

## Journal of Education & Social Sciences

ISSN: 2410-5767 (Online)

ISSN: 2414-8091 (Print)

### Gender, Culture and Leadership: Learning from the Experiences of Women Academics in Pakistani Universities

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#### Manuscript Information

**Submission Date:** March 06, 2020

**Reviews Completed:** June 14, 2020

**Acceptance Date:** July 20, 2020

**Publication Date:** Aug 04, 2020

#### Citation in APA Style:

Bhatti, A., & Ali, R. (2020). Gender, Culture and Leadership: Learning from the Experiences of Women Academics in Pakistani Universities, *Journal of Education & Social Sciences*, 8(2), 16-32.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.20547/jess0822008202>





## Gender, Culture and Leadership: Learning from the Experiences of Women Academics in Pakistani Universities

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**Abstract:** This paper has been drawn from a larger PhD research project on women's experiences of academic leadership in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. This qualitative study aims to examine the influence of socio-cultural factors on women's leadership experiences in higher education. In-depth interviews were taken from eleven participants, who were selected through purposive sampling method. The data analysis is informed by Foucauldian discourse analysis. This paper argues that leadership norms are discursively produced, according to the cultural system of Pakistani society, to limit women's participation at senior leadership positions in higher education. This research article encompasses a combination of four themes highlighting the cultural dynamics in women academic leadership: (a) socialization of women as leaders (b) gender stereotypes and labeling women in academic leadership (c) harassment and critical attitudes and (d) discursive construction of the balance between family and profession. The findings reveal that women leaders confront with gendered leadership discourses, stereotypes, harassment, and overwhelming personal and professional commitments. While, strong socialization, family support, housemaids and mentors facilitate them in their professional success. It is suggested that women should utilize the culturally informed strategies to negotiate discriminative practices and widely share their success stories with other women to improve their visibility in higher educational leadership.

**Keywords:** Gender, culture, leadership, women, higher education.

## Introduction

Globally, the participation of women in academia is rising as faculty, researchers and the administrators. However, they are invisible at top leadership positions as less than one-third women are embraced as senior administrators in higher educational institutes (Cook, 2012; Gallant, 2014). The Economist Intelligence Unit (2014) estimate that only 0.04% women occupy the most senior position of the Vice Chancellor in Pakistani Universities. This low representation indicates the persistent socio-cultural disparities against women aspiring senior leadership positions in academia. This paper argues that the academic leadership discourse is constructed and reconstructed to reinforce masculine hegemony and to limit women's participation in executive roles in Pakistani universities.

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Historically, cultural norms restrain women from leadership roles by portraying them as weak, incompetent, and dependent on men. Therefore, they are not considered appropriate for administrative and managerial roles. Moreover, women start perceiving themselves as unfit for leadership positions that adversely affect their career advancement (Desai, Chugh, & Brief, 2014; Madden, 2011). This scenario is even more complicated in developing countries like Pakistan, where professional growth of women is not entirely dependent upon their personal skills, education and resources. Instead, several factors are involved in this process, for instance, class, caste, age, spiritual beliefs and cultural patterns (Farooq et al., 2020; Roomi & Parrott, 2008). Although, many women have entered the profession of higher education, there is no guarantee that they will succeed in the main stream leadership roles. Additionally, marital responsibilities and obligations restrain women from professional grooming and advancement in their career trajectories (Manzoor, 2015).

Many researchers have documented the interplay of socio-cultural factors on women academic leadership in the past two decades; however, there is scarcity of literature in the developing region of the world, particularly in South Asia (Morley & Crossouard, 2016). In Pakistan, many researchers have documented the experiences of school and college principals; however, few studies have explored the perspectives of women leaders in higher education (Bana & Khaki, 2015; Manzoor, 2015). These studies have mainly investigated women's leadership styles and obstacles in attaining leadership roles but ignored the opportunities available to them in this patriarchal structure. This qualitative study, intends to bridge this gap in existing scholarship by extending an understanding of women's leadership experiences in the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. It also examines the extent to which existing scholarship about women leadership is applied uniformly in academic environment of Pakistan. This study is significant in understanding the existing academic leadership discourses that strengthen male domination in higher educational institutes in Pakistan. Moreover, it will facilitate social scientists in exploring the influence of cultural and social factors in women empowerment and broaden their lens to identify and recognize women's leadership abilities and skills.

