

## Challenges/Barriers Women Leaders face and Coping Strategies they use at University level

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### ABSTRACT

*This study focuses to highlight the challenges faced by women in their journey to be successful leaders. Further, this research paper also explores the coping strategies to deal with arising challenges. The qualitative research method has been employed by the researchers to conduct this study. Specifically, phenomenology research design has been used more to address the research questions. Because of the pandemic circumstances, only 12 women leaders were interviewed telephonically based on convenience from the three campuses of a public sector university of Lahore. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data and to generate themes. Six main themes including 'Cultural Restrictions, Family Related Problems, Issues Related to Colleagues, Problems from Hierarchies, Gender-Discrimination & Stereotyping, and Glass Ceiling (Unseen issues) from Hierarchies' have been emerged. The data related to the challenges faced by the women leaders has been presented under these themes. To present the data related to the coping strategies used by the women leaders only one main theme named as 'Masterplan' has been generated. Some implications of the findings are presented in the last section.*

### KEYWORDS

Women Leadership Challenges, Glass Ceiling, Gender-Inequality/Discrimination, "Lack of Fit" Perception, Coping Strategies, Public University Setting

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender-based discrimination is a school of belief. Women are welcomed as members of many workplaces, but they are not satisfied working with them. When women are in positions of authority, they face a range of obstacles because men have no limitations. Gender inequalities in career advancement have been exacerbated by gender disparities in household roles. Organizations need work, but a woman cannot devote her entire day and night to any organization because she is responsible for her entire family. Women frequently have short time to develop network and organize activities that are necessary for advancement.

Women are underrepresented as leaders in educational institutions such as in colleges, due to a lack of opportunity to demonstrate their leadership talents. Because of the highest politics in top management, sexual harassment, and the difficulty of balancing family and work, the bottom third woman in particular resists moving to top leadership positions (Ward & Eddy, 2013). Because men frequently have the potential to dominate administrative processes at universities, resulting in gender discrimination by demoting women from leadership roles, there may be personal worries that obstruct their potential to succeed.

Women have come to believe that they cannot be good leaders as a result of gender inequity. According to some studies, the Glass barrier is the most significant societal hindrance that every woman leader faces, while others claim that specific impediments within companies impede their advancement to top positions. Others argue that women's incapacity to lead successfully at colleges is due to both cultural and organizational issues (T&D, 2006). They think that women lack administrative skills and experience, limiting their opportunities for senior leadership roles. Another argument is that, even though many firms have many competent and skilled women, stereotype prevents them from being promoted to managerial roles.

Men, on the whole, hold the majority of leadership posts. They also like to encourage other guys to positions of power who share their interests (Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002). Due to cultural hurdles, women are underrepresented in management roles. During the selection process at universities, they have a difficult time. It shows that in the route of women leaders, gender discrimination and stereotyping present a slew of obstacles.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership is a vast topic that involves a variety of leadership theories and practises. We might claim that women's leadership is only a component of this enormous notion. Women's leadership is vital, according to certain studies. This evidence shows that women can be effective leaders and lead in the same way men do. They may be born with leadership characteristics or learn to lead effectively through their profession and interests. Others may refer to this as a feminist viewpoint. The feminist



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viewpoint is that women must be given the same opportunities as men. Women have particular characteristics as leaders that set them apart from male leaders, and these attributes are important in today's environment (Palmu-Joronen, 2009). Women have distinct leadership characteristics that distinguish them from male leaders, and these characteristics are critical in today's climate (Hart, 2006).

Many researchers believe that women leaders face unique concerns, challenges and that their careers are more difficult than men's. Certain external and internal constraints exist in both developing and less developed countries. The basic problem is that women are marginalized in higher education, especially in senior management roles (Altbach, 2010). Despite the demands of modern times, there is still a gender gap, despite increased awareness of gender equality and shifts in women's leadership perceptions. There are few people with whom women university presidents can collaborate (Bagilhole 1994; Kerman, 1995).

