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Gendered Leadership and Professional Identity in Sindh's Higher Education: Institutional Barriers and Policy Implications

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ABSTRACT

Women in higher education leadership in Pakistan remain markedly underrepresented, particularly in the Sindh province, where patriarchal social structures, feudal cultural norms, and opaque institutional systems severely constrain their leadership trajectories. This qualitative study investigates how women in Sindh's academic institutions construct their professional identities and navigate barriers to leadership in both urban and rural university contexts. Drawing on Feminist Theory, Social Identity Theory, and the Glass Ceiling and Sticky Floor metaphors, the research explores the lived experiences of women in mid-to-senior academic positions. In-depth narrative interviews reveal five interlocking challenges: gendered institutional cultures that delegitimize female authority, the absence of formal mentoring pathways, resistance from male subordinates, intersectional discrimination affecting women from minority and rural backgrounds, and persistent work-life imbalances unsupported by institutional policies. Despite systemic constraints, women faculty display resilience and agency through adaptive leadership styles, informal mentorship practices, and strategic navigation of institutional norms. Their narratives demonstrate a shift from hierarchical leadership models to relational and transformative practices grounded in empathy, inclusivity, and advocacy. The study contributes to the evolving discourse on gender and leadership in South Asian higher education by providing an empirically grounded, context-specific account of how women resist, reframe, and redefine professional identity under constraint. Policy recommendations include institutional reforms such as gender quotas, mentorship programs, leadership training hubs, and gender-sensitization initiatives. Ultimately, the study

calls for a structural overhaul that reimagines academic leadership as an inclusive, participatory domain where women's contributions are not only visible but institutionally valued.
Keywords: Gender and Leadership, Professional Identity, Higher Education in Pakistan, Intersectionality, Women in Academia

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions play a critical role in shaping future leadership and ensuring equitable societal development. In Pakistan, and specifically in Sindh province, this potential is hindered by entrenched socio-cultural norms and patriarchal structures that limit women's participation in academic leadership. Despite representing nearly half the population, women's participation in decision-making roles in universities remains negligible. According to recent data, only 27 women serve as Vice Chancellors compared to 193 men across Pakistani universities.

This research explores how women in Sindh's higher education sector navigate challenges related to professional identity and leadership roles. The focus is on understanding the multi-layered barriers—including gender-based discrimination, stereotyping, lack of mentoring, and weak institutional policies—that hinder women's progression in academic leadership.

Women in Sindh face a dual burden: fulfilling traditional domestic roles while striving to build professional careers. In rural Sindh, cultural practices like early marriages, honor-based violence, and restricted mobility exacerbate the problem. Even in urban centers such as Karachi and Hyderabad, women's leadership is often viewed with skepticism. This raises critical questions about how academic institutions construct and respond to women's professional identities.

The study contributes to a growing body of research on gender equity in academia by highlighting the structural and cultural impediments that women face in developing their professional identity and ascending to leadership positions. By investigating these challenges through empirical and theoretical lenses, the article offers recommendations to foster a more inclusive academic environment.

Background of the Research

Women's leadership in higher education is widely recognized as a driver of institutional transformation, diversity, and inclusive governance. Globally, scholars agree that women's presence in academic leadership enhances organizational responsiveness, improves equity in policy implementation, and serves as a role model for students and early-career professionals (Morley, 2013; O'Connor, 2020). However, in Pakistan—and particularly in Sindh province—this potential is undermined by socio-cultural constraints, gender-based discrimination, and systemic institutional exclusion. The problem lies in the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior academic leadership despite their increasing participation in faculty positions and graduate programs.

What is expected in relation to this problem is the equitable inclusion of women in decision-making bodies, academic governance, and strategic roles. Ideally,

women should ascend to leadership positions based on merit, protected by gender-responsive policies and supported by institutional mentoring structures. However, the present situation paints a different picture. Out of over 220 public and private universities in Pakistan, only 27 are headed by women as Vice Chancellors compared to 193 men. The gap is not just numerical—it reflects deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs, lack of affirmative policies, and institutional cultures that sideline women in leadership trajectories.

This gap between expectation and reality is especially stark in Sindh. Women academics from this region report facing not only professional discrimination but also intersectional challenges tied to their class, caste, religion, and rural-urban location. Early marriages, restricted mobility, and honor-based constraints in rural Sindh further suppress women's career aspirations and diminish their visibility in academic leadership.

International scholarship offers multiple solutions to address this gender gap. Research from countries like South Africa, Canada, and Malaysia advocates for institutional mentoring programs, leadership training for women, affirmative action policies, and gender audits (Blackmore, 2013; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). In Uganda, Tamale (2021) highlights how embedding feminist leadership principles in university governance contributed to more gender-inclusive management cultures. In contrast, some regions rely on quota-based appointments without meaningful inclusion, leading to "symbolic" leadership (Zia, 2019).

