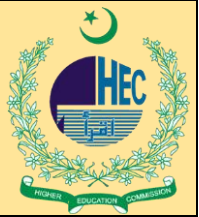




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Issues and Challenges to Women Academic Leadership: A Case Study of Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study investigates the multifaceted barriers hindering the advancement of women into academic leadership positions within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan. Despite a significant presence of women at student and junior faculty levels, a stark vertical segregation persists, with their representation drastically diminishing in senior roles such as Deans, Directors, and Vice-Chancellors. Guided by Feminist Standpoint Theory and Gendered Organization Theory, this research employs in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women in academic leadership roles across multiple Pakistani universities. A thematic analysis of the data reveals a complex, interlocking system of challenges operating at three levels: macro socio-cultural expectations (e.g., familial obligations, societal norms), meso organizational structures (e.g., male-dominated informal networks, biased policies, lack of institutional support), and micro internalized barriers (e.g., imposter syndrome, the double bind). The findings demonstrate that women are not passive victims of these structures but actively employ strategies of resilience, strategic navigation, and the formation of informal "sisterhood" networks to overcome these hurdles. The study concludes that the underrepresentation of women is a systemic issue requiring multi-faceted interventions. It recommends concrete policy and institutional reforms, including transparent promotion criteria, mandatory mentorship programs, and leadership development initiatives, to dismantle the gendered barriers and foster a more inclusive and equitable academic leadership landscape in Pakistan. The research contributes a nuanced, context-rich understanding of the gendered power dynamics within Pakistani HEIs, highlighting the critical need to leverage this untapped potential for the sector's future development.

Keywords: Women Academic Leadership, Gender Equity, Higher Education in Pakistan, Gendered Organizations, Qualitative Case Study, Barriers and Challenges.

Introduction

Women comprise a large majority of students in higher education worldwide, but their role in the highest echelons of academic administration is still far behind their numbers. In a recent report by UNESCO (2022), more than 54 percent of all undergraduate students around the world are women; however, they are underrepresented in senior leadership roles at universities, with fewer than 30 percent of the top leadership positions being held by women, such as Rector, Vice-Chancellor, or President. Such a striking inequality is not just a statistical anomaly but a significant indicator of systemic obstacles that remain in place and hinder female career advancement. The

academic environment, which may seem to be an exemplary representation of meritocracy and progressive thinking, is, ironically, full of a so-called leaky pipeline issue, where the number of women at each level of the academic ladder, moving on, decreases, and the most acute levels are executive suites (O'Connor et al., 2021). This international trend of underrepresentation provides a fundamental backdrop against which it is essential to analyze its more localized and in many cases more extreme variants in national settings such as Pakistan, where socio-cultural pressures add another layer to the process of women entering leadership.

The situation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of Pakistan is especially interesting paradox. There has been a tremendous quantitative expansion in the sector in the last 20 years, as the number of universities has grown and student enrolment has reached millions. Reflecting the trends across the world, the number of women has increased significantly; women constitute almost 48 percent of undergraduate students and are well represented at lecturer and assistant professor ranks, especially in the humanities, social sciences, and life sciences (Higher Education Commission of Pakistan [HEC], 2023). But this promising pipeline leaks drastically at the senior levels. There is a sharp vertical division between the sexes, with women occupying only 8 percent of the position of the Vice-Chancellor and around 15 percent of Dean and Directorial posts in government and private universities (Malik & Noreen, 2022). This precipitous decline of excellent junior faculty to a desert of female leadership indicates a fundamental flaw in the system to grow, promote, and retain female talent, and indicates that the obstacles are not those of entry but those of advancement.

The importance of this leadership deficit can hardly be overestimated as it has a direct and significant impact on the health and the effectiveness of the higher education sector itself. The diversity of leadership groups, which is enhanced by a diversity of views, is empirically connected to stronger institutional innovation, stronger problem-solving, and better financial and academic results (Dezs o & Ross, 2021). In the Pakistani HEIs, women leaders play a central role in developing inclusive policies that meet the needs of a large female student population including campus safety and curricular reform that can challenge gender stereotypes. Moreover, their physical representation in leadership roles is an effective symbolic and practical role model to female learners, which directly affects their aspirations and helps counteract the imposter syndrome that negatively affects ambition (Cheryan et al., 2023). In conclusion, it is not just a tokenistic move toward gender equity but an essential strategic move to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality) and to have a more representative, effective, and future-ready higher education system in Pakistan to promote women academic leadership.

