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## An Inquiry Into The Constraints Faced By Women's Accessing The Senior Leadership Positions In Higher Education Of Punjab

### Rameez Nasir

Principal, The New School, Model Town, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

[Rameeznasir346@gmail.com](mailto:Rameeznasir346@gmail.com)

### Dr. Ijaz Ahmad Tatlah

Associate Professor, Division of Education, University of Education, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

[tatlah@ue.edu.pk](mailto:tatlah@ue.edu.pk)

### Dr. Naila Zarar\*

PhD Education, Division of Education, University of Education, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

[naila.zarar10@gmail.com](mailto:naila.zarar10@gmail.com)

### Durr E Shahwar

MPhil History, Art and Cultural Heritage, University of Education, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

[durreshehvaar@gmail.com](mailto:durreshehvaar@gmail.com)

### \*Corresponding Author

#### ABSTRACT

This study employed a qualitative research design underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm to explore the constraining factors influencing women's access to senior leadership positions in higher education institutions (HEIs) of Punjab. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select 20 women leaders from public HEIs, ensuring representation across diverse institutional contexts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility to probe participants' perceptions and beliefs in depth. This semi-structured protocol was developed by the inquirer and validated by taking the experts' opinion. The interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed and analyzed with the help of Manual Thematic analysis. This study concluded that women's access to senior leadership in higher education remains restricted by structural, socio-

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cultural, and institutional barriers. However, enabling factors such as supportive networks, mentorship, and evolving institutional policies offer pathways for greater inclusion. Addressing these constraints through targeted reforms can enhance gender equity and leadership diversity in Punjab's higher education sector.

**Keywords:** Women Leaders; Educational Leadership; Higher Education

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## INTRODUCTION

The underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles within higher education institutions (HEIs) remains a pressing global issue, reflecting persistent structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. While women have made significant advances in access to education and academic careers, their progression into senior leadership positions continues to be constrained by gendered dynamics, socio-cultural expectations, and organizational practices (Morley, 2021). This disparity is particularly evident in regions such as South Asia, where cultural norms and institutional structures intersect to restrict women's agency in leadership (Shaukat et al., 2022). In Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province and an educational hub, the question of why women remain underrepresented in senior academic leadership positions requires deeper inquiry into both the constraints they face and the enabling factors that may support their upward mobility.

Globally, higher education has been viewed as a transformative sector that promotes inclusivity and gender equity. However, the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership highlights a paradox: while women are increasingly visible as students and early-career academics, their visibility diminishes as leadership positions grow more senior (O'Connor, 2022). For instance, women make up nearly half of higher education teaching staff in several countries but constitute far fewer vice-chancellors, rectors, or deans (UNESCO, 2021). The "leaky pipeline" metaphor continues to capture this phenomenon, wherein women enter academia in large numbers but gradually exit or remain stagnant in mid-level roles due to structural and cultural obstacles (Nguyen, 2020).

Several factors underpin this disparity, including gender stereotypes, implicit bias in recruitment, limited access to mentoring, and unequal work-life expectations (Benschop & Brouns, 2020). The persistence of patriarchal norms in academia further normalizes male dominance in senior leadership, subtly shaping perceptions of who is considered "fit" for leadership. Even in Western contexts where gender equity policies are robust, women still face slower career progression and underrepresentation at executive levels (Burkinshaw & White, 2021). These international insights set the stage for examining local contexts such as Punjab, where socio-cultural traditions amplify gendered barriers.

In South Asia, the intersection of culture, religion, and institutional practices often exacerbates gender inequities in professional spheres, including academia. Women are frequently expected to prioritize family responsibilities over professional advancement, resulting in career interruptions and limited leadership opportunities (Chaudhry & Rahman, 2021). Within Pakistan, the higher education sector has expanded significantly in recent decades, yet the leadership landscape remains

heavily male-dominated. Studies show that women rarely ascend to senior roles such as vice-chancellors, registrars, or deans, despite evidence of their competence and contributions (Shah & Amjad, 2020).

