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Challenges Faced By Female Teachers in Leadership Position in Public Sector Universities of Southern KPK

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ABSTRACT

This study examines female public sector university lecturers' challenges in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province's south. The author aims to describe challenges caused by social cultural and institutional factors. These challenges affect the hiring and retention of women in leadership positions in the academy. Research in this area employs a phenomenological approach. Using the purposive sampling technique, authors interviewed ten female university lecturers in public service universities in south Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Authors used Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis as a guide to analyze the data. These authors identified both social-cultural factors and challenges caused by the dominant male culture. These include Patriarchal culture, male dominance, pardah and hijab, the perception that women in leadership roles lack commitment, and the double burden of domestic and work responsibilities. The authors pointed to the lack of family-centered policies, having no place in male-dominated decision-making networks, and unfair promotions. Authors argue that these challenges require major structural changes to create the real equity in higher education leadership for women. Authors have shared findings from a conservative region of the world and offered useful recommendations for administrators and future researchers.

KEYWORDS: *Women in Leadership, Academic Leadership, Gender Barriers, Higher Education, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Public Sector Universities, Qualitative Study.*

INTRODUCTION

There is a gap difference between men and women in leadership positions in universities worldwide because more women than men gain access to higher education and employment (Khan et al., 2025). This gap takes even wider proportions in developing countries where traditional, patriarchal customs are firmly established and act as obstacles to women in achievement of their fullest potential as leaders (Wasim, 2024). It is apparent that there is a problem at a structural, cultural, and organizational level that contributes to this gap even as women's education levels.

Pakistan has the same problem as other South Asian countries. Although 47% of students in Pakistan's universities are women, there are women representing only 9% of the Vice Chancellor positions of Pakistani public sector universities (Arslan, 2025). Women staff of Pakistani universities are concentrated in positions that are temporary and of lower status, and are significantly unrepresented in the upper echelons of the profession (Khan & Shah, 2026). Women professors in universities are negatively affected by patriarchal systems and social norms of Pakistani universities, resulting in lack of research publications, barriers to research peripheral activities and occupation of positions of leadership (Khan & Shah, 2026). The barriers are systemic and exist in the social and institutional norms that are Patriarchal in nature and sustain hierarchies of gender in Pakistani academia.

The women of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) have unique struggles as teachers in academic leadership. First, these women are confined in their homes. There are cultural and religious beliefs which inform the separation of women from men, and, ultimately, women from the community. Lastly, patriarchy and the bias against modernization strengthen human institutions and practices. Worse, women personalities which may influence the community are completely absent (Junaid et al., 2026). Multiple obstacles faced by women academic leaders in KP are attributed to traditional practices, bias against women, and male dominance, as well as perceptions against modernization and discrimination in schools and colleges (Khan et al., 2025). Further, the pardah and hijab culture, along with the rules and procedures of an organization, create an environment of exclusion as a barrier for women's leadership.

While the challenges confronting women in leadership positions in the public sector universities in southern KP are being documented, systematic research on the experiences of these women remains limited. Creating the academic environment devoid of systemic barriers requires an understanding of the obstacles which women in leadership face in the public sector universities in southern KP. This study creates an important contribution to the discussion of gaps in equality of opportunity and equitable access in higher education in Pakistan.

Statement of Problem

Although Pakistani women in higher education have increased, public sector universities in Southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa still have issues with women obtaining and keeping leadership roles. The issues range from culture and deep-rooted systems to being perpetual maids of all trades at the workplace and at home. Women still constitute the smaller portion of academic leadership roles. It reinforces inequality and restricts how higher education institutions make decisions. Inclusion of different socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and interests allows for a more complex and higher quality of education. Therefore, this study attempts to illuminate this issue and the struggles women leaders in academia face in the region.

Objective of the study

1. To explore the sociocultural challenges faced by female teachers in leadership positions at public sector universities in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
2. To examine the institutional and organizational barriers that hinder women's progression to and retention in leadership roles within these universities.

Research Questions

1. What are the sociocultural challenges encountered by female teachers in leadership positions at public sector universities in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

2. What institutional and organizational barriers impede women's leadership advancement in public sector universities of southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

Significance of the Study

The study has implications for different stakeholders. For policymakers and higher education administrators, this study will give them empirical data on which they can rely to develop informed gender-sensitive policies and practices that can help mitigate barriers to women's advancement to leadership positions. The study also notes the challenges of female leaders in academia in southern KP. This provides actionable data for improving gender inclusion and equity in the public sector universities.

