

## Issues and Challenges to Women Academic Leadership: A Case Study of HEIS in Islamabad, Pakistan

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### Abstract

The representation of women in the academic leadership in Pakistan is still low and it not only shows the trends of gender disparity that exist globally but also the socio-cultural constraints prevalent in Pakistan. This paper analyzes personal, organizational and societal issues of academic women leaders in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Islamabad. Based on the feminist theory, social role theory, and institutional theory, this research takes the form of a quantitative descriptive and analytical design. The results were obtained based on structured surveys of female faculty and administrators in three HEIs, variables included personal ambitions, family commitments, work-life balance, organizational policies, mentorships, decision-making representation, incentives, and the dominant attitude prevailing in the society. Through statistical analysis through SPSS, it was found out that family pressures, cultural expectations and patriarchal norms are the major factors that limit the leadership aspirations of women and their career growth. These are also compounded by organizational obstacles like inadequate institutional support, the absence of mentorship programs, and underrepresentation in leadership institutions. Socially, the issue of gender stereotyping and conservative attitudes remain to be socially entrenched and appertaining to women leadership potential. The paper highlights the interaction of these multi-level factors and requires an in-depth policy reform, a gender-sensitive institutional policy, and specific leadership development interventions. To overcome these obstacles, it is not just necessary to have organizational commitment but also changes in the society at large that can encourage gender inclusive leadership cultures within the higher education sector in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Women's Academic Leadership, Higher Education Institutions, Gender Inequality, Feminist Theory, Social Role Theory, Institutional Theory

### Article Details:

Received on 30 March 2026

Accepted on 26 April, 2026

Published on 29 April, 2026

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## Introduction

The expression of women in higher education in leadership in Pakistan is quite low signifying deep-rooted gender inequality despite the movement on higher education equity globally. The socio-cultural norms of the past, patriarchal system, and systemic impediments have failed to give women a chance to hold decision-making roles like that of vice chancellors, deans, and department heads (Rafiq, Kamran, Zia, Munir, & Afzal, 2024). These are not merely numerical issues as they display deeper patterns of institutional and social restrictions that limit leadership pipelines of female academics (Bhatti & Ali, 2020). In the context of higher education in Pakistan, the traditional gender roles and organizational customs have reinforced male-centric hierarchies, which have hindered the development of gender equality in the leadership (Shah, 2021). The attendant underrepresentation of women is indicative of structural and cultural processes that need specific policy and institutional changes in order to establish fair opportunities.

Gender diversity in the leadership role is not a mere symbolic exercise but it is a very necessary aspect of providing inclusive governance, institutional performance and making sure that the policies are informed by diversity. There is also evidence that women leaders often induce collaborative forms of management, focus more on equity-based decisions, and help achieve better results in academic and organizational settings (Khalid & Mujahid, 2021). There is also a wider cultural context to representation: it disrupts set gender stereotypes and makes an institution pledge to equality (Qureshi & Saleem, 2022). In Pakistan, though, the potential of female leadership is not fully explored due to the existence of such barriers as the conservatism in the culture, the lack of mentorship opportunities, and institutional support (Rafiq et al., 2024). These issues not only jeopardise gender equality in countries and around the world but also restrict the ability of higher education institutions (HEIs) to adequately meet the needs of modern academic and social life.

Islamabad, the federal capital has a special place in the academic system of Pakistan. The city is the home of several leading public and private HEIs including Quaid-i-Azam University, International Islamic University, and the National University of Sciences and Technology, which strategically places the city to shape the national educational policy and governance trends (Naseer & Shah, 2021). Yet in spite of its urban, resource, and policy-sensitive context, women are underrepresented in senior academic leadership roles. Male leadership is still supported by institutional cultures, which sometimes belong to the socio-cultural expectations and are a part of the countrywide trends (Bhatti & Ali, 2020). The unbalance between the potential of Islamabad as a liberal educational center and the actualities of the gender disparity in leadership exemplify the extent of the structural hindrances that go beyond geographical and institutional opportunities.