Punjab, as Pakistan's largest province with numerous public and private universities, presents a critical case for understanding these dynamics. Social norms emphasizing traditional gender roles, coupled with institutional biases, create formidable barriers for women aspiring to leadership. At the same time, some enabling factors—such as government policies on gender equity, international collaborations, and emerging networks of women leaders—signal opportunities for transformation (Batool & Qureshi, 2021). Exploring the interplay between constraints and enablers within this context provides valuable insights for both policy and practice.

The constraints limiting women's access to senior leadership roles in HEIs of Punjab are multidimensional. Structural barriers, such as male-dominated hiring committees and opaque promotion processes, often disadvantage women (White & Burkinshaw, 2022). Cultural barriers, including societal expectations of women as primary caregivers, further restrict their mobility and availability for leadership roles requiring extended working hours or relocation (Naz & Saeed, 2021). Additionally, institutional cultures in Pakistan often perpetuate patriarchal hierarchies that implicitly privilege men in leadership selection and decision-making (Saeed & Zubair, 2020).

Moreover, women leaders frequently encounter resistance in the form of gender bias, workplace harassment, and exclusion from influential networks. The absence of formal mentoring systems exacerbates the problem, as women lack access to role models and sponsors who can advocate for their career progression (Abid et al., 2022). Collectively, these constraints form a web of systemic and cultural impediments that restrict women's leadership agency.

### **Rationale of the Study**

While international research has extensively examined women's leadership barriers and enablers, there is limited scholarship that situates these dynamics within the cultural and institutional realities of Punjab. The unique interplay between socio-cultural norms, institutional practices, and individual aspirations in this context necessitates a localized inquiry. Understanding how women perceive the obstacles and enabling factors in their leadership journeys can provide valuable evidence for policy reforms and institutional strategies.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore women leaders' perceptions of the constraints and enablers shaping their access to senior leadership positions in HEIs of Punjab. By amplifying their voices, the research contributes to broader debates on gender equity in higher education while offering context-specific insights that can inform policy, institutional practice, and leadership development initiatives.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To investigate the constraints perceived by women educational leaders in attaining senior leadership positions in HEIs of Punjab.

## Significance of the Study

The significance of this inquiry lies in its potential to contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it enriches existing scholarship on gender and leadership by foregrounding the voices of women leaders in a context underrepresented in global research. Practically, the findings can guide higher education policymakers, institutional leaders, and advocacy groups in developing targeted interventions to dismantle barriers and strengthen enablers for women's leadership in Punjab's higher education. By highlighting both the challenges and problems, this study seeks to contribute toward building more inclusive and equitable academic institutions in Pakistan.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm to explore the constraints and enabling factors influencing women's access to senior leadership positions in higher education institutions (HEIs) of Punjab. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select 20 women leaders from public HEIs, ensuring representation across diverse institutional contexts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility to probe participants' perceptions and beliefs in depth. This semi-structured protocol was developed by the inquirer and validated by taking the experts' opinion. The interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed and analyzed with the help of Manual Thematic analysis.

### Data Analysis & Results

Thematic analysis of the 20 interviews with women leaders in public sector HEIs of Punjab revealed three major themes: *Institutional Barriers*, *Socio-Cultural Constraints*, *Personal and Professional Challenges*. Below, participants' perspectives are presented under each theme.

#### Theme 1: Structural Barriers

Structural barriers refer to the organizational and systemic impediments that hinder women's progression toward senior leadership in higher education institutions. These include limited promotional opportunities, rigid hierarchies, opaque recruitment processes, and unequal distribution of resources. The voices of participants reveal how such barriers operate within their institutional contexts. The participants' stance is stated as under where P represents the participant:

#### P1:

I often feel that no matter how hard women work, the structural hierarchy is not designed to let us climb smoothly. Senior positions are usually rotated among a closed circle of men who have longstanding networks. Even when we meet all eligibility criteria, informal lobbying tends to prevail over merit.

