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Experiences of Women Leaders in the Academia of Pakistan: Social Expectations and Challenges for Women Leadership

¹Anum Awan, ²Dr. Farhan Navid Yousaf and ³Ameema Malik*

1. Ph. D Scholar, Institute of Social & Cultural Studies, Department of Sociology, University of the Punjab, Quaid.e. Azam Campus, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.
2. Professor, Institute of Social & Cultural Studies, Department of Sociology, University of the Punjab, Quaid.e. Azam Campus, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.
3. Lecturer (Visiting), Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Anthropology, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

| *Corresponding Author: | anum.awan@vu.edu.pk |

ABSTRACT

The research adopts a qualitative approach to delve into the experiences of women leaders within Pakistan's higher education sector. Its primary aim is to explore the societal expectations and challenges that these women face in their leadership roles. To gather relevant insights, the study employed purposive sampling, selecting 30 participants from six universities located in Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Islamabad. This strategic selection ensured that the participants were well-positioned to offer valuable perspectives on the topic. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews, allowing for a rich, nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences. Thematic analysis was then used to analyze the collected data, leading to the identification of one overarching theme. This main theme was further divided into five sub-themes, reflecting recurring patterns in the participants' responses. These sub-themes provide a structured framework to better understand the societal expectations, challenges, and nuances of women's leadership in the workplace within the context of higher education in Pakistan. This approach offers significant insights into the complex dynamics of gender and leadership in the country

| **KEYWORDS** | Women Leaders, Academia, Impression Management Strategies, Challenges, Social Expectations |

Introduction

Due to the influx of women in higher education, the participation of women in academia is increasing day by day. In today's time, higher education is necessary to gain the top role in the science because it requires certain specialties and experiences which the women have after their long term in the science (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006). The leadership role of women has also been referred to as the 'women's advantage', which is the gain of the spot line positions. They are certain to benefit from a number of factors, the most important of which is being recognized at a higher hierarchical level (Niemi, 2017). The concept of female superiority has been in the spotlight since 1990.This shows that the struggle of women to gain space in the leadership has a long history and this motivated the authors to coin a specific term about their struggle. Since the middle of the last century, they have been striving for their advancement. In countries such as Pakistan, women who initially questioned male supremacy have become capable of competing with men, something once considered taboo (Helgesen, 1995).

Female leaders in Asia face additional constraints in meeting social expectations of what it means to be a good woman and balancing their personal and professional identities. They are expected to behave professionally and maintain a distance from their

followers, for example by dressing appropriately and arriving at work on time. Furthermore, there is no recognition by society for the efforts they have made, nor is there continuous criticism for the competence they have demonstrated (Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Oplatka, 2006). This suggests that the leadership styles of men and women are portrayed differently in society and that men are encouraged to take on leadership roles (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006; Northouse, 2015; Wynen et al., 2015). Yet, men are significantly more likely than women to see themselves as successful in managerial roles and men are more likely than women to see themselves as the worst boss (Pfaff et al., 2013). Yet, studies show that female leaders who demonstrate female qualities and attributes like tolerance, sacrifice and respect achieve equal success. According to Nisar (2011), successful university leaders in Pakistan possess qualities such as being dedicated, committed, motivated, decisive, and possessing extensive policy knowledge. She shows that the least important aspects of academic success for female leaders are tolerance, sacrifice and respect for others.

Especially when it comes to women's leadership, the social and cultural structure of Pakistan is unfavorable to women. The social and cultural values of Pakistan are hostile to women's role in the employment sector, especially in the field of leadership. The role of women in the employment sector is openly contradicted by the social and cultural values of Pakistan. According to Ahmad (2018), Pakistan did not perform satisfactorily with regard to women's leadership roles between 2012-17. This country is ranked second from bottom in global gender gap indexes, representing limited active participation of women (Shaukat & Pell, 2015). Pakistan's social and cultural system falls into a traditional and conservative category where women are restricted in their ability to earn for family survival or to use their educational and practical skills learned throughout their educational process (Saher et al,2014).