Among these, the most appropriate solution, based on empirical evidence, is the implementation of multi-pronged institutional reforms. These include:

1. Gender-responsive policies tied to promotions and governance participation;
2. Mentorship and leadership training programs designed for women at early and mid-career stages;
3. Monitoring mechanisms such as gender audits and disaggregated data collection.

These interventions work best when supported by cultural transformation within the institution—an aspect particularly relevant in the conservative socio-political context of Sindh.

Problem Statement

While global and regional academic discourse has increasingly acknowledged the structural barriers hindering women's leadership in higher education, the local academic landscape of Sindh remains markedly under-explored. In particular, the ways in which women construct, negotiate, and resist professional identities within patriarchal and institutionally rigid environments are poorly understood.

Empirical research on gender and academic leadership in Pakistan has largely focused on urban centers such as Lahore, Islamabad, and Karachi, using generalized national data that fails to account for the intersectional and localized challenges in Sindh. Issues such as caste hierarchies, tribal affiliations, religious marginalization, and rural-urban disparities are rarely incorporated into these analyses. Moreover, existing studies often exclude women's voices, offering minimal insight into how lived experiences shape leadership trajectories and identity formation.

While recent studies (e.g., Soomro et al., 2023; Zia, 2019) acknowledge the barriers women face in academia, they stop short of investigating how institutional culture and policy shape women's professional identities within leadership roles. There is little critical engagement with how identity is performed, validated, or challenged within academic spaces—especially in the context of leadership hierarchies dominated by male networks and feudalistic authority structures.

In contrast, international literature emphasizes that professional identity is fluid and socially constructed (Beijaard et al., 2004; O'Connor, 2020). Regional studies in Bangladesh and India highlight the importance of institutional validation, community recognition, and policy alignment in supporting women's career advancement (Haque et al., 2019; Rao, 2016). Such frameworks remain underutilized in Pakistan's gender and leadership research, particularly in the Sindh province.

Furthermore, studies on leadership barriers—including lack of mentoring (Tamale, 2021), symbolic inclusion (Ahmed, 2012), glass ceiling effects (Zia, 2019), and opaque governance structures—have yet to be examined in an integrated, localized, and intersectional way in Sindh's academic institutions.

Despite national and institutional commitments to gender equity, academic leadership in Sindh remains structurally exclusive and culturally resistant to women's participation. Women who do attain leadership positions often encounter marginalization, policy opacity, and resistance from peers and subordinates, resulting in deep identity dissonance and institutional invisibility. What remains missing in existing literature is a focused, empirical inquiry into how professional identity and leadership roles intersect, and how institutional culture and policy (or their absence) shape these experiences in Sindh. Addressing this research gap is essential for designing evidence-based policies and inclusive leadership frameworks in Pakistan's higher education system.

Research Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to explore how women in Sindh's higher education institutions construct their professional identities and navigate their leadership roles amidst institutional and socio-cultural constraints.

The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the professional identity construction of women faculty in higher education institutions in Sindh.
2. To identify the socio-cultural, institutional, and interpersonal barriers that affect women's access to and experience of leadership roles.
3. To analyze how gendered institutional policies and workplace cultures shape or hinder women's career progression and leadership aspirations.
4. To explore how women academic leaders exercise agency and resistance within male-dominated academic structures.
5. To provide policy recommendations aimed at enabling equitable leadership pathways for women in academia.

Research Questions

This research is guided by the following questions:

1. How do women faculty members in Sindh's higher education institutions construct their professional identities?
2. What institutional, cultural, and personal barriers do they encounter in accessing and performing leadership roles?
3. How do women experience and respond to exclusionary leadership structures within their universities?
4. What strategies do women academic leaders employ to sustain and assert their leadership?
5. What reforms are necessary at the institutional and policy level to support inclusive academic leadership in Sindh?

Significance of the Study

This study holds multifaceted significance for academic, policy, institutional, and theoretical domains. Academically, it addresses a critical gap in Pakistan's gender and education literature by focusing on Sindh—an under-researched province in leadership studies—and examining how gender, leadership, and professional identity intersect within its unique socio-cultural and institutional landscape. From a policy standpoint, the research provides valuable insights for education policymakers and regulatory bodies, such as the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan, by highlighting the structural and cultural barriers to gender inclusion in academic leadership, particularly in provincial contexts. Institutionally, the findings offer practical implications for university administrators seeking to develop more inclusive environments through the design of gender-sensitive mentoring programs, leadership development initiatives, and institutional gender audits. Theoretically, the study contributes to the global discourse by applying feminist theory, social identity theory, and the glass ceiling framework within a localized context, thus offering a regionally grounded perspective that enriches and extends existing models of women's leadership in higher education.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this study is confined to public and private universities within the Sindh province of Pakistan, with a specific focus on women faculty members occupying academic and mid-to-senior leadership positions, such as Heads of Departments (HoDs), Deans, Directors, and Vice Chancellors. Data collection draws from multiple sources, including institutional policy documents, in-depth interviews with women leaders, and survey responses from academic faculty. As an interpretive and exploratory study, the research prioritizes depth and contextual understanding over statistical generalizability. However, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Due to logistical and accessibility constraints, the sample may not fully capture the diversity of all districts or institutional types across Sindh. Additionally, the sensitivity of gender-related topics may influence participants' willingness to share openly, potentially affecting the richness and completeness of the data. The study also does not incorporate perspectives from male academic leaders, which could have provided a comparative lens to further illuminate institutional gender dynamics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory offers a critical lens for analyzing how systemic gender inequalities are embedded in institutions. Central to this theory is the belief that patriarchy is structural—it is not just about individual attitudes but about how systems are organized to privilege men and marginalize women (hooks, 2000).