This study is motivated by the postmodern theoretical assumptions of Michael Foucault and a feminist scholar, Rewyn Connell, to examine and evaluate the existing discourses and power relations that are intended to reinforce gender disparities in academic leadership in Pakistan. Foucault (2000) argues that power hierarchies and manifestations are systematically controlled by the institutions by the use of knowledge and organization of ideas. He stipulates that the dissemination of knowledge asserts a sort of pressure and a power of resistance upon other kinds of discourses present in society. He argues that historically, all societies have incorporated the knowledge or truth to legitimize the relationships of power and maintain social stability.

While Foucault's manifestation of power and knowledge has not considered gender based power relations in the organizations; many feminist scholars have facilitated us in understanding leadership as a discursive, relational and inter-subjective experience for men and women. Leadership is understood as a complex social phenomenon, where a leader executes certain predetermined activities that are highly influenced by the socio-cultural discourses (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Weiler, 2008). This study has incor-

porated Connell's assumption of 'hegemonic masculinity' to investigate the discursive construction of leadership norms in academia. The 'hegemonic masculinity' is defined as a cultural norm that endorses traditional power of men and restrains women from attaining and maintaining leadership positions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Incorporating postmodern theoretical underpinnings of Foucault and Connell facilitated in understanding socio-cultural experiences of women leaders in higher education. Moreover, it helped in a thoughtful understanding of the masculine discourses present in academic administration and management that are being formulated by the hegemonic men.

## Literature Review

Leadership positions offered to the academicians represent a complex interrelation of personal, social, cultural and organizational factors that influence their personal as well as professional lives. However, the extent to which these constraints develop problems for men and women leaders may vary across societies and cultures (Haile, Emmanuel, & Dzathor, 2016; Louw & Zuber-Skeritt, 2009). The leadership scholarship reveals that when a woman holds a typical position of influence and authority, that role of power is devalued and turned into a role of service (Monroe, Ozyurt, Wrigley, & Alexander, 2008). Women are systematically excluded from the power structure in higher education by increased discrimination, stereotypes and the community pressures to negotiate work-life balance. They are expected to accomplish the care responsibilities because they are traditionally socialized to be nurturing, caring and comforting (Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen, 2014). These social expectations also develop self-doubt among women about their leadership skills. In a meta-analysis about the influence of leadership perceptions on men and women in 95 organizations from different countries, it is found that men believe themselves to be more efficient as compared to women in male dominated organizations (Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woehr, 2014).

Similarly, Pakistani society has double moral standards and a culturally developed notion of 'izzat' (honor) to control women in public and private domains, and to reinforce male dominance. Women are socialized according to the pre-established cultural patterns that endorse serious implications on their career advancement. The masculine leadership discourses are disseminated and manipulated to keep women silent, invisible and subject to a close surveillance (Shah & Shah, 2012). In a study conducted by Shah and Shah (2012), about women college principals in Pakistan, it is found that women are unable to utilize their authority due to the dominant masculine ideologies. Gender discourses are strengthened and acquired recognition through the given interpretation of the religious text by males to de-power their female counterparts.

The scholarship about the cultural constraints for women in academic leadership also emphasizes the subtle and powerful influence of gender stereotypes. In a meta-analysis about leadership stereotypes of 69 studies, it is revealed that these stereotypes are decidedly masculine and there is no change over a period of time in these attitudes. Males are stereotypically defined as strong, committed, self-reliant, aggressive and dominant. This is not surprising that all these characteristics are also associated with a successful leader

(Crites, Dickson, & Lorenz, 2015). However, this behavior is subjective because a leader's attitude should be in line with the institutional norms, circumstances, problems and the followers' behavior (Keohane, 2007).

In their study about the effects of stereotypes on women leaders, Hoyt and Murphy (2016) explain that women do not fit to the predetermined notions of leadership due to their feminine characteristics and aspirations. Eagly and Chin (2010) explicitly elaborate that women leaders are expected to both approach leadership in a masculine way and maintain feminine identity i.e. friendliness, warmth and accommodation. This is more challenging for women because when they demonstrate masculine attributes such as assertiveness and competitiveness, they experience prejudices and criticism. Women leaders in developing countries experience greater obstacles due to the wide recognition of culturally appropriate leadership styles in academia. Asian countries perceive women leaders as incompetent and ineffective in managing critical situations (Morley & Crossouard, 2016). In her study, Shah et al. (2009) affirm that women college heads in Pakistan cannot utilize their authority effectively due to the dominant masculine beliefs. Moreover, they are prejudiced by the community for staying late in office and giving less time to the family (Farooq et al., 2020; Roomi & Parrott, 2008).