For female academics and aspiring leaders, this study documents their experiences and describes it as a systemic barrier. This may lead them to the motivation to demand institutional change. Further, the study contributes to the academic discourse on gender and leadership in African universities, a topic that has little to no research. This study further describes the leadership experiences of women in this region that lacks cultural inclusion. This study adds to the demand of other academics for structural changes that include cultural inclusion to promote gender equity in universities (Khan & Shah, 2026).

Literature Review

Global and South Asian Context of Women in Academic Leadership: The proportion of women in senior leadership roles across the academy remains low, despite a substantial increase in female participation in academia over the years. Barriers to access and retention of women's leadership positions in academia across developing countries have been extensively documented. Traditional societies and less developed countries still present barriers to women of all ages in reaching the higher echelons of leadership positions (Wasim, 2024). Female academics on the continent still grapple with patriarchy as many of the structures of higher education remain stubbornly patriarchal (Tamale, 2020). The challenges facing senior women leaders in South Asia include the cultural, social, structural, and policy barriers that combine to affect women's access to senior positions in academia, thereby providing a regional pattern of woman-related leadership exclusion (Morley et al., 2023). These barriers have been well-documented in the studies of public higher education leadership in South Asia, with barriers including insufficient family support, poor time management, and poor technological skills (Morley et al., 2023).

Pakistan's Higher Education Gender Gap in Academic Leadership: In Pakistan, female enrollment in higher education outnumbers that of males, yet, there remains a significant gender gap in female representation in academic leadership. Currently, females comprise 47% of university students, while women occupy only 9% of the positions of vice-chancellors in the public sector of higher education (Arslan, 2025). A gap equally staggering is found in the other leadership strata, such as deans, departmental heads, and other ranks in the senior administration. Through their research, Khan and Shah (2026) established that, while there has been a greater female participation at the lower scholarly ranks, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions. Their research found that women academics suffer inequitable distribution of research opportunities and other leadership development opportunities, while carrying the burden of domestic work and the undervalued work of the institution. Their research points out that these inequitable practices occur systemically and are entrenched in Patriarchal social values and norms which reinforce inequitable gender divisions in Pakistani academia. Naseem et al. (2023) found that females hold only 4.5% of leadership positions in Pakistani higher education, and that the male faculty

dominate leadership positions, and therefore, create stereotyping and significant challenges to females in the faculty. The COVID-19 pandemic has pronounced the inequitable situation for women in the academe, by increasing the domestic work for women academics.

Socio-cultural and Institutional Challenges: The obstacles women face in Pakistani academia are numerous and complex, extending to the socio-cultural and institutional spheres. Research focused on the province of Sindh demonstrates that the patriarchal social system, the cultural norms of feudalism, and the systems of higher education combine to strongly limit women's potential to be leaders. Multiple studies have broken barriers into different categories, such as personal, (for example, the demands of home) and interpersonal (gender-stereotyping, role conflict) and organizational (i.e. male dominance) categories. Other challenges include informal mentoring, resistance from subordinates who are men, forms of discrimination faced by women from rural and minority populations, and the effects of having an imbalance of work and life due to lack of the institution providing support for it. Women faculty experience barriers in their careers, but Khokhar (2018) describes how having women in higher leadership roles is more accepted and is a result of programs like improved day care centers and promotions based on ability rather than gender. While these changes are more accepted, they do not change the gaps caused by the system.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Context: Possible barriers for women in academic leadership exist at all levels in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Wasim (2024) analyzed women in higher education administration in KP and discovered this area lacks women leaders due to multiple cultural and structural reasons. An intersectional approach revealed family, organizational culture, and urban-rural relaxations of organizational norms and processes as key components to gender inequity in leadership. Khan, Idris and Ghaffar (2025) undertook qualitative research on women academic leaders in the public sector universities of KP, elaborating on the challenges faced by women leaders attributing some of these to male dominated society and gender inequity, Patriarchy, social norms of bias, and women's limited financial autonomy. Negative perceptions towards women's engagement in leadership due to their role in the family and the culture of Purdah and Hijab in this area along with gender discrimination and gender based inequity in higher education institutions perpetuate challenges in women's leadership in KP. Lashari and Shah (2026) assert that a male dominated mono-religious ideology of Pakistani culture and the influence of religious discourse on women's deprivation of engagement in the public sphere of higher education "hijab-ized" women leaders' discourse and justified their exclusion from leading the public sphere of higher education in Pakistan.

