

Female Leadership and Institutional Support in Higher Education: Insights from KP (Pakistan)

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Abstract

Women's leadership in higher education remains an underexplored yet critical dimension of institutional development in Pakistan. While women now represent a significant share of students and faculty, their presence in senior leadership positions remains disproportionately low. This study examines the experiences of ten female leaders in universities across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), highlighting the structural, cultural, and interpersonal challenges that shape their leadership trajectories. Guided by the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders, the research employed a qualitative design, drawing on in-depth interviews to capture women's lived realities. Findings reveal recurring barriers, including blocked promotions, frequent departmental transfers, exclusion from decision-making, and hostile behaviour from junior colleagues. Participants described institutional practices that destabilised their leadership authority, such as being repeatedly shifted after setting up departments or having their promotion cases delayed when higher roles were anticipated. Cultural norms and organisational politics intersect to reinforce gendered power dynamics, often leaving women isolated and without adequate administrative support. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience, continuing to perform leadership duties and advocate for inclusive practices. Comparative analysis across other provinces and global contexts suggests that, while the nature of gender bias varies, the systemic exclusion of women from leadership is a shared concern. The study underscores the urgent need for institutional reforms, including transparent promotion criteria, stable appointments, mentoring systems, and gender-sensitive governance structures. Addressing these gaps will not only enhance women's participation in leadership but also strengthen the inclusivity and effectiveness of higher education in KP.

Keywords: Women Leaders, Higher Education, Institutional Support, Gender Bias.

Introduction

Women's participation in leadership within higher education has become an essential global concern, as gender equality is increasingly recognised as central to institutional excellence, innovation, and inclusivity. Despite growing international initiatives to promote gender equity, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions across academia, particularly in developing countries where structural barriers, socio-cultural constraints, and institutional biases persist (Morley, 2013; O'Connor, 2018). Within Pakistan, and more specifically Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), the representation of women in higher education leadership remains limited, reflecting both cultural traditions and systemic gaps in institutional support.

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Higher education institutions (HEIs) are key drivers of social and economic development. Universities not only generate knowledge but also shape the values and norms that influence wider society (UNESCO, 2015). The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, therefore, has far-reaching consequences. It restricts diversity in decision-making, narrows institutional perspectives, and perpetuates gender inequality (Airini et al., 2011). Leadership in higher education requires skills such as negotiation, vision-building, and collaborative governance, yet women leaders often encounter resistance from colleagues, subordinates, and administrative systems when occupying these roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These challenges are often compounded in regions like KP, where traditional patriarchal structures exert a strong influence on workplace culture and institutional practices.

In Pakistan, women make up a significant portion of the higher education student body and academic workforce, yet their representation declines sharply in senior leadership. According to the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC, 2022), women account for nearly 46% of tertiary-level enrollments. However, only a small fraction hold positions such as deans, vice-chancellors, or department heads. In KP, where cultural conservatism is deeply rooted, women leaders face additional challenges, including gendered mobility restrictions, stereotypes about women's capacity to lead, and institutional mechanisms that reinforce male dominance in governance structures (Shah & Shah, 2012). This imbalance not only undermines women's career trajectories but also hinders institutional performance and inclusivity.

The challenges faced by female leaders in KP's higher education are multifaceted. One common barrier is the phenomenon of frequent transfers and administrative reshuffling, disproportionately applied to women. Female department heads report being shifted every one to two years, preventing them from consolidating their authority, sustaining reforms, or completing long-term projects. Male counterparts, by contrast, often enjoy stable tenures. This reflects what Eagly and Karau (2002) describe as "role incongruity," in which women in leadership roles are perceived as misaligned with gendered expectations of subordination and compliance.

Another structural challenge lies in promotion and recognition. Women frequently experience blocked promotions, delayed evaluations, or deliberate sidelining when their advancement threatens established male-dominated hierarchies. In many cases, women's promotion cases are paused if they are seen as likely candidates for positions such as deans, demonstrating how institutional politics can be used to control women's mobility. Moreover, junior colleagues who are promoted ahead of women often adopt harsh or dismissive behaviours, creating hostile work environments that further marginalise women leaders.