Thus, this paper aims to provide a qualitative analysis of the complex nature of issues and challenges that particularly inhibit the rise of women to academic leadership positions in Pakistani universities. In going beyond quantitative head counts, this study aims to reveal the lived experiences of women who traverse this tricky terrain. It seeks to unravel the complex interaction of social-cultural expectations, organizational structures and personal/internal barriers that all combine to form a glass ceiling in the academy. By examining the stories of women who have either reached leadership positions or were forced to give up their aspirations, the present paper will present a context-rich, nuanced account of the processes that led to the persistence of gender inequality within the highest echelons of academic power in Pakistan.

It is necessary to justify a case study approach to Pakistani HEIs because of the specifics of their operation. The sociocultural specifics of the country, which are greatly intertwined with patriarchal values and the established roles within the family, create a unique set of limitations and demands that professional women have to deal with and are starkly contrasting to the Western ones (Ahmed & Isran, 2022). Moreover, the Pakistani university system, which is usually defined by a top-down administration, a strong informal system, and a multi-dimensional intertwining of politics and culture, forms a special environment in which leadership interactions are negotiated (Shah, 2023). A case study methodology is specially adapted to investigate this complexity in-depth, to facilitate the thick description of the phenomenon within the real-world context. It also gives the toolbox to know not only whether these obstacles are present but how they work and are experienced, thus providing information that is essential to formulate culturally and institutionally relevant interventions.

Literature Review

The consistent lack of female representation in positions of authority at the international level has been theorized many times, and some of the main ideas that explain it form a framework of how to interpret this phenomenon. The metaphor of glass ceiling, which became widely used in the 1980s, explains the unseen but unbreakable barrier between women who have the qualifications and achievements and can reach the top of the power structure in organizations (Cook & Glass, 2014). This obstacle is frequently followed by the leaky pipeline, a similar notion that describes how women are also systematically sifted out at every subsequent career level as a result of both structural and cultural biases. Moreover, women often face the so-called double-bind dilemma when they are seen as either incompetent leaders who are too soft or too unlikeable women who are too assertive, and they have to walk a thin and, more often than not, contradictory line of acceptable behavior (Eagly & Karau, 2021). The theories have been developed initially in the business environment but were found to be highly relevant to the academic world, in which the notion of a pure meritocracy can mask the presence of strongly gendered norms of hiring, promotion, and perceptions of leadership potential. The international higher education system is, thus, not an impartial space but a gendered system in which masculine values are frequently taken as a given, which places women at a disadvantage cumulatively (Acker, 1990).

The research in the international scholarly setting has empirically identified the particular obstacles that operationalise these theoretical ideas. In the West, the literature on the topic is consistent in pointing out how the gendered nature of organizational structures, which include a lack of work-life integration policies and schedules that do not match with caregiving responsibilities, are systematically disadvantageous to academics who are primary caregivers, who are more often than not women (Wolfinger et al., 2023). Besides structure, the culture of academia also contributes to bias in the form of a significant lack of sponsorship, where senior (usually male) leaders recommend high-potential juniors to promotions and other desirable opportunities; women are more mentored than sponsored (Barsh & Cranston, 2023). This is exacerbated by subconscious bias in peer review, hiring, and promotion committees, where the same CVs are often rated lower when the name on it is female, and attributes like aggression in men are interpreted as leadership potential whereas in women are interpreted as difficulty (Moss-Racusin et al., 2022). Studies in Asian and Middle Eastern societies, including Japan and Saudi Arabia, affirm these trends and further highlight how strongly established patriarchal

societal norms can further compound these organizational obstacles, highlighting the fact that although their manifestations may differ across cultures, the general themes of gendered exclusion are strikingly similar (Alohali et al., 2022; Tanaka, 2023).

In Pakistan, the literature affirms that these global and regional forces do exist but they are compounded by a set of powerful and unique socio-cultural and organizational forces. An influential patriarchal compromise dominates the socio-cultural environment, in which the main identity of women is usually built around the roles of wives and mothers. According to scholarly work by Syed et al. (2022), the concept of izzat (honor) is regularly linked to women following the designated domestic spheres, so extensive travels to conferences or late hours on campus is a topic of familial and social questioning. This cultural tax is a psychological and logistical burden that vastly overshadows the burden that male colleagues have to deal with (Saher & Kausar, 2023). At the organisational level, the power structures in the Pakistani HEIs tend to reflect that in the society. The research on governance shows that Vice-Chancellors are often politically appointed, and the selection of leadership is dominated by informal networks of men, colloquially known as the old boys club, and women are systematically excluded based on their qualification (Haleem & Din, 2022). In addition, recruitment and promotion activities, on paper, are merit-based, but in reality, they are often based on personal contacts and patronage, and the lack of transparency regarding the criteria is also helpful to the people who are already inside the inner circle and are further marginalizing women (Butt & Latif, 2023). This synthesis shows that women academics in Pakistan have to deal with a twofold burden, global trends in gendered academic discrimination exacerbated in a local environment of highly constraining patriarchal norms and poorly institutionalized, politicized university administration.

