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## **Role of Women at Top Management in Public Sector Universities of Islamabad, Pakistan**

### **Abstract**

The present research paper reflects those factors that are influencing career advancement of women academics towards senior positions in the universities of Pakistan. Researchers have examined organizational, cultural and personal denominators affecting on career elevation of female faculty. The present research was carried out in public sector universities Islamabad and 150 respondents were interviewed. The findings of in-hand research paper depict that women are grossly underrepresented at senior management positions. The findings of this paper suggest that the absence of female role models; gender biased practices and skewed structures embedded in organizations are the salient factors attributable to this imbalance. In addition, socio-cultural norms and quest for striking work-family balance by women academics further dent their career prospects. Hence proactive operable strategic actions have been recommended to facilitate female faculty in their quest for work-life balance and to address the invasive inequity in the education management structure.

**Keywords:** Career Advancement; Gender Inequity; Glass ceiling; Sticky Floor Syndrome; Work Family Balance

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Underrepresentation of female academics at the higher echelons of management across tertiary educational institutions is perceived to be a product of skewed management policies and discriminatory practices which are firmly

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entrenched in the system of education management (Pautasso, 2015). There is a visible dearth of female leaders occupying the academic and administrative positions in the universities (EU, 2012). Although a great number of women have achieved distinctions in their professional lives, yet they have not been embraced as top leaders in public and private educational institutions and face inexorable obstacles (Avinet *et al.* 2015). The patriarchal mindset presumably assigns subsidiary status to women in comparison to their male counterparts. Resultantly, the 'glass ceiling' and stereotypical stratification of roles continue to hamper women professionals in their quest for self-actualization and renders it hard for them to vie for senior leadership positions (Festing *et al.*, 2015, Mairtin-Cairncross 2014, Cook & Glass 2014 and Howe-Walsh *et al.* 2014). According to a report compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), despite receiving more than fifty percent of all PhD degrees in the United States, there still are fewer female faculty members occupying top levels of hierarchy in the universities. Number of research reports reflect that there are more female students than male students in UK but there is exceptionally low representation of women holding top management slots in the universities (Carr *et al.* 2015, Higher Education Statistics Authority, 2014). Gender inequality in academic institutions is acknowledged to be a worldwide phenomenon pervading both developed and under developed nations (Olaogun *et al.* 2015). According to European Commission, (2013), only 15.5 per cent of institutions of higher education in the entire EU had a female head and around 10 per cent of universities had female rectors in 2010. On the national front, gender stratification continues to be a norm in Pakistani society whereby roles are socially constructed in conformity with the dictates of patriarchal psyche. Women occupying higher management positions are at the lowest, three percent in Pakistan (ILO, 2015). The socio-cultural environment prevailing in Pakistan, observes Sen (2001), plays a critical role towards victimizing. According to Ahmad (2018) Pakistan has been holding the second-to-last place in the Global Gender Gap Index in the last five years (2012-17). Shaukat and Pell (2015), further elaborate that the secondary status assigned to women in Pakistan is a corollary of patriarchal system which is widely pervasive across all classes, regions and professions of Pakistan. The notion ensures the exclusion of women from Policy formulation and decision making processes determining matters of inheritance, succession and women participation in public domains (Shaikh *et al.* 2015, Faisal (2010) and Tazeen *et al.* 2011). Shah and Shah (2012) are of the view that women's access to positions of leadership is constricted by the cultural norms and beliefs which regulate their lives. Traditionally, the image of women in Pakistani society is perceived to be one representing weak, submissive, incompetent, dependent and inferior being. Women hardly manage to rank as top leaders despite possessing the requisite academic and professional credentials, (Saher *et al.*, 2014; Salik & Zhiyong, 2014).

