

INTERSECTING INEQUALITIES THROUGH A SOCIOLOGICAL LENS: SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDERED ACADEMIC IDENTITIES IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines intersecting inequalities through a sociological lens by exploring how symbolic boundaries shape the construction of gendered academic identities in Pakistan. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study draws on published documents, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and scholarly literature accessed through academic databases in sociology and higher education. These sources were purposively selected for their relevance to gender, inequality, symbolic boundaries, and academic identities within the Pakistani context. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, enabling the systematic identification and interpretation of recurring patterns and meanings. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed to ensure contextual sensitivity and nuanced representation of gendered experiences in academia, and analysis continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The findings reveal that gendered academic identities are socially constructed through the interaction of symbolic boundaries, institutional practices, and intersecting inequalities rather than being solely determined by individual agency. Female academics encounter both overt and subtle forms of exclusion, including restricted access to leadership positions, unequal recognition of scholarly competence, and culturally embedded gender norms. At the same time, the study highlights women's agency in negotiating, contesting, and redefining these boundaries, underscoring the dynamic nature of symbolic boundaries within higher education institutions. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of symbolic boundaries, cultural and social capital, and intersectionality, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how gendered inequalities are reproduced and resisted in Pakistani academia, with implications for policy and institutional reforms aimed at fostering more equitable and inclusive academic environments.

Keywords: Symbolic Boundaries, Gender, Academic Identities, Intersecting Inequalities, Higher Education, Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

The study of gendered academic identities in Pakistan necessitates an understanding of the multiple, intersecting social structures that shape individuals' experiences within higher education. Gender, as a social category, is not merely a reflection of biological difference but a dynamic construct that interacts with other axes of inequality, including class, ethnicity, and institutional hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984). These intersections give rise to complex patterns of privilege and disadvantage, which are often subtle, symbolic, and culturally embedded (Bourdieu, 1984; Crenshaw, 1991). In this context, the concept of symbolic boundaries the socially constructed distinctions that categorize, separate, and hierarchically rank individuals and groups offers a powerful lens to analyze how gendered academic identities are produced, maintained, and contested (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Symbolic boundaries operate through norms, practices, and discourses that shape perceptions of competence, authority, and legitimacy within academic institutions (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026b). For female academics in Pakistan, these boundaries manifest as unequal access to opportunities, differential recognition of expertise, and exclusion from decision-making spaces, reflecting broader societal expectations around gender roles (Shoaib, Iqbal, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026). Simultaneously, symbolic boundaries are not static; they are negotiated, resisted, and sometimes redefined through everyday interactions, institutional policies, and collective practices within universities (Ali, Abdullah, & Shaoib, 2026; Ali, Abdullah, & Shoaib, 2026; Larijani, Shoaib, & Abedi, 2025).

By situating gendered academic identities within the framework of symbolic boundaries, this research seeks to illuminate how systemic inequalities intersect and materialize in higher education. It emphasizes that gendered experiences in academia are socially constructed and deeply relational, shaped by both macro-level societal structures and micro-level institutional interactions. Understanding these processes is crucial not only for unpacking the reproduction of inequalities but also for envisioning strategies to

foster more inclusive, equitable, and supportive academic environments in Pakistan.

Study Context

Pakistan's higher education landscape presents a complex terrain for examining gendered academic identities, shaped by socio-cultural norms, institutional structures, and historical legacies (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026b). Despite significant expansion in higher education over the past two decades, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions, research opportunities, and certain academic disciplines, reflecting entrenched gendered hierarchies (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026c). Societal expectations surrounding gender roles, combined with patriarchal family structures and conservative cultural norms, often influence women's career trajectories, professional mobility, and participation in public academic life (Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025b). Universities in Pakistan are not only sites of knowledge production but also arenas where symbolic boundaries such as perceptions of intellectual authority, legitimacy, and professional competence are drawn and reinforced (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026). These boundaries are influenced by formal institutional policies, informal networks, mentorship patterns, and disciplinary cultures, which collectively shape experiences of inclusion and exclusion (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a). Additionally, intersecting factors such as socio-economic background, regional identity, and access to resources further stratify opportunities within academia, producing differentiated experiences among female academics (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a).

