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The Impact of Higher Education in Promoting Women Empowerment in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how higher education in Pakistani universities could be used to empower women. Although there have been significant improvements in the number of women enrolling and developing policies to address the issue, there remains gender disparity in the leadership, decision-making, and institutional processes. A survey-based approach was applied. Stratified random sampling was followed in selecting six universities in Punjab. Convenient sampling was used to select 600 students from these universities. Data was summarized with the help of descriptive and inferential statistics. The numeric results indicated that the respondents identified institutional initiatives to equality and the current existence of gender stereotypes within higher education. Higher education institutions can play a big role in transforming the policy and practice of women and gender balance as well as a more inclusive society by closing the gap between policy and practice.

Keywords: Leadership, Women empowerment, Higher Education, Institutional policies
Higher Education (HE)

Introduction

The saying "women are from Venus, men are from Mars" is widely employed to explain different thoughts, emotions, and behaviors between men and women. It is unavoidable of such disparities by implying that they are essentially dissimilar, just like if they were different species (Morgacheva, O., & Furst, D. E., 2012). When we talk about women empowerment then Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962) was the person who most significantly paved the way for women to hold positions of leadership (George R. Goethals & Crystal L. Hoyt, 2017).

It is widely acknowledged that women's empowerment is largely dependent on their ability to make decisions at home, and that education may increase women's negotiating power and influence both inside and outside of households (Malhotra & Schuler, 2002). Education for women can enhance their ability to make decisions at home by increasing their socioeconomic resources, such as income and earning potential (Brixiova et al., 2021). A growing body of data highlights the significance of women's rights and organizing groups as catalysts for change, as well as their influence on the enactment of laws and policies that promote gender equality (Htun & Weldon, 2010).

In Pakistan, gender inequality is a long-standing and persistent problem. According to the 2017 census (Population, Labor Force and Employment 2018, 179), women make up 49% of the population in Pakistan, yet they are underrepresented in the workforce. A



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large body of research on women's economic status indicates that most impoverished individuals are female. It is perplexing that despite Pakistan's significant female population, women are not able to occupy senior executive positions in the domains of economics, politics, security, and education (Sarwat Rauf, 2022).

It is indisputable that men and women differ in many facets of life. The question is whether these differences reflect the inherent differences between men and women, or if they are a result of our perceptions of those differences, stemming from gender stereotypes. When examining the nature and content of gender stereotypes, one finds that they not only highlight typical differences between men and women, but also dictate ideals for what each gender should look like and act like in various spheres of life (Naomi Ellemers, 2018).

A fragmented pathway for female mobility and success throughout all facets of Pakistani society is reflected in the gender gap in higher education. Pakistan will not generate the female leadership required for comprehensive and forward-thinking reform in the nation if women do not attend and succeed in the academy. To balance women's employment chances, deliberate actions in higher education must be taken.

Literature Review

Up until recently, the study literature focused on the two theoretical dimensions of the binary construct. The first is biological, where people are primarily classified as male or female based on their evolutionary sexual traits (Archer, 2019; Buss, 1995; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992). The other is sociological, where people can identify with multiple gender identities in addition to the binary biological construct due to socialization (Moss, 2024). The concept of empowerment is multifaceted rather than unitary, with different dimensions that may not move in tandem or at the same speed. Domestic decision-making, control and access to resources, mobility and freedom of movement, income, asset ownership, self-efficacy, and self-confidence are among the most widely cited markers of empowerment (Machio, M.P., et al., 2022). Examining the successful career experiences of women who have attained senior leadership positions has been a more popular trend in the literature in recent years (Hannum, Muhly, Schockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015).

A number of stakeholders, including financial institutions, academic institutions, business associations, the media, and communication platforms, have collaborated to support women entrepreneurs, in addition to government initiatives. However, their efforts appear to have had a limited impact (Aneke et al., 2021). With the responsibility of childcare and household duties, they are limited in developing in their careers and being productive researchers (De Welde and Stepnick 2023). Furthermore, unconscious bias and a culture that is not fully accommodating of flexible work arrangements may pose further barriers to female teachers (Walters et al., 2022).