Research Gap

Although the available literature does effectively describe the general socio-cultural and organizational obstacles that women have to contend with in academia around the world and in Pakistan, there remains a gap in the literature. Existing research tends to concentrate on quantitative underrepresentation or theoretical obstacles, and they do not reflect the lived experiences of the women who have to cope with this complicated environment. There is an acute shortage of in-depth qualitative research which examines how patriarchal norms, family expectations and gendering of organizational structures like informal networks and biased promotions are subjectively experienced and negotiated by women in Pakistani HEIs. Most studies consider these barriers as independent variables, failing to study the cumulative and compounding impact they have on the career path of an individual. Thus, this paper seeks to address this gap by adopting a qualitative case study design to offer a clear, contextualized picture of the complex issues as experienced by the women academics themselves, and thereby lending a voice to their resistance and resilience strategies in a very Pakistani context.

Problem Statement

Although women continue to make a substantial and ever-increasing appearance as students and junior faculty in Pakistani HEIs, there is a severe vertical disparity with their representation in senior academic leadership positions dropping drastically. This underrepresentation is not just a statistical issue but an institutional failure that undermines the possibility of diverse thinking, inclusive policymaking, and equal role modeling and ultimately it affects the quality and relevance of higher education. Although prior studies have noted the existence of general socio-cultural and organizational obstacles, they lack the depth of insight into the ways in which these

interlinked barriers, including patriarchal norms, family responsibilities, male-dominated governance, and discrimination in practices, are actually lived and navigated by women in the context of Pakistani academia. This paper fills this gap by exploring the lived experiences of women to explain the complicated processes that compromise their rise to leadership roles.

Research Objectives

1. To identify and analyze the socio-cultural barriers that impede women's access to academic leadership roles in Pakistani HEIs.
2. To examine the organizational and institutional practices within Pakistani HEIs that hinder or support women's career advancement.
3. To explore the personal strategies and coping mechanisms employed by women to navigate challenges and achieve leadership positions.
4. To provide evidence-based recommendations for HEI policymakers and administrators to foster a more gender-inclusive leadership environment.

5. Research Questions

1. What socio-cultural factors are perceived by women leaders as the most significant challenges to their academic career advancement in Pakistan?
2. How do organizational structures and cultures within Pakistani HEIs facilitate or constrain women's pathways to leadership?
3. What personal attributes and support systems do women academic leaders credit for their success despite existing challenges?

Methodology

Research Paradigm

This study is situated within an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm. This approach is chosen because it aligns with the aim of understanding the complex, subjective realities of women academic leaders. It acknowledges that multiple truths are constructed through social experiences and that the researcher's role is to interpret the meanings participants assign to their challenges and journeys within their specific context.