Over the past 20 years, reasonable research has highlighted the relationship between socio-cultural factors and women's academic leadership, which remains an area of concern, particularly for Southasia (Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Little research has examined the perspectives of women leaders in higher education in Pakistan, although a large number of scholars documented the experiences of school and university heads in Pakistan (Bana & Khaki, 2015; Manzoor, 2015). Their challenges are discussed in the literature in relation to their professional aspirations (Shaukat, Shahzadi & Yousaf, 2021); social, organizational and personal barriers as well as opportunities to progress (Shah, Bashir & Amin, 2020); Khan, Haidar & Amin, (2021); Ali & Rasheed (2021); Bhatti & Ali (2022); the role of work-family conflict (Saleem & Ajmal (2018); sticky floor syndrome and gender stereotypes (Farooq et al., 2020).

On the basis of above discussion, present research is intended to explore the social expectation associated with Pakistani women leaders and the challenges they face due to these expectation in the field of academia. In this regard qualitative approach was opted to gather data from thirty (30) women leaders by using purposive sampling technique.

Literature Review

The leadership literature has shed light on another critical issue faced by women executives, and that's balancing work and family life. Work-life balance is a serious issue for women leaders as they have to strike a balance between the responsibilities of leadership and the excessive responsibilities of family (Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Rehman & Roomi, 2012). While trying to balance the two, she may find her family supporting or resisting. The leadership role requires time and effort, which a married women leader in particular may not be able to provide due to her family responsibilities.

With limited resources and time and less supportive behavior of family members, a married women leader balances both spheres. The result is a lack of visibility for women in leadership positions. The balance between work and family life is crucial for women executives to successfully lead (Haile et al., 2016; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012).

According to Marafi (2013), balancing work and private life is an important issue for all professionals across industries. You must balance your professional and personal life. This professional balance makes them more effective, allowing them to devote adequate time to both their work and their family. In discussing the professional role of women as leaders in science, the issue of work-life balance takes on greater importance. The women are mainly perceived in terms of their gender-specific responsibilities. All the women with whom they are holding a top organizational post or working have to give time to their families. Without their close attention to their families, they cannot survive. The gender perspective is also considered by the women in academia. The women are increasing their leadership role in the academia, but their life at home is becoming one of the major obstacles to their effective performance. The women who have a good balance between home and work have more opportunities for success. Educated women are better able to maintain a balance between work and family life. They draw up a regular timetable according to which they carry out their duties at work and in the family in a systematic way.

Developing countries like Pakistan do not attach importance to work/life balance, but developed countries have a proper system in place to maintain work/life balance. As an example, Houston et al. (2006) stated that in New Zealand, most academicians must work overtime. In these cases, only those scientists who have managed to maintain an adequate balance between their professional and personal lives are able to survive. However, in contrast to this, they are faced with many social, personal and professional problems. For example, academics find it difficult to maintain their work-life balance, as reported by Kinman & Jones, (2003). In such a disrupted system, they cannot fully concentrate on either their professional roles or their family responsibilities.

The women of Pakistan are not exempt from this problem, either. The everyday life of working women is very stressful, with little time left for personal care. In the same concern, studies have been conducted and it has been found that the working ladies of Pakistan are under severe pressure from both the family and the employment sector (Fatima & Sahibzada, 2012; Shakir & Noorani, 2014). Most of them are educated and they want to contribute to the national development and they do jobs to play their role, but in most of the cases, their jobs are not supported by their families, which leads to the pressure from one side. On the other hand, the professional duties demand extra time from them, which adds to the problems and in the end, they become like psychological ghosts. This situation can be addressed by allocating appropriate time for both family and work. Because of the stereotypes that society has built about a leader and a woman, women also face challenges. Because people have different definitions of a leader and a woman (Sczesny, 2003), it becomes difficult for women to hold leadership positions. Furthermore, the company also prefers men for leadership roles due to their desire to maintain the status quo (Lockwood, 2004).