Imposter syndrome is one element that has a detrimental impact on women's involvement in HE leadership." An internal phenomenon is 'imposter syndrome,' which happens when someone feels dishonest or unworthy despite their successes (Clance & O'Toole, 2014).

The study argues that a sustained policy commitment to equality for its own sake may be necessary to achieve equality between men and women, as the links between empowerment and development are likely too weak to be self-sustaining (Duflo, 2011). Women's empowerment depends on several key determinants, including education, poverty, economic autonomy, as well as social and cultural issues, and access to economic opportunities. The research revealed a strong correlation between



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empowerment determinants and increased participation in society (Naz et al., 2020).

This study tried to seal these gaps and provided a deeper insight into the barriers to female education in Pakistan by examining the specific challenges of female students of different socioeconomic and cultural status.

Objectives

To determine existing biases in gender stereotypes regarding women empowerment

To identify best practices and policies implemented by higher education institutions to promote gender equality and women leadership.

Research questions

What are the prevailing genders stereotypes influencing perceptions of women in leadership roles?

In what ways do male and female faculty members differ in their views on women empowerment and leadership potential?

How do female faculty and students perceive the impact of gender stereotypes on their leadership aspirations and career progression?

How do higher education institutions measure the success of their gender equality initiatives, particularly in terms of increasing women's participation in leadership roles?

What are the effective strategies and policies by higher education institutions to promote gender equality and women leadership?

How do mentorship programs in higher education institutions contribute to fostering women leadership and breaking down gender barriers?

METHODOLOGY

The research explored that how higher education in Pakistan allowed women to break the gender stereotypes and achieved empowerment by using a survey-based methodology. The quantitative strand used structured questionnaires to present statistical trends. Given the intricacy of gender dynamics and the paucity of previous research in the Pakistani context, this design was appropriate (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Shorten & Smith, 2017).

Target Population

All public and private universities in Pakistan were the target population. These institutions could amplify or diminish the academic, cultural, and organizational gender-specific constructs tied to each institution. The emphasis on higher education institutions stemmed from their pivotal role in shaping social values and norms, defining leadership trajectories, and developing pathways within the culture (Shah & Shah, 2020).

Accessible Population

Due to resource restrictions, the study was limited to universities in one region of Pakistan, Punjab that is the most populous province. Recent studies indicate that concentrating on Punjab exclusively still achieves the objective of grasping the major changes in higher education and streamlining the fieldwork (Malik & Javed, 2021).

Sample and sampling technique

This research implemented multistage sampling. The stratified sampling across Central, Southern and Northern Punjab ensured the selection of six universities across the regions of Punjab. From each region, two universities were chosen. 600 Students were drawn from the six universities, with 100 students from each (50 from each of two selected



departments).

Research Instrument

To gather quantitative information, researcher developed a questionnaire that contained Likert type questions (e.g., 5-point scale: Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree).

Data Analysis

Researcher analyzed the data by using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics was used to describe demographic and inferential statistics (one sample t test) was used to analyze the mean values of the responses. This method enabled the researcher to determine if higher education does transformative work toward women empowerment.