Leadership studies also emphasize the significance of work-life balance for women. It is found critical for women at senior leadership position due to their excessive domestic and professional responsibilities (Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Rehman & Roomi, 2012). Women experience constant support or resistance from their family in managing their public and private lives (Emslie & Hunt, 2009; Weigt & Solomon, 2008). Particularly, married women have to manage their dual roles with limited resources, cooperation and time that become the main reasons of their invisibility at senior leadership positions (Haile et al., 2016; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012).

Moreover, cultural norms in South Asian countries confine women within the family and exclusively account them for the care responsibilities i.e. child rearing and taking care of the extended family (Sinha, 2016). These family roles are even more complex in countries like Pakistan, where family members frequently influence women's professional choices and restrain them from taking independent decisions (Roomi & Parrott, 2008). The domestic commitments often become constraint for women, who aspire for senior leadership positions in academia (Farooq et al., 2020; Fazal, Naz, Khan, & Pedder, 2019). Few other studies also affirm that women managers cannot succeed in their professional lives because they consider family as their priority. They work harder at both household and work that often develops issues, for instance, unhealthy lifestyle, stress, less aspiration, and health disorders (Roomi & Parrott, 2008).

## Methodology

This qualitative study is stemmed from the doctoral dissertation of the first author. The methodology of this study is embedded in the postmodern theoretical paradigm; therefore, this investigation is situated within interpretive ontological and constructivist epistemological stance. It facilitated in a comprehensive and careful understanding of the

leadership discourses present in higher educational institutions and reconstruction of the meanings of the narratives of the participants about the phenomenon. For this research, an academic leader is defined as an individual employed by a university for the administrative and managerial purposes in a broader way to advance and improve educational systems, policies and ethics. With an aim to limit the scope and to develop homogeneity in the targeted population, women leaders serving in co-educational universities of general category (as listed by Higher Education Commission, Pakistan) located in Rawalpindi and Islamabad have been selected. These universities represent a unique socio-cultural environment that helped to explore the influence of dominant leadership discourses and gender based power relations on career advancement of women.

Purposive sampling technique was utilized for the selection of the prospective participants. The study sample included women, characterized as (a) possessing a doctoral degree (b) designated as Assistant Professor, Associate Professor and full Professor (c) currently working as Dean, Director or Head of Department and (d) has minimum one-year university leadership experience. The data was obtained by the face to face in-depth interviews, to get a thoughtful insight on the lived experiences of women leaders. For this purpose, an interview guide was developed that covered a range of topics, identified through an extensive review of the literature, to remain close to the research questions. Moreover, a pilot study was also undertaken for testing the interview guide and enhancing the quality of research. Its results and reflections highlighted the valid and reliable questions in the interview protocol, and gave further directions in the study.

All interviews were audio recorded after obtaining an informed consent; however, field notes were also taken during the discussion with the participants to keep record of the important codes and themes identified by participants, as well as to document researcher's personal observations and interpretations. The interviews were conducted in the office settings, where the participants felt more comfortable. Each interview took approximately seventy to eighty minutes. Although, twenty-three narrative summaries were developed for this study depending upon the saturation in the data; in this article, we have focused on the stories of the eleven women, who shared valuable information about the social and cultural aspects in academic leadership.

Michael Foucault's discourse analysis informed the entire data analysis and writing stages. Transcription was very carefully done to avoid any misinterpretations and to reflect accurate narratives of the participants. Transcriptions were done in both English and Urdu languages because most of the participants used mix languages that were later translated into English. The translated transcripts were counter checked by a language expert to ensure the accuracy. Subsequently, the descriptive codes were derived from the data patterns formulated from the transcripts, and finally the themes were developed.

The ethical guidelines recommended by the Belmont Report were considered to protect the rights of the study participants and beneficiaries, and to maintain justice during the entire research process. Written informed consents were taken from the participants and confidentiality of the data was ensured. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain confidentiality of the participants. Moreover, to ensure validity and trustworthiness, we have utilized (Creswell & Creswell, 2017)'s principles including, member checking, peer debriefing, controlling personal bias and observation.