By situating this study within the Pakistani context, the research seeks to explore how symbolic boundaries operate to construct gendered academic identities, highlighting both structural constraints and the agency of women navigating these spaces. This context provides a critical lens to understand the interplay between societal norms, institutional practices, and individual strategies, thereby offering insights into

the broader dynamics of gendered inequalities in higher education.

The Data and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine intersecting inequalities through the lens of symbolic boundaries in the construction of gendered academic identities in Pakistan. The data are drawn from published documents, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and scholarly literature accessed through academic databases relevant to sociology and higher education. These documents were purposively selected for their direct engagement with themes of gender, inequality, symbolic boundaries, and academic identities within the Pakistani context. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for the systematic identification, coding, and interpretation of recurring patterns and meanings across the texts. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed to ensure close attention to context and nuanced representation of gendered experiences within academia. The analysis continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, where no new themes emerged from the data. Based on the synthesized themes, results were drawn and analytically interpreted, leading to contextually grounded conclusions about the reproduction and negotiation of gendered inequalities in Pakistani higher education institutions.

Results and Discussion

This section has been based on the six different themes on the subject under discussion as followings;

Theme 1: Intersectionality and Multiple Boundaries

Educational institutions are followed by the general culture of the societies (Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025a). In Pakistan, like every other institution, educational places are also backed by the gendered cultures and norms (Waris, Shoaib, Sharif, & Abdullah, 2025a). Higher educational institution observes patriarchal norms as well as believes that are visible at every level in Pakistan (Waris, Shoaib, Sharif, & Abdullah, 2025b). Students form their identities

based on the gendered culture and expectations of these institutions (Shoaib, Waris, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Perceived academic identities of both male and female gender are not merely products of disciplinary norms and cultural expectations but also supported by the many other elements. Students belonging to different social classes, race, Ethnicity, religion and nationality and their interplay with Gender create unique gendered academic identities in academic institutions (Waris, Shoaib, Sharif, & Abdullah, 2025c). Intersectionality is multidimensional approach that reinforces and strengthens the symbolic boundaries. Strong financial and urban culture exerts different impact on the self-construction of being a male and female (Waris, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). As well as when strong religious norms and expectations are backed by rural background then they result in quite different gendered personalities as well as academic identities among male and female students (Shoaib & Abdullah, 2025). For instance, male students belonging to rural middle class family holding a strong religious background is more likely to be reserved, less-confident and put extra efforts to achieve academic success and is more likely to be a student of STEM field (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b). Perceived academic expectations of such students are not only based on disciplinary and institutional norms but intersectionality of other social elements also plays a crucial role (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). Same like that, female students who belong to elite class has lesser religious and ethnical influences on their personality (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025c). Their social class is key determinant in shaping their gendered and academic identities that are drastically different from rest of the students (Ali, Shoaib, & Ali, 2025). Other social elements such as social class, economic status, residential area and socialization sometimes blur the line that sets both genders apart from each other especially in higher educational institutions in Pakistan (Ali, M. Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b). Symbolic boundaries within academia also influences by those factors other than gender and cultural norms (Iqbal, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). In present day, female students are prioritizing

male dominant fields to prove them equally competent and intelligent than male students (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025c). Moreover, male students are also not rigid to maintain their perceived masculine identities and gendered expectations in selection of disciplinary fields and other academic activities (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b). There are many higher educational institutions in different locations of rural and urban setting are established (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). Each institution is different in terms of academic culture and norms, disciplinary boundaries, perceived gendered and academic identities (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b). Multiple symbolic boundaries are observed in present day educational system of Pakistan because of the interconnection of various social identities (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). These layered identities result in varied access to the opportunities and resources (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025b). These differences are quite visible even within same gender especially in expensive and international educational institutions (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025a). It has become challenging for the institutions to maintain the gendered and symbolic boundaries in terms of gender whereas other factors are constantly being complicated and advanced with the passage of time (Shoaib, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025).