#### P2:

The promotion system in our university is so slow and cumbersome that women often lose hope before they reach leadership roles. The evaluation procedures are not transparent, and men usually get advanced due to strong

references. This creates an invisible ceiling that many capable women cannot break.

**P3:**

I personally experienced rejection despite fulfilling all requirements for a dean's position. Later, I learned that the role was pre-decided for a male colleague. Such practices are discouraging, as they send a message that structural rules are only followed selectively, leaving women disadvantaged.

**P4:**

Recruitments for senior roles are often carried out in a non-transparent way. Even when there is an open call, the shortlisting usually favors male candidates. Women are seldom invited for interviews, and when they are, it feels more like a formality than a real opportunity.

**P5:**

I think structural barriers start very early, when women are not given opportunities to attend management trainings or leadership workshops. By the time senior positions open up, men already have the experience and exposure, while women are told they lack the credentials to qualify.

**P6:**

There is an unspoken culture where leadership roles are considered a male domain. This affects how committees select candidates for senior posts. Women are subtly sidelined by saying things like, 'You should focus more on teaching rather than administration,' which keeps us from advancing structurally.

**P7:**

*"One key issue is that women have fewer mentors in the system. Men have networks to support their promotions, but women are left to struggle alone. The structure rewards networking more than competence, which systematically disadvantages female academics."*

**P8:**

I have noticed that administrative responsibilities are often distributed unequally. Women are given minor tasks that do not carry much weight in promotion decisions, while men handle committees or projects that are later valued for leadership positions. This division itself becomes a barrier to advancement.

**P9:**

The structure of higher education favors men because most decision-making bodies are male-dominated. Even when women are on these boards, their opinions are often ignored or overshadowed. This imbalance at the top filters down, making it harder for other women to reach those positions.

**P10:**

There is a lack of policy clarity on career progression. Promotion guidelines are vague and leave space for favoritism. Women, who may not be part of influential networks, are often left out when opportunities arise. The entire structure feels exclusionary.

**P11:**

Many times, women are told they lack the 'administrative experience'

required for senior posts. But how can they gain that experience when such roles are rarely assigned to them in the first place? The structure itself denies women the opportunities it later requires them to have.

**P12:**

I once applied for a leadership post and was told informally that the institution needed a 'strong male figure' to manage external stakeholders. Such perceptions are deeply structural, as they imply that women, no matter how qualified, are structurally disqualified on gendered grounds.

**P13:**

*"The workload distribution is unfair. Men often get research-related assignments that count more in promotions, while women are burdened with teaching and service roles. Structurally, this means women are evaluated less favorably when senior positions are considered."*

**P14:**

*"I believe the structural evaluation of performance is biased. Publications, administrative roles, and visibility matter most, yet women are systematically given fewer chances to excel in these domains. The structure silently favors men while presenting itself as neutral."*

**P15:**

In my institution, when new leadership roles are created, the initial discussions happen informally among male colleagues, even before the official advertisement. By the time women know of the opportunity, decisions are already made. This hidden structure disadvantages us significantly.

**P16:**

I was once advised to wait for 'my turn,' as if leadership opportunities rotate within a small inner circle. The structural culture is such that men remain the first choice for leadership, while women are placed in supportive roles regardless of merit.

**P17:**

*"Many committees that select leaders are themselves male-dominated. This creates an echo chamber where structural bias continues unchecked. Women candidates often feel like outsiders trying to fit into a system designed to benefit men."*

**P18:**

Another barrier is the rigid tenure and seniority system. Women who may have taken career breaks for family responsibilities are penalized, as the structure calculates years of service strictly without acknowledging these realities. This makes it harder for women to compete.

