Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy (JSSRP)

GISSR
Global Institute of
Social Sciences Research

Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Barriers and Enablers for Women in Executive Leadership of Higher Educational Institutions in Pakistan

Abid Hussain[1], Muhammad Azeem Ahmad[2], Zeeshan Ahmed[3], Aneeqa Sultan[1]
1. PhD Scholar, Southern Business School, University of Southern Punjab Multan, Pakistan.
2. Associate Professor, Southern Business School, University of Southern Punjab Multan, Pakistan.
3. Assistant Professor, Southern Business School, University of Southern Punjab Multan, Pakistan.

Abstract: *Although the number of female enrolments to higher education in Pakistan is on the rise, women are grossly underrepresented in executive positions in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This qualitative research looks at the lived conditions of women in the academic top leadership roles, the structural, socio-cultural, and institutional aspects that they encounter and the mechanisms they employ in order to cope with them. The authors base the study on the role incongruity theory and the notion of gynandrous leadership, which places the leadership paths of women in the framework of gendered organizational norms. The thematic analysis of data collected on 15 semi-structured female interviews on the leadership of Pakistani HEIs (n=15) was conducted. The most interesting insights have to do with the gender bias and stereotyping that diminish the authority of women, the notable issues with combining the professional and the family expectations, the absence of formal leadership development and mentorship opportunities, and adopting the adaptive leadership styles, which integrate traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics. These measures help women to bargain and to fight with the current leadership standards to build more inclusive academic governance. The research indicates that to aid women in educational leadership, policies should be gender sensitive, organized mentorship programs, and institutional reformation is necessary. This study can be used to understand gender equity in the leadership of South Asian higher education more profoundly due to the combination of empirical data and theoretical perspectives.*

Introduction

In recent decades, Pakistan has seen significant improvement on access to education by women especially in the tertiary level. The efforts of the government, the rise in awareness and the social attitude has led to an increasing the number of women entering universities and now, women make up a large percentage (and in a lot of cases, a majority) of the student population such spheres as medicine,

education or social sciences have been particularly high in the female participation rates and this is a good sign to indicate a positive change in gender dynamics in the academic sphere. This trend on improvement in educational attainment has been repeatedly referred to as a form of social development and empowerment (Khan et al., 2024). Nevertheless, this educational achievement has not been matched with the gains in leadership or decision-making roles in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Women, although highly qualified and in many cases perform better than male counterparts and are taking postgraduate and doctoral degrees in large numbers are still grossly underrepresented in the executive positions, including the vice-chancellors, deans, registrars, and directors. The gap is indicative of a disturbing gap between the performance of women in schools and their professional growth in the academic field (Khan & Hollingworth, 2024a).

The present studies highlight the occurrence of what researchers have described as the glass ceiling, a phenomenon that is invisible and yet deeply entrenched in the system and hinders women on their way to the highest leadership positions, no matter the qualifications nor the achievements they had (Lashari, 2023). This ceiling is supported in the Pakistani context by more convoluted labyrinth of structural, institutional and socio-cultural obstacles that are systematized to hinder upward mobility of women. These barriers are complex and usually overlap with each other in complicated manners thus they are hard to navigate. They include the explicit and implicit, normalized forms of exclusion, including, but not limited to, biased leadership selection procedures, restricted access to mentorship and career networks, stereotypical beliefs regarding women in the workplace, and inadequate organizational policies that do not reflect gender (Jehan et al,2025).

