

GENDER-BASED DIFFERENCES IN THE LEADERSHIP ROLES: EXPERIENCES OF ACADEMIC HEADS IN GOVERNMENT COLLEGES

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ABSTRACT

This research utilizes a qualitative approach to study how gender affects the leadership activities and experiences of academic heads who work at Pakistani government colleges. Academic heads who are women encounter distinctive problems which include gender-based stereotypes alongside insufficient mentorship support and difficulties managing personal and professional responsibilities even though they maintain comparable job positions to their male counterparts. The Role Congruity Theory guides this research that examines leadership hindrances as well as decision processes and inclusivity patterns using interviews with educational institution leaders. Female executives who work in environments dominated by men need to modify their actions so they can function effectively though they encounter employment prejudice and structural challenges that bar their career advancement. This investigation demonstrates the necessity to develop gender-aware policies together with mentoring systems and institutional system changes which support leadership equality. This research seeks to enhance government college leadership gender equality through academic inclusion by identifying the changes which will promote equal representation and leadership effectiveness.

Keywords: Leadership, academic heads, gender-based differences, equality, Inclusion, challenges, experiences

INTRODUCTION

Headship in learning institutions acts as a key player in the provision of education and acts as agents of change by shaping the education culture and policies. Such experiences and difficulties which the leaders undergo, depend on their gender, as the culture and expectations of the society affect them together with the organizational culture. In Pakistani culture where women are confined to their homes and are not seen holding traditional powerful roles of society, leadership profiles of male and female government college are influenced by certain set of factors that are consistent with the Pakistani culture.

Women and men act as academic heads in government colleges and although both are employed on similar posts, for different colleges,

they have different patterns to how they attained their leadership positions, how they make decisions and the issues they are likely to face in this capacity. A male candidate may be more advantaged by traditional masculine perceptions of power and control, while women leaders encounter obstacles in form of stereotyping, work and family conflict, and lack of support and mentorship. The disparities impact the different career zones of such persons while also affecting institutional efficiency and diversity.

A trend that has attracted more study is the gender equity in leadership positions but few works have been dedicated to reveal how gender plays a role in the leadership positions of heads of institution in Pakistan. These gender differences must be known

to forge ways on how both sexes could be treated fairly to foster and encourage the empowered leadership of male and female leaders alike effectively. Explicitly, this qualitative research will attempt to find out gender disparities in leadership positions and responsibilities of academic leaders in government colleges of Pakistan. It is through exploring their struggles, possibilities, and viewpoints that this study aims at offering an understanding of how gender plays into leadership and offer suggestions on how the academic sphere can create balance of the leadership experience.

Challenges include the fact that leadership is socially constructed in many societies as a masculine domain and hence female leaders in education could experience sexism from male counterparts; secondly, women leaders are often expected to work much harder than men to assume leadership roles (Coleman, 2000, 2001, 2003; Lyness and Heilman, 2006; Olsson and Walker, 2003). But with the introduction SDGs, restructuring of Pakistani woman's identity has emerged, which calls for constructing fairly transparent and safer environment for the women to grow and perform their best to achieve SDG-5 i.e., gender equality set by United Nation (UNDP, 2020). Every society needs to undergo self-check often, to be able to shed negative thought processes. This research is one step in that direction which uses the feminist educational perspective to theorise the ecological context into which educational leaders in the strategic gendered culturally sensitive context of Pakistan are situated. Previously researchers attempted to identify the level of gender equality in leading academic medicine and sciences in different countries of the world. Contrasting to expectations, gender imbalance is observed both in different tiers and nations, including those nations which have obtained the highest scores in gender equality indicators that is the Nordic nations (European Commission, 2019). A study by the European Commission reveals that out of all the professors in the member states in Europe, only one-quarter is women (European Commission, 2019). Likewise, in medical schools of United States of America (USA), only 18% of the heads of the departments are females only (Carr et al., 2018). Research also indicated that gender-based disparities are complex and many extrinsic and intrinsic causes of the problem have been established. (Hartmark-Hill, Hale, & Gallitano, 2021) (Györfy,

Dweik, & Girasek, 2016)

Nevertheless, majority of the scholarly research articles on the facet of women and leadership in AM have been carried out in the developed countries of Europe, United States and Canada (Alwazzan & Al-Angari, 2020). In this regard, a country like Pakistan creates the best setting to explore and evaluate the challenges that these women face in order to achieve leadership roles in government colleges. Pakistan is one of the largest South Asian countries that was under British colonization and has over 241 million populations and 48.54% of the women population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). In fact, the strictly conservative and patriarchal system prevailing throughout the country has a profound impact on culture and gender (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022) thus limiting women's chances of career options and promotion to a greater extent (Mohsin & Syed, 2020).