In the academic context, feminist scholars argue that institutions reproduce gender hierarchies through recruitment, curriculum design, leadership norms, and evaluation systems. Ahmed (2012) introduces the concept of institutional whiteness, which in the South Asian context translates into institutional patriarchy—where even policies that appear gender-neutral operate in ways that sustain male privilege.

In Pakistani academia, patriarchal traditions manifest in hiring practices, networking cultures, and informal exclusions. For example, female faculty are often expected to "prove" their capability through excessive labor or emotional resilience—expectations rarely imposed on male colleagues. Feminist theory thus becomes essential in analyzing how women's leadership is not just blocked but systematically devalued.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, as proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), posits that individuals derive a sense of belonging, esteem, and identity through group membership. In organizational contexts, the boundaries between in-groups (those who fit dominant norms) and out-groups (those who do not) shape access to power and recognition.

In academic institutions where leadership is male-dominated, women are often perceived—and perceive themselves—as outsiders. This perception fosters exclusion not only through external marginalization but also through internalized doubt, known as "imposter syndrome" (Clance & Imes, 1978).

Research from Nigerian and Kenyan universities (Wanjiru, 2018) reveals that women in leadership positions often lack peer support, experience social isolation, and feel forced to "adopt masculine styles" to gain acceptance. In the Pakistani context, women often find themselves caught between expectations of invisibility and demands for performative leadership, leading to social and psychological conflict.

This theory also explains the resistance women face from subordinates, who may see female leadership as deviant from the normative group structure. In Sindh, where tribal and religious affiliations play a role in workplace dynamics, this social exclusion is even more pronounced.

Glass Ceiling and Sticky Floors

The "glass ceiling" is a widely recognized metaphor for the invisible but real barriers that prevent women from advancing to senior positions, regardless of competence or credentials (Cotter et al., 2001). These barriers often include:

- Exclusion from informal networks
- Subjective performance assessments

- Lack of transparent promotion pathways
- Biased leadership selection processes

"Sticky floors," meanwhile, refer to the barriers that keep women stuck in lower-tier roles, often due to structural inertia or socio-cultural expectations (Zafarullah, 2014). In Pakistan, women are overrepresented in lecturer and assistant professor roles but rarely move beyond them.

In Sindh, both metaphors are starkly visible. While many women teach at public and private universities, few are part of search committees, policy boards, or accreditation bodies—key spaces of academic power. When they do attain leadership roles, it is often in non-strategic departments or as token representatives without authority

Professional Identity in Academia

Professional identity refers to the evolving self-concept that individuals develop in alignment with their roles, values, and responsibilities in a professional setting (Beijaard et al., 2004). In the context of academia, this identity is fluid, shaped by institutional norms, disciplinary affiliations, career trajectories, and power dynamics. For women, particularly within male-dominated academic cultures, professional identity often becomes contested, fragmented, and negotiated.

O'Connor and White (2011) assert that female academic identity is inherently gendered and intersectional. Women are often caught between societal expectations of being nurturing and modest, and institutional demands for assertiveness, visibility, and strategic leadership. In Pakistan, these tensions are amplified, as traits such as modesty, deference, and domesticity are valorized, while leadership is coded as masculine (Khan & Bukhari, 2016). The internalization of these conflicting norms often results in "identity dissonance," where women experience professional alienation both within the institution and in broader cultural contexts.

Moreover, identity construction is deeply influenced by recognition—or the lack thereof. As shown in studies from South Africa (Mabokela, 2015) and India (Rao, 2016), without symbolic and institutional validation, women's professional identity remains precarious. In patriarchal environments such as Sindh, recognition is not only absent but actively resisted through mechanisms of exclusion, devaluation, and invisibility.

Gender Disparities in Leadership

Globally, women remain underrepresented in higher education leadership despite increased participation in academic roles. According to UNESCO (2022), while women comprise 45% of tertiary education staff worldwide, they occupy less than 25% of senior leadership positions. The disparity is even starker in the Global South, where sociocultural constraints are reinforced by weak institutional frameworks.