Masculine traits such as being a good decision maker, organized, assertive and strategic have been used to develop the leadership model. This model makes it difficult for women to achieve leadership positions, due to different stereotypes of women. Women leaders are commonly seen as empathetic, nurturing, loving, responsive, democratic, participative and nurturing (Heilman, 2001; Fisher & Koch, 2001). Qualities

such as cooperation, inclusion, democracy and participation are considered female leadership styles (Northouse, 2010). "Feminine leadership style is also believed to effectively manage and inspire performance and possess high levels of cultural competence" (Traub, 2011).

The challenges faced by women in leadership positions are influenced by both internal and external factors. In the perspective of the environmental setup of academia, the internal factors are taken into consideration. Though the existing environmental setup of the university provides space for the women but when the issue is about their leadership, serious concerns arise (Johnson et al, 2008). Women have different needs and requirements and want to run the setup according to them but the environmental characteristics are not changing suddenly. Female leadership feedback is also skewed by male-dominated organizational structures and environments (Madden, 2011).

Theoretical framework

In current study theory developed by Alice Eagley and Linda Carli, 'double-bind theory' (Eagley & Carli, 2007) is appropriate as it highlights unique obstacles women face in leadership roles as a result of social norms and gender bias. Female leaders are often expected to strike a balance between assertiveness and self-confidence in order to be perceived as competent, yet these traits may be judged differently from those of male leaders. This dilemma forces women to walk a tightrope between appearing too soft or too tough, leading to inequitable evaluations and barriers to promotion. In order to overcome these challenges, addressing gender bias and fostering an inclusive leadership environment is critical. Eagly and Carli's book, Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders' delves into this theory and sheds light on the complexities that women face when they take on leadership roles.

Material and Methods

To explore the experiences of women leaders in Pakistani academia, this study uses a qualitative research approach. The qualitative approach is particularly suited to this study because of its ability to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure the selection of participants who could provide the most relevant and insightful data. This non-probability sampling technique allows the researcher to gather rich and relevant data by deliberately selecting participants based on specific characteristics or criteria that are in line with the research question. In all, 30 participants were selected from six universities in Lahore, Rawalpindi and Islamabad, representing different perspectives within the academic landscape of those areas. These participants were specifically selected on the basis of their ability to provide meaningful insights into the topic of the research. Data collection was carried out through the use of the in-depth interview method and the data collection has been analyzed through the use of thematic analysis.

Results and Discussion

In this theme I have documented responses of respondents regarding what society expects from them and how they are dealing with these expectations. During interviews, respondents were asked about the way's society is putting pressure on them and how they are balancing work-family life. The section also covered the stigmatization of women. Respondents have frequently talked about stigmatization or labelling from society for working women. A participant having two (02) years of experience at managerial position, shared her views regarding societal expectations from working

women and stigmatization associated with her as: *"Woman play dual role in our society. She has to be perfect in performing household responsibilities and also at workplace. Workplace demands that women should create balance between her work-family lives."* (Respondent # 1)

While another participant who was Dean of the faculty, having one year of experience at this position responded as:

I always try to create balance between work-family because organization do not consider family issues. Organization demands things to be done timely. Before coming to this position, I have served as a head of the department and at that time my daughter was suffering from cancer. I was supposed to be there for her treatment and also expected to perform my workplace tasks on time. It was so tiring for me but I didn't complaint at workplace. *(Respondent # 2)*

A participant who was the head of the department having one year at this position talked about stigmatization or labelling associated with working women as:

People enjoy labelling working women or we can say stigmatizing. People expect from working women to be a perfect woman who performs well at workplace and at home also. I feel that people stigmatize women that she cannot drive good, if she pursues her career, she will not be able to give attention to her kids, she cannot be a good mother. *(Respondent # 3)*