The role of women in any society is always a reflection of that country's cultural lens. The sole purpose of women, according to conventional cultural norms, should be to take care of their families and have children. Women are more concerned with their families than with any other activity that men must engage in (AAUW, 2016). Organizational culture can be characterized as dynamic activities that convey what the organization's vision is, is, and must be. O'Connor (2011) defines organisational culture as an organisation's policies, goals, ideals, and customs which ensure participation of gender at a ground position and then explore the leadership roles as male leaders in hierarchies. Barriers specific to one organization may differ from those specific to another in a variety of ways. And, taken together, these hurdles constitute a bottleneck for women, preventing them from progressing in their careers and becoming great leaders (Baker, 2003). Mentors should provide greater motivation, inspiration, and encouragement to women. So, the explanation for the lack of female leaders is that they are not well-versed in problem-solving skills, are emotionally vulnerable, and are sexually assaulted. Men leaders believe that they are more capable of making key judgments and are emotionally stronger than women (Hanson, 2008).

Leaders' ability to work hard may be harmed by stereotype threats. Depression, worry, a sense of responsibility, stress, and mental disease are all possible outcomes. Threats of this nature might influence behavior and lead to bad characteristics (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2010). Women are traditionally viewed as the major caregivers for their families and children. In today's world, the nature of work has gotten more demanding, necessitating more time to balance family and work, and advancement opportunities have put women in a difficult position of having to pick between their profession and their family (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2009).

The glass ceiling is defined as the invisible barriers that limit women's upward professional development and keep them in lower management positions. According to the report, biased policies and male/female injustice, which are exacerbated in universities, are the reason of women's predominance in higher managerial positions throughout all public colleges (Pautasso, 2015).

According to research, power and women are not mutually exclusive. The term "lack of fit" is derived from this perception. According to Eagly and Heilman, when a woman exhibits more autocratic behavior than communal activity, she will be seen negatively. Men in similar leadership roles are less interrupted than women due to gender preconceptions. Due to gender preconceptions, men have greater flexibility in high hierarchical positions than women (Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, & Heilman, 1991). It is evident that women leaders mostly used transformational leadership style and it helps to achieve the organizational goals in an effective way (Eagly, 2003).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the challenges/barriers that women leaders face and coping strategies these women leaders use at University level?

## METHODOLOGY

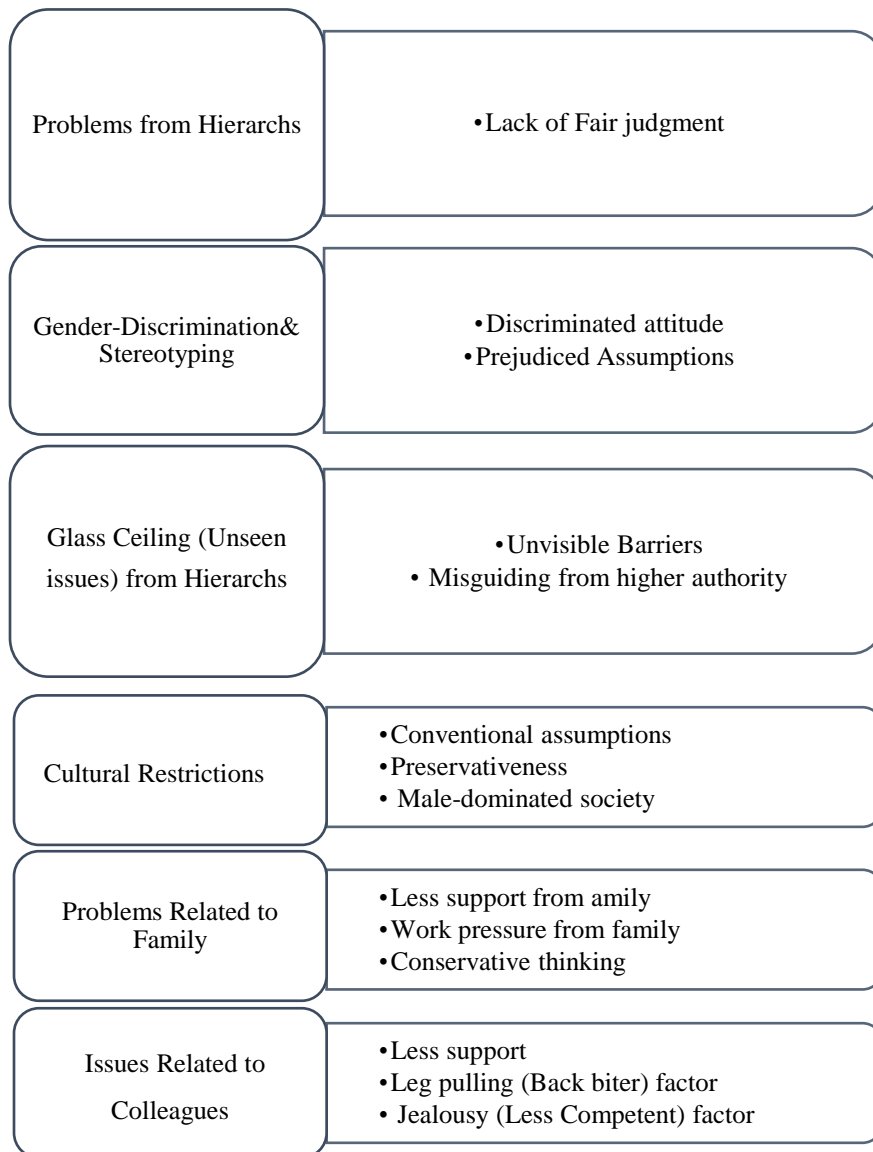
The paradigm of this study is interpretive, therefore a qualitative research design was employed. Patton (2002) defines the qualitative method in his book as "qualitative method yield with enriched information about sample which is small in number but it decreases generalizability to another context because collected data depends on the observation and opinion of people which is subjective" (p. 14). Moreover, the nature of the study is based on the phenomenological framework, because it focuses on the lived experiences of the people. Moustakas (1994) defines phenomenology as a phenomenon that is based on the "what and why" type of research questions and participants need to answer these questions. Due to the arising pandemic conditions of the country, a convenient sampling technique was employed to collect data from women leaders. Twelve leaders were decided to be interviewed telephonically from the three campuses of a public sector university of Lahore. In the qualitative study, large sample size is less favorable than a small sample size because this design deals with the in-depth information collected from the participants. When the information collected from the large sample does not add further information then it is worthless and saturation takes place (Robson, 2002). Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data because Guest, Namey & Macqueen (2012) describe "the thematic analysis is employed by the researcher to gain the richness and detailed understanding of the text" (p. 11).

**RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

This section of the paper presents the collected data in two heads by generating themes for the research question and then elaborates the related findings. The first heading deals with the presentation of data related to the challenges faced by the women leaders. The second heading deals with the presentation of the data regarding coping strategies used by the women leaders to overcome the facing challenges.

**CHALLENGES FACED BY THE WOMEN LEADERS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL**

Six main themes including ‘Cultural Restrictions, Problems Related to Family, Issues Related to Colleagues, Problems from Hierarchies, Gender-Discrimination & Stereotyping, Glass Ceiling (unseen issues) from Hierarchies’ were generated to present data related to the challenges faced by the women leaders. Further classification of sub-themes is presented in the Figure-1 below. Quotations from the data recorded from participants are also presented as evidence.



**Figure 1. Challenges faced by Women Leaders**

**CULTURAL RESTRICTIONS**

According to the evidence gathered, our society's closed culture is the most significant obstacle in a woman's quest to become a great leader. Majority of the respondents perceived that Pakistani culture is rooted with the several challenges which restrict them to work outside as supervisor. It is the biggest hurdles declared by all respondents in terms of conservative thinking

of society, traditional assumptions, and male-oriented society. Few quotations from the data recorded from participants are presented below as evidence.

*Both masculine and female boundaries have been established by society. A female is thought to be only able to fix family-related tasks under set limits (Respondent (R)10).*

*Despite having several challenges, everyone respects me as a woman. But, because of the masculine predominance bestowed by this society, there are times when I wish I were a man (R9).*

While some have the opposite opinion about this issue. One of them has stated:

*Traditional ideas, in my opinion, do not still hold sway in today's culture...Women's involvement in management has been acknowledged in modern culture, which has changed society's attitude toward women (R5).*

Another interviewee said that she has complete support from her family, so she didn't bother with such issues because no society is free from such prejudiced perceptions about women leaders. She stated:

*If your family is behind you, don't need to worry about societal obstacles. Be forceful and powerful, because no society is immune to biased attitudes about women in the workplace (R3).*

### **PROBLEMS RELATED TO FAMILY**

The gathered data points out that less support from family can create difficulty for women leaders to work with male colleagues. The responses from the participants show the diversity in this regard. Some of them reported that they have no issues to face from their families while some of them share the issues that they had from their family. Some of them have the perception that less support from the family is due to the backward thinking which is transformed from their forefathers. Few women leaders faced issues from the family in terms of lack of support, pressure and backward judgments. In this regard, quotations recorded from the participants are presented below as proof.