In Pakistan, women represent around 28% of the academic workforce, yet fewer than 10% hold top-tier leadership roles such as Deans or Vice Chancellors (HEC, 2023). Studies attribute this gap to several structural barriers: lack of

mentoring (Soomro et al., 2023), informal male-dominated networks, gender-blind promotion procedures, and tokenistic appointments (Zia, 2019). In Sindh, these challenges are exacerbated by feudal and tribal influences, which limit women's institutional mobility and public visibility.

Comparative studies in South Asia reveal similar patterns. In Bangladesh, Haque et al. (2019) found that universities lack transparent leadership succession processes, while Subedi (2022) in Nepal highlighted women's exclusion from strategic planning. In India, Rao (2016) and Sinha & Sreekantan (2020) observed that gender-neutral policies fail to address everyday resistance, informal bias, and the cumulative burden of caste and language discrimination.

Institutional Barriers to Women's Leadership

Institutional barriers include both overt policies and covert norms that inhibit women's access to leadership. These may manifest in hiring criteria, governance structures, or cultural expectations embedded within the academic institution.

Zia (2019) introduces the concept of "symbolic inclusion," where women are given titles without actual decision-making power. Soomro et al. (2023) argue that university leadership development remains gender-blind, lacking mentorship, performance transparency, or internal accountability. In Sindh, Shaikh (2021) found that faculty selection boards often rely on tribal or political loyalties, marginalizing women. Jatoi & Laghari (2022) note that even when women attain leadership positions, they face procedural delays, exclusion from informal networks, and excessive scrutiny.

The issue is compounded by institutional silence: many universities in Sindh lack gender equality policies, sexual harassment redress mechanisms, or leadership pathways designed for women. These institutional voids mirror global patterns. Ahmed (2012) coined "institutional patriarchy" to describe how academic structures perpetuate male dominance. In Kenya and South Africa, similar forms of exclusion and resistance have been observed (Mabokela, 2015; Wanjiru, 2018).

The "sticky floor" phenomenon (Zafarullah, 2014) further traps women in low-mobility, teaching-only roles, with little access to leadership or administrative portfolios. In such climates, even qualified women struggle to progress professionally, constrained by opaque governance and implicit bias.

Empirical Studies on Gender and Leadership

Empirical studies from Pakistan indicate that while women are gradually entering academia, their participation in leadership remains superficial and constrained. Zia (2019) critiques the symbolic elevation of women to leadership roles without authority. Soomro et al. (2023) emphasize the complete absence of structured mentorship programs, particularly in non-urban areas. Khan and Bukhari (2016) find that promotion procedures are often governed by informal norms favoring male candidates.

In Sindh, Jatoi & Laghari (2022) reveal that women perceive leadership hierarchies as opaque and politically dominated. Shaikh (2021) identifies caste,

mobility restrictions, and feudal traditions as key barriers to professional advancement, especially in rural areas.

Regional evidence echoes these patterns. Haque et al. (2019) document exclusionary leadership pipelines in Bangladesh, while Rao (2016) and Subedi (2022) describe the isolation and marginalization of women in senior roles in India and Nepal. In Canada, Bensimon and Marshall (2003) warn of a "chilly climate" where women must conform to male norms to be accepted as leaders. In the UK, O'Connor (2020) finds that legitimacy often requires adopting masculine managerial styles.

In African contexts, Wanjiru (2018) and Mabokela (2015) show that even in post-colonial institutions, women face tokenism, gatekeeping, and social isolation, highlighting the global pervasiveness of academic patriarchy.

Critical Summary of the Literature

Collectively, the literature underscores that academic leadership is neither gender-neutral nor meritocratic. Rather, it is shaped by historical power asymmetries, institutional resistance, and deeply embedded gender norms. While international and national frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5) advocate for gender parity, their implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in contexts like Sindh.

Women's professional identity in academia is often forged in the shadow of masculine norms and constrained by structural limitations. Although global and regional research has documented these phenomena, few studies explore how identity formation interacts with leadership experiences in a localized Pakistani context. Particularly lacking are studies that integrate intersectional variables such as caste, geography, and religion into institutional analysis.

This study seeks to bridge that gap by providing an empirically grounded, theory-informed examination of how women in Sindh's universities construct, contest, and perform their professional identity within leadership roles. It also connects identity work to institutional culture, policy frameworks, and leadership pathways—offering a comprehensive lens that is currently missing from the literature.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a methodological framework grounded in the research onion model (Saunders et al., 2019), encompassing philosophical, strategic, and procedural layers that guide the research design.

At the philosophical level**,** the study is situated within an interpretivist epistemology, which prioritizes understanding the subjective experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes of women in academic leadership. Rather than seeking objective generalizations, the interpretivist stance allows the researcher to explore complex social realities embedded in the institutional and cultural contexts of Sindh's higher education sector. The goal is to understand how women construct their professional identities and navigate leadership within historically patriarchal and structurally rigid academic institutions.