Theme 2: Identity Negotiation and Resistance

Although gendered identities and symbolic boundaries has been a prominent feature of educational institution in Pakistani education system (Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b). Masculine ideologies and parameters are prioritized at every level. But in recent centuries, the term gender has been part of debate among scholars and intellectuals (Shoaib, Iqbal, Rasool, & Abdullah, 2025). To maintain or to resist the gendered and academic identities of male and female is not as simple as it seems rather it has become quite a challenge (Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). It has become very ambiguous to determine what belongs to whom in term of gender. Male are supposed to practice masculine behavior and female are supposed to express feminine behavior but the gendered

associated behaviors have become questionable (Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). Both of the genders themselves have been trying to reshape the existing gendered patterns to break the rigid patriarchal norms (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025c). This practice is visible in everyday interactions patterns among students at higher education level (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025a). For instance, male students are supported to select the female associated fields like fine arts or fashion designing (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025b). On the other side female students are being equally recognized in STEM fields. Moreover, female students try to speak, dress and behave in manly manner to represent them as powerful, independent and expressive as men (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025c). Same like that male students are equally comfortable in a group of female students and they have developed the sense of gendered equality especially in educational system (Shoaib, Batool, Kausar, & Abdullah, 2025). Beside the micro level changes, there are planned macro-level strategies to negotiate the reformation and resistance of existing gendered identities (Shoaib & Ullah, 2025). Self-presentation at institutional level has become a way to redefine what is appropriate for female and what she is supposed to do (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025). For example, female students are participating in STEM fields more actively and are getting recognition, they are presenting themselves as a leader and entrepreneurs (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). They have become more calculative and earning members of the society (Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Ahmed, 2025). All of the existing knowledge and theories are male dominant including literature and history etc. but in present day opposite gender have developed counter narratives to justify and supports the equal importance and contribution of female in society (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025b). Educational institutions and society supports the collective actions to support female (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025a). In addition to that, collective actions of male and female in educational and academic activities are helpful to blur the perceived gendered differences among students (Ahmed, Shoaib, & Zaman, 2025). For example,

the incorporation of female ideology and opinions in technological interventions is helpful to minimize the monopoly of male ideology in the field of technology (Shoib, Ahmed, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). The widely accepted belief of masculine mentorship is now being replaced by the females as the number of female scholars has been increased prominently around the globe (Shoib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a). Same like that, the concept of feminism and feminist approaches in the fields of academics are now widely used to shift the focus from masculine only identity to feminine point of view (Shoib, Kausar, Ali, & Abdullah, 2025). This new approach has brought new consciences in the field of education especially at higher level in Pakistan (Shoib, Rasool, Kalsoom, & Ali, 2025).

Theme 3: Gendered Networks, Mentoring, and Social Capital

In Pakistan, the working mechanism of education system is contradictory in nature (Shoib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). Rules, regulations, policies and paper works are quite contrasting than the actual practices (Ali, Shoib, & Kausar, 2025). Although the system is supposed to work for all the students despite the gender and disciplines but in fact, the actual practices are contrasting and contradictory (Shoib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025c). Gender is again playing a central role to determine who will have the access to what extent (Shoib, Ali, & Kausar, 2025). Universities are interdisciplinary fields and so, networking is a basic tool to survive (Shoib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b). But again the distribution and access to the networks are also gendered and affected by the other elements such as social class and disciplinary cultures etc. Male students have easy access to the system (Shoib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b). Moreover, the social network of male students and staff is vast than those of female (Shoib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a). Huge range of social networking enables the efficient and quick access to the resources. Whereas, on the other hand the females have a small range of networks mostly within the same gender and discipline (Shoib & Bashir, 2025). So the female students and staff have less reliability over others in utilization of resources and opportunities (Shoib, Shamsher, & Iqbal,