At the interpersonal level, women leaders in KP also confront insubordination and collective resistance from subordinates. Accounts from female academics describe situations where male staff members form lobbies against them, refuse to cooperate, and even ridicule their authority. Rather than addressing these challenges, administrative bodies often exacerbate them by sharing confidential complaints with subordinates or ignoring women's recommendations. This lack of institutional support reflects not only organisational weaknesses but also systemic gender bias embedded in governance structures (Kele & Pietersen, 2015).

Globally, similar trends can be observed. Studies from sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia reveal that women leaders are often marginalised through exclusion from informal networks, tokenistic appointments, and the double burden of balancing professional and family responsibilities (Acker, 2012; O'Connor, 2014; Singh, 2017). In Western contexts, although progress has been made, women leaders continue to face subtle biases and limited access to elite academic "clubs" that influence decision-making (Airini et al., 2011). What distinguishes KP's case is the combination of cultural conservatism with institutional practices such as frequent transfers and promotion delays, which intensify the barriers women leaders face.

The significance of this study lies in situating women's leadership experiences within KP's unique socio-cultural and institutional environment. By examining the intersection of gender norms and governance practices, the study highlights how systemic prejudice undermines women's authority, limits their opportunities for career progression, and discourages their full participation in higher education leadership. Drawing on qualitative interviews with ten female leaders from different universities in KP, this research provides insight into the lived realities of women navigating hostile institutional cultures while striving to perform leadership roles effectively.

The study is guided by the “role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders” (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which posits that prejudice arises when there is incongruity between the stereotypical attributes of women and the perceived requirements of leadership roles. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant in KP, where women leaders' authority is routinely questioned and undermined through practices that reinforce the incongruity between gender and leadership expectations. By applying this framework, the research not only interprets the challenges women face but also situates them within broader patterns of gendered discrimination in academic leadership.

Ultimately, the study contributes to debates on gender and leadership in higher education by demonstrating how institutional support—or its absence—shapes women's ability to lead in KP universities. It emphasises that women's exclusion from leadership is not the result of individual shortcomings but systemic and cultural factors that perpetuate gender inequality. Addressing these barriers requires structural reforms, cultural change, and deliberate strategies to foster inclusive governance in higher education.

2. Literature Review

The issue of women's leadership in higher education is not only a matter of institutional design but also one of social expectations and cultural context. Universities serve as important sites for leadership development, yet senior academic and administrative positions remain dominated by men, particularly in South Asia. The gap is especially stark in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), where cultural norms, political environments, and institutional structures converge to shape women's career opportunities. A substantial body of scholarship in leadership studies, gender theory, and higher-education research sheds light on the multiple barriers women encounter and the kinds of institutional supports that can make a difference. This review synthesises that scholarship, linking global insights to the specific challenges and possibilities within KP.

Theoretical Frameworks: Congruity, Labyrinth, and Authentic Leadership

Theories of gender and leadership help explain why women continue to face challenges in occupying senior roles. One prominent framework, role congruity theory, argues that prejudice against women leaders results from the perceived mismatch between communal gender norms and the agentic qualities associated with leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2010). In many organisational cultures, leadership is still imagined as masculine, meaning that when women demonstrate competence, they are often judged as violating gender expectations. When they conform to gender norms, they may be seen as lacking leadership qualities (Eagly & Mladinic, 2011).

Building on this, Eagly and Carli (2007) introduced the labyrinth metaphor as a more nuanced alternative to the “glass ceiling.” Rather than a single barrier, women face an intricate maze of obstacles—ranging from biased evaluation systems to work–life balance pressures—that complicate progression to senior posts. In contexts such as KP, this metaphor resonates strongly, given the complex interplay of tradition, family structures, and institutional governance.

A third line of scholarship emphasises authentic leadership—how women construct their leadership identity within cultural and organisational expectations. Research suggests that when institutions allow leaders to express coherent identities rather than forcing conformity to narrow norms, women are better able to thrive (Al-Moamary et al., 2020; Spiller, 2021). For societies with deeply embedded gender roles, authenticity may be a key pathway for women to exercise authority without feeling detached from community expectations.