In terms of research approach, the study employs a deductive–inductive hybrid. Initially, themes and codes were derived from established theoretical frameworks such as Feminist Theory, Social Identity Theory, and the Glass Ceiling metaphor. These frameworks informed the construction of interview guides and survey instruments. However, the analysis remained open to emergent themes and unanticipated insights, thus maintaining flexibility to inductively capture contextual nuances and lived realities shared by participants.

The research strategy involves a case study design, focusing on selected public and private universities across Sindh. This strategy allows for in-depth, multi-layered analysis of the interplay between gender, leadership, and professional identity within real institutional settings. Sindh's urban-rural divide, institutional heterogeneity, and diverse participant profiles enrich the case-based inquiry.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to capture both breadth and depth. The qualitative component comprised semi-structured interviews with 20 women occupying mid-to-senior academic leadership positions (e.g., Heads of Departments, Deans, Directors, and Vice Chancellors). These interviews offered deep insights into their lived experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies. The quantitative component involved a survey administered to 60 academic faculty members (both male and female), aimed at assessing perceptions of gender inclusivity, leadership pathways, and institutional support mechanisms. In addition, a document analysis of two key national policy documents—related to higher education governance and gender equity—was conducted to assess the presence or absence of gender-responsive frameworks.

The study used a cross-sectional time horizon, with data collected over a five-month period, allowing for a snapshot of institutional and individual experiences without the constraints of long-term observation.

For data collection and analysis, multiple techniques were employed. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic coding using both theory-driven and data-driven codes. Survey data was analyzed through basic statistical summaries (percentages, frequency distributions) to complement the qualitative findings. Content from policy documents was evaluated through qualitative content analysis to identify gaps, silences, or symbolic language around gender and leadership.

Ethical approval was secured from the institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants gave informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Data was stored securely and analyzed with integrity to reflect the authentic voices and experiences of participants.

Findings and Analysis

Findings: Thematic Analysis of Women's Leadership in Sindh's Higher Education

This section presents the emergent themes from interviews conducted with female academic leaders across public and private universities in Sindh. Thematic coding of narratives revealed five major themes, reflecting both structural barriers

and subjective experiences of navigating leadership in gendered institutional cultures.

Theme One: Gendered Institutional Culture and Symbolic Leadership

Women reported that academic leadership remains largely masculinized, where authority is equated with traditionally male characteristics such as assertiveness, control, and political access. Even when women were appointed to leadership roles, they faced skepticism and informal delegitimization.

"When I became HoD, the male faculty joked about who I slept with to get there." — *Participant 8, Urban University*

Such statements reflect a toxic institutional culture in which women's achievements are often attributed to patronage rather than merit. Leadership was not perceived as a gender-neutral category but rather a contested space, where women had to constantly assert legitimacy in the face of sexualized gossip, gatekeeping, and informal exclusion.

Participants in both urban and rural campuses noted that male colleagues viewed women in leadership as "accidents" or "interims," reinforcing the notion of symbolic rather than substantive inclusion.

Theme Two: Work-Life Conflict and Institutional Apathy

Participants highlighted how their leadership roles collided with domestic expectations. The absence of gender-sensitive workplace policies—such as flexible hours, on-campus childcare, or family leave—intensified the challenge.

"My male colleagues don't have to rush home to children or cooking like I do. I'm exhausted." — *Participant 4, Public University*

This work-family interface was invisible in institutional planning and appraisals. The labor of care was taken for granted, reinforcing the perception that women were "less committed" or "inconsistent." The narrative revealed a double burden—the professional task of leading departments and the unpaid domestic work waiting at home.

Such structural apathy contributes to career stagnation, as women self-select out of promotions due to the fear of being overwhelmed.

Theme Three: Absence of Mentoring and Informal Gatekeeping

A recurring pattern across narratives was the absence of mentorship, both formal and informal. Women were expected to "figure it out" and survive through improvisation.

"No one trained me for this. You just survive on your own instincts." — *Participant 12, Private University*

Male-dominated informal networks functioned as exclusive decision-making hubs. "Boys' clubs" ensured that knowledge, opportunity, and influence remained siloed among male faculty. Even when women showed initiative, their access to institutional memory and insider culture was restricted.

The vacuum of mentorship and leadership training not only hinders professional growth but isolates women in key decision-making roles, contributing to burnout and disengagement.

Theme Four: Subordinate Resistance and Legitimacy Struggles

Participants frequently described being undermined by male subordinates, especially in settings where age, seniority, or rural norms amplified gender bias.

"Even junior male lecturers don't follow my orders unless I 'remind' them who I am." — *Participant 2, Regional University*

This resistance was not simply interpersonal—it was systemic. Male subordinates questioned authority, challenged instructions, and invoked bureaucratic delays to resist female leadership. The need to "perform authority" constantly drained emotional energy and created a climate of chronic delegitimization.