**P19:**

*"The structure is not flexible enough to consider diverse career paths. Women who enter leadership from unconventional trajectories are often dismissed as unqualified. The system values linear, uninterrupted careers, which naturally favors men."*

**P20:**

*"Finally, structural barriers also include lack of facilities that could support women leaders, such as childcare or flexible schedules. Without addressing these, the system*

*implicitly assumes leaders must fit a male mold, making senior roles less accessible for women.”*

## **Theme 2: Socio-Cultural Constraints**

The findings under this theme reveal that socio-cultural expectations significantly limit women’s progression into senior leadership roles in higher education. Participants consistently highlighted the burden of balancing professional responsibilities with family and caregiving duties, which often restricted their mobility and career advancement opportunities. Deeply entrenched gender norms, stereotypes about leadership being a “male domain,” and societal pressures to prioritize domestic roles further discouraged women from aspiring to top positions. Additionally, participants pointed out that cultural attitudes in Punjab sometimes undervalue women’s leadership potential, creating subtle but persistent resistance within both professional and social circles. Despite these challenges, some women emphasized the importance of supportive families and changing societal attitudes as enabling factors that can gradually mitigate these cultural constraints.

### **P1:**

P1 explained that socio-cultural expectations placed upon women often hinder their leadership aspirations. She highlighted how extended family responsibilities and the cultural norm of prioritizing domestic roles over professional growth make it difficult for women to dedicate themselves fully to leadership positions. According to her, women in Punjab are often judged more on their ability to manage households than their leadership capacities, which undermines their professional confidence and ambitions.

### **P2:**

P2 emphasized that cultural stereotypes of women being “less capable” in administrative or decision-making roles discourage them from applying for senior posts. She added that, within her social circle, pursuing leadership was considered “unfeminine,” creating self-doubt. For her, these socio-cultural narratives are deeply ingrained and manifest in subtle discouragement from both family and peers.

### **P3:**

P3 stated that despite her qualifications, she faced social resistance when aspiring to senior roles. Relatives often questioned her “need” to work so ambitiously, suggesting that leadership should be reserved for men. She noted how such attitudes create an internalized barrier for women, where societal approval becomes a significant factor in decision-making.

### **P4:**

P4 reported that balancing motherhood and professional commitments is one of the most challenging socio-cultural expectations for women leaders. She mentioned that senior leadership positions demand extended hours and frequent travel, which society views as incompatible with a woman’s role as a primary caregiver, thereby discouraging women from pursuing such paths.

### **P5:**

P5 highlighted the stigma attached to assertive women in leadership roles.

She explained that while men in authoritative positions are considered decisive, women with the same traits are often labeled as aggressive or disrespectful to cultural norms. This double standard restricts women from exercising their leadership authority effectively.

**P6:**

P6 observed that women in Punjab face a cultural expectation to be modest and avoid public visibility. For her, leadership requires a degree of visibility and influence that clashes with these norms. As a result, women leaders face social criticism and reputational risks that men rarely encounter.

**P7:**

P7 argued that many women hesitate to pursue senior roles because of the fear of social backlash, particularly from male colleagues and even extended family. She explained that leadership success often provokes gossip and criticism, with people questioning whether women are neglecting their “true” domestic responsibilities.

**P8:**

P8 shared that community perceptions significantly influence women’s confidence in leadership. She explained that when society continuously undermines women’s authority, women leaders begin to internalize these beliefs and underestimate their own abilities. This cultural conditioning often prevents women from competing on equal terms with men.

**P9:**

P9 emphasized that women leaders are pressured to conform to traditional feminine ideals of humility, patience, and self-sacrifice. She felt that when women adopt a more assertive style, they face social disapproval. In her view, these cultural ideals limit women from projecting strong leadership identities necessary for senior positions.

**P10:**

P10 explained that social mobility is often restricted for women, especially in conservative communities. Attending meetings late at night or traveling for conferences is frowned upon, and women leaders face criticism for “overstepping their boundaries.” This cultural restriction curtails women’s access to crucial leadership opportunities.

**P11:**

P11 discussed how societal preference for male leaders remains dominant in higher education. She explained that in many families, women’s careers are treated as secondary to men’s, reinforcing the notion that women’s leadership ambitions should be limited. For her, this mindset creates a cycle of underrepresentation.