This is the backdrop to this research which explores the issues and prospects of women in academic leadership at Islamabad HEIs. It targets individual, organizational and socio-cultural forces which affect their career development and aims at finding out the obstacles and facilitating circumstances. The research is expected to provide practical knowledge that can be used in reforming institutions, intervening in policies, and advocacy. It aims at filling structural gaps and taking advantage of opportunities in order to foster gender-inclusive leadership models that enhance institutional excellence and lead to the overall educational and societal development in Pakistan.

## Literature Review

Worldwide, the number of women in higher education leadership has been on the rise albeit slowly and the gap exists especially at the top management. Globally, the trend indicates that

although women are getting higher representation in academia, the number of women in positions of top leadership like vice-chancellors, presidents, and deans is low (Morley, 2023). It is widely believed that systemic biases, institutional sluggishness, and the compounding effect of patriarchal norms built into academic systems are the reasons behind the gender leadership gap (O'Connor, 2024). In the country, the same trends can be traced in the higher education sector, with women in leadership positions being extremely limited even though there is great improvement in women enrolment in their undergraduate and postgraduate education (Bhatti & Ali, 2020; Rehman et al., 2024). Research in Pakistan reports women leadership in academia to be situated with a sociocultural context of empowerment and limitation; e.g., the proliferation of women-only universities has created access to female leadership, at the same time, promoted gender segregation (Jehan et al., 2025). Through comparative research, it is important to note that whereas other nations including Rwanda and Norway have implemented conscious policy intervention to elevate female leadership representation in academia, Pakistan has weakened its commitment to gender-sensitive leadership development framework, thus expanding the structural gap (Shaikh et al., 2023).

Obstacles to women higher education institutions (HEIs) leadership in Pakistan are well established and they are both institutional, socio-cultural, and personal. Jessar and Kazmi (2023) stress that the deeply rooted patriarchal traditions, absence of gender-sensitive policies related to leadership, and the poor institutional support are still an obstacle. The issue of gender stereotyping usually leads to the discrimination of women as less in command or competent in leadership positions, thus hindering their career advancement (Bhatti & Ali, 2021). The glass ceiling effect is also strengthened by informal organizational cultures in that, decisions are mostly made by men and leadership opportunities are distributed based on networking where women are not always included (O'Connor, 2024). Such structural barriers are associated with the lack of clear promotion standards, gender imbalance in selection groups, and restricted access to leadership training (Jehan et al., 2025). Pakistani context adds an extra layer of complications to barriers, as the society places the emphasis on women and their domestic responsibilities, rather than professional commitment, leading to the development of the double burden that impedes career growth (Rehman et al., 2024). It can also be mentioned that international literature indicates that the same issues in other countries of South Asia (Morley, 2023).

At individual level, ambition, family priorities, and work/life balance are some of the factors that affect the leadership paths of women in the academia. A study also focuses on the issues of professional ambition and domestic responsibilities that, more often than not, put female academics in complicated crossings that either result in career breaks or minimized mobility (Rehman et al., 2024). These issues are especially acute in Pakistan because of conservative family set-ups and the need to be primarily caretakers (Jessar & Kazmi, 2023). The vision of leadership among women in academia is also killed due to the self-perception of women that is influenced by societal programming in which leadership is a male context (Bhatti & Ali, 2020). Additionally, lack of easily identifiable female role models in the highest leadership roles can discourage younger women to aspire to that role (Morley, 2023). Institutional workload assignments also compromise personal agency; women tend to be overworked in terms of teaching and administrative duties, which limits the possibility of conducting research studies, networking, or developing their leadership skills (Shaikh et al., 2023). The literature is clear on the fact that these barriers could be addressed through policies that promote flexible work arrangements, childcare facilities, and leadership training that is

sensitive to women circumstances and promote more women to participate in academic governance.

