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**Abstract:** *The current study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of women academic leaders regarding various sociocultural challenges that hinder women leadership positions at the public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study objectives were to know about various sociocultural challenges faced by women in leadership positions. An in-depth qualitative research design was adopted for a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The data was collected through a purposive sampling method from the ten respondents in the universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The data was recorded, transcribed, coded, and then themes were generated from the respondents' views. The study concluded that women face various challenges that stem primarily from deeply entrenched sociocultural norms, including gender bias, female lower financial autonomy, patriarchy, male dominance, negative perception of modernization, and the general perception that women are not committed to leadership roles due to their familial engagements and responsibilities. Furthermore, the pardah and hijab culture and institutional discrimination based on gender are the factors that hinder women's leadership positions at universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study recommended comprehensive interventions to address both cultural biases and institutional discrimination based on gender that hinder women's progression to leadership positions at universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.*

**Introduction**

Education becomes a catalyst for better health and well-being, empowering women to address social challenges and advocate for change. It fosters leadership, building resilience and confidence. Moreover, education opens doors to maternal and child health awareness, access to information and technology, encouraging community involvement, and promoting participation in sports and recreational activities, creating a transformative ripple effect (Engida, 2021).

Women have historically been excluded from senior management roles, according to studies on leadership that employ a gender equity perspective (Dickson, 2023, and Shaikh & Bhagal, 2015).

Universities around the world also exhibit this, as seen by their limited involvement in academic leadership roles (Avin et al., 2015; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017). For instance, 10% of PhD-granting universities in 27 European nations have female vice chancellors (VCs) (European Commission, 2012). Traditional gender roles, societal preconceptions, and patriarchal standards are examples of sociocultural hurdles that prevent female academics from assuming leadership roles in higher education. Social stereotypes limit women to lower roles, assuming that women are less capable than men, and linking leadership to masculine characteristics (e.g., Alshdiefat et al., 2024; Islam et al., 2023; Tran & Nguyen, 2020). Women must put in more effort to demonstrate their abilities and obtain equal opportunities because of these gendered assumptions, which generate a lasting bias that they must overcome (Morley, 2014). Women are paradoxically underrepresented in leadership roles, despite their qualifications, because of prevalent gender stereotypes and biases (Ghundol & Muthanna, 2025).

Gender biases are further reinforced by patriarchal standards in higher education, which foster unfavourable conditions for women in leadership roles. These norms can take many different forms, such as gendered expectations for behaviour, unequal access to opportunities and resources, and unofficial networks that do not include women (O'Connor et al., 2020). Furthermore, discriminatory behaviours, including challenges to women's authority i.e., gender bias, stereotypes and deeply entrenched societal norms, doubting their choices, or attributing their achievement to affirmative action rather than merit, might result from patriarchal beliefs (Islam et al., 2023). The main obstacles to women's leadership advancement in higher education in the Arab world include gender stereotyping, patriarchal standards, and a lack of supportive organizational policies. Though development is still gradual, certain institutions in the region have begun implementing policies aimed at gender inclusion (e.g., Hilal et al. 2024). According to reports, the main obstacles to women's leadership in the Jordanian context include structural barriers such as male-dominated administrative structures and a lack of inclusive recruiting processes (Alshdiefat et al., 2024). It appears that open recruiting practices and leadership development initiatives that support academic women are desperately needed to overcome these obstacles (Ghundol & Muthanna, 2025).

Similarly, the patriarchal social framework in Pakistan prevents women from holding positions of authority (Bhatti & Ali, 2020). According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) (2015), women VCs made up 0.04% of Pakistan's VC population, and they were mostly found in institutions exclusively for women (Khokhar, 2018). There are few female leaders in important academic and administrative roles, according to a recent study conducted in Pakistan's federal capital (Bhatti & Ali, 2020). There is an urgent need for women to hold leadership positions in education today. Under the motto that no nation can advance without the participation of its women in employment and especially at leadership position. Women academic leaders are starting to take on a more significant role in inspiring female students to oppose social conservatism. Female leaders not only transform organizations but also spark social change and boost institutional performance (Offermann et al., 2020).