These experiences shaped what several participants called an "identity dissonance"—where they held titles but not power.

Theme Five: Intersectionality and Exclusion in Policy Silence

Beyond gender, caste, religion, and class played a pivotal role in shaping women's leadership trajectories. Scheduled caste women, ethnic minorities, and women from rural districts reported facing compound discrimination.

"Even in academic meetings, people look at you as a token — not as a leader." — *Participant 11, Minority background*

This intersectional invisibility often meant that marginalized women were placed in symbolic roles without meaningful participation. Moreover, universities lacked gender-disaggregated leadership data, making it difficult to track progress or design interventions.

Participants were united in stating that no institutional mechanism existed to monitor women's leadership representation, enforce gender policies, or support leadership transitions. Without data, change remains anecdotal and reactive.

Theme Six: Pockets of Transformation and Positive Deviance

Despite overwhelming barriers, some universities—particularly women-only institutions and newer universities like Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University—were highlighted as spaces where women thrived.

"Here, the Vice Chancellor is a woman, and you can see the difference—she supports mentoring, promotes women, and leads with empathy." — Participant 5, Women's University

These bright spots demonstrated that institutional culture is not static. Where leadership was intentional about inclusion, female faculty felt recognized, empowered, and inspired to lead. These cases offer models of positive deviance that can inform broader reforms.

Interpretive Summary

The findings illustrate that women's academic leadership in Sindh is shaped by a constellation of barriers—gendered assumptions, informal exclusions, domestic burdens, and policy silence. Yet, these women are not passive victims. They demonstrate resilience, micro-resistance, and transformational leadership, often operating outside formal structures.

Leadership for these women is not about authority—it is about navigating

contradiction, claiming space, and constructing legitimacy within unsupportive environments. The data affirms that professional identity and leadership are socially produced and politically negotiated, not merely achieved.

DISCUSSION

This section interprets the research findings in light of the study's theoretical frameworks and broader socio-cultural realities of higher education in Sindh. The emerging data confirms that professional identity and leadership for women are shaped by both internal subjectivities and external institutional structures.

Feminist Theory: Cultural Scripts and the Gendering of Leadership

The findings vividly affirm Feminist Theory's assertion that leadership is not a neutral category but a culturally scripted and gendered construct. In the Sindhi academic landscape, leadership continues to be associated with masculinity, assertiveness, and political clout — all traits traditionally discouraged among women. This cultural coding renders women's leadership invisible, tokenized, or delegitimized, as demonstrated by participant quotes describing jokes about sexual favoritism or resistance from male subordinates.

Feminist scholars like Acker (1990) have long argued that organizations are gendered in both design and effect. The informal "rules of the game" — tea-room negotiations, patronage networks, and performance expectations — systematically exclude women. In rural Sindh, these gendered scripts are further reinforced by tribal, religious, and familial expectations, limiting mobility and access to power.

Yet, some participants subtly subvert these scripts—not by mimicking male behavior, but by practicing inclusive, relational leadership grounded in mentorship and advocacy. These acts reflect what hooks (2000) calls "radical praxis"—transforming institutions from within.

Social Identity Theory: Exclusion, Categorization, and Identity Dissonance

Drawing from Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory, many participants self-categorized as outsiders to dominant leadership groups, leading to internalized disempowerment and performance anxiety. Even when women held leadership titles, they often felt "out of place," constantly negotiating their presence in male-dominated environments.

This categorization process begins early. Without mentoring or representation, women rarely see themselves as "leaders" and tend to self-exclude from formal opportunities. The internalization of gendered norms produces a double bind: acting too soft renders them "ineffective"; acting too assertive makes them "abrasive."

Several participants voiced an identity dissonance: a fracture between how they viewed themselves and how they were viewed by colleagues. This dissonance eroded confidence, produced emotional fatigue, and delayed career advancement.

Glass Ceilings and Sticky Floors: Structural Invisibility

The "glass ceiling" metaphor becomes especially potent when examining institutional structures. Competent women were denied promotions due to

perceived "lack of assertiveness" or "insufficient experience"—despite superior academic records. Informal networks dominated selection processes, with opaque and male-centered decision-making frequently cited.

In parallel, the "sticky floor" phenomenon was also visible—many women reported being stuck in low-authority or teaching-intensive roles without mobility. These structural barriers disproportionately affected women from minority groups and rural districts, highlighting the intersectional nature of academic exclusion in Sindh.

Participants called for formal mechanisms—clear policies, grievance procedures, and transparency in promotions—to dismantle these invisible ceilings and floors.

Urban-Rural Leadership Divide: Cultural Geography of Exclusion

The research reveals a stark urban-rural divide in institutional cultures. While women in urban universities (Karachi, Hyderabad) encountered resistance, they also had access to networks, role models, and policy literacy. In contrast, rural campuses like those in Larkana or Sukkur operated within entrenched patriarchal ecosystems, where female leadership was treated as deviance.

