

EFFECT OF SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS ON WOMEN'S CAREER ADVANCEMENT IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS AT SCHOOL LEVEL IN PUNJAB

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effect of socio-cultural barriers on women's career advancement in leadership positions at the school level in Punjab. Despite growing awareness of gender equity in education, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles. The research highlights how deeply rooted societal norms, cultural expectations, gender stereotypes, and traditional family roles restrict women's professional growth. It explores the influence of community attitudes, religious perceptions, and resistance to female authority within educational institutions. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, the study gathers insights from female administrators, revealing how socio-cultural factors undermine confidence, limit opportunities, and reinforce male dominance in decision-making roles. The findings stress the urgent need for policy reforms, awareness campaigns, and institutional support to challenge these barriers and promote inclusive leadership in Punjab's school system.

Key Words: Socio-Cultural Barriers, Women's, Career Advancement, Leadership, School, Punjab.

INTRODUCTION

Career advancement aligns employees' goals with organizational needs through a structured approach. Career development can be conceptualized as a dynamic, behavioral process that influences an individual's professional trajectory, encompassing key aspects such as career choices, role integration, career progression patterns, professional identity formation, work-related values, and decision-making approaches (Kow Kwah & Lee, 2021). Career mobility can be pursued for a number of reasons, such as improving present performance, motivating staff to take advantage of future employment chances, and accomplishing organizational goals and objectives.

But according to earlier research, women face greater obstacles to job success than men do since they frequently have to put work and family obligations before of their education and professional development. This makes it difficult to balance obligations to your family and your employment. Furthermore, Karen (2013) discovered that women are rarely promoted to senior management positions due to the placement of female employees in lower-level or less influential roles in particular fields, such as people, financial specialty, and public relations. Since men usually hold the highest positions of authority, such as presidents or chief executive officers, women's contributions to senior positions remain mostly inconsequential. The incapacity of women to advance to the highest executive

positions has become a major area of study and discussion as more of them join the workforce (Karen, 2013). Unlike their male counterparts, women find obstacles to advancement in companies.

Despite gaining managerial experience, women in many countries still face the glass ceiling. According to research, women face the glass ceiling more frequently as they advance up the managerial ladder, and career obstacles for women manifest significantly earlier than for males. There is a dearth of empirical study on gender stereotypes in organizations, especially in the public service sector, according to Barker & Monks (1998). They concluded that, although women may overcome certain career obstacles up to a certain degree in the hierarchy, they face more rigid barriers that are challenging to overcome after that.

In Pakistan, women's status varies significantly within the social hierarchy largely due to the country's traditional and patriarchal society, which harbors a wide range of attitudes. Societal norms often perpetuate stereotypical gender roles and expectations (Klein and Nestvogel, 1992; Ibrah, 1993), leading to the frequent neglect of women's fundamental rights. This oversight stems from a lack of understanding of the Qur'an's true teachings, which emphasize gender equality and women's empowerment (Shah & Shah, 2012).

Patriarchal systems are more deeply entrenched in rural and tribal regions, including Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, and Rural Sindh. In these areas, traditional customs and practices reinforce male dominance over women. As a result, initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality are often overlooked, and constitutional provisions designed to protect women's rights are frequently ignored. This perpetuates a cycle of dependence, where women rely heavily on men, and reinforces a patriarchal culture that prioritizes male authority (Shah & Shah, 2012).

A shift is underway in contemporary attitudes toward girls' education in Pakistan, according to Lall (2009). Traditional cultural barriers to girls' education are gradually diminishing, and structural changes in Pakistani society are contributing to greater acceptance of educating

girls. In fact, more parents in rural areas are now sending their daughters to school, leading to an increase in the gross enrollment rate (Lall, 2009). Nevertheless, notable gender differences in literacy and educational attainment still exist in spite of these advancements, especially in suburban regions (FBS, 2011; Murtaza, 2012). This implies that even while views are shifting, much more has to be done to ensure gender equality in the classroom.