Eagly et al. (2020) claim that female leaders seem like real leaders who can handle difficulties because they are adaptable, resilient, enthusiastic, and responsive. Transparent interactions, ethical care, and a conviction in empowering people via teamwork are all components of the leadership style of female educators (Alhammedi, 2019). For women who work in culturally sensitive societies, this problem poses greater risks. In Pakistan, many communities are organized along gender, ethnic, cultural, and tribal lines, particularly in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Professional women encounter numerous challenges in performing their everyday academic and professional tasks as a result of the strict rules and culture of Pashtun society. Furthermore, gender stereotypes that are prevalent in Pashtun society

hinder women's professional advancement, particularly when they aim to hold leadership roles (Maryam et al, 2021). As a result, the current study investigated the individual stories of female academic leaders in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa public sector universities.

One of the many issues facing Pakistani academia is the underrepresentation of women at executive level. According to studies conducted in the US (Lopez, 2008) and Asia (Shamsuddin, Saeed, & Shahla, 2012), the underrepresentation of women in leadership management is linked to a number of issues pertaining to leadership roles. According to research by Ali and Syed (2017), women in Pakistan continue to encounter significant obstacles in their jobs as a result of regional cultural customs. It specifically draws attention to concerns, including sexual harassment, career-related obstacles, and financial disparity at the meso level, as well as macro-level societal norms around female modesty and gender segregation, and micro-level factors pertaining to family status and agency. In this context, Jahan (2024) explained that socio-cultural barriers, i.e., lack of women's autonomy and their involvement in decision-making at the workplace affects their efficiency and limits their professional growth in academia. Such high pressures, lack of efficiency and limited professional growth due to socio-cultural disparities are further manipulated with the women leaders' qualities and they are considered not fit for a leadership position in academia.

The problem of women's underrepresentation in leadership positions exists throughout Pakistan. However, the Pashtun culture in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province is particularly affected by the issue (Awan, Yousaf and Malik, 2024). The ability of women to pursue education and engage freely in society is restricted by several unique cultural taboos and social traditions that are upheld in Pashtun culture. Women are not allowed to leave their homes in some rural areas of KP, and they are always required to cover their faces when speaking to outsiders. Similarly, women in the cities of KP, Peshawar, and Mardan have limited and conditional freedom; according to cultural custom, they are only permitted to leave the house to work outside and must observe purdah (Wasim, 2024).

However, there is a dearth of research on Pakistan's underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. Therefore, this study examines the difficulties experienced by female leaders in fulfilling their leadership roles in education at a public university in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The focus of this research is to examine how numerous challenges influence their overall efficiency and effectiveness in leading roles. It is worth mentioning that the present study is one of the pioneering endeavors that not only examines issues associated with female educational leaders in the province of KP, Pakistan, but also stipulates worthwhile suggestions to policymakers for addressing women's educational leaders' issues on realistic grounds.

### **Study Objectives**

- To explore the socio-cultural barriers faced by women academics in attaining leadership roles in the public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- To understand the influence of socio-cultural challenges on women academic leaders in public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

### **Research Questions**

- What are the socio-cultural barriers faced by women academic leaders in attaining leadership roles in public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?
- How do socio-cultural barriers influence the leadership experiences of women academic leadership in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

### **Literature Review**

Leadership is viewed as a masculine field, primarily due to the predominantly male culture at the HEIs.

The networking, institutional policies, and advancement guidelines all favour men, undermining the credibility of women (O'Connor, 2014). They experience discrimination and exclusion as a result. Furthermore, they feel alienated in the field due to the dearth of female role models (Bagilhole & White, 2013). The lack of female leaders in academia is caused by a number of causes, some of which we address here. The selection procedure is where the limitations begin (Galloway, 2012). Men are frequently given preference for these roles in hiring and promotion procedures, particularly at middle and senior levels (Blackmore, 2014; Kauser & Tlaiss, 2011). Women feel devalued and disregarded as a result of discriminatory hiring and promotion practices (Gallant, 2014). Supporters may also be influenced by stereotypes about women that link them to the house and family (Dover, Manwani, & Munn, 2018).

The reviewed studies, including Ballenger (2010) and Johns (2013), reveal a significant shift in societal norms as educated women challenge ingrained cultural expectations. This aligns with the literature emphasizing the transformative role of education in dismantling traditional barriers, substantiating the claim that education acts as a superhero cape for women (Foster & Appleby, 2015). Khan (2021) illuminates the cultivation of leadership skills through education. This aligns with the literature on education being a catalyst for building resilience and confidence, fostering women's transition into advocates for positive changes in their communities (Dahlum et al., 2022).