Theoretical Frameworks and Coping Strategies:

There are multiple scholarly lenses to instance the barriers women face in academic leadership. In Pakistani academia, feminist institutionalism, theories of gender and organization and social capital framework have been used to explain the continuum and cascading nature of the structural, cultural, and relational dimensions of gender inequality (Khan & Shah, 2026). Sadaf, Bano, and Rahat (2024) identified three distinct forms of promotion trajectories of female professors working in the Pakistani Public Universities by detailing configurations of personal credentials and coping strategies to address delays, social capital and workplace relationships, and the university's promotion system. In Pakistan, the literature also shows that women in academia leverage networking and mentoring to manage and survive in the male-dominated higher education environment. It is suggested that formal mentoring and capacity building programs are offered on a continuing basis by policy makers to enhance the skills of women so that they may effectively pursue their leadership positions.

Summary and Research Gap: Though there is a lot of research on women in leadership positions and their challenges in academia in Pakistan, especially in the culturally conservative region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the challenges faced by the women in leadership teaching positions in the public sector universities of KP, specifically southern KP, have not been researched. Leaving out issues of geographic location, western KP and southern KP have different customs and norms and behaviors that define institutions in other provinces. Although issues have been recorded at the national and provincial levels, the intersection of geography, customs, and norms present in the southern region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has thus far been neglected. Also, policy formation does not incorporate women leaders' voices or perspectives. The focus of this study is the issues faced by women leaders in teaching leadership positions in public sector universities in southern KP. This study will provide a basis for developing gender-sensitive policies along with institutional restructuring to enhance equity and inclusivity in the academic environment in southern KP.

Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology for studying the challenges faced by female teachers in leadership positions within public sector universities in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This chapter defines the research methodology in terms of research design, population and sample, sampling methods, instruments, and the approach to data collection. Choosing the right methodology increases the trustworthiness of the research findings. In the following paragraphs, the researcher outlines the major elements of the chosen methodology for the research study.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design in an attempt to understand the woman teachers in leadership positions. As Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, explain, qualitative research is appropriate when the aim is to describe the participants' meanings in their environment. In this context, the specific qualitative design is phenomenology. Phenomenology is concerned with lived experiences and how persons construct meaning in their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design is appropriate in this context, as the intention is to understand the lived experiences of women in leadership positions in the culturally conservative environment in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Using a phenomenological approach, the researcher is able to develop themes that resurface in stories of participants, while appreciating the uniqueness of individual experiences.

Population of the Study

The population of this study is all public sector female university teachers in leadership positions in the southern region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Southern KP region has the districts of Dera Ismail Khan, Tank, Bannu, Lakki Marwat, and Kohat, where universities fall under the Higher Education Department of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The population of this study includes female leaders in the position of vice-chancellor, dean, director, chair, head of department, and other senior administrative positions in these universities. Based on the available data, there is a severe lack of female representation in leadership positions across these universities which reflects the trend of higher education in Pakistan (Khan & Shah, 2026; Arslan, 2025). Limiting the study to southern KP is extremely important due to the region's identifiable local cultures within structures of patriarchy and tribalism, as well as purdah, which affects women's potential for academic leadership (Wasim, 2024; Junaid et al., 2026).

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The sample consists of female teachers in a leadership position in the public sector universities in the southern region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In this study, purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, will include participants who satisfy the inclusion criteria. Purposive sampling is a type of sampling method utilized in many qualitative researches to capture information-rich cases to understand the phenomena of interest in depth (Patton, 2015). The volunteers will be selected based on the following inclusion criteria: being a female teacher in a leadership position in a public sector university in the Southern KP region, having a minimum of one year of experience in a leadership position, and agreeing to be part of the study. The sample size will be decided based on the principle of data saturation, and this is when more data is collected and analyzed until additional themes or frameworks do not emerge from the data (Guest et al., 2020). It is generally accepted that phenomenological studies reach data saturation with 10 to 15 participants, although this number may change based on how much detail and how rich the data is.

Research Instrument

The main data collection tool in this study is a semi-structured interview guide created by the researcher. The use of semi-structured interviews in phenomenological research allows for flexibility in examining participants' experiences while also ensuring that specific elements or themes are addressed (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide will include a series of loosely defined questions to encourage participants to give detailed descriptions of their experiences, challenges, and the strategies they have employed to cope in their leadership positions. The guide will emphasize sociocultural, institutional, family, and professional challenges and opportunities, as well as how participants cope with the demands of their leadership positions. The interview guide will be developed after an extensive review of the literature on the topic and an expert review of qualitative researchers, especially gender researchers. A two-participant survey of the guide in a sample of the target population will be conducted to evaluate the clarity and the appropriateness of the questions, and for instrument improvement.