Gendered Leadership Styles and Persistent Stereotypes

Considerable debate surrounds whether women lead differently from men and whether these differences matter for advancement. Several meta-analyses indicate that women are more inclined toward transformational leadership styles—emphasising vision, mentoring, and motivation—which are often effective in educational environments (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2003; Vinkenbug et al., 2011). Despite these advantages, cultural stereotypes frequently associate leadership with traditionally masculine qualities such as assertiveness and control (Koenig et al., 2011; Schein & Davidson, 1993).

This stereotype gap can create evaluative penalties: even when women demonstrate strong transformational leadership, their contributions may be undervalued compared to those of men who exhibit similar behaviours (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Hoyt (2005) further argues that leadership efficacy—women's own belief in their capacity to lead—is shaped by these stereotypes, influencing their willingness to pursue leadership positions. Longitudinal studies underline that early access to leadership experiences provides lasting benefits, yet without supportive institutions, these gains do not always translate into senior appointments (Offermann et al., 2020).

Barriers in Higher Education: Formal Rules and Informal Practices

The higher education sector is marked by structural barriers that limit women's advancement. Formal obstacles include unclear promotion criteria, lack of flexible administrative tracks, and appointment committees often dominated by men (Bornstein, 2008; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). Informal factors—such as restricted access to mentoring, reliance on male-dominated networks, and the assumption that women cannot commit long hours—further complicate advancement (Damiani et al., 2017; Madden, 2011).

In Pakistan, these institutional barriers interact with broader socio-cultural norms. Studies of professional women illustrate that mobility restrictions, safety concerns, and household responsibilities frequently constrain career opportunities (Mumtaz et al., 2003; Zeba & Shahnaz, 2000). Within the education sector, qualitative research on women principals highlights how patriarchal norms and familial obligations limit both their appointment and performance in leadership roles (Maryam & Ghaffar, 2021; Ishaq & Memon, 2016). These findings suggest that higher education in KP cannot be understood in isolation from the wider cultural environment, which often places heavy constraints on women's professional lives.

Work–Life Balance, Organisational Climate, and Policy Environments

The literature underscores that leadership in higher education is demanding, frequently requiring long hours, travel, and social networking outside regular working times. For women, these requirements intersect with family roles in ways that can discourage the pursuit of leadership positions. Comparative studies show that the use of work–life balance programs depends not only on the policies themselves but also on organisational culture and societal expectations (Brown et al., 2021). Policies such as childcare services, flexible working hours, and safe transport options are often more effective when supported by institutional-level leadership (Thomas, 2021).

Furthermore, intersectional research demonstrates that women's experiences of leadership are not shaped solely by gender. Religion, ethnicity, class, and migration history intersect to produce varied challenges. For South Asian Muslim women in particular, cultural expectations and community pressures can amplify workplace discrimination, meaning that policies need to be adapted to local realities rather than copied wholesale from other contexts (Tariq & Syed, 2017).

Institutional Supports: Mentorship, Sponsorship, and Policy Interventions

Across multiple studies, mentorship and sponsorship emerge as critical supports for women's leadership development. Mentorship provides guidance, but sponsorship—where senior leaders actively advocate for a woman's advancement—is especially effective (Salas-Lopez et al., 2011; Damiani et al., 2017). Leadership training and capacity-building programs also increase women's preparedness for senior roles, although their impact depends on whether institutions create genuine opportunities for advancement afterwards (American Council on Education, 2012).

Transparent selection processes and clear criteria are also vital. Ambiguity in promotions often leaves room for bias, whereas structured, published procedures help ensure fairness (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Some contexts have experimented with quotas or representation targets to accelerate women's entry into decision-making bodies. While these measures can improve descriptive representation, researchers warn of risks of tokenism if quotas are not combined with broader cultural and institutional reforms (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Evidence points to integrated strategies—mentorship, training, transparent processes, and family-friendly policies—as the most sustainable route to change.