The primary reason for women's underrepresentation is that they are expected to be the primary breadwinners and caregivers for everyone in the home (Eagly and Carli, 2007). A fundamental issue is also created when this leads individuals to alter their professional pathways or keeps them from reaching the experience and knowledge goals necessary for subsequent job progress (Maryam et al., 2021). Although this is a difficult task, Eagle and Carley (2007c) contend that by putting a number of behavioural tactics into practice, women can enhance their leadership skills and facilitate organizational success. Women need to "integrate institutions into society" first. Leaders are expected to speak on behalf of the organization during meetings and protests. According to stereotypes, men leaders are seen as more credible when they have power. In a similar vein, more assertive female leaders are seen as aggressive. Women must thus strike a balance between community and power and act amiably when the situation allows. Second, social capital must be developed by women (Eagly and Carley, 2007c).

### **Methodology**

The current study was purely qualitative in nature, aiming for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The nature of the study is complex and multidimensional due to its unique nature and personal narrative of the academic leaders; the research design is qualitative.

### **Sampling procedure**

A sample is a smaller representation of a larger population. The current study is part of a PhD dissertation, and proper approval was obtained from the education department for sampling and data collection purposes. A total of ten respondents were interviewed purposively through an in-depth semi-structured interview. The data was collected till the saturation point. The tools were developed and properly approved by the supervisor, the graduate studies committee and advanced research board members. Further, to make it validated by the expert, the tools were shared with the experts and their suggestions were incorporated. After the incorporation of the changes, the data were collected from the ten respondents purposively. Before the data collection, an approval letter from the Department of Education for the data collection was obtained and proper consent was taken from the participants.

### **Tools of data analysis**

The data were collected through in-depth interviews with the respondents. The collected data were

then coded and analyzed through thematic analysis. The analyzed data through thematic analysis were then presented in the form of themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Analysis of the study**

#### **Socio-cultural barriers**

We live in the twenty-first century with rampant scientific and technological advancements around us. Similarly, women around the world are trying to break the barriers of male-dominated societal norms and deeply rooted cultural norms marginalization. Due to the socio-cultural barriers, the situation of women in leadership positions is low throughout the world and alarming in developing nations, especially in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. Despite the global advancements, the region continues to resist female leadership roles even in public sector universities through extremist ideologies and cultural conservatism. Moreover, deep-rooted cultural beliefs perpetuate the notion that women are inherently inferior to men in leadership positions due to gender bias, leading to discrimination and marginalization.

In this, the responses of R1, R3 and R8 mentioned that:

*“Yes, we do work and we seem to be financially independent, but the real issue is whether we can make financial decisions on our own? This is a question mark, whereas in reality and in practice, majority of the employed women, including us, are not free in decision-making. Obeying and following family decisions, especially the husband and other male figures of family, are deeply rooted in our socio-cultural setup up and such violations are considered as challenging social norms. Further, I would like to mentioned here that we have dependency up to a larger extent in financial decisions; hence, it is a reality that women in this region are not autonomous in making self-financial decisions”*

Similarly, the responses of R1, R2, R5 and R7 mentioned that;

*“This is a normal belief that men can give more time to work and sit till late evening and they show commitment and dedication to a leadership role as compared to women. However, there is a general bias that women have to give more time to their children, families and will not be able to give their full commitment to their leadership or authority roles”.*

The same primary data is supported by the work of Awan, Yousaf and Malik, (2024) & Habiba, Ali, & Ashfaq (2016), that, due to the deep-rooted social and cultural norms, it is a widespread perception in Pakistani society that women should play distinct roles from men, based on their gender and social position in society. These cultural and social orientations make them dependent on men in many domains of life, in familial as well as in professional life. The study further explores that due to the social norms, women have certain limitations in terms of Pardha and hijab, which restrict their mobility without out male member of the family at late evening or in some tribal areas it is banned. The present research affirmed mobility issues, gender segregation, traditional male dominance, restricted public and professional participation, lack of autonomy in decision making are the main hindrances in women academic leadership progression in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

#### **Patriarchy**

Strong males uphold the rules and beliefs that govern and influence our society, which makes it extremely difficult for women to assume leadership positions in the Pashtun society. Patriarchy is a system in which the power of decision-making is in the hands of males, especially the elder male of the household. Such a system is strongly embedded in Pashtun culture and social setup. In the study area, patriarchal structure hinders women from getting into leadership positions at the workplace, especially in academia. "Whether male dominance creates resistance to women in exercising leadership roles"

was the question posed to the respondents in this respect.