Unlike their rural counterparts, urban women from middle-class and upper-class families are having better access to education and work possibilities, which gives them more control over their life (Khan, 2007). The widespread disparity in women's status and rights, however, endures in all spheres of Pakistani society and is still a major concern in spite of these advancements (Saeed, 2004).

The complexities of this challenge extend beyond cultural factors, as institutional barriers and conflicting values - both modern and traditional - continue to hinder women's empowerment and undermine their roles in society (HEC, 2004).

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To identify the effect of Socio-Cultural barriers on women's career advancement in leadership positions at school level.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What major barriers do women face at Socio-Cultural level to their career advancement in leadership positions at school level?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Working with Karau to create the role congruity theory, Eagly's social role theory developed (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Because leadership responsibilities are traditionally linked with masculine attributes. Considering female leaders to be less promising than their male counterparts is the first type. The second type occurs when actual female leaders are subjected to biased evaluations or unfair treatment due to their gender a harsher evaluation because their

leadership responsibilities don't align with traditional gender norms.

According to Eagly & Karau (2002), these biases foster a culture in which women are less likely to hold leadership positions and encounter greater barriers to success in them. Furthermore, Eagly & Sczesny (2009) contend that the distinctions and parallels between cultural preconceptions of men, women, and leaders are the basis for the difficulties and advantages faced by female leaders. Two kinds of expectations are produced by cultural stereotypes: prescriptive beliefs, which describe the ideal characteristics of a group, and descriptive beliefs, which describe the actual characteristics of each group. Regardless of the social or organizational setting, these stereotypes impact behavior, which puts female leaders in a difficult situation because gender norms and leadership don't align. Women's access to leadership positions and professional progress are hampered by this type of prejudice.

Although Eagly & Sczesny (2009) recognize that there has been a paradigm shift toward women leaders as a result of shifting leadership preconceptions, this transformation has been gradual, especially in professions where males predominate. Kottke and Agars (2005) make a distinction between gender, which is associated with individual, societal, and cultural views of sexuality, and sex, which is a biological term based on innate features. Women are still underrepresented despite tremendous societal advances and laws, particularly in developing nations where negative socialization patterns prevent women from entering the workforce and holding leadership positions (Sidani, Alison, & Charlotte, 2015).

Research indicates a consensus that societal and cultural expectations associate leadership qualities with males (Williams, 2016). This stereotype prevents women from advancing in organizational hierarchies, with Heilman (2001) noting that it can derail even the most competent women's careers. According to feminist scholars, these expectations are perpetuated throughout adulthood after being engrained in early infancy (Thorne, 1993). Research indicates that the way society views gender roles deters women from

pursuing leadership jobs (Baran, 2012). The majority of domestic duties have historically been performed by women, while males are viewed as the breadwinners of physically demanding occupations (World Bank, 2016). Women often struggle to balance professional and family roles, a challenge not equally faced by men. Employers may prefer to hire individuals without such distractions, disadvantaging women who typically hold primary caregiving responsibilities (Acker, 1990).

In such environments, women who attain leadership positions often feel pressured to adopt masculine leadership styles to prove their competence. This 'think manager-think male' syndrome is emphasized in many studies, with some suggesting that women must act and think like men to succeed in leadership roles (Schein, Mueller, & Lituchy, 1996). In order to fit into top management roles, women may therefore repress their natural behaviors (Boulgarides, 1984). Nonetheless, when women exhibit authoritative and assertive leadership, they are frequently criticized for not meeting the stereotype and are also considered unfit if they don't (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Thus, women face a double standard where neither choice is valued or appreciated.

Gender stereotyping in the workplace has its roots in the Social Role Theory of Eagly and Cowley (1986). According to the hypothesis, people generally act in ways that fit the social roles that correspond to their gender that conform to social norms that are distinctive to their gender. For instance, women are viewed as caregivers at home and at work, whereas males are viewed as heroes due to their agency and authority (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Two important components of gender stereotyping are communality (e.g., care for others, sociability, emotional sensitivity) and agency (e.g., assertiveness, independence, leadership competency) (Hentschel, Heilman, & Peus, 2019). The perceived clash between masculine and feminine ideas in the workplace gives rise to stereotypes and negative responses (Clow & Ricciardelli, 2011). Because they are thought to be incapable of leading effectively, women leaders frequently experience prejudice (Eagly & Sczesny, 2019).