Research Design

A qualitative multiple-case study design was employed, focusing on several Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across Pakistan. A case study design is profoundly appropriate as it facilitates an in-depth, holistic, and contextually rich exploration of a contemporary real-world phenomenon the barriers to women's leadership where the boundaries between the phenomenon (the challenges) and its context (Pakistani HEIs) are not clearly evident. This design allows for the capture of intricate details and the influence of specific institutional cultures and policies, which is essential for answering the "how" and "why" of the research questions.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was utilized to identify information-rich participants who met the criterion of being women in academic leadership roles (e.g., Dean, Chairperson, Director, and Vice-Chancellor) within Pakistani HEIs. To overcome access challenges and identify further potential participants, snowball sampling was also employed, whereby initial participants referred other qualified colleagues. The study aimed to recruit between 15 and 25 participants to achieve data saturation, the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from subsequent interviews.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. An interview protocol was developed with open-ended questions aligned with the research objectives to ensure consistency while allowing for flexibility to probe emergent themes. Each interview, conducted in a secure and private setting, was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. As a secondary method, document analysis of publicly available institutional policy documents (e.g., strategic plans, gender policies, annual reports) was conducted to triangulate findings and provide context for the organizational structures discussed by participants.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The software NVivo was used to manage, code, and organize the large volume of qualitative data systematically, ensuring a rigorous and transparent analytical process.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted under strict ethical guidelines. All of the participants gave informed consent before engagement in the study, which explained the purpose, procedures, and rights of the participants. All identifiable information was eliminated to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality and pseudonyms identify individuals and their institutions in the reporting of findings. Participants were informed that they had a right to withdraw at any point with no penalty. All digitized data such as audio recordings and transcripts will be stored on a password-protected secure server and will be deleted five years after the study is completed.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws a lot on Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST), a theory that holds that knowledge is socially situated. Originally developed by researchers such as Sandra Harding and Dorothy Smith, FST holds that marginalized members of society are in a unique position to understand the nature of power and power structures, since they have to learn the rules of the dominant group to survive in them (Harding, 2021). Within the framework of this study, women in Pakistani academia who are working within a highly patriarchal and exclusionary institutional context are not just subjects but very much knowers. Their on-the-ground experiences of gender and career desire give them an advantageous position to observe and evaluate the seemingly objective workings of power in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This framework is also a direct challenge to deficit models which would explain the underrepresentation of women as a personal failure, redefining it as a systemic result of gendered power relations that could only be fully understood through the perspective of those disadvantaged by them.

The use of Feminist Standpoint lens is central to the design and interpretation of every aspect of the present research. It explains why it is reasonable to focus on the voices and subjective experience of the women leaders using qualitative in-depth interviews as the main source of valid knowledge about the barriers in the Pakistani HEIs. The research questions are themselves constructed to reach this position, attempting to reveal how participants experience, interpret, and contest the power relations that they face. In addition to that, FST places a reflexive requirement on the researcher, where they need to recognize their own positionality and how it can impact the co-construction of knowledge, both in the interview and in the analysis (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2022). In embracing such a framework, this study does not aim at the production of an objective truth about barriers to leadership but rather to illuminate the partial and situated

truths that arise out of the shared experiences of women who have been engaging with these structures, thus creating a more critical and complete picture of the institutional status quo. In order to supplement the macro-level insights of Standpoint Theory and to provide a meso-level analytical tool into the mechanics of institutions, this work also uses Gendered Organization Theory, as developed by Joan Acker (1990). This fundamental work of Acker contends that organizations are not neutral bureaucracies; rather, they are gendered processes in which advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine. This lens offers a vocabulary of critique to explore how precisely Pakistani HEIs generate gendered results. It enables research into particular organizational structures (e.g., hierarchical governance), processes (e.g., promotion committees that reward masculine characteristics such as relentless availability), and cultures (e.g., the old boys club) that systematically de-value and disadvantage women (Britton & Logan, 2023). Whereas FST offers an explanation as to why women voices are important to comprehending power, Gendered Organization Theory offers the conceptual framework to understand how their voices can be analyzed to reveal the specific, mundane, and frequently invisible organizational practices that comprise and reproduce inequality. Collectively, these frameworks provide a strong theoretical basis upon which to study the experience of marginalization as well as the structural edifice that creates it.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the interview data suggested that there are some complex and interrelated challenges experienced by women who aspire and who hold academic leadership positions within the Pakistani HEIs. The results are organized into three levels of analysis to give a clear conceptual framework: macro-social-cultural barriers, meso-organizational barriers, and micro-personal/internal challenges. This multilayered discussion shows how the external systems and internalized norms, combine to create the leadership environment that women face. In this structure, five themes were identified that are supported by the strong voices and lived experiences of the participants.

At the macro level, the most pervasive theme was The Weight of Cultural Expectations: Familial Obligations and Societal Norms. Participants consistently described navigating a societal framework where their professional ambitions were secondary to prescribed gender roles. The concept of *izzat* (family honor) was deeply intertwined with notions of a woman's primary responsibility being the domestic sphere. A Dean of Social Sciences (Participant C) elaborated, "Your PhD means nothing if your husband's dinner is not on time or your children's studies are neglected. The pressure is immense and silent; it is in the raised eyebrows when you leave for a conference, the 'concerned' advice from relatives about neglecting your 'real' duties." This external scrutiny often translated into immense personal guilt and a need to perform perfection in all roles, a double burden rarely shouldered by their male counterparts. Another department chair (Participant F) poignantly stated, "We are expected to be superwomen. To lead a department, you must be assertive and decisive. But to be a 'good' woman, you must be humble and accommodating. Balancing these contradictory expectations is a daily tightrope walk that exhausts your mental energy before you even tackle your actual job."