2025). At university level, male have the culture of giving and taking favors that makes their daily routine and tasks easier for them whereas females try to rely on their own because of less social networking and thus they lag behind (Shoib, 2025b). As it has been part of discussion that almost every activity is gendered and depicts gendered boundaries, so is the case in mentorship (Shoib, 2025a). In Pakistan, the process of mentorship is gendered and mostly it happens unintentionally (Shoib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025b). For example, male teacher always supports and encourages male student to be financially strong, socially smart and competent to be a better earner (Shoib, Tariq, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025). On the other side, the same teacher tries to educate the female to be a better and socialized daughter and to be a housewife or make them realize that they do not necessarily have to take part in economic activities after completion of the degree (Shoib, Iqbal, & Iftikhar, 2025). Same like that female teachers have different intentions towards female than male (Shoib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025a). For instance, female teachers try to encourage men to study hard because they have to be an earning unit of the family (Shoib, Shamsher, & Iqbal, 2025). Following that female teachers' counseling to the female based on perceived gendered identity that is shaped by the cultural norms (Shoib & Zaman, 2025). Such mentoring patterns exert long lasting impacts on the long term decisions and career progression among male and female (Shoib, 2024e). Male have strong intentions and plans for future and female rely on their family to take decision for her future in Pakistan (Shoib & Ullah, 2021a). Alongside all these factors, access to the social capital also reinforces the symbolic boundaries among students (Ali, Zaman, & Shoib, 2024). Despite the gender of the student, social class is another prominent feature for formation of symbolic boundaries (Shoib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2023). Every social class occupies different level of social capitals (Shoib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024a, 2024b). Male and female students who belong to elite class academic circle have strong social capital and huge range of networking in educational institutions (Shoib, 2023c, 2024d). Such students have high level of

academic achievement in overall than rest of the students and vice versa.

Theme 4: Symbolic Boundaries in Academic Knowledge Production

Symbolic boundaries are relative in public and private sector institutions of Pakistan (Shoaib, 2024b). In general, the symbolic boundaries are in favor of male identity and supports male supremacy in educational field (Shoaib, 2024c). These gendered differences are not only apparent but deep rooted as well in academic knowledge production (Shoaib, 2024a). Powerful and authentic knowledge is produced and verified by the legitimate authorities that are supposed to be men especially in Pakistan (Shoaib, 2023b). Although females outnumber the male students at university level yet the female are always left behind when it comes to the authentic sources to produce and verify knowledge (Shoaib, 2023a). Female associated disciplines are less prioritized and are subjective as well as creative in nature and do not require scientific methods to be used (Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2022). So, these disciplines are not much focused in general. On the other hand, male dominant disciplines are powerful and important not just socially and technically but economically as well (Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2023). Because of these the educational institutions put more focus to develop these fields by increasing the resource allocations, budgets and better research works (Shoaib, Rasool, Anwar, & Ali, 2023). These patterns work like symbolic boundaries to differentiate the roles and expectations of male and female students as well as other authorities (Shoaib, Anwar, & Mustafa, 2022; Shoaib, Anwar, & Rasool, 2022). Most importantly, the financial control belongs to the male in the field of education. More power and resources are allocated to the male dominant disciplines including STEM (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, & Abdullah, 2022; Shoaib, Fatima, & Jamil, 2021). One possible explanation is that STEM fields are more productive and relate to the economics of the society, thus, these disciplines are put on priority as compare to the fields of arts and humanities (Shoaib, Tariq, Shahzadi, & Ali, 2022). Another explanation is that these disciplines are scientific and technical that

requires high maintenance and resources as compare to the other fields (Shoaib, 2021). Along with that the higher authorities that are responsible for policy making and budget allocation are male figures and representation of the female identities is very fewer (Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021; Shoaib, Iqbal, & Tahira, 2021). Similarly, the gendered production of knowledge is not structural only but is deep rooted in the system (Shoaib, Ahmad, Ali, & Abdullah, 2021). Academic identity of female and symbolic boundaries are developed in way that female is never considered equally competent to produce the knowledge rather she only has to accept and follow the given patterns (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, et al., 2021). Power-politics is another explanation of gendered knowledge production in higher educational institutions of Pakistan. Educational system is not neutral in terms of gender, social class culture and norms etc. both of the genders tries to hold and sustain the maximum power (Shoaib, Abdullah, & Ali, 2020). Many strategies are used for this purpose such as female authorities support female interests and male supports male identities (Shoaib, Abdullah, & Ali, 2021). Same like that female supports the female related research work and publication rather male supports male dominant ideologies and concepts in research works etc. gender biasness is towards resources, opportunities, funding, setting symbolic boundaries etc. is very prominent in Pakistan (Mariam, Anwar, Shoaib, & Rasool, 2021; Rafique & Shoaib, 2015; Shoaib & Rafique, 2015). This biasness is not just limited to the educational institutions but the overall structure of the society and other interconnected institutions also supports these differences and inequalities in favor of men (Shoaib & Ullah, 2021b). Female have less support from family to take part in field researches or outdoor academic activities and male do not have to face any restrictions from family and society (Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, et al., 2025a). Female are almost totally dependent on the family to support them financially but male is free to do part time jobs and to get engaged in other economic activities to support their academic expenses. Symbolic boundaries at university level support the