*The fact that most families are unwilling to allow their daughters to become highly qualified is one of the reasons why women leaders are rare in number in top leadership positions (R12).*

*Family pressure destroys your mental serenity, and your attention is frequently diverted by their assumptions (R10).*

*People believe that men are cowardly and useless because they devour their wives' earnings because men are the breadwinners in the household (R11).*

While one of the interviewees reported that she had no issue to face from the family side by stating:

*As a single person, I am not subjected to any negative influences from my family (R12).*

### **ISSUES RELATED TO COLLEAGUES**

The data revealed an interesting fact about this challenge. Most of the respondents reported that they had a lot of hurdles to face from female colleagues than males due to the jealousy factor, leg-pulling from competitive staff members, and lack of support from them. With the help of recorded quotations, this fact can be easy to understand.

*My colleagues had caused me a lot of problems. They do not help in any way. I'd like to point out that the organizational climate was receptive. Rather than permanent faculty, I believe I have good working experience with my visiting faculty (R3).*

*My female coworkers had confronted me with numerous hurdles. Some of my male coworkers have been unsupportive. They undermine me in several scenarios, create scary circumstances for me, and cast doubt on my leadership. It makes me feel as if they are putting pressure on me (R5).*

*In terms of the jealousy issue, few female bosses have cooperative employees. Otherwise, this component can be found in any company... I'm up against a challenge from my coworkers, as some of them are envious of my development because they are academically superior to me, but I have more job experience (R4).*

*Even in male-dominated businesses, a type of factor (leg pulling) is more prevalent in females than in males. Some of my colleagues have expressed dissatisfaction with the vice-chancellor, which has put me on edge (R7).*

### **PROBLEMS FROM HIERARCHS**

Only a few women leaders reported that they had faced some alarming situations from their Deans/Vice-chancellor due to the biased judgment created by some colleagues, while the majority stated that they have full support from them.

*Because of jealousy, coworkers continued to mislead the director and reported it to the vice-chancellor. I had a lot of problems with that procedure (R6).*

Another one has the opposite perception as she stated:

*I am extremely fortunate and grateful to Allah Almighty for providing me with this opportunity to serve humanity and the university. My hierarchs, my Vice-Chancellor, and my director did not have any issues with me. They are all working together and being supported (R2).*

### **GENDER-DISCRIMINATION& STEREOTYPING**

The majority of the respondents stated that no single organization is free from this issue. The pre-supposed assumption about somebody can give him/her a tough time to prove them wrong. Respondent's views about this issue are presented as evidence.

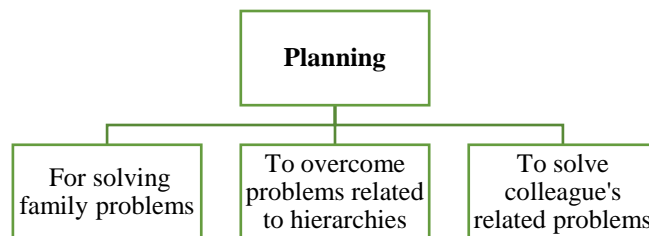
*Gender stereotyping has resulted in erroneous beliefs (biased judgments) about women among other male members of the organization. The primary issue for women here is to use their leadership skills to disprove their ideas (R4).*

*When I first started in this department, the majority of the professors were guys. They strained to recognize me as their head since it went contrary to their egotistical nature, therefore they caused me a great deal of sorrow (R7).*

*To demonstrate my leadership qualities, I must work hard and accomplish chores more effectively than guys, because I am aware that people may have preconceived notions about me owing to gender stereotypes (R10).*

### **GLASS CEILING (UNSEEN ISSUES) FROM HIERARCHS**

Only those interviewees reported this issue from their hierarchs who have prejudiced assumptions about their skills and competencies. In return, they create invisible problems by misguiding them.



**Figure 2. Planning Architecture**

*There were no explicit requirements or rules to adhere to. Due to unforeseen barriers initially, there's also a lack of passion, drive, and devotion, which caused a labyrinth for me to become lost in while trying to figure out the best way to fulfil my position (R4).*

While one interviewee reported this (glass ceiling) issue from her colleagues. As she stated;

*By communicating the goals with my colleagues and other staff members, I make critical decisions for my department in a democratic manner. Some employees suggest alternatives to me that do not produce the desired results, leaving me perplexed as to what to do. How to go about it... (R4).*

### **COPING STRATEGIES USED BY WOMEN LEADERS TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES**

Only one main theme named as 'Masterplan' was generated to present the related data which covers strategies to deal with problems from their family, Dean/Vice-chancellor, and colleagues.