At the meso level, the analysis uncovered two critical themes related to institutional practices. The first, Navigating the Masculine Ethos: Organizational Culture and Informal Networks, highlights how the very culture of academia in Pakistan is gendered. Participants

frequently referred to the "old boys' club" – an informal, male-dominated network that controls information flow, mentorship, and ultimately, opportunities for advancement. A Professor of Engineering (Participant H) observed, "The real decisions are not made in the senate meeting. They are made in the vice chancellor's lounge over a cup of tea, a space where women are seldom invited. You are outside the inner circle, and therefore, you are out of the loop for strategic roles." This exclusion was compounded by a culture that often valorized aggressive, masculine leadership styles while penalizing the same behavior in women. The second organizational theme, Structural Hurdles: Biased Policies and a Lack of Institutional Support, points to the absence of concrete systems to support women's progression. Participants universally cited a lack of transparency in promotion and hiring criteria, which allowed subjective bias and patronage to flourish. Furthermore, the near-total absence of institutional support mechanisms, such as on-campus daycare facilities or formalized mentorship programs, was a significant barrier. As an Associate Professor (Participant K) noted, "The policy on paper says one thing, but the practice is another. There is no will to implement gender-sensitive policies because those in power do not see it as a problem. We are told to 'work harder' to prove ourselves, but the system is not designed for us to succeed in the first place."

Finally, at the micro level, the findings revealed profound internal conflicts. The theme The Internal Battle: Confidence, Assertion, and the Imposter Syndrome was nearly universal among interviewees. Many spoke of constantly doubting their capabilities and feeling like a "fraud" despite their accomplishments, a phenomenon exacerbated by the constant need to justify their presence in leadership spaces. A Director of a research center (Participant M) shared, "Even after fifteen years, I sometimes walk into a high-level committee meeting and feel that momentary pang of doubt—'Do I truly belong here?' You have to consciously suppress that voice, a voice that my male colleagues seem never to hear." However, countering this narrative was the empowering theme of Agents of Change: Resilience, Mentorship, and Strategic Navigation. Despite the barriers, participants showcased remarkable agency. They spoke of developing resilient mindsets, seeking out informal mentorship from senior female colleagues ("sisterhood," as one called it), and learning to strategically navigate the system. A Vice-Chancellor (Participant P), one of the few in her position, explained her strategy: "I learned the rules of their game and then chose when to play by them and when to quietly subvert them. I built my own coalition of support, mostly with other junior female faculty I mentored. Our power is in our solidarity and our impeccable credentials, which they cannot ignore." This theme underscores that women are not passive victims of these structures but are actively employing strategies of resistance and resilience to carve out a space for leadership.

Discussion

The results indicate that the lack of women in academic leadership in Pakistan is not just a pipeline or individual decision problem but rather a potent, self-perpetuating system of exclusion acting at macro, meso, and micro levels. The reading of these interrelated themes can also be interpreted as patriarchal socio-cultural norms giving the basis of inequality, which is then institutionalized into gendered organizational structures and eventually internalized by women as psychological conflict. This trend is observed since the system is built in such a way that it preserves a status quo that associates masculinity with authority. The pressure to be an idealized traditional woman combined with an impossibly high bar of competent professionalism is so intense that it only allows the most extraordinarily strong women to pass through. The informal

old boys club is successful because it is unaccountable; its authority lies in its secrecy and thus it reproduces itself through the promotion of people who fit the established system and frame the exclusion of others in terms of merit or cultural fit. The systemic and synergistic nature of the barriers, then, is that the cultural expectations confirm the organizational biases, which in their turn elevate the personal struggles and create an almost impenetrable barrier to leadership.

When interpreted in the context of the existing literature, these findings both validate and problematize the prior studies. The case of the double burden and the effects of patriarchal ideals are closely related to the experiences of women in the Middle East and South Asia, which proves that cultural context enhances generic gender barriers (Alohali et al., 2022; Syed et al., 2022). Likewise, the fact that the old boys club and biased promotion practices were identified also resonates with the analysis conducted by Malik and Noreen (2022) in the Pakistani context. This paper, however, disapproves of any one-sided structural or cultural explanations since it has been able to show how both are important and interact. As an example, although a lack of mentorship is a common theme in international literature (Barsh & Cranston, 2023), our results indicate that in Pakistan, the problem is not merely a shortage of mentors but rather the gendered character of sponsorship; senior men leaders are reluctant to sponsor junior women colleagues due to the cultural prohibition against cross-gender professional intimacy (ghairat), and thus continue to exclude them in informal networks. This introduces a very important cultural dimension to the international debate on sponsorship. Moreover, the discovery that women form informal networks of sisterhood with the objective of mentorship is a contribution to the literature because it has provided an important strategy of resistance that is especially relevant in a setting where formal support is not available.