## **Main Findings**

Four key themes have emerged from the data collected from the participants that highlight the cultural dynamics in academic leadership.

### **Socialization of Women as Leaders**

Several participants shared the influence of socialization on their domestic and professional roles. Apparently, the women having strong family socialization are more successful in their leadership roles; however, others with weak socialization experience constant constraints in their career trajectories and attempt to learn culturally defined leadership qualities from their personal experiences and observations. A participant, who learned fundamental leadership skills from her family, counted its advantages in her professional success. She said that:

I have learned many leadership skills at different stages of my professional life; however, my family has a great role in my personality development. It always encouraged and motivated me to achieve my aims of life, and supported me in all good and difficult times. (Sobia, Dean, Professor)

Likewise, a Director narrated the role of primary socialization on her professional achievements. She stated:

My family motivates me in dealing with critical situations that boosts my confidence and self-esteem. (Manahil, Director, Associate Professor)

These excerpts highlight the role of primary socialization in development of strong leadership skills, such as confidence, independence and motivation. It is clear that the professional achievements of Sobia are strongly linked with her strong family socialization. Her parents have maintained equality among her siblings and ensured the provision of similar opportunities, regardless of their gender. Moreover, they took care of her self-interest and encouraged her to achieve her ambitions. Manahil's family also has a very balanced family environment. It offers a liberal attitude toward women education and employment, as many women in her family are succeeding in their professional lives that motivated to achieve her career goals with confidence and self-assurance. On the contrary, participants having weak and traditional socialization experienced greater obstacles to succeed in their careers. They reported issues, for instance, lack of confidence, insecurity, less inspiration etc. Warda, who is raised along the traditional patterns of socialization, communicated that:

My parents raised me according to the traditional norms due to which I am introvert and shy from my childhood, and faced many challenges in early stages of my professional life. (Warda, Chairperson, Associate Professor)

The conversation with this participant clearly manifests the need of strong socialization for women to learn culturally prescribed leadership skills. Women like Warda confront numerous challenges due to their traditional family socialization. Such families confine women in their households and suppress their leadership skills from early childhood. Therefore, these women feel hesitant in taking independent decisions and firm actions at their workplace, particularly at the early stages of their professional career. Their families constantly discourage them for dominating roles at their workplace. Warda worked hard to get aware of her inner administrative and managerial skills. Her mentors also motivated in identification and improvement of her leadership abilities. Many women in this study also highlighted the significant contribution of their mothers in learning effective managerial skills. It shows that if a mother is aware of the importance of equal opportunities for her children, she can also pave ways for them to learn relevant skills. Khadija expressed the powerful role of mother in her leadership socialization. She stated that:

My mother developed a balanced family environment, where I got many opportunities to polish my skills. She confronted numerous challenges in this process but never compromised on my rights. (Khadija, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

It is evident that gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in society and internalized through the process of socialization. It is a major challenge for a woman to get recognition as effective leader in a male world due to the traditional socialization patterns. Khadija belongs to a rigid family that confines women within the family and restricts women's mobility. However, her mother was concerned about her better future and made extraordinary efforts to get family's consent for her foreign academic exposure. She is the first woman in her family to have an amazing learning opportunity at an international university.

It is concluded that primary socialization has a vital role in career development of women leaders in academia. Women with weak family socialization experience many obstacles in managing administrative and managerial roles. They have to make extraordinary efforts to succeed in the competitive organizational culture by giving more time to their work and sacrificing their personal lives. Moreover, mentors have a significant contribution in keeping these women active, enthusiastic, competitive and motivated.