Most organizations use informal recruitment and selection processes while capitalizing on personal networks rather than adopting formal course for merit-based selections. In Pakistani society, as men have larger social networks than women, male applicants tend to have more opportunities to be considered for the jobs. Women on the other hand prefer not to have social networks with their male colleagues due to religious and cultural constraints (Quraishi & Kalim, 2008). In academia often, women are denied opportunities of rising to senior managerial

positions as they are given much lesser chances of availing professional trainings, attending formal meetings, getting training from local or foreign workshops, availing scholarships, engaging in research related activities and participating in symposia. Kamau (2001) has concluded that institutions lack policy and practice to motivate women to rise to senior university management positions, as a result they become victims of segregation.

Whitaker and Lane (1990) observe that women encounter several obstacles and barriers on way to acquire senior leadership positions. It has been argued that women are least motivated to seek senior positions as they find no role models to emulate (Jamaliet al, 2005). Most women prefer to have same sex mentors as they understand the challenges women can countenance in workplaces. Male mentors, explains Hansen, (2008) prefer to mentor men as they believe that women can get emotional while making important decisions. Risks of workplace sexual harassment also discourage male mentors to guide female colleagues. The top leadership often assumes that women do not have the desire, ambition, and passion to excel at senior management positions and avoid getting embroiled in work place politics at the cost of their family lives. Annis (2008) and Nelson & Levesque (2007) reverberate the same assumption when they state that women lose their aspiration for senior positions because of several obstacles like having a nurturing nature, stereotyping, gender discrimination and domestic responsibilities.

It has been often theorized that the biological clocks for women are in total variance with their career clocks. Their advancement is greatly marred by their efforts to keep a balance between their work and domestic responsibilities throughout their lives (Hughes et.al.2009). When women are in the child bearing age, they are concomitantly countenancing the pressure of building their careers. The act of child bearing on part of women employees gives the impression that women are not fully committed to their work, as most of the time women give preference to their families which results in creating hurdles in their career advancement (Goff, 2005). Referring to queen bee syndrome Baumgartner & Schneider (2010) illustrate that the women who manage to reach at the top in an organization, avoid helping other women struggling to climb up the ladder of hierarchy. They believe that other women must also navigate through all the tumultuous hurdles as they had done before. Another factor considered significant in determining the under-representation of women faculty members at senior positions is the “sticky-floor” syndrome whereby they self-sabotage by declining to accept career advancement opportunities thrown their way. (Twemlow, 2017).

Bond (1996) believes the following viewpoints contribute to the denial of senior positions of management to women: firstly, at personal level the psycho-social characteristics shape personal and behavioral skills of women by making them feel less self-assured and having lower potential for leadership qualities. Secondly, at institutional level structural factors such as discriminatory hiring practices and promotion policies, limit leadership training for women and distorted corporate policies. Finally, Aina et al (2015) explain that gender roles defined by social structures are transported to the work places in such a way that both men and women are spurred to continue adhering to the societal beliefs they are accustomed to subscribe to. The phenomenon of underrepresentation of women can further be illustrated in the light of conceptual frameworks evolved by the

theorists. The Social identity theory postulates that individuals' social behaviors are configured by social groups they belong to. Women not hailing from masculine group are considered a threat to male superiority in public and private domains. As a result, men ensure that women are without power or resources (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Budworth& Mann, 2010).

According to Expectation theory, individuals are categorized according to their status, gender, race, occupation etc. Individuals within the same groups are given more importance by their group members (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980) The gender-stereo-typical beliefs prompt men to perceive women as less competent than men. The individuals of higher status (men), perform better, given more opportunities to progress and manage to acquire positive evaluations (Powell, 2014). Foschi, (2009) explicitly elaborates that there are stricter measures for evaluating the capabilities of women as compared to men. This instant study intends to investigate organizational, cultural and personal denominators that define the career progression prospects of women faculty members, to the senior leadership positions in the universities of Islamabad, and to suggest operable strategic options to address the issues.

## **2. Objectives**

To explore the work-life balance, 'sticky floor syndrome' and glass ceiling are attributable to women's being under-represented at key leadership positions in tertiary educational institutions

To examine the gender stereotyping and socio-cultural norms affect the progress and elevation of female faculty?