Theoretically, the results are so strong they validate central beliefs of both Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and Gendered Organization Theory (Acker, 1990). The personal experiences of the participants are invaluable pieces of evidence that the standpoint of marginalized women is privileged indeed, and it is this privileged position that allows them to diagnose the power structures within the Pakistani HEIs in unique and critical ways, which would not be visible through the dominant perspective. Their stories were very clear in explaining how allegedly neutral policies and practices are highly gendered, just as Acker has theorized. Nevertheless, this paper also builds upon these theories by bringing out the concept of cultural agency in a patriarchal society. Although these theories are useful in explaining structures of oppression, the Pakistani case study shows how women use cultural norms to their advantage, such as by couching their ambitions of leadership in the terms of family honor or national progress to make them more acceptable, in manipulating the very system in which they are enslaved. This implies an addition to FST: that the marginalized standpoint is not only the source of critical knowledge but also the source of ingenious, culturally-specific tactical resistance that must be factored in the theory.

One surprising important discovery was the subtlety of class and privilege as mediating factors to these difficulties. Although everyone had to contend with gender-related challenges, individuals with higher socio-economic status and those who received encouragement and support (especially educated fathers or husbands) reported that they had far more ability to overcome organizational obstacles. They had the ability to pay to have domestic help to reduce the double burden and they had the social capital to access networks a little easier. Such intra-gender difference was unanticipated and indicates that the glass ceiling in Pakistan is not a

monolithic barrier, but is stratified. The other unexpected finding was the deep feeling of isolation that was expressed by women who had managed to attain leadership positions. Rather than feeling empowered, they said they felt like tokens, under the microscope, and felt pressured to keep other women at arm's length in order to be accepted into the inner circle, which restricted their potential as change agents. This observation questions the linearity that the pipeline metaphor presupposes and indicates that representation at the top alone can reproduce alienation as opposed to unity.

Conclusion

This paper has conclusively shown that the glaring underrepresentation of women in the academic leadership of the Pakistani Higher Education Institutions is a multifaceted product of a self-perpetuating system of obstacles that have been functioning at a number of levels. These results demonstrate a strong interdependence between deeply ingrained macro-level socio-cultural norms, which define the role of a woman as primarily domestic, and meso-level organizational arrangements that are gendered in nature in their organization and functioning. The overall impact of informal networks that are male-dominated, absence of transparent and equitable policies, and the lack of an institutional support mechanism establish an environment where the default leadership model is masculine. Moreover, these outside forces do not just present as an impediment that must be surmounted; they become internalized at the micro-level and materialize in the form of severe psychological struggles with imposter syndrome and the ongoing necessity to negotiate identity. Thus, the path to leadership of a woman in Pakistani academia is not a linear, meritocratic process but a constant balancing of competing interests, which only with the greatest strength and tactical ability can lead to her securing a position that she is already competent to fill.

With these realizations, it is apparent that solutions need to be multi-dimensional just like the problems themselves. Limited measures, like an increased appointment of women to committees, will not be enough without a fundamental desire to change the underlying structures and cultures that continue to promote inequality. There is need to take concerted action on three front's policy, institutional practice, and cultural discourse. Policy requirements should shift beyond declarative statements by instituting gender-balanced selection committees, clear promotion standards, and instituting tangible support systems such as on-campus daycare and formal mentorship and sponsorship programs. At the institutional level, the vice-chancellors and other senior leadership should be proactive and promote a cultural change that embraces the different leadership styles and unravel the exclusionary nature of informal networks. Lastly, it must not be a short term tactic to challenge the long-established socio-cultural norms, but should also focus on changing the mindset by putting forward the stories of successful women leaders not as an exception, but as a role model of a lot of unused potential. Finally, the promotion of gender-inclusive academic leadership is not a marginal diversity program but a strategic priority of Pakistani HEIs to strengthen their legitimacy, creativity, and capacity to serve the entire population in an effective way.

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