A head of the non-academic department, responded as: *"I think socialization matters. For me it is the socialization of women from early age that gives her strength to perform dual roles. She has the strength to perform at home and at work also."* (Respondent # 4)

Family Prioritization

Family prioritization is one of the major expectations from the women either they are working women or housewives. They have to maintain their familial roles in every situation. but when it comes to the working women especially those who have performing the managerial roles being heads or leaders in academia, the situation becomes more complex. In majority of the cases, the families don't bother about their positions, they just perceive them as mothers, wives, daughters etc. For example, a respondent explained,

I am having a leadership role since last three years. I am a hardworking lady and want to maintain the both familial and professional duties but in most of the time I am presumed to be mother and wife only. Both my children and husband expect me mother and wife first and leader later. *(Respondent # 4)*

Another woman elaborated as "*Under the male-dominant typical society, the women are only perceived in the typical traditional culture. Society just views the females in domestic point of view only. They don't prefer the professional roles of the working ladies*" (Respondent number, 5).

A well-informant told,

Care giving is the primary responsibility being a woman in Pakistan. You have to look after your family including children, spouse, parents and in-laws. I think these are females' roles assigned you by birth but the families should also consider the academic responsibilities of the women *(Respondent number, 7).*

An experienced lady explained the situation in more details about the family prioritization of familial roles. She told,

> Whole of the responsibilities of the home making are attached with women in Pakistan. The society perceives you to be caregiver, maid, chef, manager of home, and all other responsibilities. The women in Pakistan are performing their family role knowingly or unknowingly *(Respondent number, 9).*

Modesty in Behavior and Attitude

First of all, the females are not openly supported for job in the male-dominant societies like Pakistan but recently this approach witnessed changes.

Despite doing jobs, they have to maintain socially acceptable behavior and attitude. The findings of the present research fetched a variety of similar results which assert that although women are allowed to work but they have to keep in mind their certain limits. In the similar stance, a woman elaborated,

> Professionalism is the core value not only in the employment place but also in the routine matters of the women life. They women have to be strict in employing professional role through which they inly interact with colleagues when it is necessary *(Respondent number, 17).*

A female head of department stated,

> According to me the dress code is the primary direction of the family because a sensible dress makes you professional on one side and acceptable to family and in-laws on the other side. So, the dressing code should be according to our norms and cultural values *(Respondent number, 19).*

Likewise, the commentary of another informant also matched with same who explained, *"The western and European culture should be discouraged. We should follow the socially acceptable dressing. The wearing of jeans and tops are such kind of dresses which are not in accordance to the culture of Pakistan"* (Respondent number, 30).

The human behavior and attitude is an abstract concept which further involves sub-concepts. It does not only involve the you acting and behaving rather it also includes your priorities and the ways of communication you adopt. This research also focused on exploring factors of modesty of behavior and attitude other than just dressing. For example, a participant elaborated, *"The communication style is one of the major dimensions exploring your medium of behavior. The communication should be based on respectable values which shows your kind gestures".(Respondent number, 29).*

Another respondent told,

> The communication should be fair enough according to the situation. The families demand you to be kind and humble during communication. To my experience, the polite communication enhances your worth being a leader especially when you are talking to you subordinate staff *(Respondent number, 21).*

Balanced Approach

Balanced approach is another expectation from the working women in Pakistan. All of the women are expected to adopt an equitable balanced approach in adopting their roles and responsibilities.

For instance, a woman told, "*If you think about the social expectations, you cannot survive even for a short period of time because society expects from you a lot. You have to manage your roles and responsibilities according to you own schedule*" (Respondent number, 22).