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

Research on the issue of gender inequity at senior leadership level in the higher education institutions of Islamabad was carried out by using exploratory research method. This study utilized inductive analysis approach which is used to analyze raw data to develop concepts, categories or themes by researchers (Thomas, 2006). The objective of this research was to abridge raw data and highlight the main themes emerging out by investigating all the components in the collected data in a holistic manner. A total of 150 faculty members (75 male and 75 female) from each university namely, Quaid-e-Azam University(22), COMSATS Institute of Information Technology(22), National University of Science and Technology(20), FAST University(22), National University of Modern Languages(22), Air University(22) and Pakistan Institute of Development Economics(22), participated in the research study. Faculty members having three or more years of job experience were selected using purposive sampling technique as it permits researchers to make a deliberate choice of their participants who are willing to offer the required information on the basis of their knowledge or experience (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2015). However, Secondary data for this research study was obtained from research articles, reports (UNICEF, UN, European Commission, UNESCO, 2010) policy documents (World Bank) and websites of universities. On the basis of this data an interview schedule was designed. For collecting primary data, a semi-structured interview schedule was considered more

appropriate as it gives the researchers an opportunity to discuss relevant topics in depth (Mathers *et al* 2002). In addition, hand-written notes were also taken by the researchers during their discussions with the respondents who were encouraged to share any information they deemed relevant to the research theme. Finally the researchers transcribed the notes taken during interviews and analyzed the responses given to the questions in the interview schedule. Likert scale was used to calculate the trend of the respondents about women role at top management. The method of thematic analysis was used for classifying, identifying and analyzing themes which emerged in the research data and identified areas for discussion.

#### **4.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The research findings clearly signify that the representation of the women holding senior management positions in the universities in Islamabad is significantly lower as compared to male faculty. A database collected from seven universities presented in Table 1 indicates that almost all key leadership positions in the public-sector universities in Islamabad (under lens) are being held by male members. The data reveals that no female has been able to rise to the position of rector/vice Chancellor and only one female faculty member could secure her elevation to the position of Dean in the universities under study. According to the information available on the sampled universities' websites in January, 2017 a total of 48 (78.6%) male faculty members and only 13 (21%) female faculty members were occupying the positions of heads of department. Interestingly, the respondents of these universities believe that none of the universities have any discriminatory policy impeding women's elevation to the senior level positions.

**Table -1 Male/female academics occupying key Administrative positions in the universities in Islamabad**

Position	Q.Azam		Nust		Air		Numl		Pide		Comsats		Fast
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Rector/	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓
ViceChancellor													
Dean	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
Registrar	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		
Directors	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		
HODS/ Chairpersons	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓

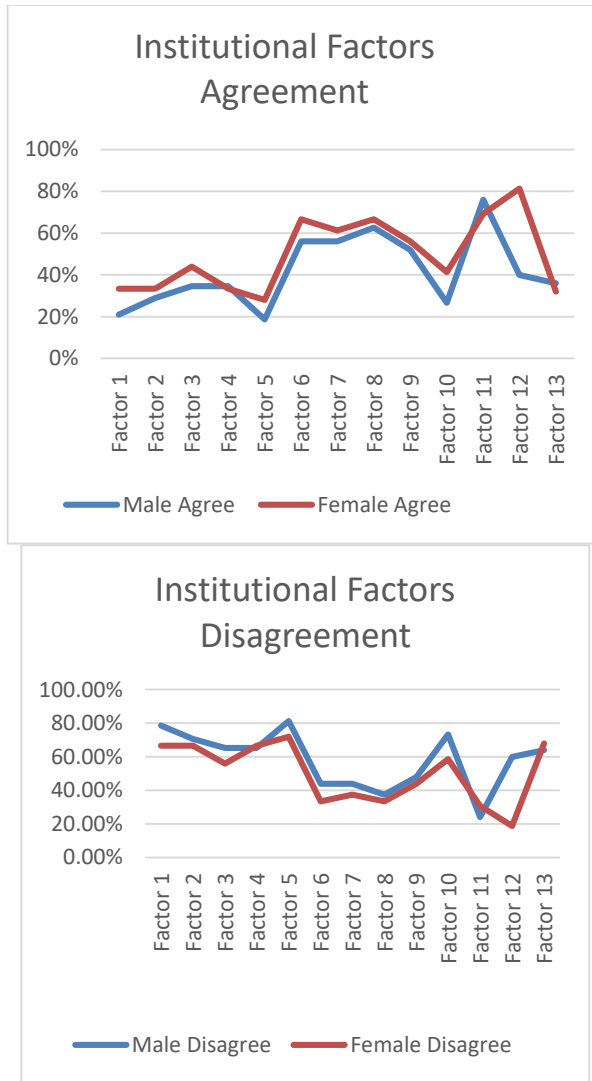
Source: Field research and university websites