The existence of the problem is illustrated by empirical researches. As an example, a mixed-method study by in medical and dental colleges in Pakistan found out a paradox: despite females being most students during the study, they occupy just about 15% of the leading positions. Even individuals who achieve such jobs are often faced with several gender-based issues such as professional marginalization, ostracism in major decision making circles, and even marginalized and discriminatory issues that are so deep-rooted yet so pervasive. Those experiences show not only individual cases of prejudice, but also the cultures of the institutions in general, which still underrate or undermine female leadership (Ngcobo et al., 2025). In addition to the institutional factors that restrict women in their career paths, there exist wider societal and cultural values within which women are socialized to follow their profession. Assertiveness social structure of Pakistan, women are usually socialized in such a way that they are supposed to spend most of their time at home, and any leadership characteristic that includes assertiveness, ambition, and independence is perceived to be not in tandem with their traditional femininity. The institution of leadership in HEIs can be characterized as a masculinized system that incidentally puts women at a disadvantage in terms of perception and practice. Lack of gender inclusive policies including flexible working hours, maternity support or even child care facilities makes the problems of women even worse especially those who combine work and family life (Rana et al., 2024).

A systemic web of these overlapping barriers, cultural, institutional, psychological and organizational, cannot be solved by a series of ad-hoc reforms or token appointments. It is not merely a question of numbers, but of the need to change the systems and conventions upon which leadership in HEIs is based. In this respect, the issue of women underrepresentation in academic leadership should be perceived as the social justice issue, institutional equity and national development (Fazal et al., 2025). It is therefore vital that a critical and detailed investigation be done into how these complex forces intersect to restrict women into the senior leadership roles in Pakistani HEIs. Better insights into these obstacles, especially through the lens of those women who have succeeded in or are still trying to

succeed in going through them, are essential to building interventions that extend beyond gender parity on a merely superficial level. The proposed study aims to add to that knowledge by investigating the lived experiences, issues, and coping mechanisms of women in executive positions in public universities. In this perspective, the study is expected to determine the structural, cultural, and policy-level adjustments required to create a more inclusive and gender-equitable academic (Kousar et al., 2025).

Research Problem and Significance of the Study

Although as seen, significant progress has been achieved in terms of women access to higher education in Pakistan, the fact that they have continued to be underrepresented in the executive leadership of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) reflects important systemic and structural constraints. The problem is not merely one of numerical difference but of a wider institutional culture that is gendered and based on power inequity that limits women in their leadership roles. As of 2023, according to Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan, women hold less than 12 percent of the positions of the vice-chancellor or pro-vice-chancellor in the public universities, although they are almost half of the academic workforce in the entry and mid-career level .This imbalance depicts a high level of the vertical segregation in the academic hierarchy, which poses critical questions regarding the institutional equity and leadership building (Ullah, 2024).

The current body of research of gender and leadership in the academia brings out the fact that organizational cultures and models of leadership tend to mirror the male culture and thus women find it difficult to access and succeed in the top positions (Bano & Nadeem, 2024). The gendered organization theory (Acker, 1990) includes that institutions are not gender-neutral but they incorporate gender into their structures, routine, and assumptions, and they favor the male forms of leadership. On the same note, role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) is used to explain the existence of a discrepancy between what is viewed as an effective leader and what is perceived as femininity by the society in terms of gender role expectations. These theoretical points of view provide useful explanations on how leadership opportunities in Pakistani HEIs can disenfranchise women systematically, irrespective of their qualifications or experience.

Although the issue of gender mainstreaming in higher education has received international concern, no research on Pakistan, though critically analysis of how institutional, cultural, and policy-level factors interact to restrict access of women to academic leadership, has been conducted in Pakistan. A big part of the available literature is descriptive or anecdotal addressing the experiences of women without a sufficient questioning of the organizational logics and leadership models that perpetuate these inequalities. Furthermore, the policy responses, including the gender equity frameworks by HEC, are not well implemented and well assessed.

This research fills these gaps by investigating the institutional, as well as socio-cultural processes that determine the career paths of women in leadership in Pakistan-based public HEIs. It not only locates the underrepresentation of women as a statistically interesting issue, but as a symptom of institutional logics and power systems. When using the gendered organizational prism and basing the study on empirical evidence, this study can be seen as the contribution to the existing academic discussion regarding the gender, leadership, and organizational change in higher education. Eventually, it will educate the academic discourses as well as policy interventions to encourage fair, inclusive leadership practices within the higher education sector in Pakistan.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions.

1. What are the perceived barriers that hinder women's progression to executive leadership positions in HEIs in Pakistan?