**P12:**

P12 noted that marriage often becomes a critical socio-cultural constraint for women leaders. She explained that some women are pressured to leave or scale back their professional careers after marriage, as in-laws expect them to prioritize home

responsibilities. This undermines continuity in women's professional development.

**P13:**

P13 shared that female leaders are often judged by their adherence to cultural dress codes and mannerisms. She observed that deviations from these expectations, such as speaking confidently in public or dressing in a non-traditional way, attract criticism that overshadows their leadership skills.

**P14:**

P14 reflected on how cultural expectations place women under a constant need to "prove themselves." She explained that unlike men, whose authority is accepted without question, women leaders are often scrutinized for every decision. This cultural scrutiny, she argued, erodes confidence and creates unnecessary stress.

**P15:**

P15 argued that women leaders in Punjab are often burdened with the expectation of being "role models" of cultural morality. She explained that this pressure makes them cautious about personal and professional choices, restricting their freedom to lead effectively. According to her, such cultural expectations rarely apply to male leaders.

**P16:**

P16 explained that women leaders often experience cultural policing from both men and women. She shared that female colleagues sometimes reinforce traditional gender roles, discouraging women from pursuing leadership for fear of disrupting cultural harmony. This indicates that socio-cultural constraints are perpetuated by both genders.

**P17:**

P17 emphasized that the perception of leadership as a "male domain" is still strong in Punjab. She explained that women leaders constantly have to negotiate their credibility in ways that men do not, often overcompensating to counter cultural bias. For her, this represents a silent yet powerful constraint.

**P18:**

P18 stated that women are often criticized for spending less time at home due to leadership responsibilities. She explained that this criticism comes not only from extended family but also from peers and neighbors, creating social pressure that discourages women from actively pursuing higher leadership positions.

**P19:**

P19 observed that women's career progress is often slowed by expectations to fulfill caregiving roles for children and elderly family members. She explained that society continues to position these responsibilities as exclusively women's duties, leaving little room for them to balance leadership with domestic obligations.

**P20:**

P20 reflected that societal acceptance of women leaders is conditional; they are respected only if they balance domestic responsibilities impeccably. She emphasized that unlike men, women are not allowed the flexibility to prioritize careers. This dual expectation creates a cultural double bind that limits women's

progression.

Participants' Stances

### **Theme 3: Institutional Constraints**

Institutional constraints emerged as one of the most prominent themes, reflecting how organizational dynamics, hierarchical practices, lack of transparent policies, and limited professional development opportunities hinder women's progression into senior leadership roles. Participants highlighted systemic flaws within higher education institutions, including gender bias in recruitment, opaque promotion procedures, and inadequate support systems.

**P1:**

P1 described institutional politics as one of the biggest hurdles, arguing that recruitment and promotion procedures were not transparent. She shared that decision-making bodies were often dominated by men, leaving women with little say in leadership matters. According to her, merit often became secondary to favoritism and personal networks.

**P2:**

P2 emphasized the lack of structured mentorship programs for women in higher education. She noted that while men frequently benefit from informal networks and mentorship, women often have to navigate institutional hierarchies on their own. She felt this lack of support significantly reduced women's chances of reaching senior positions.

**P3:**

P3 highlighted the absence of clear evaluation criteria for promotions. She explained that institutional assessment policies were vague and often subjective, leaving room for bias and discrimination. She believed that transparent benchmarks could help women demonstrate their capabilities more effectively.

**P4:**

P4 reported that many women leaders are overloaded with administrative tasks without being given leadership authority. She expressed that women were often assigned responsibilities but not entrusted with decision-making power, creating a symbolic inclusion that undermined their institutional role.

**P5:**

P5 noted that the institutional environment often lacked childcare support and flexible working hours, which disproportionately affected women. She suggested that universities should consider policies such as on-campus childcare facilities to make leadership more accessible for women with families.