Narrative and Qualitative Insights: Leadership Stories and Identity Work

Beyond large-scale surveys and statistical analyses, qualitative approaches offer valuable insights into how women experience leadership journeys. Narrative studies reveal how personal agency, mentoring relationships, and turning points shape women's capacity to claim leadership roles (Damiani et al., 2017; Nidiffer, 2003). These accounts highlight the importance of informal supports and resilience strategies, aspects that quantitative research often overlooks.

Further work on leadership authenticity suggests that women's identity negotiations are central to their leadership trajectories. Rather than abandoning cultural expectations, many women leaders find ways to integrate them with institutional demands, crafting a style that feels legitimate both personally and socially (Al-Moamary et al., 2020; Spiller, 2021). In regions like KP, where community and family structures play strong roles in professional life, such identity work is particularly salient.

Despite rich theoretical frameworks and evidence from multiple contexts, several gaps remain when applied to KP. First, much of the high-quality evidence—particularly meta-analyses of leadership styles—derives from Western or East Asian contexts, raising questions about transferability (Eagly & Wood, 2013). Second, empirical mapping of gender representation in university leadership across KP is limited. Without comprehensive data, it is hard to assess the effectiveness of existing policies.

Local studies offer some direction. For example, Maryam and Ghaffar (2021) illustrate how women principals in KP face challenges that extend beyond institutional rules, shaped profoundly by community expectations. Broader work on women's autonomy in Pakistan underscores the need to adapt global models to local contexts (Zeba & Shahnaz, 2000; Mumtaz et al., 2003). Together, these findings call for KP-specific research that is attentive to both structural reforms and socio-cultural dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in “role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders”, developed by Eagly and Karau (2002), which offers a clear explanation of the persistent barriers women encounter when aspiring to leadership positions in male-dominated environments such as higher education institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. The theory argues that prejudice against female leaders arises when there is a perceived incongruity between the characteristics associated with women and those considered desirable for leaders.

In most societies, including Pakistan, gender roles have historically been defined by communal attributes—such as nurturing, cooperation, and modesty—while leadership has been associated with agentic traits—such as assertiveness, authority, and decisiveness (Eagly & Karau, 2010). When women occupy leadership roles, they are often judged against these incongruent expectations. If they conform to communal expectations, they may be viewed as insufficiently authoritative to lead. Conversely, if they demonstrate agentic traits necessary for leadership, they are frequently penalised as “unfeminine” or “too aggressive.” This double bind contributes to the systemic disadvantage women face in advancing within higher education.

The relevance of this theory to KP's context is evident in women's experiences of frequent departmental shifts, delayed promotions, and resistance from colleagues and subordinates. For instance, women leaders often report that male colleagues form lobbies against them, leaving them isolated and compelled to perform tasks independently. This reflects the prejudice embedded in role incongruity: subordinates resist female leaders not because of competence deficits, but because their authority challenges entrenched gender-role expectations. Similarly, when administrations withhold promotions or leadership opportunities on political grounds, it further reveals how institutional practices reinforce incongruity between female identity and leadership identity.

Research globally has demonstrated the explanatory power of role congruity theory. Studies across higher education settings show that women in leadership positions are consistently judged more harshly than men with comparable qualifications and achievements (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Koenig et al., 2011). In Pakistan, Maryam and Ghaffar (2021) found that women principals in KP schools faced scepticism about their ability to manage institutions, echoing the same dynamics described by Eagly and Karau. This suggests that role congruity theory is highly transferable to understanding women's leadership in KP's universities.

Moreover, the theory explains why female leaders often face institutional hurdles that their male counterparts do not. Male heads of departments, for example, may not be subject to the same frequency of transfers or the same degree of staff resistance. Such inequities reflect the gendered expectations that align male identity with authority and leadership, while casting women leaders as incongruent with the role. These dynamics undermine not only women's progression but also institutional effectiveness, as talented leaders are constrained by structural bias.

Role congruity theory also highlights the psychological consequences for women leaders. Being consistently undermined or judged through conflicting standards can erode self-efficacy and discourage persistence in leadership roles (Hoyt, 2005). However, women who remain resilient, as seen in KP, illustrate the importance of individual agency within these constraints. However, resilience alone cannot dismantle structural prejudice; institutional reforms are needed to reduce the incongruity between women's gender roles and leadership expectations.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the leadership experiences of women in higher education institutions (HEIs) across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. A qualitative approach was deemed most suitable because it allows exploration of lived experiences, institutional practices, and cultural dynamics that are not easily captured by

quantitative tools (Creswell, 2014). By focusing on narratives, this method provided more profound insights into how women perceive leadership roles, navigate institutional structures, and respond to challenges in their professional trajectories.