The continuation of gender preconceptions is another significant barrier to women's career development. Macarie et al. (2011) claim that the underrepresentation of women in senior management is due to cultural views about gender roles. Women's job advancement is often limited by patriarchal societal structures and family systems, which confine them to traditional tasks such as caring for in-laws, raising children, and performing home chores (Sowjanya et al., 2017). Additionally, Schwanke (2013) asserts that cultural elements reinforce preconceptions and assumptions that prevent women from assuming leadership roles, especially in industries where men predominate.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A research design is a strategy for collecting, evaluating, and interpreting data in accordance with the research questions of the study (Sekaran, 2009). The research was explanatory sequential in nature. In an explanatory sequential design,

women's career advancement in leadership roles at the school level in Punjab is analyzed, with a focus on the impacts and obstacles, by first collecting quantitative data and then qualitative data.

Population

All the Headmistress working in Govt. Girls Secondary schools in Punjab were the population of the study.

Sampling & Sample Size

The sample was based on only Headmistresses of girl's secondary schools. 1658 Headmistress were worked on leadership positions in girls high schools. Therefore, 10% sample was selected randomly from 1658 which was consist of 165 Headmistress. Simple random sampling technique was employed for quantitative data.

Research Instrument:

A closed ended questionnaire and structured interview schedule was used as a tool for this study.

Quantitative Results

Table 1: Socio-Cultural Barriers

Descriptive analysis of "Culture & Traditions"

Sr#	Statement	SA	A	N.A/N.DS	DA	SD	Mean	S.D
Culture and Traditions								
1.	Traditions and cultures still restrain my movement towards leadership position	18.2	55.2	7.9	16.4	2.4	2.30	1.025
2.	My culture have given this impression that top management positions are only suitable for men	17.6	51.5	7.9	18.8	4.2	2.41	1.109
3.	People in my culture believe that a woman is supposed to be a subordinate and not the boss.	16.4	46.1	9.7	23.0	4.8	2.54	1.156
4.	Traditional attitude of women as weaker sex has an effect on women career advancement	17.0	46.1	12.7	20.6	3.6	2.48	1.108
Total		69.2%	198.9%	38.2%	78.8%	15%	2.43	1.09

The preceding table's (M=2.43, S.D=1.09) led to the conclusion that the effect of culture and traditions on headmistress in leadership positions was low.

Table 2

Descriptive analysis of "Racism & Biasness in recruitment"

Sr#	Statement	SA	A	N.A/N.DS	DA	SD	Mean	S.D
	Racism and bias in recruitment							
1.	Racism and bias in hiring women, delayed the women's progress	14.5	43.0	17.6	20.0	4.8	2.58	1.111
2.	Institutional bias which begins at the hiring stage continues throughout women's careers	9.1	47.9	19.4	20.0	3.6	2.61	1.022
	Total	23.6%	90.9%	37%	40%	8.4%	2.59	1.06

The preceding table's (M=2.59, S.D=1.06) led to the conclusion that the effect of racism and biasness in recruitment on headmistress in leadership positions was low.

Table 3

Descriptive analysis of "Gender Discrimination"

Sr#	Statement	SA	A	N.A/N.DS	DA	SD	Mean	S.D
	Gender Discrimination							
1.	Due to bias and discrimination against women they are paid less than men	10.9	37.0	15.2	32.1	4.8	2.83	1.140
2.	Women's career advancement is hindered by the unequal employment opportunities	17.6	52.1	11.5	16.4	2.4	2.34	1.027
3.	Gender biases are the most frequent barriers to women's advancement	12.1	58.8	10.9	15.8	2.4	2.38	.971
	Total	40.6%	147.9%	37.6%	64.3%	9.6%	2.51	1.04

The preceding table's (M=2.51, S.D=1.04) led to the conclusion that the effect of gender discrimination on headmistress in leadership positions was low.