Pakistan's job market, in general, is male-dominated with only given professions of teaching or of medical practice accepted to be qualified for the female population of Pakistan. Women students comprise nearly 70 percent of students in Pakistani medical schools although only 50 percent register with PMDC, and even less practice medicine as a career (Rafia, 2013). There is a great gap in understanding gender-based differences in extent and experience of leaders from a non-western perspective.

Recently, all-boys government colleges have started hiring women faculty members and students in their BS programs affiliated with different universities. Although women academic heads share equal responsibilities and roles as their male counterparts, they remain underrepresented in leadership positions in male-dominated institutions. This study also aims to explore the experiences and challenges faced by women academic heads in government colleges in Pakistan, highlighting the differences in their roles and experiences in order to bring them into the mainstream.

For the qualitative study "Understanding Gender Based Differences in the Leadership Roles and Experiences of Academic Heads in Government Colleges in Pakistan", the semi structured Interview Guide for 30 - 40 minutes' session with heads of department, vice principals and senior principals of the government colleges has been designed. It explores the following research

questions: What background experiences including tenure and motivation for the role, leadership roles and experiences where responsibilities, decision making, conflict management etc, influence gendered expectations and disparities among academic leaders? What barriers women has to encounter while being in the leadership position especially in a male-dominated institution. What part cultural and religious dynamics play in creating gender-based differences in the roles and experiences of academic leaders. In this study, we seek to capture the ways in which participants perceived their roles, focusing in particular on the role of gender in shaping their leadership experiences.

Gender representation in leadership roles in academia is a critical issue across the world, with women being underrepresented in roles in higher education institutions. Government colleges have also been proven to show comparative results that women are a small percentage of leaders holding principal or director posts. The study highlights several causes of the gender gap in academic leadership such as gendered society stereotypes, structural constraints within institutions as well as the socio-economic environment surrounding career options available. Leadership opportunities should be equally available to women and men as women may employ a different teaching modality and style than men. (Schrouff et al., 2019)

Another study discusses systematic imbalances in research, management, and service duties in academia noted in the literature. Women academics have issues concerning acknowledgement, low citation status and peer-review mechanisms (Ackers, 2010). Several areas of concerns in experience of women academic leaders in government colleges have been market out from the findings of the present study. These are barriers based in career development and discrimination, work-family conflict due to family obligations, management of leadership in masculine organizations, and looking for female role models that would offer support (Smith et al., 2004). To redress these imbalances, call for use of policies to recruit women and other marginalized groups to leadership positions in academic institutions, gender sensitivity training for members of faculties, deans and directors, fostering of women's mentorship programs, work flexibility and challenging of gender attitudes in society through

awareness creation and advocacy (Schrouff et al., 2019).

A number of investigations have identified citation bias by gender across scientific fields in the last couple of years (Zhou et al., 2020). Work produced by female primary or senior authors can be cited less often than work produced by their male counterparts (Chatterjee et al., 2022). This disparity in citation could have some far-reaching effect on promotion and career status of women within the university systems. Further, Helmer et al., (2017) revealed that gender prejudices are present in peer review mechanisms. However, even in this regard, the gender related stereotyping or expectations is likely to impact the evaluation of leadership performance (Eagly & Carli, 2007). A study shows that the gender gap in academic careers increases with an increase in the levels of a career. For example, women in the United States entering the rank of principal investigator at a rate about 20% lower than their male counterparts (Lerchenmueller & Sorenson, 2018). Such trends persist in the other countries and the respective agencies (Burns et al., 2019; McAllister et al., 2016; Pohlhaus et al., 2011). In addition, scholars have found out that while pursuing their first year of education after high school, women are 1.5 times more likely to disengage from STEM higher education than men (Ellis et al., 2016). It only goes further to widen the gap in between men and women when it comes to academic appointments. Women leaders in academic medicine use humor to confront gender-related issues and experience aggressive gender-based humor in the workplace, and the constraints placed on women leaders discourage them from effectively confronting this aggressive gender-based humor and perpetuating gender inequities. (Hobgood et al., 2024)