## MASTER PLAN

All respondents had the similar perception about strategies, employed to solve addressed challenges. All of the responses are presented collectively.

*I believe that if you have solid time management abilities and if you do planning, you will be able to quickly tackle family-related challenges that arise in a leadership role. I solve these issues by allowing enough time for both parties. In this aspect, my main priority is always my family (R11).*

*I try to communicate with them with plan to address their situation. It appears to be the most successful technique for resolving any issue (R5).*

*I plan to instruct my colleagues to boost their creativity, and I frequently collaborate with them whether or not it is necessary (R9).*

*I somehow operate in a transformational style, encouraging them to be creative and energetic. I believe I must understand their strengths and capacities, thus I usually provide them work accordingly. This is my planning to deal the issues. (R4)*

*Because I cannot utilize my leadership capacity to fix the situation, I feel that problems/obstacles with higher authority can be solved by proper and planned communication and dialogue (R8).*

*Your proper professional development will assist you in dealing with obstacles since it will make a positive impact on them, and as a result, they will consciously listen to your problem (R7).*

## DISCUSSION

The first research question was asked from participants to share the challenges that were faced by them at university level. The results are consistent with earlier studies done in this area because the respondents reported the same issue as the current research highlighted. The findings reveal that the obstacles that women leaders confront at the executive level are common to all women leaders, especially in Muslim nations, due to cultural, religious, and societal expectations (Sajid & Batool, 2013; Hossieni, 2008; Luke et al., 2003; Neale & Özkanlı, 2010).

According to a recent study, the conservative mindset of social standards and values posed a challenge to the majority of women. Women are also subjected to cultural taboos that limit their ability to assume leadership roles (Doumato, 2010; Metcalfe, 2011). Several previous studies have reported the same challenges that the current study has. The findings indicate that every woman leader faces organizational challenges on her path to becoming a leader. In a male-dominated organization, women's leadership abilities are assessed based on the stereotypical assumptions made by the stereotypical. Women leaders encounter societal and cultural prejudiced attitudes from coworkers as well as top-hierarchs (Emory, 2008).

The findings imply that women leaders have been challenged by the building of hidden or unseen obstacles that perplex them regarding their jobs and responsibilities, causing them to question whether they are on the correct track or not, and this barrier has been observed in prior studies as well (McRae, 1995).

Finally, interviewees were requested to describe the strategies they have used to address the problem at hand. According to studies, women who head any type of organization are aware of the nature of their department, their coworkers' working conditions, and the nature of the conflict that they may produce. As a result, they've devised a strategy for resolving conflicts. The current study findings reveal that, first and foremost, female leaders must be analyzed and distinguished from male leaders. Second, they should examine their leadership approach. When female executives fail to fulfill their goals, conflict arises among colleagues and deans, So the majority of them close-up this research question by saying that they would like to solve the addressed issues democratically which is the best solution that is also seen in the previous studies (William, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

It is concluded that obstacles can be tackled and overcome by drawing on positive experiences,. Providing positive reinforcement and expanding chances for women in higher education can have a significant and cumulative influence on such issues. If we are smart in our efforts and clear about the results, we may be able to lay the groundwork for institutional policies and greater social change where women and men will be able to lead in ways that are consistent with their professional and personal duties. This study suggests that leadership development training programs should incorporate experiences of women leaders who are confident and using authority. Positive role models who demonstrate a variety of ways of overcoming the challenges and skillfully managing a leadership position would serve as motivator, inspiring and trainer to train the novice women leaders for leadership roles to make their job more enticing. It would also be beneficial for leaders to talk more about the intellectual thrill that comes with the broad range of senior leadership responsibilities. There is a need to run a campaign to make the organizational environment conducive for women leaders and debunk prejudices against women. A campaign focused on the importance of women leadership role should involve the families, community and society at larger scale to educate the people

regarding the discrimination and prejudices against women. Institutions may have specific policies on the said issues to ensure the fair practices and avoidance of discriminations and biases against women.

### CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

**Dr Muhammad Amin:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Analysis through Software, Data curation, **Samreen Jalal:** Writing- Original draft preparation, Visualization, Investigation, Validation, **Fahd Naveed Kausar:** Writing- Reviewing and Editing.

### COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

It is declared that all authors don't have any conflict of interest. It is also declared that informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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