Table 4

Descriptive analysis of "Insufficient policies & Programs to address the gender issues"

Sr#	Statement	SA	A	N.A/N.DS	DA	SD	Mean	S.D
	Insufficient policies and programs to address gender issues							
1.	There are great inconsistencies across the countries in developing policies and programs to support women's career advancement	13.3	57.6	13.3	13.3	2.4	2.34	.953

2.	Despite fulfilling the criteria for promotion, women's are still not promoted.	9.1	46.7	13.3	26.7	4.2	2.70	1.089
Total		22.4%	104.3%	26.6%	40%	6.6%	2.52	1.02

The preceding table's (M=2.52, S.D=1.02) led to the conclusion that the effect of insufficient policies and programs to address gender issues on headmistress in leadership positions was low.

Qualitative Results

Traditions and Culture

Social assumptions about gender roles are greatly influenced by customs and cultural norms. Women's severely hampered in many nations by deeply ingrained cultural ideas that women's major obligations are family, childcare, and household chores. These societal and cultural norms both covertly and blatantly impede women's advancement and their ability to rise to the highest echelons of organizations (Saher & Matloob, 2014).

Women's respond that...,

I have personal experience, how deeply ingrained customs and cultural norms can prevent women's from rising to leadership positions since I am a woman working in the education sector, especially at the school level. It is more difficult for women like me to advance to leadership positions because of these cultural norms, which frequently influence the work environment and how society perceives women's duties.

The idea that a woman's first duty is to her family and home is still very prevalent in my culture. Despite my love for teaching and desire to assume leadership positions, I have frequently felt under pressure to put my responsibilities as a wife and mother before my own professional development. I had occasionally considered seeking for a leadership position, but I refrained since I knew it would involve additional work and responsibility, which could be interpreted as ignoring my obligations to my family.

The actual educational setting is influenced by cultural norms as well. Because they felt that men were more powerful and more suited to make administrative decisions, parents and even coworkers occasionally favored male bosses. Even though I was just as qualified as or more qualified than my male peers, this bias undermined my confidence and made me feel like I had to prove myself all the time.

Racism and Biasness

Women from racial and ethnic minority origins experience "double jeopardy," which is the term used to describe the combined consequences of racial prejudice and gender discrimination. Their work experiences are shaped by these overlapping biases, which also limit their access to leadership chances and seriously impede their ability to advance in their careers (Schaefer, 2008).

Women's respond that...,

I am speaking from my experience, how racism and bias in the hiring process can severely impede my ability to grow in my career and assume leadership position as a woman. The injustice of hiring and promotion decisions frequently left me feeling ignored and underappreciated, even when I had the credentials, expertise, and drive to advance in my profession. Being passed over for leadership positions even though I fulfilled all the requirements was one of the most discouraging experiences I've ever had. In several cases, I applied for a senior position, but it was awarded to a male colleague who was less qualified. It caused me to wonder if my abilities were actually being taken into account or if my gender and race were the true obstacles preventing me from moving forward.

Gender Discrimination

One widespread obstacle that seriously impedes women's advancement into leadership positions is gender discrimination. Unfair treatment, skewed assessments, restricted access to opportunities, and exclusion from decision-making processes are some of its overt and covert manifestations. When taken as a whole, these discriminatory behaviors limit women's career advancement, deter women from pursuing leadership positions, and strengthen male-dominated leadership frameworks (Valian, 2005).

Women's respond that...,

Throughout my professional trajectory, I have personally experienced the burden of culturally ingrained gender

discrimination as a woman, particularly while pursuing leadership position. My professional development has frequently been hampered by the deeply held views in the culture I'm a part of about what a woman's position should be.