The characteristics of organizations, such as university policies, membership in decision making groups, rewards, and mentoring programs play a crucial role in determining the possibility of women in leadership. Policies used in institutions without the concept of gender mainstreaming do not solve the challenges that women have on their hands, like maternity leave, career breaks, and re-entry pathways (Jehan et al., 2025). The participation in decision-making is also restricted; in most instances, although females represent a considerable proportion of the faculty staff in certain universities, their positions as leaders are focused primarily on men (Bhatti & Ali, 2021). Mentorship also establishes itself as an important enabling factor, as research shows that women are much better prepared to be leaders and more confident when they have been part of a structured mentorship program (Jehan et al., 2025; Bhatti & Ali, 2021). Pakistani HEIs, however, offer mentorship opportunities on an ad hoc basis, and they can rely on personal connections and networks, which puts women in an unfavorable position since they are not included in those informal systems (Shaikh et al., 2023). Academic incentives like research grants, conference funding, and leadership fellowships tend to unintentionally benefit men because of the biased nature of the evaluation process or the failure to reach out to women (O Connor, 2024). Gender audit, leadership pipeline, and peer mentoring networks of organizational interventions are effective and not only do they develop skills but also advocate structural changes.

The societal level factors, especially patriarchal rules and regulations, gender stereotyping, and cultural expectations have a strong influence in the capability of women to reach the ladder of leadership in academia. In Pakistan, the sociocultural context in which higher education institutions are functioning tends to place women in a subservient position as opposed to a position of authority (Jessar & Kazmi, 2023). Institutional culture is not the only domain where patriarchal norms are established; they also cause gendered hierarchies to be reinforced in policies (Rehman et al., 2024). Traditional culture may restrict the options of women in the field when it comes to their visibility, ability to travel, and interact with other professionals in the field, which are all essential factors in terms of leadership (Bhatti & Ali, 2020). Gender stereotypes of women as emotionally-oriented or generally unable to cope with complicated administrative tasks further establish prejudice in gender (Morley, 2023). These societal limitations are even stricter in conservative and rural areas and women are unlikely to get even into academia, not to mention the leadership. According to comparative studies, nations that have proactive gender equity laws and campaigns in society have been more effective in breaking down such obstacles, and thus integrated societal and institutional changes are needed in Pakistan (OConnor, 2024).

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Though the research on academic leadership by women in Pakistan is increasing, there is however a considerable gap in the empirical research regarding academic leadership of women in Islamabad HEIs. Although Bhatti and Ali (2020, 2021) have examined gender, culture, and leadership at Islamabad universities, the research foundation remains at the small level in terms of both scope and sample diversity. The majority of researches are either general to Pakistan or specific to the provincial level like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Wasim, 2024) or Sindh (Jessar & Kazmi, 2023), and the peculiarities of the institutional environment in Islamabad remain unexplored. Islamabad is a hub of a number of public and private universities, most of which have unique governance models and a different extent of gender inclusiveness, which makes the city a perfect place to conduct a comparative study. Little information is available on

the interaction of policy frameworks in the federal-level institutions with the localized sociocultural processes in shaping the leadership trajectories of women. There is also a lack of documentation on mentorship and networking programs that respond to the Islamabad academic setting as well as barriers and enablers that women leaders face in this city that is both urban and culturally diverse. It is essential to fill such gaps in order to develop specific strategies to improve gender equality in academic leadership throughout the HEIs of the capital.

## Problem Statement

The presence of women in academic leadership in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Islamabad is in proportionately low levels despite the considerable increase in the number of women enrolment and academic engagement. Although some headway has been achieved in the gender equality in education promotion, socio-cultural, institutional, and personal barriers can still be reflected in leadership positions within the universities where males still prevail. Already published literature cites the following as systemic problems gender bias during selection, a lack of clear and transparent promotion routes, fewer opportunities to be mentored, and expectations placed on women by the society and their inability to move freely and advance their careers. Organizational traditions tend to maintain the male-dominated decision-making networks whereas the society reinforces the established gender roles that limit the leadership ambitions of women. Despite the existence of research on women leadership in other parts of Pakistan, analysis on the women leadership in Islamabad is scarce because of the existence of varied public and privately managed HEIs with different governance systems. Such a gap restricts the progress of tailored policies and leadership development programs that would be appropriate to the capital context in relation to socio-cultural and organizational environment. This research gap needs to be filled in order to promote equitable access, eliminating the structural disadvantages, and empowering female leadership within Islamabad HEIs, and hence, to ensure the overall gender equality and institutional performance in the higher education sector of Pakistan.