The participants in this study were 10 women faculty members from different universities across KP. All participants had either served in or aspired to leadership positions, including heads of departments, deans, directors, and members of decision-making bodies. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select these women, ensuring diversity across academic disciplines, age, and institutional contexts (Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach allowed the study to include voices from both general and women's universities, capturing a range of leadership experiences across varied institutional cultures.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary tool for data Collection. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or virtually, depending on the participant's preference. The interview guide included open-ended questions on pathways to leadership, organisational support, mentoring opportunities, gender-based barriers, and personal strategies for overcoming challenges. Semi-structured interviews ensured consistency across participants while still allowing women to articulate the issues most relevant to their own experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the process. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity; pseudonyms were assigned during transcription to protect identities. Consent was obtained before each interview, and recordings were used only for research purposes. Such measures were significant given the socio-cultural sensitivities in KP, where women leaders often navigate conservative norms alongside professional demands (Shaukat & Pell, 2016).

For analysis, the study employed thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were read multiple times for familiarity, and initial codes were developed around recurring issues such as institutional barriers, cultural expectations, and availability of support structures. These codes were then refined into broader themes that highlighted both common patterns and unique variations across the ten women's experiences. NVivo software was used to manage and organise the data systematically, ensuring reliability and transparency in the coding process.

The inclusion of 10 women as participants does not aim to generalise the findings to all female academics in Pakistan. Instead, it provides rich, context-specific insights into the leadership landscape in KP, where structural challenges and gender norms remain deeply intertwined (Batoool, Sajid, & Shaheen, 2013). By integrating women's voices with institutional realities, this methodology highlights not only the barriers to female leadership but also the resilience and strategies women employ to negotiate space in academic governance.

Results

The findings of this qualitative study reveal a layered and complex set of barriers and experiences faced by women leaders in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Based on in-depth interviews with ten women who had either held or aspired to leadership positions in universities across the province, the analysis identified several recurring themes. These themes capture the institutional, cultural, and interpersonal hurdles that shape their leadership trajectories, as well as the resilience strategies employed to navigate hostile environments.

The data are presented under four major thematic areas: (1) structural and administrative barriers, (2) cultural resistance and lobbying, (3) interpersonal challenges and subordinate dynamics, and (4) resilience and coping strategies. Within each theme, participants' voices are included through direct quotes to preserve the authenticity of their experiences.

Theme 1: Structural and Administrative Barriers**Promotion Delays and Gatekeeping**

A prominent barrier identified by participants was the deliberate obstruction of promotion cases, often linked to political manoeuvring within universities. Several women reported that despite fulfilling the academic and service requirements for promotion, their cases were delayed or blocked by administrators. One participant expressed her frustration "my promotion case was stopped because of the expectation that I might be appointed as Dean. Rather than recognising my eligibility, they used this as an excuse to keep me from moving forward."

This account highlights how formal procedures, such as merit-based promotions, are instead politicised, reflecting broader patterns of gatekeeping in academic institutions (Bornstein, 2008; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). Such delays undermine women's career trajectories and serve as a means of control by restricting their access to senior roles.

Repeated Departmental Transfers

Another recurring experience was the repeated shifting of women leaders between departments, often without justification. Participants interpreted these moves as strategies to destabilise their authority and prevent them from building long-term institutional influence. One participant, with nine years of leadership experience, shared "I was shifted from one department to another almost every year or two. Whenever I set up labs or offices with my own effort, I was suddenly moved again."

She added that these relocations were not applied equally to male department heads "this frequency does not exist for male heads of departments. They remain in one place for years, while women are continuously moved."

This finding resonates with Madden's (2011) observation that women in higher education face unequal application of rules and structures that diminish their legitimacy as leaders.