## **Gender Stereotypes and Labeling Women in Academic Leadership**

The detailed discussion with the participants clearly manifests that gender stereotypes endorse additional pressure on women leaders beside traditional socialization patterns. Society has developed stereotypical behaviors to portray a negative image of women, who aim to succeed in leadership roles. The institutional norms are greatly influenced by these masculine discourses; consequently, women remain absent at top administrative positions. It unveils that power is strongly associated with the men in society and they are reluctant to share it with their women counterparts. A Chairperson elucidated that:



There are perceptions such as 'women are not better leaders', 'women don't deserve senior leadership positions as they lack leadership qualities', 'she cannot handle pressures and get scared very soon', 'she could not take quick and effective decisions' etc. However, there are also some thoughts that support women leaders such as 'women focus on minute details', 'they are flexible and accommodating' and 'they are emotionally intelligent', but I feel that the negative stereotypes outweigh the positive thoughts in many cases. (Fozia, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

The narrative of Fozia elucidates that academic leadership norms are developed to reinforce masculine hegemony. Selection boards are mostly male dominated and evaluate female participants on predetermined masculine standards. Therefore, fewer women get promotions and are left behind in their career progression as compared to their men counterparts. It shows that men are unwilling to share their hegemony with women. These perceptions are also internalized in women from their childhood through the process of socialization thus they start considering themselves unfit for top leadership positions. As Naheed mentioned: I do veil and don't take it as an obstacle in my professional life but my colleagues often become judgmental about it. (Naheed, Chairperson, Assistant Professor).

Similarly, a Director reported her concerns in this way:

I frequently receive comments such as 'janny ka jara' (she is like a male) or 'she is doing too much work like a male'. Moreover, there are labels, for instance, women are not good leaders, they are emotional; however, I try to ignore such gossips. (Manahil, Director, Associate Professor)

The participants expressed that feminine qualities such as tolerance, flexibility, modesty and accommodation are also very helpful in academic leadership. It facilitates to keep them aside of the conflict and managing critical situation effectively. However, women leaders are often prejudiced for demonstrating feminine attributes in the administration. The conversations with the participants also reveal that the masculine norms are considered necessary for the administrators. Therefore, women leaders need to inculcate dominant leadership qualities to keep themselves well aligned with prevalent leadership practices. Unfortunately, society not only victimizes women possessing feminine traits; it also keeps criticizing women, who adopt masculine standards, such as confidence, boldness, competitiveness etc. These women often receive abusive remarks from their male colleagues and staff. However, women leaders desire to be identified with their personal qualities, rather being evaluated against dominant masculine leadership standards. Many families also get influenced by the prevailing gender stereotypes; consequently, restrict women mobility and independent life. Naila shared her family's perception about working women in this way:

Once, I was interested to apply for a position of the VC in another province but my husband discouraged me with the statement, 'you shouldn't pursue this opportunity, leave it and look for a nearby option'. (Naila, Dean, Professor)

This narrative helps to understand the stereotypes present in community concerning women's mobility and decision making. Most of the leadership opportunities are available in the newly established universities that are generally located in small cities and women cannot get benefit from such opportunities due to the stereotypes associated with women's mobility. It shows that these discourses are deep rooted in society and influence the perceptions of the family members. Naila pointed that she has raised her children on equality but her sons often state that women are weak and emotionally instable; however, their mother is an exception.

It is clear from the above experiences of women leaders that leadership stereotypes have reinforced masculine ideologies in higher educational institutes. Cultural norms represent women as confuse, less confident, weak, incompetent and emotional. It is evident that these ideologies are internalized among individuals through the process of socialization to limit women's participation in senior leadership roles. The selection boards are mostly male dominated and safeguard the interest of males. However, women are enthusiastic to alter these conservative behaviors by constant hard work, demonstrating their skills at different organizational forums, and managing their dual roles effectively.

## **Harassment and Critical Attitudes**

This issue is investigated very carefully in this study because it is a sensitive topic and women generally hesitate to communicate such experiences. Contrary to my expectations, many women generously shared their stories of harassment and critical attitudes within their institutional settings that helped me to understand the intensity of the problem. All participants reported that their universities have developed an anti-harassment policy that is consistent with the governmental guidelines; however, it is not implemented effectively. Warda, who often receives demeaning jokes and comments from her colleagues and staff, elaborated that:

I remain very careful while interacting with my male colleagues because they take no time to cross the limits. Once, after a meeting, a male colleague commented that 'madam you do things very well because you explain your point very interestingly'. I was alarmed by his statement and carefully responded. I try to keep my behavior well controlled and voice tone slight harsh while interacting with men. (Warda, Chairperson, Associate Professor)