2. What personal, institutional, and societal factors serve as enablers for women attaining and succeeding in executive leadership roles in Pakistani HEIs?

3. How do women in leadership roles in HEIs navigate, negotiate, and overcome the challenges they face?

Since the research problem is quite complex, situational, and personal, a qualitative research method is the most suitable. Qualitative inquiry allows exploring personal experiences, social norms, and institutional practices in a deeper manner using rich and narrative data. It enables capturing voices, perceptions, and emotions of the women who have gone through or are going through the leadership pipeline in HEIs. This study seeks to provide some fine details that the quantitative approach may fail to capture through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, including implicit biases, informal power structures, and personal coping mechanisms. This study aims to both comprehend the barriers and enablers by foregrounding the experiences and interpretations of women in leadership but also to shed light on the way forward to provide meaningful change in policy and practice.

Literature Review

Abbas et al. (2025) Stated that women access into executive leadership in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Asia and Pakistan has shown a complex network of institutional, socio-cultural and structural obstacles. The available literature, however, tends to lean more towards descriptive explanation, without necessarily critically addressing the manner with which these obstacles interrelate and influence leadership outcomes. This review is a synthesis of important research to identify convergences, divergences, and conceptual developments, thus contextualizing the unique contributions of the current research. Fuller and Lashari (2025) present a valuable qualitative study of women Vice Chancellors who had to deal with the challenges of patriarchal institutional cultures in the Pakistani state-owned universities. The paper also presents a new form of transformational leadership that combines both masculine and feminine characters, a so-called gynandrous leadership that goes against conventional gendered leadership frameworks. Although the findings by Lashari focus on the agency of women in overcoming the gender role incongruence, the study is not critical to place this style of leadership in the wider theoretical frameworks of gender and leadership, which restricts its explanatory role to individual narratives.

Nonetheless, Islam et al. (2025) use a massive qualitative method to determine the systemic barriers in the education-to-workforce pipeline, especially in conservative areas. Their results on perceived discrimination and absence of support by the institution give the necessary background to comprehend why a lot of women fail to achieve leadership positions. However, the research does not explicitly discuss the movement of early career phases to executive leadership in academia, and the gap in the research is critical, as it relates to the mechanisms that either maintain or break the glass ceiling. Manzoor et al. (2025) Elaborate on this insight by placing obstacles in the socio-economic and cultural environment of Baluchistan, which are poverty, patriarchal values, and policy flaws. Their writing highlights the importance of local contextual variables which are not properly investigated on national analysis levels. Yet, it is concerned with the access to education not with the advancement into the leadership positions, which restricts the understanding of the institutional cultures of the higher education institutions that reproduce the gender differences at the superior levels.

Nonetheless, Marriyam and Zahra (2025) provide an excellent summary of compounded barriers, including work-life balance issues and male privilege, and emphasize new post-pandemic solutions, such as online mentorship. Their research pushes the debate further in terms of emerging enablers, but it does not have a strong theoretical interaction with the gendered leadership concepts or the structural reproduction of exclusionary practices. Nwajiugo (2025) provides a detailed overview of the region, which strengthens the dominance of gender stereotypes, institutional cultures that are patriarchal, and gaps in policies. Their campaign on gender-sensitive leadership training and reforms inclusiveness are closely related to the demands of structural change in modern times. However, their discussion mostly summarizes the available research without empirically questioning the way these variables intersect in Pakistani HEIs, or how women leaders proactively negotiate or avoid the glass ceiling.

All these studies support the fact that women have continually been underrepresented in HEI leadership as a consequence of a glass ceiling, which is formed by socio-cultural norms, institutionalized prejudice, and structural inequalities. However, there are some major gaps in the literature: the lack of integration of gendered leadership theories (including the role congruity theory and gynandrous leadership), empirical research on women who have or want to become an executive is limited, and the interaction of socio-cultural and institutional processes that support or disrupt leadership inequities is not thoroughly explored. This paper fills these gaps by integrating both empirical explorations of the lived experiences of women in executive jobs in Pakistani state universities with a theoretical approach that is skeptical in its interaction with developing theories of the glass ceiling. It goes beyond the documentation of barriers to examine the interaction between institutional practices and socio-cultural norms and therefore develops a more holistic and contextualized picture of gendered leadership within higher education. In this way, the research will not only add to the academic discussions about gender and leadership but also a policy debate that can help create more inclusive academic governance.