Understanding gender-based differences in academic leadership roles and experiences is crucial for promoting equity and excellence in higher education institutions. The research highlights persistent disparities but also identifies areas where targeted interventions can make a positive impact. Further studies examining specific strategies to increase women's representation in top leadership positions would be valuable for informing policy and practice in this area. (Meza-Mejia et al., 2023)

It is important to understand the reasons for gender-based differences leadership in college and what might be reasonable and effective for both

gender in the academic profession. However, the studies prove that inequality still persists; at the same time, they reveal some potential for the enhancement. A research synthesis of best practices on improving women's managers' status and likelihood of accessing the executive suite would be informative for future research. (Meza-Mejia et al., 2023)

The literature consistently highlights the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership positions. A study by Kuhlmann and Ovseiko (2017) emphasizes that women are significantly outnumbered in top leadership roles across European academic health centers, pointing to structural barriers that hinder women's progress (Kuhlmann & Ovseiko, 2017). Similarly, Shahzad et al. (2024) found that in Pakistani medical and dental colleges, cultural biases and institutional practices significantly affect women's advancement to leadership roles (Shahzad et al., 2024).

Research by Coleman (2007) indicates that gender impacts access to leadership roles, with women often facing more obstacles than men in educational leadership in England (Coleman, 2007). Acker (2010) discusses the concept of "gendered games" in academic leadership, where institutional cultures often favor male leadership styles, thereby disadvantaging female leaders (Acker, 2010). The methodological approaches in these studies vary, but mixed methods designs are common. For instance, Yadav and Lata (2018) utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore leadership experiences of female administrators in India, highlighting the pervasive impact of gender bias (Yadav & Lata, 2018). Qamar et al. (2020) employed a similar approach to investigate gender disparities in Canadian academic radiology departments (Qamar et al., 2020). A recurring theme is the double bind faced by women, who are expected to balance traditional leadership traits with gender-specific expectations. Bhatti and Ali (2020) explore this dynamic in Pakistani universities, noting that women leaders often face harsher evaluations than their male counterparts (Bhatti & Ali, 2020).

Mentorship and networking are identified as critical factors for advancing women's careers. Ozkanli et al. (2008) stress the importance of these resources in Australia, where women have less access to mentorship compared to men (Ozkanli et al., 2008). This finding is supported by research

from Investopedia (2020), which highlights the gender gap in academic leadership and the need for targeted mentorship programs (Investopedia, 2020). Policy interventions are also crucial. A study by the American Council on Education (2020) shows that institutions with active gender equity policies see more balanced representation in leadership roles (American Council on Education, 2020). This is echoed by Chao (2020), who advocates for systemic changes to eliminate gender biases in higher education leadership (Chao, 2020). Despite these insights, there are significant gaps in the literature. Many studies call for more longitudinal research to understand the long-term impacts of gender equity initiatives. For example, research by Nietzel (2022) at U.S. universities suggests that while some progress has been made, deeply ingrained biases still persist (Nietzel, 2022). Comparative studies, such as those by the World Economic Forum (2022), provide a global perspective on gender disparities, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive approaches to promote gender equality in leadership (World Economic Forum, 2022).

In conclusion, the literature reveals significant gender-based differences in leadership roles within academic institutions. While progress has been made, persistent structural and cultural barriers continue to impede women's advancement. Future research should focus on effective strategies to promote gender equality, ensuring diverse representation at the highest levels of academia. This comprehensive review underscores the critical need for ongoing exploration and intervention to bridge the gender gap in leadership roles within government colleges and beyond.

Research Objectives

To explore how academic leadership positions in Pakistani government colleges differ for male and female administrators.