## Research Objectives

- To critically analyze personal, organizational, and societal challenges that impede women's progression into academic leadership roles in Islamabad's higher education institutions.
- To evaluate the scope and effectiveness of institutional support mechanisms, policies, and leadership development opportunities available to women leaders.
- To investigate societal perceptions, cultural norms, and gendered expectations influencing women's aspirations and access to leadership positions.
- To propose evidence-based, context-specific strategies aimed at enhancing women's representation, participation, and influence in academic leadership.

## Research Questions

- What personal challenges, including career aspirations, family responsibilities, and work-life balance, affect women's ability to attain and sustain academic leadership roles in Islamabad's HEIs?
- How do organizational structures, institutional policies, leadership pipelines, and support systems shape women's career trajectories in academic leadership?
- What societal and cultural barriers, such as patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes, restrict women's advancement into higher leadership positions?
- Which targeted interventions and strategies can effectively improve women's participation and representation in academic leadership roles within Islamabad's higher education sector?

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative descriptive and analytical research design to systematically investigate the challenges, institutional support, and societal perceptions affecting women's progression into academic leadership positions. The design is suitable for examining measurable relationships between variables and drawing evidence-based inferences that can inform targeted interventions.

### Population and Sampling

The target population comprises female faculty members and administrators employed in three selected Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) located in Islamabad. These institutions were purposively chosen to represent a mix of public and private sector universities. Using a stratified random sampling technique, respondents were selected to ensure representation across academic ranks, administrative positions, and departments, thereby capturing diverse perspectives on leadership experiences.

### Data Collection

Primary data was collected through structured survey questionnaires comprising closed-ended items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The instrument was designed to capture respondents' views on personal, organizational, and societal factors influencing their leadership progression. Prior to administration, the survey tool underwent pilot testing for clarity, reliability, and validity.

### Variables

- Independent Variables: Personal factors (e.g., aspirations, family responsibilities), organizational factors (e.g., institutional policies, leadership training, workplace support), and societal factors (e.g., gender norms, cultural perceptions).
- Dependent Variable: Women's academic leadership progression, measured through indicators such as leadership attainment, tenure in leadership roles, and perceived opportunities for advancement.

### Data Analysis

Collected data was processed and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarize the data, while correlation and multiple regression analyses were applied to examine the strength and direction of relationships between independent variables and the dependent variable. The statistical significance threshold was set at  $p < 0.05$ , ensuring robustness and reliability in the findings.

### Theoretical Framework

The feminist theory offers a fundamental framework of analysis in understanding the gender disparities that continue to dominate the leadership systems by focusing on how the power imbalance is systemically entrenched in the social, political and institutional framework. It questions norms of androcentrism that is, it raises questions about the cultural and structural processes that define the inability of women to access leadership universally including in societies where formal equality is present. According to the theory, gender inequality cannot be considered a historical legacy of patriarchy but it is continuously practiced by institutionalized norms, practices and discourses favoring men (Lorber, 2010; Wienclaw, 2000). Within the realm of leadership, feminist theory also criticises underlying assumptions and organisational cultures that privilege male forms of leadership, and tend to undermine collaborative or transformational styles of leadership which are more associated with women. In addition, it highlights intersectional aspects of inequality, as women leadership paths are

not defined solely by gender but also by race, classes, age, and other identity indicators. Feminist theory strives to uncover the structural impediments, such as glass ceilings, sticky floors, or a glass cliff, through the lens of lived experiences of women and promote policies and cultural changes that will allow women to make equal decisions in areas of decision-making.