Leaders require having frequent interaction with their colleagues and subordinates to manage their administrative activities effectively. This research finds that community has legitimized men to victimize women. Verbal and non-verbal harassment is a tool for men to reinforce their power in community and organizations. The conversation with Warda implies that sexiest hostility is deeply rooted in organizational structure and is evident in the form of harassment against women. Men often articulate undignified jokes or statements that also contain elements of harassment. It is also found that males also get benefit of their age and designation at their workplace. Moreover, they quickly alter their attitude to defend their gendered behavior. Another participant expressed similar experiences in these words:

Our current management believes in less respect toward women and often use disrespectful language, for instance 'wo yeah keh rhi thi' or use the word 'bibi' (a typical word used for women in Pakistani society) instead of 'madam' or 'miss'. These are very hurtful behaviors and I take it as a kind of harassment. I observe the dress code and keep my voice relatively loud, harsh and rude to avoid such circumstances. (Naheed, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

The narratives of the participants clearly manifest the domination of men in the university structure. There are strong male lobbies that frequently utilize impertinent language and demeaning jokes to discourage women's participation in executive roles. They even don't hesitate to harass them during formal meetings and at official platforms. It is clear that women leaders are well aware of their rights but men take no time to victimize them. Therefore, women remain very careful during interaction with their male colleagues and staff. Khadija, who is an unmarried woman, reported as follows:

I never let anyone to cross the limits but some individuals try so. For instance, I love nail art and my nails remain well grown and shaped. Once, a male colleague, who was sitting beside me commented, 'ab bnda ap ky haath dekhy, ya ap ka kam' (you are typing with such beautiful hands, should I focus on your hands or on your work). I was alarmed and replied quickly that 'ma in hathoon sy thapar bhi bohat acha maar sakti hoon' (I can also slap badly with these beautiful hands). He was an elder and had the same designation but I feel that males take every single woman status as an 'available status'. (Khadija, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

Another unmarried participant elaborated gendered and critical attitudes of males at her work place in this way:

When I accept an offer for a cup of tea from a male colleague, they often perceive it negatively, and if I accept their invitation for a second time, they completely misinterpret and start crossing the limits. In such cases, I refuse them straightforwardly in a bit harsh tone that 'app is qabil nhi hain k ap k saath chay pee jay' (you don't deserve to have a cup of tea with me). Furthermore, I often receive odd jocks on mobile. Below the age of thirty, I used to ignore and never replied but now, I reply them with a one liner note that don't you ever dare to send me such message again and it is very effective as no one ever tried to attempt again due to my first harsh response. (Faria, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

The above analysis uncovers the conventional attitude of men toward unmarried women. The dominant masculine discourses encourage them to harass their female counterparts. Particularly, unmarried women are perceived more negatively in organizational settings. Men utilize various means to grab their attention and if they don't get a positive response, they start exploitation. The data shows that women utilize numerous strategies to deal with such behaviors, for instance, careful interaction with males, using a bit harsh and louder voice tone, define limits and convey them very clearly to avoid any humiliation and embarrassment.

## **Discursive Construction of the Balance between Family and Profession**

Maintaining work-life balance is found as most challenging for women leaders in this study. All participants maintained that family is their priority and they are not willing to spoil their family life due to their leadership commitments. Therefore, they induce more efforts to keep balance between their work and family responsibilities. The participants also acknowledged the supportive role of their spouses and in-laws in managing their dual roles effectively. Moreover, all women have house-maids to assist them in their household chores. A participant communicated the enabling feature of the joint family in balancing her household and professional activities in this way:

My husband and in-laws are very supportive as they take care of my children in my absence. Furthermore, I have household assistants to help me in accomplishing household chores. (Sana, Director, Associate Professor)

Sobia also expressed her similar experiences in these words:

I have two sons, who often help me in domestic activities and my husband always remains beside me in dealing with critical situations. (Sobia, Dean, Professor)

A successful woman leader has to utilize variety of skills to manage her professional roles beside family and marriage. It is clear from the narratives of the participants that family support is essential for women in effective organization of their dual roles. Family cooperation helps to reduce their workload and motivates them to attain and maintain leadership positions. However, it is found that it is more challenging for the single mothers because they have to manage all activities on their own. Liba, who is a single mother, shared her constraints in socialization of children due to her demanding professional life in these words:

My kids are suffering a lot due to my administrative roles. They have to stay with me in university after their school and during summer vacations. I feel that I had much time for my family before taking up this position. (Liba, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