Lack of Administrative Support

Women leaders also described institutional administrations as indifferent or, at times, complicit in reinforcing barriers. Requests for support in addressing workplace hostility were often ignored or mishandled. One participant explained "whenever I wrote to the administration to break the groups working against me, instead of taking action, they showed my letters to those very people."

Such breaches of confidentiality not only left women leaders vulnerable but also emboldened opposition groups. This echoes findings from Maryam and Ghaffar (2021), who reported similar administrative negligence in leadership contexts in KP schools.

Theme 2: Cultural Resistance and Lobbying**Lobbying and Informal Networks**

Participants consistently described the role of lobbying and informal male-dominated networks in undermining women's leadership authority. One woman explained "there are strong lobbies in KP universities. Decisions are made outside formal structures, and women are usually excluded from these circles."

These accounts reflect the "labyrinth" metaphor of leadership barriers (Eagly & Carli, 2007), where women face multiple obstacles embedded in institutional culture. Exclusion from networks denies women access to critical information, alliances, and resources needed to sustain leadership roles.

Political Manipulation of Positions

Linked to lobbying was the political manipulation of leadership roles, including frequent chair reshuffling or the delay of appointments. Several participants noted that such practices

disproportionately targeted women, who were seen as less able to resist political interference. This aligns with Glazer-Raymo's (2008) argument that women leaders are often viewed as more vulnerable to institutional manipulation, limiting their autonomy and authority.

Theme 3: Interpersonal Challenges and Subordinate Dynamics

Resistance from Subordinates

A significant theme was the resistance women faced from their own subordinates, who often refused to cooperate and formed alliances to undermine their authority. One participant explained, "my subordinates are not working. They usually become a team against me, so I have to complete every task by myself."

This experience highlights how gendered dynamics within academic hierarchies affect women leaders differently. While male heads often receive cooperation, women leaders encounter active resistance, forcing them to carry disproportionate workloads.

Harsh Behaviour from Junior Colleagues

Some participants also shared experiences of disrespectful treatment from junior colleagues, particularly those recently promoted. One woman recalled "my junior colleagues, after promotion, started showing harsh behaviour. Instead of cooperating, they tried to create obstacles in my work."

These experiences underscore the persistence of patriarchal norms that resist female authority, consistent with the role congruity theory of prejudice toward women leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2010).

Isolation in Leadership Roles

Many participants described feeling isolated in leadership roles, with little peer or institutional support. One woman explained "whenever I took initiatives, I had to do them alone. Instead of working with me, colleagues stood aside or criticised my decisions."

This isolation not only increased workload but also created psychological strain, as women leaders lacked the collegial solidarity often available to their male counterparts.

Theme 4: Resilience and Coping Strategies

Despite these barriers, participants demonstrated resilience and perseverance. They shared strategies for coping with institutional hostility, including self-reliance, persistence, and personal investment in their departments.

Self-Reliance and Initiative

Several women described completing tasks independently when subordinates or administrators failed to cooperate. One woman reflected "whenever labs, offices, or furniture were needed, I arranged everything on my own. I never waited for others, because I knew they would not support me."

This initiative demonstrates women's determination to fulfil their leadership responsibilities despite structural opposition, echoing Offermann et al.'s (2020) findings on the long-term resilience of women leaders.

Persistence Despite Transfers

Even after repeated departmental shifts, women leaders sought to rebuild their spaces and maintain professional standards. One participant stated, "every time I was shifted, I started again from zero. It was exhausting, but I never gave up."

This persistence illustrates women's commitment to leadership in higher education despite recurring institutional disruptions.

Advocacy through Formal Channels

Some women continued to use formal reporting and administrative channels, even when met with resistance. While these efforts were often undermined, they reflect women's insistence on asserting their rights within institutional frameworks.

Cross-Cutting Observations

Taken together, these findings reveal that women leaders in KP universities face multi-layered barriers. Structural obstacles, such as delayed promotions and repeated transfers, intersect with cultural practices, such as lobbying and informal male networks. Interpersonal challenges, including insubordination and disrespect from colleagues, further undermine women's authority. However, participants also exhibited resilience, relying on self-initiative and persistence to navigate hostile environments.