To identify the specific problems that academic leaders in Pakistan's government colleges encounter together with their gender-related variations in these problems.

To find out how gender affects academic leaders' professional roles and career opportunities and workplace satisfaction at government colleges in Pakistan.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant #	Age Range	Position	Department	Gender	Teaching Experience	Leadership Experience
1	45-55	Principal	English	Male	15-20 years	5-10 years
2	40-50	HOD	Chemistry	Male	10-15 years	0-5 years
3	50-60	HOD	Urdu	Female	20-25 years	10-15 years
4	40-50	HOD	Physics	Female	20-25 years	5-10 years
5	45-55	HOD	Botany	Female	15-20 years	5-10 years

Note. HOD = Head of Department.

Methodology

A qualitative study investigates gender-specific variations in leadership development pathways between academic government college leaders across Pakistan. The theoretical framework uses Role Congruity Theory which examines social preconceptions about gender norms alongside leadership roles. According to Role Congruity Theory stereotypes across social groups impact evaluations of what it takes to excel in particular roles.

Relating to Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau 2002) the more someone's attributes match assumptions about their abilities and workplace skills the more people will view them as competent (Eagly and Karau 2002). Our main worry is how mismatched expectations produce discriminatory attitudes.

Research using Role congruity theory indicates that leaders do not tend to choose females to be their successors when traditional leadership roles disrupt gender stereotypes.

Academic heads (men and women) participate in-depth interviews which comprise semi-structured inquiries. We used purposive sampling to select these participants. The study examined leadership difficulties together with challenges particular to each gender and widespread community attitudes. Thematic analysis is used to discover recurring themes from the interview data together with underlying subthemes present in participant narratives.

Three important ethical elements of this study include obtaining informed consent along with protecting confidentiality and achieving ethical clearance. Research findings will organize into four categories that include leadership preferences and gender-specific obstacles as well as social

performance expectations and institutional support system analysis. Through triangulation methods combined with reflexivity assessment and detailed case description the study will achieve trustworthiness and rigor. A methodical examination exists to explore gender dynamics within higher education leadership roles.

Findings and Analysis

We have successfully conducted interviews from 2 male participants and 3 female. The study's saturation was reached while conducting the interview from the 5th participant.

Academic leaders and faculty members discussed major topics connected with leadership behaviors in addition to gender interactions and rule-making methods while describing the obstacles of running a mixed-gender institution. This report presents a thorough assessment of the results through thematic analysis of the established themes that relates to Role Congruity Theory.

Leadership and Decision-Making

The process of leading proved exceptionally demanding to participants because they had to make tough choices between disciplining staff and students. The principle of the college (Participant 1) stressed his requirement for 'swift and forceful decisions for controlling situations', while another staff member (Participant 3) noted difficulties with decision-making in a workplace mostly held by males. 'The leadership team displayed contrasting decision making approaches because some leaders chose to work together but others made choices through command authority'. (Participant 3). Women within the organization admitted they needed to handle interactions with men who made most decisions at school. Participant 5 mentioned

'When I came here in this department but nobody was there, I had to manage alone everything and I did it. So, when they say that women can't manage things, they are wrong. In challenging situation women can handle anything'. This shows that women are confident and can handle difficult situations but they are perceived wrong, men need to acknowledge the fact that this is not a matter of gender, it an individual ability both men and women can have it.

Therefore, The research results support Role Congruity Theory because leadership positions generally link to assertive traits that conventional society views as masculine. Female leaders who try to be assertive may appear aggressive to others but those who try to be flexible appear weak to others. The traditional masculine leadership preference of quick decisions and authority shown by the principal exists opposite to female educators' method of building teamwork and managing dynamics within predominantly male educational institutions. This indicates a conflict between what their roles dictate versus what leadership demands of them according to gender norms.

Gender Dynamics and Inclusivity

The working experience at the college proved challenging for various female instructors who described facing difficulties from male dominance in the workplace. Participant 3 described the widespread use of 'lobbying' behavior combined with harassment incidents in the workplace and the HOD identified male colleague opposition to policy implementation at first. According to the principal (Participant 1) 'it is essential to establish an environment free of stress which promotes inclusivity for male and female staff and students.' Female participants demonstrated their disapproval regarding the current inclusive practices because they reported problems with insufficient services including child care and unequal treating from staff.