The above narrative indicates the apprehensions of the single mothers about the socialization of their children. As leadership requires more time and energy; therefore, they are unable to find quality time for their children. Most importantly, they do not have any supportive structure, for instance, day cares for their kids after school time. Moreover, their close relatives were not concerned about their issues and housemaids were also not much reliable to leave children with them for long durations. It is found that these women often have to make apologetic excuses to their top management for not attending late meetings or conferences. Hence, they lose the opportunity to develop strong professional networks. This is an important discourse present in the society that creates barriers in career advancement of single mothers. In the absence of family and institutional support, women seek alternative arrangements for their children, such as hiring house maids and baby sitters. A childless married participant shared that:

My in-laws are accommodating as they understand the nature of my job. On the other hand, I have housemaids for assistance; therefore, I have less household responsibilities. However, sometime my family gets apprehensive due to my work overload and late sittings but they never resist. (Manahil, Director, Associate Professor)

The detailed discussion with married women leaders clearly manifests the need of work-life balance to become successful. Leadership requires more time and efforts due to which women cannot give much time to their family. Therefore, family support seems mandatory for women to pursue their leadership careers. Interestingly, the joint family system, that is dominant in Pakistani society, is found supportive for women leaders in this study as it facilitates in organizing their domestic chores in their absence. Moreover, childless women experience fewer constraints in contrast to the working mothers, as they have to spare time for their children as most of the husbands put this responsibility exclusively on women. Consequently, most of the participants had small families of no more than three children that facilitated them in successful management of all personal and professional activities.

Moreover, the stories of unmarried participants unfold the influence of a prevailing discourse about career oriented women in Pakistani society. These women are perceived as incapable to manage their married life effectively due to their high career aspirations. In addition, community often victimizes these women by asking them about marriage plans and criticizing their priorities. An unmarried participant shared her experiences in this way:

People generally believe that I am professional and unable to give time to my family. However, I personally feel that if I am managing my current life with my old parents, successfully, I can manage my married life as well. (Memoona, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

The narratives of participants like Momoona emphasize the prevalent discourse about career oriented women due to which they face obstacles in finding their mates. These women are not considered ideal for marriage as people believe that they cannot give much time to their family. This perception is internalized among people in diverse ways through the process of socialization by institutions, such as family, education and religion. Power is often inaccurately associated with bread winners, who are predominantly men. When a woman starts earning and contributing to the family's economy, this hierarchy of power dilutes and often shifts that is often undesirable for men. Interestingly, despite having the power to earn, some women continue to experience discrimination silently and often compromise their career for their domestic lives due to their traditional socialization. Deviant women, who fight for their career, are not accepted by the society and most of them remain unmarried or experience separation and divorce.

It is concluded that the success of a women leaders is largely dependent upon their abilities to maintain work-life balance. In this process, family cooperation is found necessary for these women as they often have to stay late in offices due to multiple professional

commitments. It is found that married women with little kids experience greater impediments in maintaining a balanced life as compared to married women with no children or with grown-up children. Moreover, career oriented women are often criticized for having strong professional ambitions; therefore, experience rejection in marriage by the community.

## Discussion

The debate emerging from this study resonates with the existing scholarship on women leadership worldwide. Yet, there are some unique findings that contribute to the existing literature, especially in the context of Pakistan. The findings indicate that leadership norms are discursively produced to develop constraints for women in attaining senior leadership positions and women have to deal with them implicitly or explicitly for their career advancement. Hence, women having strong primary socialization and social support system are able to deal with the challenges more effectively.

Strong early stage leadership socialization serves as a great opportunity for women in their career. It is evident that such women are more confident, motivated, and committed. On the contrary, women having traditional gendered socialization experienced greater impediments in early stages of their career. They are not socialized to be unapologetically competitive; therefore, they need to work hard to overcome this gap and learn effective leadership skills from their lived experiences and observations. Moreover, professional mentoring and networking help to identify and polish their latent abilities. Similar to these finding, the literature also indicates the influence of socialization on women's leadership roles (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). This study found the variation of socialization patterns among various socio-economic groups of women. Most participants belonged to the middle class families that generally practice traditional patterns of socialization.

It is clear that the dominant masculine discourses present in society often stereotype women as weak and unfit for leadership roles. Moreover, if a woman becomes strong and confident, she is stereotyped as 'being a male'. Previous leadership researches explicitly elaborate that gender stereotypes systematically favor men at top leadership positions (Eagly & Chin, 2010; Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). However, these prejudices are much strong due to the rigid patriarchal structure in Pakistan. This study unveils that woman leaders with strong career aspirations were extremely stereotyped in society due to which they never got married or experienced separation and divorce.