In my experience, a lot of people still believe that men should be in charge. I frequently encountered tacit opposition or remarks such as "Are you sure you can manage both work and home?" or "Leadership requires tough decisions, which can be hard for women" when I indicated interest in leadership positions. Although these comments weren't always intended to be hurtful, they did represent a style of thinking that was influenced by cultural norms that prioritize men as leaders and women as caregivers.

Insufficient Policies and Programs

Women's career advancement is severely hampered by the lack or insufficiency of supportive policies and initiatives within organizations, particularly with regard to leadership positions. Women frequently encounter obstacles that restrict their upward mobility in the workplace when explicit frameworks that support gender equity, work-life balance, and professional development are not put in place. These disparities reinforce male-dominated leadership systems and sustain inequality (Maki, 2015).

Women's respond that...

As a woman hoping to advance into leadership positions, I have seen that the effects of inadequate workplace regulations and support systems, which have made my path to leadership far more difficult than it has to be. Women like me frequently feel stuck, underappreciated, and ill-prepared to move into senior positions when there are no clear, encouraging policies in place.

I consequently lost out on important chances for networking and skill development, both of which are critical for advancing in leadership. Transparency was also lacking in promotion and performance reviews. Because there were no equitable methods to acknowledge and reward women's contributions, I occasionally felt that my accomplishments went unnoticed and that there were unclear standards for determining who would be given leadership roles. Because I frequently witnessed men progressing more quickly than I did, even when I

had performed on par with or better, this gave me a sense of inequality.

Discussion

Socio-cultural barriers significantly affect women's career advancement, particularly in leadership roles. These barriers stem from deep-rooted cultural norms, societal expectations, gender stereotypes, and traditional beliefs that dictate specific roles for men and women. In many societies, including regions like Punjab, these norms often confine women to domestic roles and discourage them from pursuing ambitious careers, especially in leadership positions.

One of the most profound socio-cultural barriers is gender role expectations. Women are often expected to prioritize family responsibilities over professional ambitions. This expectation places an additional burden on working women, who must balance their careers with caregiving duties. As a result, women may be overlooked for promotions, denied leadership roles, or may voluntarily opt out of career advancement opportunities due to family obligations and societal pressure.

Patriarchal values also contribute significantly to the underrepresentation of women in leadership.

Leadership is frequently associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness, dominance, and authority. Consequently, women who display leadership qualities may be viewed negatively or as deviating from social norms. This perception can lead to workplace bias, where female leaders are not taken as seriously as their male counterparts, or are subjected to higher scrutiny and criticism.

Another crucial factor is the lack of role models and mentors for aspiring women leaders. Due to historical and ongoing gender disparities, there are fewer women in high-level leadership positions. This scarcity makes it difficult for young women to envision themselves in leadership roles, and deprives them of mentorship that is often essential for career growth and professional development.

Cultural taboos and restrictions, particularly in conservative or rural areas, may limit women's mobility and participation in professional environments. For example, norms that restrict women's travel, public speaking, or interaction with men can significantly hinder their ability to

lead effectively. These limitations reinforce the perception that leadership is unsuitable or inaccessible for women.

Socialization processes also play a significant role. From an early age, girls are often socialized to be compliant, nurturing, and dependent, whereas boys are encouraged to be independent, ambitious, and assertive. This early conditioning affects self-perception and career aspirations, making many women feel less confident or less entitled to leadership roles.

Lastly, religious interpretations and community pressures can sometimes be misused to justify gender inequality, discouraging women from stepping into public or authoritative roles. While not inherently oppressive, certain interpretations of religion may reinforce patriarchal norms that limit women's professional growth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, socio-cultural barriers present significant challenges to women's career advancement, particularly in leadership roles. Deeply embedded gender norms, traditional expectations, and societal pressures often limit women's opportunities and discourage them from pursuing higher positions. These cultural constraints not only impact women's confidence and career choices but also reinforce workplace biases and restrict access to mentorship and support systems. As a result, women's leadership potential remains largely untapped. Addressing these issues requires a collective effort to shift societal attitudes, promote gender equality, and create inclusive environments that support women's growth and leadership at all levels.

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