From the review of literature, it transpired that significant factors leading to the underrepresentation of women at senior managerial positions can be classified into three overarching themes including the institutional factors, the socio-cultural factors and the personal factors.

#### **4.1 INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS**

**Table -2 Institutional Factors**

	Factors	Agreement Male		Agreement Female		Disagreement Male		Disagreement Female	
		Agree	%	Agree	%	Dis-agree	%	Dis-agree	%
1	Top management not inclined to appoint women against key positions	16	21	33	33.33	59	78.66	50	66.66
2	Discrimination against women seeking higher positions	22	29	33	33.33	53	70.66	50	66.66
3	Men are better equipped than females	26	35	44	44	49	65.33	42	56
4	Negative attitude of the faculty towards women as administrators	26	35	33	33.33	49	65.33	50	66.66
5	Women are underpaid in comparison to men	14	19	28	28	61	81.33	54	72
6	Women at leadership positions lack supportive networks	42	56	67	66.66	33	44	25	33.33
7	Inability of women to influence decision making	42	56	61	61.33	33	44	28	37.33
8	Lack of training opportunities for women	47	63	67	66.66	28	37.33	25	33.33
9	Female managers avoid helping other women	39	52	56	56	36	48	33	44
10	Lack of confidence of university community in women	20	27	41	41.33	55	73.33	44	58.66
11	Not having female role models in senior leadership positions	57	76	69	69.33	18	24	23	30.66
12	Administrative structures/practices are discriminatory towards women giving rise to glass ceiling	30	40	81	81.33	45	60	14	18.66
13	Women more likely to be motivated by sticky-floor syndrome	27	36	32	32	48	64	51	68



**Fig. 1 Fig. 2**

Institutional factors in Table-2 and graphical presentation(fig.1 and fig.2) pertain to organizational environment including structures orchestrated in the institutions of higher learning that breed discrimination against women when they are to be considered for elevation to senior positions. Despite the unequivocal emphasis on the discriminatory policies in the contemporary literature, the respondents of the present study have confirmed that no discrimination exists in the policy frameworks of their universities. While, the statistical data collated by the researcher reflects that women faculty members are not adequately represented at senior management positions in these universities. In addition, a visibly overwhelming population of male respondents' 78.66 percent and a

significant percentage of female respondents ‘66.66percent disagreedwith the proposition that management of their universities are unwilling to appoint women professionals against senior management positions. It defies the common perception evolved in view of under-representation of female faculty members on key leadership slots. The commonly held belief that women face discriminationwhen they seek higher positions of management was tested through an interview schedule. The notion was supported by 29.33 percent of male members and 33.33percent of female members. The majority of the respondents comprising bothmale and female academics denied thatgender discrimination as a telling effect on the process of determining the merit of key position holders.. They are perceived to possess superior skillsets andacademic credentials. Our results however do not concur with the popular perception of male superiority. The 65.33percent of the men and 56 percent of women refuted the perception.

***Ms. Sara a lecturer was of the opinion that:****Although in Pakistan women have lesser opportunities than men to progress in life, these days even in Pakistan, women are availing ample opportunities of acquiring higher education and specialized skills in their respective fields. Women have benefited immensely from HEC scholarships.*

As regard the faculty’s attitude towards having women as administrators, bothmen65.33

percent and women 66.66percent denied that the same was unfavorable. The faculty members generally have no qualms working with femaleadministrators.