Data Collection Procedure

Purpose: to collect data through detailed face-to-face semi-structured interviews with selected participants. Prior to data collection, approval from the ethical review board will be obtained. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants. This will include an explanation of the purpose of the study, the participant's rights, and an understanding of the voluntary nature of their participation. Data will be collected through confidential and anonymous interviews. The interviews will use pseudonyms. The interviews will be conducted at times and in the preferred location of the participants. Interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be recorded with permission. Field notes will also be taken to include context and provide cues. Post interview, the recording will be transcribed, and the data will be prepared for thematic analysis. This will be done by identifying and describing patterns and themes using the "6 steps" framework proposed by Virginia & Victoria, 2022. Member checking will be done to verify the findings by allowing participants to review their interviewed transcription and the themes.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews of female leaders of the public sector universities in Southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were analyzed using thematic analysis as suggested by Virginia and Victoria (2022) within the six-step framework. The analysis

comprised familiarizing myself with the data by several readings of the interview transcripts, initial coding, locating themes, reviewing themes, and crafting the final report. The completion of the thematic analysis resulted in many themes that aligned with the two goals of the study. The results are articulated below along with tables and the interpretations.

Theme 1: Socio-Cultural Barriers (Objective 1)

The first objective of the study was to explore the sociocultural challenges faced by female teachers in leadership positions. The thematic analysis revealed four major sub-themes under this category: patriarchal norms and male dominance, the pardah and hijab culture, negative perceptions of women's leadership commitment, and family and domestic responsibilities.

Table 1: Sociocultural Challenges Faced by Female Academic Leaders

Sub-Theme	Frequency	Sample Quotes
Patriarchal norms and male dominance	8/10	"Men in my department often question my decisions simply because I am a woman"
Pardah and hijab culture	7/10	"My mobility is restricted; attending evening meetings becomes a challenge due to purdah"
Negative perceptions of women's commitment	9/10	"They assume I will prioritize family over work; my dedication is constantly questioned"
Family and domestic responsibilities	10/10	"Balancing household duties and leadership roles is exhausting; there is no institutional support"

The results show that southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has a culture of male dominance and Academy patriarchy. Women leaders said they faced male colleagues and subordinates underestimating them. There is a Pardah and Hijab culture. This culture leads to women's low mobility depending on the women's gender, and involvement in occupational activities that occur outside the regular working hours and in the presence of men. There is a belief that women lack the commitment to leadership roles, which creates additional worries and problems for women leaders regarding their commitment. Women faced the dual-burden of professional and domestic work, and all the women interviewed described the difficulties that they faced while trying to balance leadership duties and fulfill their traditional roles.

Theme 2: Institutional and Organizational Barriers (Objective 2)

The second objective was to study the barriers created by institutions and organizations that limit women's ability to reach leadership positions and jobs. The research found four subthemes, including: absence of institutional support, male-dominated networks coupled with the absence of women in decision-making, biased promotions, and the absence of mentoring and opportunities for professional development.

Table 2: Institutional and Organizational Barriers

Sub-Theme	Frequency	Sample Quotes
Lack of institutional support	8/10	"There are no policies to support working mothers; no daycare, no flexible hours"
Male-dominated networks and exclusion	9/10	"Important decisions are made in informal male gatherings where I am not invited"
Discriminatory promotion practices	7/10	"Men are promoted faster; women have to work twice as hard to be considered"
Absence of mentoring opportunities	8/10	"I never had a mentor; I had to figure everything out on my own"

The results suggest that public sector universities in southern KP lack institutional structures designed to support women's leadership. Study participants noted the absence of informal institution structures, e.g., daycare centers, flexible work hours, and family-friendly policies.

Male-dominated informal networks result in the exclusion of women from the decision-making processes on how the organization's resources are allocated, how promotions are made, and how the institutions are governed. Women are required to exceed the expectations of their colleagues to receive the same level of recognition as their male peers. Lack of formal mentoring programs or professional development programs further impede women's ability to become and remain leaders in the academy. The barriers women face in the public sector universities in southern KP are due to systemic and structural gender disparities.

Discussion

This study contributes to existing literature on Pakistan's higher education by examining the challenges related to women's leadership in public sector universities in southern KP. The results corroborate and add to the existing literature on women's inequality in higher education in Pakistan by describing both persistent problems and contextualized phenomena. The sociocultural issues included in this study—patriarchal norms, male dominance, pardah and hijab culture, negative views of women's commitment to the family, and women's family responsibility—have been studied before in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Khan, Idris, and Ghaffar (2025) studied women academic leaders in KP, and found women faced challenges of gender biased norms, patriarchy, male dominance, and the pardah and hijab culture. This study confirms those findings. These barriers do not remain only as abstract cultural issues. They affect women in leadership in their daily lives, and influence their authority, freedom of movement, and reputation.