Research Gaps

Gap 1: Theoretical Models and Empirical Evidence Lack Integration

Some studies (Fuller & Lashari, 2025; Nwajiugo, 2025) include such theoretical lenses as transformational leadership or patriarchal institutional structures, but most of them are mostly descriptive or anecdotal. Minimal application of gender, and leadership theory (e.g. Gendered Organizations by Acker or Role Congruity Theory by Eagly and Karau) to analytically examine the experiences of women in leadership position in HEIs in Pakistan.

Gap 2: Minimal Representation of Lived Experiences of Women in Executive HEI Roles

Though a few studies focus on general obstacles to the academic or professional progress of women, there are only a handful of studies that focus the voices and lived leadership experiences of women who have ascended to the top (e.g. Vice Chancellors, Deans) of a public university, particularly in the uniquely socio-cultural context of Pakistan.

Gap 3: Poor Attention to Institutional Response and Policy Effectiveness

There is some literature that criticizes patriarchal structures and policies but does not go further to examine the response (or lack thereof) to the leadership dilemma of women by institutions (via policy, training or structural change). The effectiveness of the gender equity structures and programs of leadership of HEC also has limited assessment.

Gap 4: Regional/Intersectional Blind Spots

Most of the national research considers Pakistani HEIs homogenous, and does not investigate the impact of regional, ethnic, class-based, and institutional heterogeneity (e.g. public vs. private, urban vs. rural) on the leadership experiences of women. This creates a void in intersectional analysis.

Methodology

The qualitative research design with thematic analysis as its main research methodology was used in this study. The study was not guided by procedural rigor of grounded theory (e.g., theoretical sampling or saturation of theory-building) even though it was originally affected by the openness to emergent insights of grounded theory. Rather, the six-phase thematic analysis method by (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used because it is flexible and appropriate to investigate patterned meaning in qualitative data. This explanation will facilitate conformity between the data collection, coding, and interpretation steps, which will enable in-depth and deep insights into the leadership experiences of women in HEIs. The participants were recruited through a purposive sampling method, which defined women who are current or former executive leaders (e.g., Vice Chancellors, Pro-Vice Chancellors, Deans, and Directors) at the public and private Pakistani universities. The participants were to be qualified based on the following: First, two years of experience in leadership, at least. Second, employed in an HEI officially registered by Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan. Third, proficiency in affecting institutional policy, governance or decision-making.

The concluding sample comprised 15 respondents out of 11 universities, and this was highly diversified in terms of geographical locations (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Islamabad) and the type of institutions (large public, mid-sized private, and women-only universities). The respondents were aged between 42 and 61, with different disciplinary backgrounds, such as science, humanities, and medical education. This variety had made it possible to explore shared and context-specific leadership experiences.

Data Collection Methods

The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which provided an opportunity to have free and in-depth conversations. Face-to-face (n = 5) or online (n = 10) interviews were held on a secure platform (Zoom and Microsoft Teams) and depended on the availability of the participants and their geographic location. The duration of each session was 45 to 75 minutes. An interview guide with an emphasis on career pathways of the participants, perceived barriers/enablers, organizational cultures, and organizational leadership identities. To guarantee the confidentiality of virtual interviews, the participants were: (1) promotion of use of privately secured environments. (2) Aware of the encryption protocols of the platform. (3) With pseudonyms, and identifiable information removed in the course of transcription. Besides interviews, institutional materials such as gender policies, promotion policies and organizational charts were triangulated and contextual in sighted.