The results confirm Role Congruity Theory because women in leadership positions encounter prejudice from traditional gender norms conflicting with leadership requirements. The opposition female faculty experience shows that society generally undermines women when they take authority over men.

Impact of Gender in Leadership

The female respondents discussed challenges because others see them as having lesser authority or abilities because they are women. Participant 5 reported that male colleagues viewed her as someone who would resort to gender bias for advantage yet Participant 3 emphasized how femininity needs to change to conform with male-ruled office spaces. Participant 5 mentioned that men thinks that 'women faculty members play 'women card' as a perception which exposes both real-life circumstances and interpretations from others. Female academics do not play the women card but they survive in hostile workplace environments.' (Participant 5). A widespread stereotype suggests women use the so-called 'women card' for gaining an advantage. Female academic leaders are attempting to survive under a troublesome institutional environment that lacks space for their conduct to be heard within that environment. dynamics of power and influence 'Majority is authority', is the reason women need to adjust because here we are considered in minority' (Participant 5). The majority as authority dynamic perpetuates gender bias, with men holding power and influence. Academic women should establish effective means to confront this leadership dynamic in order to make themselves heard.

Communication and Relationship Building

Female academic leaders require efficient communication methods because they need to compensate for existing power imbalances to achieve effective leadership. 'The lack of communication from others who interrupt my speech and choose to ignore me creates barriers during my academic journey. It's frustrating and demoralizing.' (Participant 4) The ability of female academic leaders to lead and influence becomes limited when they deal with communication obstacles including interruptions and dismissal from colleagues. Participant 2 mentioned ' I think gender differences can impact our experiences. If we have the same gender, we can communicate more openly. But with female colleagues, we have to be more careful. We can't be as direct or strict with them. We have to be more subtle in our communication.' This shows that both male and female leaders face communication barriers, not just women. They have to control their gestures, communication patterns and their jokes. This indicates how much distance our society has

created between the two genders that they cannot even communicate properly in a place where they have to work together every day.

Role Congruity Theory shows that women leaders encounter increased harsh criticism when they dissent from conventional female behavioral patterns. Male and female leaders must modify their conduct and outer aspects because people expect organizational leaders to follow conventional gender roles.

Women have demonstrated their effectiveness as leaders through the identification of particular characteristics including emotional intelligence and inclusivity. The prejudice against female leadership should motivate society to combat gender biases that persist in leadership positions.

Challenges in Academic Administration

Members of the research group analyzed strategic challenges related to policy implementation which occurs when policies become obstacles to standard operational procedures or require additional funding. The principal expressed his struggles to enforce policies since higher authorities failed to provide much support.

The management of female faculty along with other teaching staff emerged frequently within the discussions. Women faculty members experienced enhanced obstacles that included handling both professional commitments and family life commitments and still encountered tensions with their male peers at work.

Society expects women faculty members to put family obligations ahead of their professional career development. The expectations put further impediments in front of women leaders since they must perform their care duties while managing their leadership responsibilities.

The principal emphasizes to academic leaders the importance of needing policy backing from higher officials due to the resource limitations in their areas.

Adaptation and Survival in Male-Dominated Institutions

Multiple female participants (such as Participant 3 and Participant 5) accounted for how women needed to modify their behavior with appearance and communication methods for success in male-controlled settings. Female employees had to modify their presentation by using modest clothing styles as well as reduce confrontations and find

backing from female comrades. Participant 4 stated, 'I have changed the colors of my dresses, muted all the trending fashion, and started doing office like dressing to not look prominent.'

'We are in an institution where norms are male-friendly. You tell me how can a woman survive in those norms. I've suffered a lot and spent my time here in severe depression.' This response from female participant shows how much they suffered in order to survive in an environment which is male-friendly and them being as a minority. The challenges of working in a male-dominated institution require self-awareness together with patience and strategic decision-making abilities according to participants.

Women in leadership positions must alter their way of leading and their appearance in accordance with Role Congruity Theory which states that female leaders encounter a double standard. Female leaders need to balance traditional gender norms with leadership requirements which can lead them to lose their genuine self.