***Zahid, Assistant Professor,****added:As long as the administrators do not try to create problems or barriers for us, we don’t mind which gender they belong to.*

However due to organizational politics and strong male networking prevalent in the universities, women arein less advantageous position in terms of making it to senior management positions. This is why in all the universities the respondents did not find any woman occupying a senior position beyond the position of head of department (HOD) in some cases. Moreover,ithad been endorsed by the respondents ‘male 18.66percent and 28percent of female that women were underpaid in comparison to men workingagainst similar positions.

***Nuzhata lecturer stated as under:****People who are hired through references in our country get better pay packages. In addition, male members are often heard to bargain better for their pay packages than women at the time of hiring. I believe universities should have fixed pay scale policies according to the ranking of employees.*

Furthermore, Table 2 depicts that women holding mid-level positionsgenerallylack support networks. As aconsequence,theyhave to cope with obstacleswithout the help of peers which renders it hard for them to move ahead in their careers.A large number of women 66.66percent and 56percent of men agree with the premise. This underscores the value of networking in making career breakthrough and winning organizational battles. In the absence of these networks women find themselves rudderless in an environment loaded against them.



**Ms. Nuzhat's considered view is given as under:** *Despite realizing the need for a strong network to push forward the agenda of female faculty, we have not been able to forge a strong bond which could have a strong effect.*

The findings also reveal that women in Pakistani academic institutions are unable to influence key decision-making processes. Accordingly, 56 percent men and 66.33 percent women were in agreement with the proposition. They opine that men can more easily influence both male and female members during faculty meetings, as their statements are well supported by the participants.

**Sherish, a junior lecturer, expressed the following view:** *Whenever I needed guidance from senior female colleagues, I found them helpful and forthcoming.*

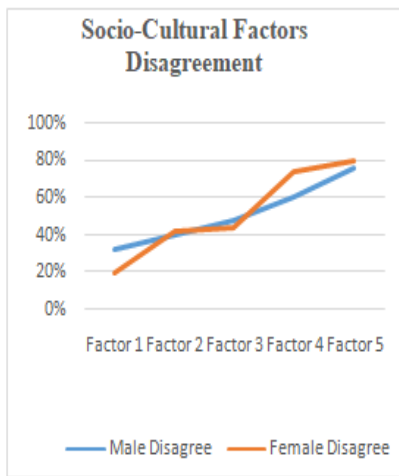
The respondents, both men and women refuse to acknowledge that there is lack of confidence of university community in women. Only 26.66 percent men and 41.33 percent women supported the premise. Another factor deemed attributable to the underrepresentation of women occupying key leadership positions is the absence of female role models. As almost all the senior managerial positions are invariably held by men in universities, there is hardly any inspiration for the mid-level female faculty members. This lack of motivation is inherently counter-productive. The respondents when confronted on this count agreed with the proposition. Both Male 76 percent and female 69.33 percent concurred with the notion that the absence of female role models is seriously contributing to the underrepresentation of women at leadership positions in the universities. From the appreciation of relevant literature, it also transpired that discriminatory structures and skewed administrative practices contribute significantly to denial of access of women to senior positions in the institutions of higher learning. Our research however demonstrated conflicting pattern, men and women respondents have shown a serious disagreement. A majority of male respondents' 60 percent disagreed with the notion that universities pursue practices and validate structures to perpetuate discrimination against women faculty members. On the other hand, an overwhelming majority of female respondents' 81.33 percent endorsed the premise that career advancement opportunities are curtailed owing to discriminatory practices and slanted structures deeply embed in organizational cultures of the universities. As pointed out above, some research scholars have pointed out the self-sabotaging propensity prevailing among female professionals, namely, sticky floor syndrome as an important factor attributable to the under-representation of women at key managerial positions. In-hand research however had not found any support for the theorem. Men 64 percent and women 68 percent rejected the idea. Women in particular were vociferous in their opposition to the notion.