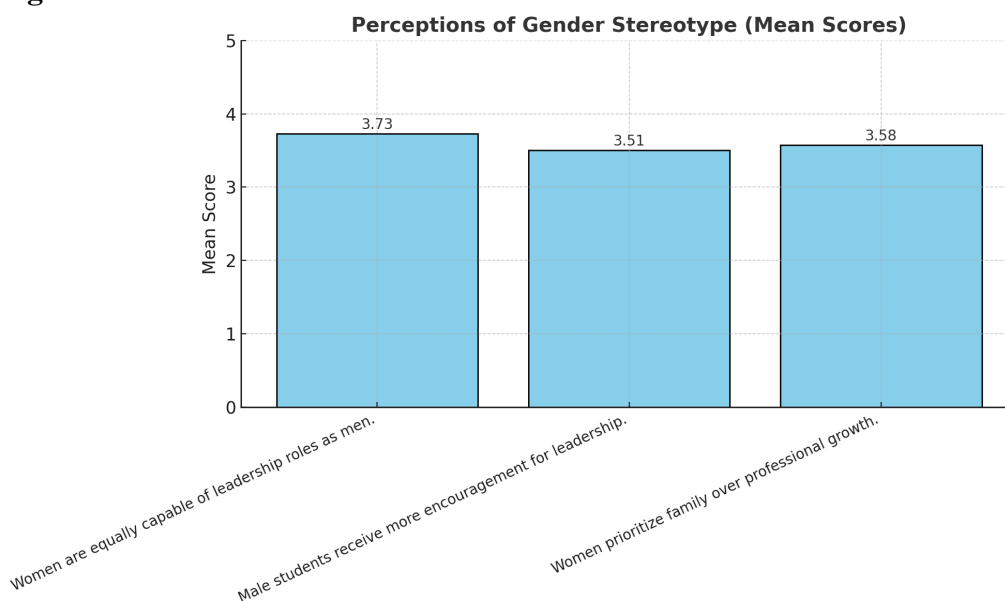
Objective 1: To determine existing biases in gender stereotypes regarding women empowerment.

Table 1: Perceptions of Gender Stereotype

Statement	Sum	M	SD
Women are equally capable of leadership roles as men.	2239.0	3.732	1.2202
Male students receive more encouragement for leadership.	2104.0	3.507	1.2051
Women prioritize family over professional growth.	2146.0	3.577	1.1356
Men are more competent in decision-making.	2040.0	3.400	1.2162

According to the findings of table 1 about respondents' beliefs of gender stereotypes, most of them felt that women are just as capable of holding leadership positions as men ($M = 3.73$). There was also moderate agreement on the perceptions that women put their families before their careers ($M = 3.58$) and that male students are more encouraged to take on leadership roles ($M = 3.51$). With the lowest mean score (3.40), the statement "Men are more competent in decision-making" showed comparatively less agreement with this stereotype.

Figure 2:





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Table 2: Awareness of Gender Equality Policies and Practices

Statement	Sum	M	SD
Specific policies on gender equality.	2102.0	3.503	1.1440
Effectiveness of institutional policies.	2135.0	3.558	1.0810
Celebration of International Women’s Day.	2243.0	3.738	1.0856
Male and female equal representation in leadership.	2233.0	3.722	1.1074
Female representation in councils and committees.	2216.0	3.693	1.0636
Specific policies on gender equality.	2102.0	3.503	1.1440

Respondents in table 2 demonstrated a high degree of awareness and agreement with institutional initiatives, according to the examination of awareness of gender equality policies and practices. International Women's Day celebrations had the highest mean ($M = 3.74$), closely followed by equal representation in leadership ($M = 3.72$). Recognizing specific gender equality policies ($M = 3.50$) and their efficacy ($M = 3.56$) also indicated moderate to strong recognition of continuing institutional efforts.

Table 3: Challenges and Barriers

Statement	Sum	M	SD
Resistance toward gender equality initiatives.	2083.0	3.472	1.1364
Barriers faced by women in higher education.	2143.0	3.572	1.1764
Institutional responsibility to enhance participation.	2270.0	3.783	1.0606

According to the difficulties and barriers findings in table 3, most respondents acknowledged that social and institutional barriers to gender equality exist. The statement "Institutional responsibility to enhance participation" had the highest mean ($M = 3.78$), suggesting that aggressive efforts are necessary. The continuation of systemic issues in higher education was further shown by the moderate agreement seen for obstacles encountered by women ($M = 3.57$) and opposition to gender equality measures ($M = 3.47$).