Another participant projected,

The women of the educated and modern societies are more aware and given much freedom about their practice life but in the typical setup of Pakistan, the women even cannot take family decision by its own even they are holding prestigious social positions *(Respondent number, 21).*

A woman with extensive professional experience of the managerial post told,

No doubt, we have to adopt a balanced approach according to our social, family and professional liabilities. But when you see the available resources and social support to the working women, the scene is totally opposite because if you expect something from working women, the women also demand something from you in return *(Respondent number, 19).*

A balanced approach means to perform the social, domestic and practical duties in an appropriate way. But the study found that no doubt all of the working women try to manage their routine according to the same yet there are many difficulties for them. In some occasions, the women expected to be at both positions which creates role strain among the working women and leads to psychological disruption among the women. For instance, a young-looking woman told,

Every working woman is a mother, wife, daughter and a position holder. She maintains all of her attached roles with balanced approach. She gives time to her children, husband, parents and practical duties as well. But sometimes it becomes so irritated that many duties become important for her and creates disturbance for her *(Respondent number, 2).*

Difficulties to reach on Leadership Positions

This theme of the study deals with all of the prominent difficulties and challenges they face in reaching at the leadership positions. Following are some of prominent issues the women leaders face for the same purpose.

All of the participants of the study reported the case of gender biasness through their experiences with variation of intensity. For instance, one of them elaborated,

Ther is difference between the theory and practice of gender biasness. In some of the cases, the real picture of gender biasness more severe but at the same time, some of the women don't face any type of biasness. It depends on your qualities, education, socialization and the organizations where you are working *(Respondent number, 30).*

Another woman told,

The prominent aspect of gender biasness is stereotyping. All of the women are perceived is in the same framework that they are not capable, tender and polite. Due to feminine nature, they cannot handle the situation appropriately which cannot be generalized at all *(Respondent number, 29).*

She enlarged her comment and said,

If the same thinking is applied on all women, then there are also many men who are shy, have limited knowledge, lack of skills and confidence then the same mentality can be applied on men as well. But in actual sense, all of the women cannot be perceived in a specific framework. This is the clear gender biasness *(Respondent number, 29).*

In the same point of view another informant told,

Women are dealt in accordance to male dominancy in our society. None cares about the efforts and hardworking the women do to maintain their social and professional balance but they are simply blamed of inferiority just because of their gender which is biasness against them *(Respondent number, 21).*

The women face gender biasness in multiple ways. They have limited family and social support. They mostly strive on their own. This is because of the unequal opportunities given to them. The study also explores that women leaders in the academia of Pakistan are also facing the issue of unequal opportunities. As one of the respondents told, "*The women have to face genders biasness while knowing that they are being discriminated. They cannot do anything due to pressure of culture. They are not given appropriate opportunities because the males are given preference over them*" *(Respondent number. 19).*

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Socio-cultural barriers also pose difficulties for the women to assume powers as leader in higher education of Pakistan. This research shows that lower representation of the females in the leadership positions is mainly triggered due to the social, cultural, religious and traditional barriers imposed on the women. They are not permitted to do a job even after gaining higher education. There is again difference between the rural and urban setting regarding this matter. For example, a participant told, "*In the typical mindset of Pakistan, the women do not enjoy freedom in choosing their careers. They are not allowed to work outside of the home because the cultural traditions demand from you to deal with family and children*" *(Respondent number, 30).*

Another female elaborated that,

Traditional gender roles restrict the outcomes of the women in Pakistan. Women are not enjoying freedom like men because they have to face traditional barriers. The traditional barriers are generated by the males as well which stops the women to assume their leadership roles *(Respondent number, 2).*

A woman explicated,

Women face so many social and cultural constraints in their routine life as working women. Although the trends are changing now yet there are many loopholes in existing system. The whole system is shaped according the masculinity because majority of the them have assumed that such positions can only relate to men *(Respondent number, 27).*

A female holding an executive position in non-academic staff told,

> I suffer more troubled situation than those who are working in academics. They have direct contact with the female students which provides an open environment to enjoy their life. But here I have hardly a few females in my staff and I am bound to sit in my office for long hours with limited enjoyment. It provides me the same cultural and social setting which a woman perceives being in a society. *(Respondent number, 8).*

Gender Influence on Responsibilities

The leadership responsibilities are termed as perks and privileges of the males only.