**P6:**

P6 felt that women leaders often encounter institutional resistance when introducing reforms. She shared her experience of proposing new initiatives but receiving little encouragement from senior administrators. According to her, this resistance discouraged women from taking innovative leadership steps.

**P7:**

*"The promotion system is highly bureaucratic, where procedural delays discouraged*

women from applying for senior posts. I believe that male colleagues received preferential treatment during evaluations, leaving women to wait longer despite equal or better qualifications.

**P8:**

*“The gender bias is there in leadership training opportunities. The men were more frequently nominated for workshops and international conferences, while women were often overlooked. The lack of exposure restricted women’s institutional growth.*

**P9:**

*“The institutional culture often reinforced gender stereotypes by questioning women’s leadership capacities. The female leaders were sometimes excluded from important committees on the assumption that they lacked the authority to make tough decisions.”*

**P10:**

P10 emphasized the lack of accountability mechanisms in higher education institutions. She pointed out that when women faced discriminatory practices, there were no formal grievance redressal systems available to support them. This absence of accountability perpetuated inequality within the institution.

**P11:**

P11 described the hierarchical dominance of the senior male administrators as a major institutional barrier. She shared that decision-making circles were “closed groups” where women were rarely invited. She argued that institutional culture reinforced male dominance rather than promoting inclusivity.

**P12:**

*The women often faced limited access to research grants and funding opportunities compared to men. The institutional committees responsible for grant allocation were male-dominated, which unintentionally or deliberately marginalized women scholars.”*

**P13:**

*“The performance recognition systems within institutions were biased. The men’s contributions were more visible and celebrated, whereas women’s achievements were often downplayed. This lack of recognition affected women’s professional confidence and institutional visibility.”*

**P14:**

P14 emphasized that the institutional mobility policies, such as transfers and postings, were not women-friendly. She recounted cases where women were denied postings at key administrative positions, often with the justification that they could not handle the workload at institution.

**P15:**

*“The universities often lacked policies addressing workplace harassment. The absence of proper mechanisms created an unsafe environment for women, discouraging them from aspiring to leadership roles. I suggest stronger implementation of anti-harassment policies.”*

**P16:**

*“The women were frequently underrepresented in statutory bodies like syndicates and academic councils. The institutional bylaws did not ensure women’s proportional representation, which kept them away from significant decision-making platforms.”*

**P17:**

*“There is a frustration at the unequal distribution of resources within institutions. The women often managed departments with fewer resources, which restricted their ability to perform effectively in leadership roles compared to male counterparts.”*

**P18:**

*“The slow career progression policies within her institution, noting that promotion pathways were unnecessarily prolonged. I felt that this discouraged women from even applying for senior positions, as the effort and patience required were excessive.”*

**P19:**

*“The institutional favoritism heavily influenced leadership appointments. Several competent women were ignored because leadership positions were “reserved” for individuals with strong personal connections. This favoritism eroded women’s trust in institutional systems.”*

**P20:**

*“The institutional culture perpetuated the idea that women’s leadership was symbolic rather than substantive. Even when women reached senior positions, they were often sidelined in critical decisions, reducing their roles to token representation.”*

## **CONCLUSION**

The study revealed that women leaders in higher education face significant challenges rooted in structural, socio-cultural, and institutional barriers, which restrict their access to senior leadership roles. Despite these constraints, many participants demonstrated resilience and identified supportive networks as enablers of their professional journey. Overall, the findings underscore the urgent need for policy reforms and institutional support mechanisms to foster greater gender equity in higher education leadership.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations based on the results are stated as under:

#### **Policy Reforms for Gender Equity**

Higher education institutions should implement clear, gender-sensitive policies, including transparent promotion criteria, equal opportunities for leadership development, and structured mentorship programs to support women aspiring for senior roles.

#### **Institutional Support Mechanisms**

Universities must establish women’s leadership forums, flexible work

arrangements, and awareness programs addressing socio-cultural biases, thereby creating an enabling environment that encourages women's participation in top-level decision-making.

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