, connecting with others, and building community and making change. Women from a wide range of professions, such as politicians, sci-



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entists, and firefighters, speak during the camps. "The girls enjoy it. They bring a lot of confidence home with them about what women can do in the world," Mumm says.

The university also holds a public speaking contest for 11th and 12th grade girls, and they must speak for five minutes about women who inspire them. Winners receive one year of free tuition and board, and students compete from around the world, Mumm says.

As North American women's colleges and universities draw more international students and put an increased emphasis on international learning and experiences, graduates have become more prepared for today's workforce.

At Agnes Scott, the emphasis on the SUMMIT program helps set the college apart, Meyer-Lee says. Global learning is not something that can be taught online or in huge classrooms. "It equips women to thrive and lead in a truly complex global society. It's extremely relevant to workforce needs today."

By working with a diverse group of fellow students in the classroom, the young women learn to see their "common humanity and understand how different countries and cultures solve problems differently and see problems differently," Paus says. "In the global economy we live in, they end up working on diverse teams."

It also helps students realize "they don't all think the same," Paus says. "It's about being open to differences, which I think any leader in the 21st century needs."

SUSAN LADIKA is a freelance writer in Tampa, Florida. Her last article for *International Educator* was "Toward a Better World" in the May/June 2016 issue.