"In rural campuses, leadership by a woman is not just unusual — it's scandalous."

The divide is not only geographic but epistemic: what counts as leadership, credibility, or authority is constructed differently in these settings. Understanding this divide is crucial for designing context-sensitive interventions.

Institutional Silence and the Crisis of Data

A critical thread across narratives was the absence of data and institutional accountability. Most universities lacked basic gender-disaggregated leadership data. Without visibility, women's experiences remain anecdotal and reform remains performative.

Feminist institutionalism emphasizes that what is not counted does not count. The absence of data sustains gender inequality by erasing it from official discourse. Several participants demanded mandatory gender audits and regular reporting mechanisms to support policy formulation.

Professional Identity as Negotiated, Not Inherited

Perhaps the most powerful insight from this study is that professional identity for women leaders is not inherited from job titles—it is painstakingly negotiated through resistance, mentoring, and advocacy.

In a landscape designed to exclude them, these women persist, adapt, and often transform their institutions from within. Their leadership is not hierarchical but transformational, rooted in empathy, inclusion, and long-term commitment to equity. This demands that our theoretical understanding of leadership moves beyond the masculine model and embraces diverse, gender-inclusive paradigms.

Discussion in the light of Research Questions

5. Discussion (in the Light of Research Questions)

RQ1: How do women in Sindh's higher education institutions construct their professional identity?

The findings of this study reveal that women in academic leadership roles construct their professional identities within a contested and predominantly male-dominated environment. Feminist Theory provides a compelling lens to interpret this process, emphasizing how leadership continues to be perceived through a masculine lens, rendering women's identities as inherently "othered." Participants consistently reported experiencing "identity dissonance"—a misalignment between how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by their peers and institutions. Many shared that they felt compelled to adopt traditionally masculine leadership traits, such as assertiveness and emotional detachment, in order to gain legitimacy and respect. However, this often came at the cost of authenticity, self-confidence, and emotional well-being. Social Identity Theory further helps explain this dynamic by illustrating how women often categorize themselves as outsiders within male-dominated leadership structures. This self-categorization results in partial assimilation, behavioral modification, and emotional fatigue. Despite these challenges, some participants actively resisted conforming to dominant norms, choosing instead to construct alternative leadership identities grounded in empathy, inclusivity, and mentorship. Their adaptive strategies suggest the emergence of a more relational, transformational model of leadership, shaped by lived experience rather than inherited norms.

RQ2: What are the major institutional and socio-cultural barriers that hinder women's access to academic leadership roles?

The research identifies a complex network of institutional and socio-cultural barriers that obstruct women's access to leadership positions in higher education. Patriarchal organizational cultures remain a significant impediment, where leadership is equated with masculinity, hierarchy, and political patronage. Selection and promotion processes are often opaque and exclusionary, with women systematically sidelined from decision-making spaces. Moreover, the absence of formal mentorship programs deprives aspiring women leaders of critical career guidance and support. Work-life imbalance further exacerbates the issue, as institutions lack policies that accommodate caregiving responsibilities, flexible working hours, or accessible childcare. The findings also highlight the severe impact of intersectional exclusions, where minority women—due to caste, religion, or regional identity—face compounded layers of discrimination. Informal resistance, such as insubordination from male colleagues or subordinates, also persists as a subtle yet powerful deterrent. These barriers correspond closely with the "glass ceiling" and "sticky floor" metaphors, where women are either blocked from advancing or trapped in low-mobility roles with limited influence.

RQ3: How do women leaders navigate, resist, or adapt to these challenges?

Despite the structural and cultural constraints, women in Sindh's academic

institutions demonstrate remarkable agency in navigating and resisting barriers. Some participants described adopting dominant behavioral norms—such as assertiveness or strategic alliance-building—as a means to legitimize their leadership. Others resisted assimilation and redefined leadership through more inclusive and transformative approaches, such as mentoring junior women faculty, initiating safe spaces for peer support, and advocating for institutional reform. A notable strategy identified was "positive deviance," where women acted outside accepted norms to create change, particularly in women-only or progressive institutions that offered relatively safer platforms for innovation. These leaders often reframed their contributions as collective advocacy rather than individual accomplishment, thereby subverting dominant leadership narratives rooted in competition and hierarchy. Their leadership styles were not only adaptive and resilient but also value-driven and relational, offering a contrast to conventional, hierarchical models of academic leadership.

RQ4: What policy implications emerge from their experiences to improve gender equity in academic leadership?

The lived experiences of participants offer concrete and urgent policy recommendations for improving gender equity in academia. Foremost among these is the need for mandatory gender quotas in leadership positions—suggested at a minimum of 30%—to institutionalize representation. Equally critical is the establishment of formal mentorship programs that support women faculty through various stages of their careers. The findings also call for regular gender audits, transparent promotion and hiring processes, and disaggregated data tracking women's progression in leadership pipelines. Additional interventions include implementing gender sensitization training to counter unconscious bias, developing supportive infrastructure such as on-campus childcare and safe transport, and enforcing maternity leave policies that are not punitive. These proposed reforms aim not merely at policy compliance but at transforming the deeply embedded gender norms and institutional cultures that have long marginalized women. In line with Feminist Theory, these policies advocate for structural transformation that centers lived experience, equity, and inclusion—not just symbolic representation.