The ethics clearance was received at the (University of Southern Punjab Multan). Everyone received an elaborate consent form containing the objectives of the study and its voluntary nature and protection of privacy. The verbal consent was provided by the participants in written or recorded verbal consent, based on the medium of interview. To ensure anonymity: First, all transcripts had all personal identifiers stripped off. Second, institutions were identified in a generic way (e.g. a large public university in Punjab). Third, the audio files were saved in encrypted drives and deleted after transcription. The participants were advised of the right to withdraw at any point without any penalty.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was based on the 6-phase process of Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) Exposure to transcripts via repetition of reading. (2) Coming up with initial codes both through the inductive (emerged themes) and deductive (based on literature and research questions) methods. (3) Thematic searching (e.g., collating codes into larger categories (e.g., leadership identity negotiation, institutional bias). (4) Checking themes in terms of consistency and uniqueness. (5) Analytically defining and naming

themes. (6) Writing the report, connecting the themes with the existing theories and empirical data. Comparison of cases was done continuously to find similarities and different experiences in different regions, types of institutions and different stages of their careers.

Being a researcher and studying gendered leadership experiences, I must acknowledge that my positionality had an impact on the research process and on the interpretation. The fact that I was an outsider might have affected the participants to openly share intimate problems, including gender discrimination or harassment at work. In order to overcome these effects, I used the following strategies: First, developing a mutual interest in academics. Second, the interviews were confidential and non-evaluative, which is important to stress. Third, promoting the participants to determine the tone and depth of disclosure. I kept a reflexive journal during the research process to record personal assumptions, dynamics of the interview, and instances of being uncomfortable or biased. As an example, I observed that certain participants spoke in a guarded manner or changed the subject when speaking about male colleagues or hierarchies of power- which may have been an indicator of discomfort when talking to a male interviewer. These introspections helped in informing my analysis because they helped to differentiate between what was said and what could have been omitted or paraphrased.

Findings

Interpretation of the interview data showed that there were four key themes that portray the gendered dynamics that influence the leadership experience of women in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan: First, gender Bias and legitimacy Problems in institutions. Second, work-Family Interface and Role Conflict. Third, lack of Mentorship and Leadership Socialization. Fourth, agency, Resilience, and Adaptation Strategy. The themes tended to overlap with the narratives of the participants as they reflected how women are structurally and culturally limited and how they use adaptive measures to maneuver within the institutional leadership contexts.

Institutional Gender Bias and Legitimacy Question

The respondents reported instances of gendered bias, which undermined their professional legitimacy, and limited their authority in the leadership positions. This was expressed both in the open marginalization and in the more veiled marginalization.

In a meeting, no one was listening to me, and I had to wait until a male co-worker restated the same. -
Participant 3

These descriptions indicate institutional micro-inequalities and gendered conventions that give male voice and reduce female authority. Some of them also mentioned the two-fold standards in the interpretation of assertive behavior.

When I talk decisively, they tell me I am being rude. When a man does it, he is referred to as strong. -
Participant 6

These are the experiences that go in line with the notion of role incongruity (Eagly and Karau, 2002) whereby female leaders are punished when they break the traditional gender stereotypes. Selective listening, disproportionate scrutiny of behavior and perceived illegitimacy were subthemes.

Role Conflict and Work-Family Interface

Most of the participants highlighted how hard it is to balance the role of a leader with family demands. The internalized strain of achieving dual-role demands was still strong despite the supportive family members in certain situations.

It always used to make me feel guilty that I was letting somebody down either at home or in the workplace. - Participant 2

Some of the respondents mentioned opportunity costs, including refusing promotions because of the family requirements.

I declined a superior role because I was not able to cope with it and my family. - Participant 8

These stories demonstrate that work-family conflict has been a consistent obstacle and has implications on pipeline attrition in leadership. The subthemes that were identified here were the guilt, emotional burden and limited career mobility as a result of gendered care giving norms.

Lack of Mentorship and Leadership Socialization

Most of the respondents stated that they did not receive formal or informal mentorship on their way to the top leadership position, and this restricted their readiness to negotiate the institutional politics and decision-making procedures.