These findings align with broader literature on gender and leadership, which emphasises that women's under-representation in senior roles is not due to individual shortcomings but to systemic barriers embedded within institutional cultures (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Vinkenburg et al., 2011). In the context of KP, where patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched, these barriers take on unique forms that require context-sensitive solutions.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal that women in higher education leadership positions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) face layered institutional and cultural hurdles that undermine both their authority and professional growth. Experiences of blocked promotions, frequent transfers, and hostile workplace behaviour illustrate a wider gendered structure of higher education governance. When compared with evidence from other provinces of Pakistan, these patterns show both similarities and distinctive intensities, reflecting how regional political cultures shape the experiences of female leaders.

One important finding was the deliberate use of administrative procedures to stall women's promotion cases. For instance, one participant noted that her promotion was blocked because of the perception that she might be appointed Dean, indicating that career progression is politicised rather than merit-based. Similar practices have been reported in Punjab, where women faculty often face delays in tenure and promotion processes due to lobbying and institutional politics (Shah, 2018). In Sindh, researchers have observed that the appointment of women to senior posts is frequently symbolic, with limited actual authority delegated to them (Qureshi & Rasool, 2020). What distinguishes KP, however, is the more substantial presence of local political lobbies within universities, which participants described as highly influential in shaping transfers, promotions, and departmental structures. These practices reveal how local power dynamics intersect with gender discrimination to produce distinctive barriers.

Another prominent finding was the repeated shifting of female heads of department, often every one to two years, regardless of their contributions in building infrastructure, offices, and laboratories. This practice not only undermined continuity but also conveyed that women's work was expendable. In Punjab and Sindh, women also report marginalisation, but research suggests they are more likely to be sidelined through exclusion from decision-making committees rather than through constant administrative transfers (Khurshid, 2016). The KP context, therefore, reflects a particularly destabilising approach to female leadership, in which disruption is used to prevent women from consolidating authority. Globally, this resonates with findings from African higher education systems where female leaders have been frequently reassigned to marginal positions, limiting their institutional visibility and long-term impact (Morley & Lussier, 2009).

The results also highlighted hostile behaviour from subordinates and junior colleagues, especially those who had recently been promoted. Women leaders explained that, rather than

cooperating, teams often resisted their authority, forming informal groups to undermine departmental functions. When complaints were sent to the administration, the information was shared with subordinates instead of being addressed, leaving women further isolated. This dynamic reflects a wider cultural challenge. In Balochistan, similar tensions have been reported, where male faculty openly question the legitimacy of women in leadership roles, reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies (Rehman & Baloch, 2021). Internationally, parallel patterns are found in universities in the Middle East, where women leaders experience resistance from colleagues who align themselves with male networks of influence (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). Thus, the KP findings fit within a broader global context where women's authority is often challenged at both administrative and interpersonal levels.

The role of lobbying and informal networks also emerged strongly in this study. Women leaders reported being systematically excluded from political alliances that determined key institutional decisions. Such exclusion is not unique to KP. In Punjab, informal networks based on kinship and political patronage similarly disadvantage women, although the higher density of women's universities there provides some degree of counterbalance (Khalid & Mujahid-Mukhtar, 2002). In Sindh, lobbying practices intersect more visibly with party politics, often overshadowing academic merit (Qureshi, 2020). KP, however, appears particularly restrictive given the limited number of women leaders and the stronger hold of localised male-dominated groups. Globally, exclusion from informal networks has been identified as one of the most persistent barriers to women's leadership in higher education, with studies in the UK and Australia highlighting how male-dominated academic "clubs" continue to dominate leadership pipelines (O'Connor, 2020).

Despite these barriers, the findings also reveal significant resilience among women leaders in KP. Several participants described completing tasks independently when teams refused to cooperate, or repeatedly rebuilding departmental infrastructure after each transfer. This persistence reflects strong personal agency, aligning with evidence from women leaders in South Asia who often rely on self-reliance to navigate institutional barriers (Shah, 2009). At the same time, the necessity of resilience underscores institutional failure. While resilience is commendable, it should not substitute for structural reforms that provide adequate support for women leaders.