gendered production of knowledge in Pakistan (Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025).

Theme 5: Language, Discourse, and Gendered Academic Identity

Language is a foremost tool used in educational spaces to reinforce the gendered academic identities more prominently at higher education level (Ali, M. Shoaib, et al., 2025a). Language acts as a key determinant in depicting the power and knowledge within academia. Words holding powerful meanings are aligned with masculinity such as dominant, assertive, decision maker, strong, more intellectual and competent (Shoaib, 2021). Contrary to this, females are associated with less important and meaningful words such as submissive, dependent, emotional, less rational and calculative etc. Moreover, disciplinary language is also gendered biased that helps to reinforce the gendered differences among male and female (Shoaib, 2023a). Male dominant fields are scientific and empirical in nature whereas female dominant fields are theoretical based mostly (Shoaib, 2023b). In addition to that, the scholars, intellectuals and higher authorities especially male use different strategies including discourses and usage of rhetoric to construct gendered academic identities (Shoaib, 2023c). Logical presentation of the facts and representing the knowledge in a planned and strategic way so that the gendered differences are presented prominently is another feature of the educational institutions at higher level. Academic languages vary across disciplines and so is the power and credibility (Shoaib, 2024a). Apart from the academic language, social language in educational institutions also strengthens the gendered academic identities and power distribution (Shoaib, 2024c). Each institution at higher level does have a mechanism of power distribution and it is obvious that male figures are treated as better options and more eligible and female are treated at marginalized group more prominently intellectually and scholarly (Shoaib, 2024b). Gendered academic identity of male and female students is reinforced and manipulated by the discourses. In Pakistan, discourses are backed by the overall gendered culture and norms of society (Shoaib, 2024d). These discourses serve their

function to highlight, disseminate and to persuade the gendered differences in shaping academic identities (Shoaib, 2024e). In Pakistan, discourses are constructed by the legitimate authorities, persuaded through formal means of education as well as communication and are used to sustain the academic identities at different level (Shoaib, 2025b). Gendered discourses in Pakistani educational system are heavily influenced by the masculinity and patriarchal norms of the society and keeping female at marginalizing edge (Shoaib, 2025a). These gendered discourses prevail at micro level including classroom activities, group discussion, student teacher interactions and at micro level such as through contents, curriculum and through intellectual and scholarly work etc. all of the existing patterns of work and system at higher educational institutions are aimed at to pursue the gendered difference among male and female for smooth and desired functioning of the institutions (Shoaib, 2023b). Gendered academic discourses are so powerful that key is believed and accepted as ultimate fact and truth. Legitimacy of male authorities and marginalization of female in academia is reinforced with the help of language as well as the discourses (Shoaib, 2021). Gendered academic identities of male and female are recurring with the help of academia and academic strategies (Shoaib, 2024c).