Social role theory provides a complementary theory because it describes how gender role expectations within a society influence leadership opportunities and behaviors. In this vein, gendered division of labor at home and in the society generates and reinforces stereotypes regarding what men and women should be like in terms of traits and abilities (Diekmann & Schneider, 2010). Men have been known to be characterized by agentic traits like assertiveness and independence whereas women are characterized by communal traits like empathy and cooperation. These are some of the expectations that affect the appraisal of leaders where women in leadership roles face a double bind where they are perceived to be too soft when they fit into communal norms and too harsh when they follow agentic behaviors. Social role theory is also used to explain how leadership avenues are sieved through occupational roles expectancy whereby some fields and roles are male-dominated because of cultural perceptions of suitability of skills and power. Concealed resistance or diminished chances of promotion can be experienced by the female faculty/administrators in the higher education sector due to evaluation of their leadership potential against gendered standards. This theory therefore gives the structural critique of feminist theory a behavioral and perceptual aspect by explaining how acculturated scripts affect the availability of women leaders as well as demand of such leadership in organizations.

Institutional theory takes the analysis up to the organizational and systemic level, and how formal and informal rules, norms and belief systems in institutions define leadership opportunities. Driven by sociology, it postulates that organizations do not necessarily work on efficiency but thoroughly on the cultural and institutional surrounding (Biggart & Hamilton, 1987; Kauppi, 2022). Institutional logics are prevailing norms of leadership structures, recruiting and promotion channels that prescribe what constitutes legitimate leadership behavior and who qualifies to be a good leader. Traditions and power structures that are highly institutionalized in most institutions of higher learning continue to favor male dominance in top leadership positions despite the fact that gender equality policies are supposedly being encouraged. Another aspect brought out in institutional theory is isomorphic pressures, which entail organizations conforming to similar structures and policies, which are frequently symbolic to earn legitimacy but this does not necessarily imply that power relationships will change. This implies that diversity and inclusion policies can be present on paper but will only have an empty effect unless supported by cultural transformation and accountability measures. The combination of institutional theory, feminist theory, and social role theory enables the framework of the study to capture the interrelation between social norms of gender, individual performance expectations, and organizational dynamics, thus, offering a detailed picture of constraints and facilitators of academic leadership advancements of women.

## Findings

The quantitative analysis indicated the huge challenges at the personal level that women faced in academic leadership at the sampled Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Islamabad. The mean scores revealed that low leadership aspirations as a result of family pressure were a common problem ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ). Family expectations, care-giving duties and societal expectations were some of the reasons cited by the respondents as reasons why they had not actively sought higher administrative positions. Another significant constraint, which was rated as such by 71 percent of respondents, was work-life balance. The SPSS correlation

analysis revealed a moderate negative relationship ( $r = -0.42$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) between family related obligation and leadership aspiration which implies that the greater family obligation, the less women are willing to embrace the opportunity of taking up a leadership position.

Personal Factor	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Percentage Agreement (%)
Low Aspirations due to Family Pressure	3.94	0.86	68
Work-Life Balance Challenges	4.12	0.79	71

At the organizational level, lack of structured mentorship and leadership training programs was reported as a major hindrance ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). The underrepresentation of women in top decision-making bodies was also notable, with only 14% of surveyed female faculty holding senior administrative posts. SPSS regression analysis indicated that the presence of mentorship programs significantly predicted women's leadership progression ( $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Furthermore, insufficient incentives for leadership roles were cited by 63% of respondents, highlighting an institutional gap in recognizing and rewarding women leaders.