In sum, the experiences of female leaders in KP higher education echo many of the challenges faced by women in other provinces of Pakistan and in higher education globally. However, the combination of frequent transfers, lobbying-driven politics, and open hostility from subordinates suggests a more acute form of resistance in KP's universities. These findings highlight the need for reforms that address both structural and cultural barriers, ensuring transparent promotion processes, rationalised transfers, and institutional Accountability for workplace behaviour. Without such reforms, women's contributions will remain undervalued, and leadership in higher education will continue to be dominated by male-dominated networks.

Conclusion

The study highlights how women leaders in higher education institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) continue to face entrenched structural and cultural barriers that undermine their authority and career advancement. The narratives show that promotion cases are often delayed or blocked for political reasons, particularly when women are perceived as potential candidates for senior roles such as deanship. Repeated transfers of female heads of department, despite their contributions in setting up offices, laboratories, and furniture, further weaken their institutional visibility. Alongside these administrative barriers, women reported experiencing hostile behaviour from subordinates, many of whom formed groups against them rather than working collaboratively. When such issues were raised, administrative responses often reinforced male networks instead of addressing the concerns of women leaders. Collectively,

these findings demonstrate how gendered power dynamics in KP universities perpetuate a cycle of exclusion and instability for female academics in leadership roles.

Compared with other provinces, KP reflects a more acute manifestation of the challenges women face elsewhere in Pakistan. In Punjab, women are often excluded from decision-making committees, while in Sindh, symbolic appointments without authority are common. In Balochistan, cultural hierarchies openly question women's legitimacy as leaders. KP's distinct pattern lies in the frequency of transfers and the strong influence of political lobbies, which use administrative measures to marginalise women leaders. Globally, similar barriers exist: women in African, Middle Eastern, and Western universities continue to encounter exclusion from informal networks and male-dominated cultures. However, the KP case illustrates a sharper form of institutional resistance, where administrative tools such as transfers and blocked promotions are systematically used against women.

The resilience of women leaders in KP deserves recognition. Many participants described completing departmental tasks single-handedly, sustaining academic functions in the absence of team cooperation, and reconstructing offices after forced relocations. These acts highlight not only personal commitment but also the institutional cost of gender discrimination: women expend energy overcoming barriers rather than channelling their capacities into innovation and growth. While resilience is admirable, it should not be a precondition for leadership success. Sustainable progress requires structural reform, not continued reliance on individual persistence.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made for higher education institutions and policymakers in KP. First, promotion must be made transparent and safeguarded from political manipulation. Clear timelines for evaluations and publicly available criteria would reduce opportunities for discretionary delays. Independent oversight committees could also ensure that women's cases are assessed on merit rather than sidelined. Second, institutional mechanisms to counter workplace hostility should be strengthened. Complaints from women leaders should be handled confidentially, and disciplinary action should be taken against group-based resistance or subordinates' non-cooperation. Without such Accountability, women remain isolated and forced to perform disproportionate workloads. Codes of conduct for faculty, combined with monitoring by gender equity committees, could address this problem systematically.

Third, the influence of lobbying and informal networks must be reduced by establishing formal, transparent decision-making forums. This could include publishing minutes of key administrative meetings, rotating committee memberships, and establishing external oversight for senior appointments. Breaking the hold of entrenched male-dominated groups would provide space for women leaders to exercise their authority more effectively.

Fourth, leadership development programs tailored to the KP context are needed. While national and international initiatives exist, provincial universities should establish training and mentoring schemes that connect emerging women leaders with senior mentors, both male and female. These programs should not only build leadership skills but also provide strategies for navigating local political cultures.

Fifth, family-friendly and mobility-supportive policies should be prioritised. Safe transport, childcare support, and flexible working arrangements would make it easier for women to take on demanding leadership roles without being forced to choose between professional advancement and personal responsibilities.

Finally, cultural change is essential. Awareness campaigns, faculty dialogues, and inclusion of gender equity principles in university statutes can help shift perceptions of women's legitimacy as leaders. While such cultural change is gradual, aligning institutional reforms with broader societal sensitisation can create a more enabling environment for women's leadership.

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