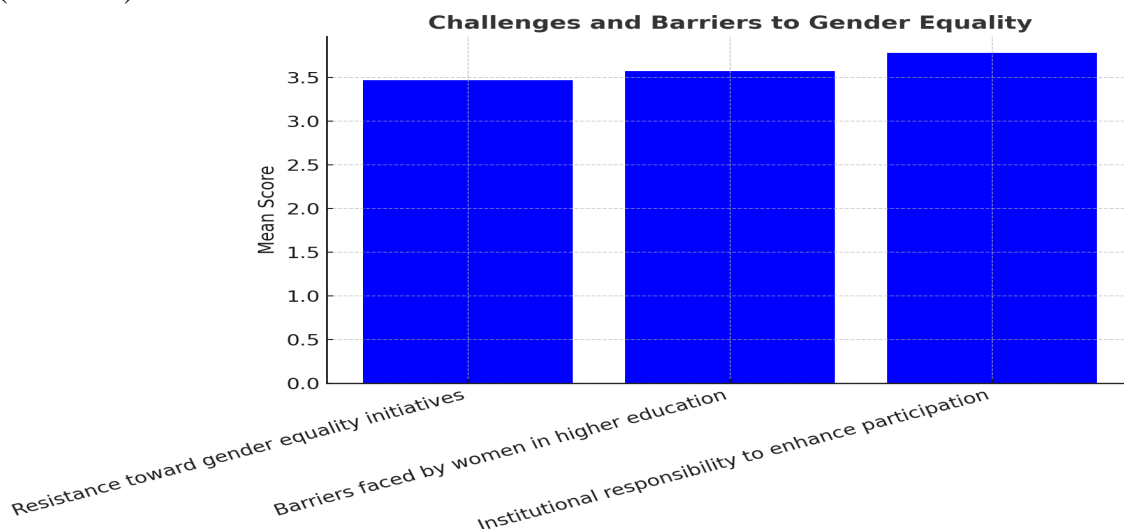


Table 4: One-Sample t-test for Perceptions of Gender Stereotype

Statement	N	M	SD	SE Mean
Women are equally capable of leadership roles as men.	600	3.732	1.2202	.0498
Male students receive more encouragement for leadership.	600	3.507	1.2051	.0492
Women prioritize family over professional growth.	600	3.577	1.1356	.0464
Men are more competent in decision-making.	600	3.400	1.2162	.0497



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According to the table 4, the majority of the assertions were moderately agreed with by respondents, according to the one-sample statistics for perceptions of gender stereotypes. The statement "Women are equally capable of leadership roles as men" had the highest mean ($M = 3.73$), indicating favorable opinions regarding women's capacity for leadership. The persistence of traditional gender attitudes in academic contexts is indicated by other comments, such as women prioritizing family ($M = 3.58$) and male students receiving greater encouragement ($M = 3.51$).

Table 5: One-Sample Test for Perceptions of Gender Stereotype

Statement	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Test Value = 3	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
				Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Women are equally capable of leadership roles as men.	14.688	600	.000	.7317	.634	.829
Male students receive more encouragement for leadership.	10.298	600	.000	.5067	.410	.603
Women prioritize family over professional growth.	12.439	600	.000	.5767	.486	.668
Men are more competent in decision-making.	8.056	600	.000	.4000	.302	.498

According to the table 1.5 for all assertions, the one-sample t-test results for gender stereotype perceptions reveal statistically significant deviations from the neutral test value ($p < .001$). The statement "Women are equally capable of leadership roles as men" had the largest mean difference (Mean Diff = 0.73, $t = 14.69$), suggesting substantial agreement with women's leadership ability. Significant positive differences were also found in other items, indicating that respondents typically favor women's equal competence and leadership potential while acknowledging gender discrepancies.

Table 6: One-Sample Statistics for Awareness of Gender Equality Policies and Practices

Statement	N	M	SD	SE Mean
Specific policies on gender equality.	600	3.440	1.1613	.0474
Effectiveness of institutional policies.	600	3.503	1.1528	.0471
Celebration of International Women's Day.	600	3.503	1.1440	.0467
Male and female equal representation in leadership.	600	3.558	1.0810	.0441
Female representation in councils and committees.	600	3.738	1.0856	.0443

Table 6 regarding institutional efforts toward gender equality, respondents' agreement ranges from modest to strong, based on the one-sample statistics regarding awareness of gender equality policies and practices. "Female representation in councils and committees" had the highest mean ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.09$), followed by "Equal representation of men and women in leadership" ($M = 3.56$). The results typically imply that respondents are aware of and generally pleased with the gender-related policies, representation, and activities that their institutions have put in place to advance equality in higher education.