For example, a female told, "*The gender influence over the academic positions can be expounded through the males and female's ratio in apex seats. There is lower percentage of the higher posts held by the females in higher education of Pakistan*" (Respondent number, 5).

Another participant elaborated,

> The gender influence is no doubt has its impact on the executive positions. The men don't have to face as many issues as the women face just because of the gender. The women mean to automatically perceive an individual with limited powers *(Respondent number, 26).*

A female explained her experience of gender influence while quoting, "*I have almost more than eight years of administrative experiences in my department. Now I have located every weak point and manage it accordingly but in the early years I faced a plenty of the troubles*" *(Respondent number, 7).*

She enlarged and elucidated,

> Frist of all, I had very sympathetic attitude towards the lower staff and continued to help them but later I realized this is not in my favor. Now, I have adopted a professional role in dealing with all matters because keep all of the staff within is professional limits is helpful for you *(Respondent number, 7).*

The third world countries do not grant appropriate respect to the females either they are in high or low positions. Women means women not a head of department, a leader or an administrator. In the practices of Pakistan, the perception prevails according to the same mentality. But at the same time, participants also narrated that now women are handling the executive positions same like the men. As one of informers illustrated, "*The perception of the masculinity is old practice because now women are performing in better ways. The masculinity only believes in the authoritarian approach but the females have adopted a contrary approach including all members of the staff*" (Respondent number, 23).

A highly experienced lady said,

> Gender assigns biological characteristics to the individuals which does not mean that you have to perceive all of the women in same paradigm. It depends on the socialization and educational qualifications which makes you laborer or a leader. I am performing all of my duties without any biasness *(Respondent number, 15).*

Similarly, a respondent explored,

> The notion of success lies in the strategic way you have adopted to deal with the matters related to your position. According to me, women are more enthused and energetic to accomplish their duties. They plan strategies and time schedules in accordance to their domestic and professional engagements *(Respondent number, 11).*

The above discussion reveals that working women are facing numerous challenges which pose serious challenges for them. In addition to those, the unjustified pay packages and the inadequate polices also are barriers for the women. In exploring the financial constraints, a woman explained,

> In public sector jobs, the women are blessed to gain almost similar pay packages but contrary to that, the women in private sectors are not enjoying the same positions. They are not given same salaries which discourage the women to do a job *(Respondent number, 21).*

A middle-aged lady explored,

> The women not only face discrimination in the salaries rather they also face discrimination in the terms of recruitment and promotion. On side, the cultural constraints put pressures and on the other hand, they have to be given inadequate chances of promotions. All of these collectively create issues for them *(Respondent number, 10).*

Discussion

This section discusses the major findings of the current study in relation to existing literature. Previous research suggests that women leaders are not well-perceived and face barriers due to societal norms, this study found that educational institutions are supportive of women in leadership roles, encouraging and providing opportunities for them. This contrasts with the broader literature, indicating that context, such as educational settings, may influence these dynamics. The Present study has explored the barriers to women assuming leadership roles, aligning with existing literature but introducing new insights, such as the influence of societal and family expectations on women's leadership identities. It emphasizes that women's professional identities develop gradually through leadership experiences, a perspective not fully covered in prior research. Overall, the findings both support and expand on existing knowledge, underscoring the complexity of female leadership and identity formation.

Conclusion

The study concludes that women identity is the most crucial factor in assuming leadership roles, shaped largely by social expectations, family priorities, and the constraints of a male-dominated society. Gender roles further limit women opportunities to lead. The research highlights the intersection between women identity and leadership, revealing that identity is a blend of social and professional elements. Leadership experiences, in turn, shape and evolve this identity, making the relationship between identity and leadership a dynamic, two-way process**.**

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