In this regard, the responses of R4, R3 and R7 mentioned that:

*“Male dominance creates resistance for women while performing a leadership role in society. This is a common practice in our society that we are kept limited to household activities and caring and rearing of the children in our family and social life. We are bound to perform the household activities and men are to perform outside home activities, and this routine is created due to high dominancy of men. It is because the whole structure of family life and social life is designed by the men”. We are not supported to do work outside home therefore, we are limited to household roles only and this is because men dominated social and cultural norms”.*

The same idea is supported by O’Connor et al. (2020) that educational institutions are universally deeply embedded in gender power relations. Patriarchy, male dominance, male gatekeepers at all levels and lack of access for women at decision-making are the major barriers to women in academic leadership progression. Similarly, Islam et al. (2023) conducted a study in South Asia, the study supported the primary data that patriarchal structure, male dominance, gender stereotyping, and cultural expectations that women prioritize family over career place a disproportionate burden on female academic leaders. The study further explores that male domination is deeply rooted in the promotion policies, HR policies, and decision-making, which are barriers to women's academic leadership progression. Similarly, Bhatti & Ali (2020) conducted a study in Pakistani universities; the study supported the primary data that the gender culture norms, male dominance, and patriarchal practices within the universities are barriers to women's leadership progression in Pakistan.

#### **Limited power decision-making**

Women are not included in the decision-making process in Pakhtun society since men alone control and create its social structure and cultural values. On the other hand, a community is optimal when men and women have equal decision-making authority. This can lessen the exploitation of women in society and empower women to establish laws or norms that support them. In this context, the study participants were asked, "Is limited decision-making power a barrier to women's participation in leadership roles?"

In this regard, the responses of R2, R6 and R9 mentioned that:

*“Yes, there is male dominance in decision-making in our society and women are not allowed to participate in the decision-making process. “We are in a subordinate position in society because most of our decisions are made by men and we are excluded from making decisions about our own lives, which limits our chances to perform any important leadership position in society”. We are lacking in raising our voices and participation in the decision-making process, which hinders our chances of attaining the leadership position in the academia”.*

The primary data is supported by Fauzi, (2024) and Morly (2014), that female academics are not involved in the decision-making process in universities due to gender bias and stereotypes. Further, it was argued that female is not neglected in decision-making due to their incompetence and not taking an interest in public activities and informal meetings, but they are underrepresented due to male dominance, gender bias, stereotypes, and masculine institutional norms. The overall system, masculine institutional norms and mindset of the male academic leader needed to change and to accept women's academic leadership.

#### **Negative perception of modernization**

The contemporary era is governed by modernization, which encourages equal involvement for both genders without discrimination against one. In the Pashtun social structure, modernization is perceived negatively due to certain reasons, which deprive women in multiple contexts, like restricted patriarchal



structure, deprivation from property rights, or forced marriages, which directly and indirectly affect women's socio-economic life. Such a negative perception of modernization is a hurdle for women in academic leadership progression. As a result, women are not encouraged to engage in financial, professional, or educational pursuits in the Pashtun culture. In this context, the question is, "Can women's participation in leadership roles be reduced by negative perceptions of modernization?"

In this regard, the responses of R3, R5 and R6 mentioned that:

*"Even though we are not encouraged to get optimal education, health, and employment opportunities and even many girls are much restricted in using smartphones or other electronic devices, like males in our houses. We are restricted even in modern times from equal participation because the Pakhtun society negatively perceives modernization".*

### **Pardha and Hijab culture**

Pardha and hijab culture are also one of the barriers to women's academicians aspiring for leadership positions in the higher education institutions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The leadership positions are associated with confidence, visibility, communication and coordination with males, whereas pardha culture is associated with privacy, solitude and withdrawal from public spaces. For this reason, the women are considered inappropriate for the women leadership position despite of their abilities and skills. Similarly, the male gatekeepers make it a standing point that due to privacy, lack of social networks and due to communication issues, the women are not able to handle the leadership position at the university level.