#### **4.2 SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS**

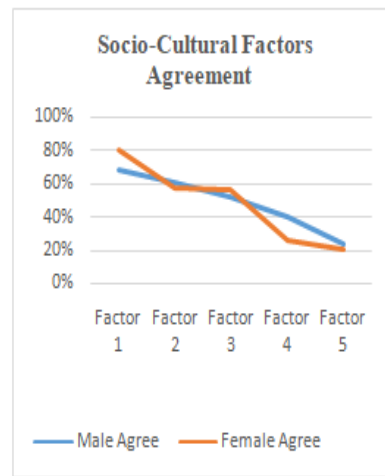
The socio-cultural factors encompass skewed societal norms that lead to underrepresentation of women at senior leadership positions, including gender discrimination and stereotyping (Singh & Terjesen, 2008; Eagly & Wood, 2012). It stipulates that the patriarchal composition of social divisions of labor between men and women in Pakistani society certainly inhibit women's career progression.

**Table-3 Socio-Cultural Factors**

Factors	Agreement				Disagreement			
	Male (75)		Female (75)		Male (75)		Female (75)	
	Agree	%	Agree	%	Disagree	%	Disagree	%
1. Patriarchal nature of the society	51	68	60	80	24	32	15	20
2. Cultural barriers, impede career progression of women	45	60	43	57.33	30	40	32	42.66
3. Work-related segregation generates stereotypical stratification	39	52	42	56	36	48	33	44
4. Women incapable of handling pressure of senior management	30	40	19	25.33	45	60	56	74.66
5. Women are not rational or objective while in management roles	18	24	15	20	57	76	60	80



**Fig.- 3**



**Fig.-4**

Table-3 and graphical presentation (Fig 3 and Fig.4) depict that 68 percent of men and 80percent of women agreed with the popular perception that women were not permitted the freedom to enjoy life, own resources and be successful in domestic and public spheres at par with their male counter parts. Resultantly, they tend to avoid responsibilities involving mobility and interaction with male members and thus end up losing opportunities of career advancement. In this backdrop, both male 60 percentand female respondents’57.33percent endorsed the notion of cultural barriers inhibiting career progression of women.Women are generally confined to specific roles both intheirhouseholdsand work place, 52percent of men and 56 percent of the women agreed thatstereotypical stratification begins to pervade workplaces. Resultantly, researchers find womenbeingconsidered suitable for minor administrative roles only.It is a common beliefreflective of a patriarchal psyche that women are incapable of handling pressure associated with senior leadership roles as they are more likely to acquiesce to such pressures. Present research findings do not seem to corroborate this notion reflective of patriarchal psyche, as 60.60percent men and 76.66 percent of the women respondents denied the premise. The present research does not conform to this perception. Majority of

the respondents comprising men 78.78 percent and women 83.33 percent have refused to accept this notion.

#### **4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study underscores the fact that discriminatory practices and skewed structures embedded in organizational cultures serve as glass ceilings to curtail women's professional elevation. The findings demonstrate that women professionals find themselves struggling to countenance with administrative measures and practices pursued by the management of tertiary institutions which are dis-advantageous to them. In addition, the act of balancing their domestic and professional tasks takes a heavy toll as a considerable number of women are more inclined towards family responsibilities rather than solely focusing on their professional roles. The socio-cultural norms, familial considerations and institutional dictates cumulatively contribute towards dampening the ambitions of female professionals for seeking leadership positions. In addition, absence of female role models and the inability on part of female protagonists to forge networks are other significant factors attributable to the under-representation of women at senior position. In order to address the inequity, policy makers and the academia need to proactively engage in efforts to orchestrate affirmative action-driven measures to empower women professionals so that the objective of gender equality is achieved at work place. Secondly, female professionals need to forge bonds and networks to make their voice heard by those who matter. Towards that end, institutions of higher learning need to facilitate female faculty in their quest of maintaining work-family balance, specifically at senior-level positions. Organizations should encourage women to continue longer in service in order to benefit from workforce diversity. Finally, a few members hailing from female fraternity who make it to the leadership positions must take the role of as mentors for the young female academics.

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