A successful female leader in the predominantly male business landscape needs to understand herself while using her distinctive attributes such as emotional intelligence and adaptability strategically (e.g., adaptability). The requirement of this adaptation reveals the prevalent social prejudice regarding female leadership.

Discussion

The thematic analysis conducted at the government co-education institution exposed the intricate relationship of gender roles to leadership expectations among both sexes. Role Congruity Theory serves as an effective model to explain leadership barriers female academic leaders face primarily when they work in male-dominated professional settings. The participants demonstrated how the double bind concept affects women leaders who demonstrate behaviors outside society's gender stereotypes.

As Participant 3 mentioned "You won't get honest interviews from other male and female members because their answers are 'sugar coated'". This statement from participant 3 indicates that in order to conceal the reality, they sugar coat their answers. But keeping in view other participant's responses, we have come to a conclusion that all of them were honest while sharing their perceptions, they all have their own opinions and views regarding the situation.

The “majority is authority” indicates that in an institute where a group is considered to be a minority, they have to change themselves in order to be a part of it, ignoring the challenges they have to face. Moreover, female faculty members emphasised that they haven’t come here by choice, they all had different circumstances such as limited seats in the women colleges and postings in far areas which gave them no choice but to work here. Therefore, the study establishes gender discrimination remains a major challenge in leadership positions because women must overcome prevailing social expectations when leading organizations. Female leaders need to modify their appearance and behavior since society wants women to maintain conventional gender stereotypes irrespective of their leadership position. The research shows how extensive gender bias remains a problem in leadership positions because women leaders must overcome societal expectations. Women in leadership positions must change their conduct and outer presentation because society demands feminine conformity regardless of their professional roles.

Academic leaders encounter various structural challenges particularly in resource-limited conditions which show the necessity for substantial changes to support gender equality in leadership positions. Leadership success of women requires sufficient organizational resources and specialized training for female leaders alongside societal changes that confront gender prejudice toward female executives.

Conclusion

The qualitative study analyzed academic professional experiences at a government coeducation institution to understand how gender roles meet leadership performance requirements. A gender-based bias exists within leadership positions as female executors struggle to meet requirements and standards of traditional gender norms.

The research outcomes support Role Congruity Theory that explains why female leaders face discrimination when they behave differently from what society expects from women. Academic women working in male-controlled institutions need to modify their professional conduct and image representation along with their communication approach because this transformation requires them to downplay their genuine character.

Research demonstrates the necessity for major reform to facilitate better gender equality in leadership roles.

The fight against gender bias requires institutions to establish multiple initiatives:

- The organization must supply tools and courses which help women leaders learn valuable relational and communication techniques. Develop organizational cultures which embrace diversity along with acceptance of every member.
- Society should challenge the conventional social constructs of male and female roles.
- New policies need to develop work-life balance structures along with solutions to understand female faculty member special needs.

Therefore, the study concludes its findings by showing that achieving gender equality among leaders demands complete organizational and societal changes alongside individual developments. The path to women's academic leadership success requires handling current obstacles which will establish a more inclusive framework.

Future Implications

The findings revealed important implications which researchers and practitioners and policymakers need to apply in academic leadership and gender equality initiatives. Academic institutions must establish gender equality policies and programs in addition to developing leadership development initiatives for female academic leadership positions and performing studies on women leaders' experiences with gender equality promotion strategies. A comprehensive effort needs to include policy changes meant to remove systematic hurdles for female academic leaders and the development of inclusive workplace environments that both embrace diversity and provide wellness support to leaders along with studies to harness effective inclusivity methods at the intersection of multiple social identities. Research into best practices for advancing gender equality across different worldwide settings will help build academic environments which both promote all leaders' success while sustaining their overall well-being.

Limitations

Since we had limited time to complete this study, therefore, we could not approach more government

colleges that is why the data might lack more opinions and perspectives. Due to the complexity of our topic, many participants hesitated to open up but we have tried our very best to get the answers which covers our research objectives. There interviews were conducted from the academic heads of Government college Rawalpindi. Due to confidentiality, we have not revealed participants' identity and the college's name as well.

Declaration of Interest:

The authors declare that there is no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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