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Table 7: One-Sample Test for Awareness of Gender Equality Policies and Practices

Statement	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Test Value = 3		
				Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Specific policies on gender equality.	9.281	600	.000	.4400	.347	.533
Effectiveness of institutional policies.	10.695	600	.000	.5033	.411	.596
Celebration of International Women’s Day.	10.777	600	.000	.5033	.412	.595
Male and female equal representation in leadership.	12.652	600	.000	.5583	.472	.645
Female representation in councils and committees.	16.660	600	.000	.7383	.651	.825

Strong agreement among respondents is indicated by the one-sample t-test results in table 7 for awareness of gender equality policies and practices, which shows that all statements deviate considerably from the test value of 3 ($p < .001$). "Female representation in councils and committees" had the largest mean difference (Mean Diff = 0.74, $t = 16.66$), followed by "Equal representation of men and women in leadership" (Mean Diff = 0.56, $t = 12.65$). These results imply that respondents believe representation programs and institutional policies are successful in promoting inclusion and women empowerment in higher education settings.

Discussion

In order to achieve social justice and inclusive development in higher education, gender equality is still a major concern. Universities serve two purposes, as they are a place where the information circulates and a device that transforms society (Schein, 2010; Chingara and Heystek, 2019). Based on the study results, the Higher Education in Pakistan is a source of empowerment and a source of gender stereotypes. Empowerment factors of higher learning, role of leadership and financial liberation are all found to be interconnected. Similar to Nussbaum (2000) and Boender (2002) the research shows that besides endowing women with the capacity to think critically, be self-confident, and be independent, higher education enables women to be able to engage in political activism, household decision making and social change. Such findings are consistent with the previous studies and demonstrated that education enhances the ability of women to challenge patriarchal norms, make economic contributions, and influence the progress of society (Haq et al., 2019; Etea et al., 2023).

Symbolism of the many measures is also brought out in the analysis. Although the gender equality policies are in place, their effectiveness is limited by the gaps in monitoring, communication, and institutional implementation. This is in line with the body of literature that proposes that institutional commitment cannot just be limited to the articulation of policies, but should also involve the implementation and cultural change (O'Connor, 2018). To sustain the empowerment in the long term, the participants emphasized the importance of high-level institutional responsibility, open-door leadership, the importance of gender studies in all disciplines, and visible female role models. To conclude, the findings substantiate that woman empowerment in higher education (HE) cannot be reduced to the issues of representation or access to resources



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alone, but also to the promotion of the agency and influence of women to disrupt the well-established patriarchal norms and provide a lasting institutional transformation. In case Pakistani universities go well beyond the token gestures and implement wholesome, culturally sensitive, and systemic policies to empower women to be leaders and active participants at all levels, they will be revolutionaries.

Conclusion

The study arrives at the conclusion that the potential of the higher education in Pakistan to empower women in the face of the virulent nature of the imbibed patriarchal norms is colossal. The results indicate a multi-level approach that is holistic whereby the inclusive learning, the institutional responsibility and active participation in the society does not exist. The universities cannot afford to merely make mere gestures to change gender equity into an institutional process wherein good policy is being implemented and overt leadership processes are taking place. Lastly, it is only possible through a systematic compliance to structural changes, critical pedagogy and effective leadership style by women that higher education in Pakistan can eventually achieve its revolutionary vision of offering a space of social justice and empowering the women.

By incorporating gender equality in every aspect of academic life, such as policy, practice, and culture, Universities can become a powerful force of sustainable social change in empowering women.

Recommendations

Boost gender equality policy implementation to address this issue by formalizing responsibility mechanisms, liberalizing the reporting lines, and ensuring clear monitoring in order to ensure that institutional programs to empower women are more than mere promises Universities should increase awareness and communication of institutional policies to enable the staff and students to be aware of what they can receive, what the institution is required to do, spread the gender policies more by introducing it to students during orientations, on digital and through campus awareness events.

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