In this regard, the responses of R2, R6 and R7 mentioned that:

*"Generally speaking, this is a common perception that females doing pardah and wearing hijab are rigid and old school. And they are traditionally viewed as narrow-minded, less adaptable and considered to be less favorable for leadership roles. Because leadership roles are viewed as transformative, flexible and adaptable. So, we are never viewed as a good choice for a leadership position, especially when there are options available in the department".*

The primary data is supported by the work of Maryam & Ghaffar (2021) that Pardha and Hijab culture limited women's leadership opportunities in the Universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. As the strict cultural norms i.e, pardha and hijab, mobility issues and public participation are the factors that limit women aspiring for leadership positions. Further, the findings of the study show that mostly women don't participate properly in public meetings due to the pardah, which is a barrier to women's academic leadership progression.

### **Cultural stereotyping and bias**

It's a cultural stereotype that hijab is associated with obedience, privacy, silence and modesty or shyness, and all these traits are in contrast to leadership traits. Also, this cultural stereotype acts as a barrier for women in advancement to leadership roles. Further, it's a stereotype that women are less capable of leadership positions and have limited decision-making skills, which hinders women's academic leadership progression in academia.

In this regard, the response of the R2, R7 and R8 are as under;

*"That most of the time in the meetings and the discussion with male colleagues, we are discriminated against due to hijab, as male colleagues are reluctant in discussing ideas and mostly don't prefer to communicate with us due to hijab and privacy. Though we are trying to be the part of that discussion, but upon our inclusion mostly they limited their discussion. Secondly, I personally felt undermined many times that my discussion points were overshadowed by my male colleagues. Their voices and opinions are valued much, and at times I receive the remarks O, madam, come on, you*

*haven't the idea even, we move in the society and we have a strong social network, we know better and that is sound devastating".*

The primary data findings are consistent with the work of Amjad et al. (2024) that women are underrepresented in the executive leadership roles despite the Master's, M.Phil., and PhD qualifications due to gender biases and discrimination based on hijab/pardah. Further, stereotypes like women are not capable like men and women cannot decide on the leadership position are the factors that are barriers to women's academic leadership progression in the public sector universities. Moreover, to avoid women in the debates and discussions due to hijab and pardah is also their exclusion based on stereotypes and gender bias, while such exclusion from the debate and discussion is also referred as an obstacle for women striving for progression to leadership positions.

### **Institutional discrimination**

Due to male dominance, male gatekeepers for leadership opportunities and deep-rooted social norms of the institutions, women are discriminated and avoided in public events, consequently they are not well-represented in their professional spaces. Though there is no such kind of documented record, however, it is observed and was shared by the respondents.

In this regard, the response of R1, R4 and R5 are as under;

*"Our visibility in the significant public events of the university is mostly ignored; similarly, we are less encouraged to participate in the executive gatherings. I personally noticed it much that mostly females' roles are limited to the presentation of a bouquet or a showpiece in events, and their contribution is not appreciated and taken seriously, just like their male counterparts. Subsequently, we are deprived of the due acknowledgement that men enjoy in their careers. However, we are invited and included in all those meetings that are specifically notified by the head of the institute or department".*

The same primary data is supported by Islam et al. (2023), that gender biased organizational structures and policies are major barriers to women's academic leadership progression in South Asia. Further, institutional policy gaps and lack of women in decision-making are another significant challenge that hinders women's career advancement at the university level, especially in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Similarly, Bhatti & Ali (2020) stated that Pakistan has less than 10% of women vice-chancellors' representation, which shows gender biased institutional discrimination and a lack of women voices at decision-making positions.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study concluded that female academic leaders in public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa face significant and multifaceted barriers to their professional advancement and effective leadership. These challenges stem primarily from deeply entrenched sociocultural norms, including gender bias, female lower financial autonomy, patriarchy, institutional discrimination and a general perception that women are not committed to leadership roles due to their familial engagements and responsibilities. Similarly, the lack of involvement of females in decision-making and the limited mobility and engagement in public programs due to purdah and hijab culture posed challenges to women's academic leadership progression. Likewise, it is a stereotype that women who wear hijab like privacy and are reserved, hence less interested in social networking, which also acts as a significant constraint to women's career advancement towards leadership roles. Collectively, all these factors lead to a systematic marginalization of women in academic leadership in the study area. The present study recommended that comprehensive policies regarding women's academic leadership and its encouragement are needed to cover the socio-cultural hurdles and institutional discrimination at all



levels in the higher education institutions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and should be applicable in a real sense.

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