Theme 6: Globalization, Transnational Academia, and gendered identity

Educational spaces are not only based on national and local culture but are now under a heavy influence of the globalization (Shoaib, 2025a). In present day and age, globalization has caused drastic changes in the normative and cultural patterns in all over the world (Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021). Educational institutions of Pakistan are not exemption to this process. Local and national culture of Pakistan has been heavily influenced because of the globalization as well as the educational system (Shoaib & Bashir, 2025). Academic disciplines, content and curriculum, teaching and learning strategies, expectations towards the opposite gender etc. have been reshaped by the international patterns (Shoaib & Ullah, 2021b). Gendered identities of male and female have been reshaping lately because of the

global influence. Gendered differences among male and female has also been blurred in higher educational spaces of Pakistan to a great extent in terms of perceived academic identities by both of the genders (Shoaib & Ullah, 2021a). Male have less pressure to pursue the traditionally male dominant disciplines and to follow the traditional patriarchal expectations set by the society. Same like that female now have a wide range of opportunities and disciplines to choose from as being part of higher educational institutions (Shoaib & Ullah, 2025). Internationally, gendered practices and standards have been reshaping because of globalization and have been influencing the gendered practices in Pakistan as well (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a). At international level, male and female both are treated as a student despite the fact of their gender. Female and male academic identities are recognized on the basis of merit, actual intellect and linguistic hegemony and not on the basis of perceived expectations by the culture and society (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b). The process of globalization has not only impacted the gendered academic identities but also has been impacting the persisting symbolic boundaries in Pakistan. Symbolic boundaries are far different at international level of education as compared to the Pakistan (Shoaib, 2023a). However, in Pakistan, symbolic boundaries are backed by the gender and cultural as well as normative patterns of the country. Symbolic boundaries of educational spaces are often categorizing as global vs. local identities (Shoaib, 2021). Global academic identities are rendered as western cultured based, global collaboration and following the global agendas in their academics especially in the field of research. However, to the other hand local identities are based on the production and promotion of the indigenous and local culture based knowledge and employing local languages than the international languages. These Global and local academic identities are not only confined to the male and female figures but also to the structural and institutional level as well (Shoaib, 2024c). Globalization and advancing academic identities has triggered the academic mobility all around the world. International migration been increased significantly on the basis of higher education. However, in Pakistan

academic mobility and migration for educational purpose is also gendered (Shoaib, 2024b). Male figures are prioritized to international migration especially for higher education to get more financial benefits and job opportunities (Shoaib, 2024d). Contrary to this, females have fewer chances for academic mobility not only internationally but within country as well (Shoaib, 2024e). Moreover, female is often restricted from migration as it is considered inappropriate for a female due to many social, cultural and economic barriers in Pakistan (Shoaib, 2023b). As male have clearly more options and easy access to the ultimate opportunities thus, they are more likely to be visible as stronger and legitimate in terms of academic figure and female are considered as marginalized group at both national and global level (Shoaib, 2024a).

Theoretical Insights

This study is anchored in the concept of symbolic boundaries, as articulated by Lamont and Molnar (2002), which emphasizes the socially constructed distinctions that categorize, rank, and separate individuals and groups within society. Symbolic boundaries shape perceptions of legitimacy, competence, and belonging, making them particularly relevant for understanding gendered academic identities in hierarchical institutions such as universities. Bourdieu's (1984) notions of cultural and social capital further complement this framework by highlighting how access to resources, recognition, and institutional support is unevenly distributed, often reinforcing gendered hierarchies. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) provides an additional lens to examine how multiple axes of inequality gender, class, and regional or ethnic background intersect to produce differentiated academic experiences. Together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate how structural inequalities, institutional practices, and individual agency interact to construct, maintain, and occasionally challenge gendered academic identities in Pakistan.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that gendered academic identities in Pakistan are neither fixed nor solely a product of individual choice; rather, they are

socially constructed through the interplay of symbolic boundaries, institutional practices, and intersecting inequalities. Female academics navigate a landscape shaped by both overt and subtle forms of exclusion, including limited access to leadership roles, differential recognition of expertise, and cultural expectations surrounding gendered behavior. At the same time, the findings highlight the agency of women in negotiating, contesting, and sometimes redefining these boundaries within universities, demonstrating that symbolic boundaries are dynamic and subject to challenge. By applying theoretical insights from symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnar, 2002), Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital (1984), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), the research underscores how structural, institutional, and individual factors intersect to produce differentiated experiences of inclusion and marginalization. In the long run, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how systemic inequalities are reproduced and resisted in higher education, offering implications for policy and practice aimed at fostering more equitable and inclusive academic environments in Pakistan.

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