Importantly, the narratives of the participants clearly manifest that the dominant masculine discourses such as 'a woman leader is a woman first', authorize men in their attempt to harass women leaders in higher education. Specifically, single women are subject to greater verbal and non-verbal harassment from academic and administrative executives and staff as well. However, these women were explicit in their behaviors toward harassment and defined clear limitation to avoid any such situations. These findings enhance our understanding of some of the personal challenges encountered by women leaders, as little is known about the issues of harassment among women leaders in higher

education in Pakistan. However, the studies elsewhere indicate the presence of harassment and critical attitudes among women faculty and staff (Bennett et al., 2011; Joubert, 2009; Monroe et al., 2008).

Moreover, women prioritize their families over their career due to the higher emphasis placed on them to confirm traditional gender roles by family and community at large; therefore, they remain highly concerned about work-life balance. Many researchers indicate the significance of work-life balance for women at academic leadership positions and have highlighted its effects on their professional development (Fazal et al., 2019; Haile et al., 2016). However, Pakistan has distinctive socio-cultural belief system, where women are expected to prioritize marriage, child rearing and domestic chores thus restraining them from contributing towards leadership roles wholeheartedly. Women require abundant skills and resources to succeed in leadership career in higher education in Pakistan.

Unlike previous studies that indicate lack of family support for professional women, this study found a good emotional and physical support of family that helps women leaders to maintain work-life balance. The majority of the participants had cooperative husbands and in-laws, who facilitated them in managing their dual roles effectively. Joint family system and household assistant also served as an opportunity for these women to pursue leadership as a profession. Moreover, most women preferred small families because they were well aware about their primary child care responsibilities. However, single mothers lacked such supportive networks in their family; therefore, experienced greater impediments in fulfilling personal and professional commitments. These findings resonate with the reviewed literature that indicate multiple challenges for married women in executive roles (Farooq et al., 2020), although little is known about the challenges and strategies of single mothers occupying leadership positions in higher education in Pakistan.

To sum up, this paper contributes to the existing scholarly work on academic leadership by highlighting the experience of Pakistani women. It enhances our understanding of the challenges women encounter and the myriad ways, such challenges are entangled with the existing hegemonic regimes. This study also offers hope for transformations as evidenced from the trajectories of these participants. Nevertheless, this study has some limitations. The participants were working in coeducational universities, in two cities of Pakistan; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to how women in other universities, in other parts of the country experience leadership. Moreover, some women were unable or unwilling to share their experiences due to the time constraints; their insight would have proved valuable in this study.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

This paper illustrated that woman leaders in Pakistani universities experience de-powering status due to the traditional socio-cultural arrangements that define and determine gendered professional roles and practices. Women are required to maintain their dual identities in two entirely distinctive domains i.e. family and work. The success of women leaders is largely dependent upon their abilities to confront multi-dimensional social and

cultural barriers for instance, traditional patterns of socialization, gender stereotypes, harassment and critical attitudes, restricted mobility, and difficulties in maintaining work-life balance. However, women also have some strong supporting networks such as good family support, mentors, professional networks, and household assistants that motivate them to attain and maintain senior leadership positions. Strong support of husbands and in-laws is found to be instrumental for their professional growth and dealing with critical attitudes. Moreover, women are struggling to get recognition in a masculine leadership culture by consistent hard work, enthusiasm and motivation to alter the conventional leadership discourses in higher education. They keep learning leadership skills from their lived experiences and increased exposure to bridge the prevalent gender leadership gap in academia.

The findings of this study have important implications because there is lack of scholarship about women leaders in higher education in Pakistan. As it is evident that women have capabilities to produce and reproduce new cultural norms favoring women, they need to share their success stories with other professional women to motivate them for participation in leadership roles. Moreover, future interventions can explore women lived experiences in different university structures, for instance, elite and non-elite universities, or public and private sector universities. Furthermore, since this study is limited to the women leaders working in co-educational universities in only two cities of Pakistan, comparative studies of men and women leaders could also be undertaken to explore diverse and unique socio-cultural discourse about leadership in higher education.



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