Nobody gave me instructions on how to handle politics and how to lead a team. I was forced to work it out myself. - Participant 5

Although some of them enjoyed encouragement on the part of senior male colleagues, such instances were few and, in most cases, unstructured.

One of my male professors had urged me to seek a leadership position. I could not have done it otherwise. - Participant 9

Isolation, slow career advancement, and low confidence in leadership were often associated with the lack of mentorship. This theme highlights the lack of gender responsive leadership development systems in HEIs.

Agency, Resilience, and Strategic Adaptation

Although the structures were there, the participants were very agency-oriented in coming up with a way of developing leadership styles that were able to strike a balance between institutional expectations and personal values. Instead of imitating prevailing (usually masculine) leadership qualities, most participants developed different styles based on consistency, fairness, and emotional intelligence.

I did not gain respect through being loud, but I was consistent and fair. - Participant 1

Some of the respondents defined intergenerational mentorship as a conscious act- one that they had adopted simply because they had not received such support themselves.

I never had a mentor, and now I ensure that I become a mentor. That's how change happens. - Participant 7

This theme represents the transformational leadership practices and resistance strategies of women; these are usually based on the belief in equity and collective development. Subthemes were emotional labor, mentoring as activism and identity negotiation.

Discussion

This paper aimed to establish how female executive leaders in Pakistani Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) encounter and maneuver structural, cultural, and institutional obstacles. The results indicate that gendered organizational cultures, family expectations, and leadership adaptation strategies interact in a complex manner. Read through the prism of the role incongruity theory and the newly introduced idea of gynandrous leadership, the analysis helps us to reinvent our comprehension of the ways in which women not only feel excluded but also act as agents within the leadership realm.

Gendered Legitimacy and Role Incongruity

The assumptions of role incongruity theory are manifested in the repeated experience of skepticism, selective listening, and more severe evaluation of assertive behavior in the participants. (Nadine et al., 2025) explain that women in leadership positions are biased as their actions are viewed to be against the conventional gender expectations. The women in this research were in a dilemma of facing two

binds: being punished because of being assertive and being sidelined when they operated as a team. These results are consistent with the previous studies by (Khan & Hollingworth, 2024) who also discovered that leadership cultures in South Asian HEIs tend to support those norms of masculine leadership. Nevertheless, the research paper is an addition to the literature as it provides first-hand report on the ways in which legitimacy is acquired or lost in daily academic governance. Instead of abstract discrimination, participants explained concrete interactional patterns, including constant interruptions or appropriation of their ideas, which can be used to lesser their authority. This indicates that there is a necessity to have more subtle studies which would follow the replication of gender inequality through informal organizational behaviors.

Leadership-Family Role Conflict: More than Work-Life Balance

Although the idea of work-life balance is generally accepted to be a challenge to women leaders, this paper shows that there is a greater dimension to the concept: role conflict influenced by the expectations of women that they should be primarily caring to their children. Some of the participants declined promotions or left leadership paths because they felt (or experienced) that they could not fit into them because of family commitments. This resonates with the results reported by (Manzoor et al., 2025), especially in the case of regional settings such as Baluchistan, where the patriarchal pressure is firmly embedded in the culture. Nevertheless, this paper adds a leadership-oriented perspective that career sacrifices take place even at the highest ranking. The emotional burden and guilt experienced by participants indicates that internalized gender norms rather than structural restrictions determine the leadership experiences of women.

Lack of Mentorship and the Gendered Leadership Pipeline

The structural gap that came out was the theme of mentorship. The majority of the participants cited the lack of mentorship in their early years of work, which is in line with the findings of (Marriyam & Zahra, 2025) who established that academic hierarchies dominated by men rarely focus on the development of women as leaders. What this work contributes is the empirical data on the inability of women to maneuver politics, form coalitions, or exercise any kind of influence because of the lack of informal leadership socialization. Interestingly, those respondents who received mentorship (even by male peers) tended to attribute such experiences as defining. This confirms previous research (Islam et al., 2025) and indicates that intentional cross-gender mentorship can be an extremely important factor in expanding women's access to leadership. Mentorship should be a policy and a cultural change that institutional reforms should focus on in the future.