The concern about women leadership commitment due to family responsibility has been previously studied, and family support was found to be an important contributor to women's leadership in higher education, in KP, studied by Wasim (2024). This study extends those findings and adds that women, despite having family support, still encounter an institutional bureaucratic barrier of doubt regarding family responsibility, leading to a contradiction that women fulfill their family role and duty while having to defend their commitment to leadership. This contradiction, studied by Khan and Shah (2026), also includes female academics in their undervalued and overburdened institutional work.

The obstacles described align with systemic barriers experienced by women in wider Pakistan. Lashari and Shah (2024) describe how Muslim men's religious monoglossia and gendered discourses justify the exclusion of women from leadership. Research investigating women's participation in leadership in Pakistani higher education have identified male domination in the organization as the main barrier. This study focuses on southern KP, where exclusionary practices are intensified by both geographical isolation and cultural conservatism.

One of the key findings of this study was the intersectional nature of barriers. Participants described how cultural norms of purdah and mobility restrictions impacted informal decision-making networks and meeting schedules to intensify exclusion. This was documented by Junaid, Ahmad, and Taj (2025) who reported how KP academia developed a set of mechanisms to exclude women along the lines of gendered discourses and spatial arrangements. The present study adds to this body of work by providing examples of the intersectional nature of barriers, and the multiple and overlapping barriers women leaders face, the accumulation of which cannot be addressed individually.

The absence of formal mentorship programs identified in this study represents a larger issue in Pakistan's higher education. Several studies in Pakistan have shown the absence of support, networking opportunities and mentors as the biggest challenges for women deans in Pakistan. This study supports these findings and indicates that there is an even bigger absence of

mentoring especially in southern KP where geography and culture may have an impact on the development of professional networks. Participants of this study mentioned the absence of guidance and the need to be resilient and learn from experience in order to assume leadership roles.

Women participants from Southern KP in this study described utilizing a number of informal support strategies under the given challenging circumstances. These included seeking support from family, building informal networks and performing at a high level in an effort to overcome negative perceptions. This may be related to Lashari's (2023) point that some women academics refuse to comply with patriarchal regimes and break social norms as well as gender segregated leadership. Reliance on individual strategies instead of institutional support exhibits the magnitude of the challenge and the ineffectiveness of the existing policies.

Conclusion

The conflicts of female teachers in leadership in public sector universities in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were investigated. The results showed that women academic leaders faced several complex barriers that are deep rooted in cultural and systemic methods of a given institution. Culture barriers include domineering men, patriarchal systems, burdens of pardah, hijab culture, and leadership of women, as well as the burden of work and domestic responsibilities. Barriers of an institution include neglect of family-focused policies, absence in men domineered decision-making networks, and unequal promotions. The absence of family-based policies and formal mentoring and professional training combines and aggravates other barriers for women in leadership positions.

The findings of this study will contribute to the existing literature on the inequality of gender in Pakistani higher education by giving evidence in the cultural conservative and isolated region of Southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The findings point out that the lack of women in leadership positions is not due to the lack of ability and interest, but stems from the deep inequalities of gender in cultural institutions and highly bureaucratized systems. Until these inequities are addressed, it will be impossible to achieve higher education gender equity, and women leaders will continue to be silenced.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Southern KP universities are required to develop formal mentoring programs that connect young women leaders to mentors, and offer them both guidance, networking opportunities, and professional support.
- Universities should create on-campus daycare and offer flexible work hours, parental leave, etc. to reduce the burden of domestic duties on women academics.
- Gender sensitivity training and publishing clear and transparent criteria for promotion are required to eliminate the existing prejudices at universities.
- Governance of institutions must involve women in both formal and informal decision-making processes at the levels of both the Syndicate and Senate.
- Universities, in collaboration with civil society, must promote advocacy to address patriarchal norms and to challenge the negative perceptions of women's leadership.
- The Higher Education Commission and the Provincial Governments must develop and enforce comprehensive gender equity policies with proper frameworks and conditions to ensure women's participation in leadership positions and monitor institutions for compliance.

Suggestions for Future Researchers

- To adapt to the situation of Pakistan, comparative research across the different regions of Pakistan is required to understand the differences in problems and the differences in the solutions.
- Research spanning the careers of women academic leaders is needed in order to understand the long-term effects of institutional barriers.
- Comprehensive research in the framework of men's perceptions and attitudes of administrators towards women's leadership can also be considered.

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