4. Policy Implications and Way Forward

The findings from this study reveal a complex interplay of institutional, socio-cultural, and interpersonal barriers that inhibit women's access to and success in leadership roles within higher education in Sindh. Despite these obstacles, participants also identified areas of opportunity and strategies for transformation. Effective and sustainable change must involve multi-level interventions—ranging from structural reforms to leadership development and cultural shifts. Based on the evidence gathered, the following policy implications are proposed.

Institutional Reform: Embedding Gender into University Structures

To ensure that women are equitably represented in leadership, universities must institutionalize gender inclusion through structural mandates. One critical reform is the implementation of a minimum 30% quota for women in key academic

leadership roles such as Deans, Directors, and Vice Chancellors. These quotas must be accompanied by clear, merit-based pathways for promotion to avoid tokenism. Promotion and hiring procedures must be standardized and transparent to prevent subjective bias and the undue influence of informal male-dominated networks. Moreover, annual gender audits should be mandated for all universities. These reports must include disaggregated data on leadership positions, promotion trends, and committee compositions. As one participant noted, "If there's no data, there's no visibility. And if there's no visibility, change is not even a question."

Leadership Development and Capacity Building

To build a pipeline of competent women leaders, formal mentorship and leadership training programs are essential. Universities should establish mentorship networks that connect junior women faculty with experienced leaders—both male and female—who can provide guidance on career progression and institutional navigation. Regional offices of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) should establish Gender and Leadership Training Hubs. These centers should offer targeted modules in administrative skills, strategic communication, negotiation, and higher education governance. Such initiatives will ensure that women are not just placed into leadership roles but are also adequately prepared and empowered to excel in them.

Cultural Change and Gender Sensitization

Institutional culture plays a pivotal role in either enabling or obstructing women's leadership. To challenge deep-rooted gender biases, universities must mandate annual gender sensitization workshops that address unconscious bias, exclusionary language, and power asymmetries in academic settings. These trainings should be compulsory for faculty, administrators, and selection committees. Furthermore, universities must establish confidential reporting mechanisms and grievance redressal systems to handle cases of harassment, bullying, and institutional gatekeeping. These safe spaces can help create a culture where women feel secure and respected, allowing them to lead with confidence.

Work-Life Integration Support

Academic institutions must recognize the disproportionate caregiving burdens carried by women and address them through inclusive policies. On-campus childcare services, flexible working hours, and supportive maternity and paternity leave policies are crucial to supporting academic mothers and caregivers. Furthermore, offering remote participation options for meetings, conferences, and training programs can increase access for women in rural areas or those managing household responsibilities. These measures would not only support work-life balance but also signal institutional commitment to gender equity.

Prioritizing Intersectionality

Policy interventions must also address the layered discrimination faced by women from marginalized communities. Leadership development programs should include targeted scholarships and training initiatives for women from scheduled castes, religious minorities, and remote districts of Sindh. Search committees must

adopt inclusive criteria that value diverse leadership styles and life experiences, moving beyond elite, urban-centric benchmarks of competence. Representation must extend beyond gender to ensure that leadership reflects the province's social diversity.

Rewarding Inclusive Leadership Practices

To incentivize change, universities should introduce recognition awards for departments or individuals demonstrating exemplary gender-inclusive leadership practices. These awards can celebrate innovations in mentorship, inclusive pedagogy, and institutional reforms. Additionally, accreditation bodies such as the HEC should incorporate gender equity indicators—such as policy implementation, gender balance in leadership, and data transparency—into their institutional evaluation frameworks. Linking accreditation points to gender equity performance would embed accountability and ensure that reforms are not symbolic but substantive.

In sum, the transformation of academic leadership in Sindh requires a holistic and sustained approach. By embedding gender equity into institutional structures, investing in leadership development, shifting cultural norms, and rewarding inclusive practices, universities can move beyond performative inclusion to meaningful empowerment. These policy recommendations, grounded in empirical evidence and lived experiences, offer a roadmap toward a more just and inclusive higher education system.

CONCLUSION

Addressing gendered leadership disparities in Sindh's higher education sector is not a matter of symbolic inclusion—it requires a systemic transformation of institutional logic, cultural norms, and administrative structures. The women in this study have demonstrated both the barriers they face and the leadership potential they embody. Their voices must now translate into actionable frameworks and enforceable policy commitments. The road forward requires more than representation. It demands restructuring the very architecture of leadership—so that academic institutions do not merely accommodate women but are rebuilt to reflect the values of equity, recognition, and shared authority.

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