Gynandrous Leadership and Strategic Adaptation

The most innovative observation of this research maybe the way women defied the leadership norms that prevailed and how they developed other leadership identities. Based on the idea of gynandrous leadership proposed by Lashari (2023), the participants mentioned the combination of empathy, fairness, and persistence to gain credibility - without being aligned with stereotypically masculine images. These stories indicate a transformational redefinition of leadership. Instead of just conforming to the norms of patriarchy, some of the participants were actively redefining the appearance of leadership in HEIs. The fact that they focus on mentoring people and community-building implies that they are moving towards collective, relational types of influence that question hierarchical, individualistic norms. This observation expands the gynandrous leadership theory because it demonstrates not only the practice of such leadership, but also the way it is negotiated politically and emotionally in the environments where the role of women is still disputed. By doing so, it will help to make a wider global debate about feminist leadership and how power in academia should be redefined.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The research provides three contributions to the existing body of literature on gender and leadership. Basing role incongruity theory empirically on the real life experiences of Pakistani women in the field of academic leadership and providing context-specific examples of how bias can work in everyday, subtle interactions. Moving the idea of gynandrous leadership beyond the description of qualities, to a more strategic conception of the way women build legitimacy and help others. Emphasizing the overlap between institutional policy loopholes (e.g. the lack of mentorship) and cultural pressures (e.g. family first) of developing leadership patterns. Thus, findings highlight the importance of leadership programs to be gender responsive. Flexible work structures and mentorship programs that integrate intersectional requirements (e.g., region, class, caregiving status).

Recommendations

Considering the findings and aligned with Pakistan's Vision 2025 and the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Gender Equity Policy (2020), the following recommendations are proposed to foster more inclusive and equitable leadership in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). First, institutionalize gender-responsive leadership development: Universities should create targeted programs for women in mid-career and senior academic roles, informed by *gynandrous* and transformational leadership models. These programs should challenge masculine-coded leadership norms and build confidence, negotiation, and policy engagement skills. Second, formalize mentorship and sponsorship structures: Building on HEC's guidelines for gender equity, universities should establish structured mentorship programs that pair emerging women leaders with experienced mentors (regardless of gender). These relationships should be tracked and supported with institutional recognition. Third, revise recruitment and promotion policies: Criteria for leadership appointments should be expanded to include mentoring contributions, service, and collaborative achievements. HEIs should audit their criteria to ensure they do not reinforce role incongruity or penalize women's career interruptions due to caregiving. Fourth, enhance institutional support for work-life integration: In line with Goal 5 of Vision 2025 (gender equity and empowerment), universities should provide family-friendly policies, such as hybrid work models, parental leave, and on-site childcare that ease leadership-family tensions disproportionately faced by women.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of women in executive leadership roles within Pakistani Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), revealing how they navigate institutional, socio-cultural, and structural challenges. Through thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, four interrelated themes emerged: gender bias in organizational culture, persistent work-family role conflict, absence of mentorship and leadership development structures, and the strategic leadership styles women adopt to gain legitimacy and lead effectively. By situating these findings within role incongruity theory and gynandrous leadership, the study offers both empirical and theoretical insights into how women confront and reinterpret dominant leadership norms. In particular, the findings expand current understanding by highlighting how women leaders in HEIs do not simply adapt to gendered structures but often resist, reinterpret, and reshape them through hybrid leadership practices and peer mentorship. The study contributes to the literature on gender and leadership in the Global South by offering a context-specific examination of leadership experiences in Pakistani academia - an under-researched but highly relevant site for gender equity discourse. It also holds practical implications for institutional reform, including the urgent need to design gender-responsive leadership pipelines, foster inclusive mentorship programs, and embed structural flexibility that accommodates diverse career trajectories.