Organizational Factor	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Percentage Agreement (%)
Lack of Mentorship & Training	4.07	0.81	66
Underrepresentation in Decision-Making	3.88	0.92	58
Insufficient Incentives	3.74	0.87	63

On the societal level, prevailing patriarchal attitudes were found to significantly restrict women's career growth ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). Cultural biases against women in leadership roles were similarly prominent, with 74% of respondents indicating that societal stereotypes adversely affect their leadership aspirations. A chi-square test revealed a statistically significant relationship between perceived cultural bias and leadership engagement ( $\chi^2(1, N=150) = 10.94$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), demonstrating that women exposed to stronger societal biases are less likely to seek leadership positions.

Societal Factor	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Percentage Agreement (%)
Patriarchal Attitudes	4.18	0.77	72
Cultural Biases	4.05	0.82	74

When comparing the three levels of challenges, societal factors showed the highest overall mean impact score ( $M = 4.11$ ), followed closely by organizational factors ( $M = 3.90$ ) and personal factors ( $M = 3.93$ ). This indicates that while internal (personal) and institutional (organizational) barriers are significant, external societal pressures exert the strongest influence on women's leadership progression. The data suggests a multi-layered interplay between these factors, requiring comprehensive interventions at all three levels.

Regression analysis also indicated that the biggest predictive weight ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) on leadership progression was the societal factors, second was organizational factors ( $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and the last was the personal factors ( $\beta = 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This implies that although individual desires and institutional support are paramount factors, when it comes to solving the problem of women underrepresentation in academic leadership, the most significant changes can be achieved by changing societal norms and biases. The results, on the whole, highlight a very well established issue of women into academic leadership in HEIs of Islamabad. A positive feedback loop of underrepresentation is generated by the interaction of personal, organizational, and societal factors. To stop this cycle, an intervention-based approach is needed, consisting of systematic mentoring, leadership development, and

incentives within the institution as well as social change campaigns to address cultural stereotypes.

## Discussion

The existing evidence explains a complex interplay of individual, institutional, and social limitations that define academic leadership development of women in the HEIs of Islamabad. On the micro-level, the aspect of family pressure and worklife imbalance, directly reduces the leadership aspirations- a conclusion that aligns with the qualitative study conducted by Sarwar (2019) in Pakistan and that emphasizes the role of family-related obligations in holding women down in their career prospects. The statistical evidence of my study - the negative correlation between domestic obligations and leadership ambition supports the complex relationship between the personal and professional life. Organizational-wise, there is a lack of formal mentorship, minimal leadership training, and poor incentive, thus reflecting national trends, much written about in the literature that promotes a formal system to guide potential female leaders (Chaudhary, 2022; Raja, 2020). These insights are consistent with the statistical forecast of the process of leadership development through institutional support ( $\beta = .33$ ), which once again confirms the transformative nature of organizational systems in the area of leadership pipeline. The societal constraints, which appear in the form of patriarchal norms and cultural biases, have the most significant average effect ( $M = 4.11$ ) and statistically significant impact on the outcomes of leadership ( $\beta = 0.41$ ), align with the global gender gap indices. Pakistan is one of the worst countries when it comes to gender parity (Global Gender Gap Index; Gender gap in Pakistan, 2024). This observation is in line with more extensive surveys that point to the universality of cultural expectations in constraining women in their life pathways (Awan, 2024; Global Gender Gap Index, 2024).

More importantly, the interaction of these layers demonstrates that improvements at an organizational level can give quantifiable results, but the most impactful factors that determine the process of female leadership are the societal norms. The precarious interdependence indicates a multi-level approach to the understanding of the gendered career dynamics presented by Sarwar (2019) that includes micro (personal), meso (organizational), and macro (societal) focal points. As the studies looking forward dictate, the regression model in this case highlights that systemic and societal reform accompanied with institutional capacity-building is more effective compared to the isolated interventions (Sarwar, 2019; Razi, 2025). The societal level has a structuring effect on individual intentions: women absorb cultural stereotypes, see the role of a leader as gender-inappropriate, and self-impose their aspirations. Being institutional, such barriers are a lack of mentoring, gender-insensitive policies that further worsen the gap between desire and opportunity. This three-way interaction, which is validated by empirical evidence in this case, will show that only holistic actions are sufficient to bring about the real progress, at the family level, at the university level, and even at the level of societal discourses.