References

Abbas, M., Lashari, S., & Wakil, I. (2025). Strategies of women's movements to counter backlashes in Pakistan: a case study of Aurat March. *Third World Quarterly*, *46*(10), 1112-1135.

Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & society*, *4*(2), 139-158.

Bano, A., & Nadeem, S. (2024). Examining women leaders' identity conflict in a low gender egalitarian culture: a study of female corporate sector leaders in Pakistan. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, *39*(2), 274-290.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101.

Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological review*, *109*(3), 573.

Fazal, S., Nazir, F., Khan, M. I., & Khan, S. I. (2025). Gender Equity in Higher Education in Pakistan: Bridging Dreams and Realities. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 1-19.

Fuller, K., & Lashari, A. (2025). Looking for feminist leadership praxis in higher education: a systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 1-23.

Islam, M. A., Hack-Polay, D., Rahman, M., Fijałkowska, J., & Dal Mas, F. (2025). Women and leadership in non-listed private companies in an emerging country: An analysis of barriers and facilitators. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, *32*(2), 2037-2050.

Jehan, Z., Hamid, S., Ali, S. S., Ali, I., Yasmin, A., & Stewart (2025), A. Bridging the Gender Gap in Academia: Creating Women Leaders through Mentorship Programmes in Pakistan's Higher Education Institutions. *NAVEIÑ REET: Nordic Journal of Law and Social Research*(13), 91-122.

Khan, M., Sulaiman, R., Nazir, O., Khan, S., & Awan, S. (2024). The unseen in the glass ceilings: examining women's career advancement in higher education institutions through a multi-level institutional lens. *Human Resource Development International*, 1-28.

Khan, N., & Hollingworth, L. (2024a). Breaking the Silence: Unveiling Barriers to Women's Leadership for Sustainable Development in Higher Education: Breaking the Silence. *JISR management and social sciences & economics*, *22*(2), 1-23.

Khan, N., & Hollingworth, L. (2024b). Breaking the Silence: Unveiling Barriers to Women's Leadership for Sustainable Development in Higher Education. *Journal of Independent Studies & Research: Management & Social Sciences & Economics*, *22*(2).

Kousar, G., Danish, M., Arshad, S., Zulfiqar, M., & Ismaeel, M. R. (2025). Economic Barriers And Social Challenges Confronting Women For Leadership And Management Positions. *Policy Journal of Social Science Review*, *3*(4), 79-90.

Lashari, M. N. (2023). Through the labyrinth: Women in the public universities of Pakistan. *SN Social Sciences*, *3*(5), 79.

Manzoor, B., Kakepoto, H., & Brohi, A. A. (2025). A Sociological Exploration of Institutional, Sociocultural, and Economic Barriers to Women's Higher Education Aspirations in Balochistan. *Indus Journal of Social Sciences*, *3*(1), 70-86.

Marriyam, A., & Zahra, S. (2025). Reason behind the Struggle: Aspirations of Pakistani Female Journalists behind Joining this Profession. *Human Nature Journal of Social Sciences*, *6*(2), 204-213.

Nadine, A., Kristin, F. S., Matthias, B., & Rodrigo, I. (2025). Rebel, reverse, or relent: How female entrepreneurs develop communication strategies on social media to handle gender role stereotypes. *European Management Journal*.

Ngcobo, G. B., Kafu-Quvane, B., & Nkosi, N. (2025). Redefining Leadership: Overcoming Gender Barriers in School Leadership and Management. In *Women's Leadership in African Education* (pp. 117-141). Springer.

Nwajiugo, S. (2025). Accessibility of Women in Educational Leadership in K-12 Alberta.

Rana, M. Q., Lee, A., Saher, N., & Shabbir, Z. (2024). Barriers to empowerment: Examining the transition of Pakistani women from higher education (HE) to professional life. *Social Sciences*, *13*(10), 514.

Ullah, J. (2024). Higher education governance in Pakistan: the role and influence of HEC in the post-18th Amendment. *Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences (JHSMS)*, *5*(1), 178-190.