These interconnected findings have policy and institutional implications that are urgent. First, universities should implement systematic mentorship and leadership development training that is specific to women, such as sponsoring flexible work and caregiving policies-addressing both personal and institutional impediments at the same time (Chaudhary, 2022; Raja, 2020). Second, national-level policy machinations, through such bodies as the National Commission on the Status of Women, must require gender-sensitive targets on leadership, open standards of promotion, and economic rewards based on gender equity achievements (NCSW, 2025). Third, there should be more changes on the societal level: gender-sensitization campaigns, community-level discussions, and educational curriculum

redesign can slowly break the patriarchal dichotomies and make women in leadership positions become the new normal, the change recommended in the recent works on empowerment (Razi, 2025; Awan, 2024). Role modeling can be enhanced by cross-sector collaboration between media, civil society, and government to help break the ingrained prejudices.

Multi-pronged approaches are necessary to ensure that gender-inclusive academic leadership is nurtured. The institutions must experiment with peer-networking sites and mentorship circles that can not only advise the emerging female scholars, but also create advocacy coalitions in governance systems. Negotiation, cultural intelligence, and policy navigation should be integrated into leadership training programmes to ensure that women are equipped to overcome the academic-specific challenges (Chaudhary, 2022). At the policy level, accountability and measurement of progress can be guaranteed with the help of data-driven monitoring instruments like gender-disaggregated leadership dashboards. Outside of the sphere of institutions, making public-facing efforts to include women leaders, infiltrating gender discourse into media and incorporating gender studies into curriculum can reset societal norms in the long term. Such holistic measures, based on the quantitative findings of the study and backed by the existing literature have the potential of interrupting deep-rooted patterns of underrepresentation, empowering women to rise to positions of substantive leadership and achieving the goal of improving equitable excellence within higher education sector in the city of Islamabad

## Conclusion

The results of this research show that the process of academic leadership of women across the HEIs in Islamabad is a complicated intersection of individual, institutional, and social factors. At an individual level, low ambitions facilitated by family obligations and the constant work-life dilemma issues still limit female potentials to pursue and maintain leadership positions. Systemic factors such as lack of organized mentorship, leadership training, and fair incentives in an organization generate organizational barriers to women visibility and representation in decision-making rooms. At the social level, patriarchal traditions, cultural stereotyping, and gendered expectations continue to be the biggest obstacles to female professional development, even more, than the most favorable institutional changes. The relationship between these two levels is circular, where the attitude of the society impacts the institutional policy, and vice versa, the attitudes of society affect the self-perception of women and their ambitions, which also influences the institutional policy, thus, the intervention at the single layer is not enough to create significant change. The findings are that to break such a cycle, there needs to be a multi-faceted approach which tackles the issues of personal empowerment, institutional reconfiguration as well as social change.

Based on the findings, the path ahead will require a multi-faceted approach in order to develop an enabling environment towards women leaders in higher education. Institutions should take initiatives to define gender sensitive policies, clear promotion guidelines and strong mentorship opportunities coupled with adopting flexible working options to cater to the different needs of life. On a policy level, national systems need to focus on gender equity measures when it comes to the appointment of leadership roles, motivate universities to reach representation thresholds, and provide leadership development initiatives that are specifically aimed toward women. The societal change, nevertheless, is the key element, as it involves the advocacy on the community level, media campaigns, and educational changes that are necessary to counter and redefine the traditional gender roles. With these obstacles to be overcome simultaneously, the HEIs of Islamabad have the chance to create a more inclusive

leadership environment, which is beneficial not only to gender parity but also to the academic governance and innovativeness. Such a combined strategy can become a game-changer in the organizational aspect of leadership as the voice and the opinion of women should be the most heard in terms of determining the future of higher education in Pakistan.

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