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Symbolic Boundaries and Gendered Academic Identities at Higher Educational Institutions in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study inspects the role of symbolic boundaries in shaping gendered academic identities within higher educational institutions in Pakistan. Drawing on sociological theories of boundary-making, gender, and academic identity, the research reconnoiters how institutional cultures, disciplinary norms, and everyday academic practices contribute to processes of inclusion and exclusion. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study is based on a thematic analysis of secondary data systematically extracted from Google Scholar and other major academic databases. The findings reveal that, despite formal commitments to meritocracy and gender equality, symbolic boundaries grounded in gendered expectations of authority, professionalism, and respectability continue to structure academic life. Female academics, in particular, encounter heightened scrutiny and normative pressures that influence their professional recognition, participation, and career trajectories. The study further highlights that academic identities are dynamically negotiated, with instances of resistance and boundary crossing coexisting alongside entrenched inequalities. By foregrounding the symbolic and cultural dimensions of gendered inequality, the study contributes to the sociology of education and gender studies in Pakistan and underscores the need for institutional interventions that address not only structural disparities but also the implicit norms and practices that sustain unequal academic environments.

Keywords: Symbolic boundaries, Gendered academic identities, Higher education, Gender inequality, Sociology of education

Introduction

Higher educational institutions in Pakistan are not only sites of knowledge production and professional training but also powerful social spaces where identities are constructed,



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negotiated, and regulated (Ali, Abdullah, & Shoaib, 2026). Within these institutions, academic identities are shaped through everyday interactions, institutional cultures, and normative expectations that often reflect broader gendered hierarchies embedded in Pakistani society (Ali, Abdullah, & Shoaib, 2026). The concept of symbolic boundaries understood as socially constructed distinctions that categorize people, practices, and spaces offers a critical lens for examining how inclusion and exclusion operate in academic settings (Wallace & Wallin, 2015). These boundaries delineate what is considered legitimate knowledge, appropriate academic conduct, and credible scholarly authority, whereas simultaneously shaping gendered experiences of belonging and recognition (Tsouroufli, 2025). Gendered academic identities in Pakistani higher education are produced through formal structures such as recruitment, promotion, and evaluation criteria, as well as through informal practices including mentorship, collegial networks, classroom dynamics, and everyday interactions (Shoaib & Abdullah, 2025). Female academics, in particular, often navigate complex and sometimes contradictory expectations related to professionalism, respectability, mobility, and visibility (O'Connor, 2023). Symbolic boundaries based on gender, discipline, age, marital status, and institutional prestige subtly privilege male academic identities although constraining women's participation, voice, and career advancement (Maritz & Prinsloo, 2015). These processes are frequently normalized and rendered invisible, making them difficult to challenge through policy alone (Mallman, Harvey, Szalkowicz, & Moran, 2021).

This study seeks to explore how symbolic boundaries operate within higher educational institutions in Pakistan to shape and differentiate gendered academic identities. By examining how academics perceive, experience, and negotiate these boundaries, the research aims to illuminate the micro-level mechanisms through which gender inequality is reproduced or resisted in academic spaces. Situating the analysis within the sociological traditions of boundary-making and gender studies, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how power, culture, and institutional norms intersect to structure academic life. Ultimately, the research aspires to inform more inclusive and equitable practices within Pakistan's higher education sector by foregrounding the lived realities of gendered academic identities.

Study Context

The rationale for this study is grounded in the persistent yet often understated gender inequalities within higher educational institutions in Pakistan. However, policy frameworks and institutional reforms increasingly emphasize gender equity, empirical evidence suggests that disparities in academic recognition, career progression, leadership opportunities, and everyday professional interactions continue to shape the experiences of male and female academics in unequal ways (Jones, Aldous, Lane, & Penney, 2025). These inequalities are not always the result of overt discrimination; rather, they are frequently reproduced through subtle, symbolic processes that define norms of legitimacy, authority, and belonging within academic spaces (Gokturk, 2025). The concept of symbolic boundaries provides a critical analytical tool to examine these subtle mechanisms (Eppolite & Burford, 2020). By focusing on how distinctions related to gender, discipline, institutional culture, and social respectability are constructed and maintained, this study moves beyond structural indicators of inequality to explore the cultural and interactional dimensions of academic life. In the Pakistani context where higher education institutions are embedded within broader patriarchal social relations symbolic boundaries often intersect with cultural expectations surrounding gender roles, mobility, family responsibilities, and moral respectability. However, these processes



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remain under-researched, particularly from the perspective of academics' lived experiences.

This study is further justified by the limited sociological scholarship that systematically examines gendered academic identities in Pakistan using a boundary-making framework. Existing research has largely focused on access, enrollment, or policy-level analyses, leaving a significant gap in understanding how gendered identities are negotiated within institutions on a daily basis (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026b; Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026c; Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b). By addressing this gap, the study contributes original empirical insights to the sociology of education and gender studies, whereas also engaging with global debates on academic identity formation in the *Global South*. Finally, the findings of this study have practical relevance for higher education governance and policy. By revealing how symbolic boundaries shape inclusion and exclusion within academic institutions, the research inform more context-sensitive interventions aimed at fostering equitable professional environments. Such insights are essential for developing institutional practices that not only promote gender parity in numerical terms but also challenge the cultural norms and symbolic hierarchies that sustain gendered inequalities in Pakistan's higher education sector.

The Data and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore symbolic boundaries and gendered academic identities within higher educational institutions in Pakistan. The data were derived from secondary sources, systematically extracted from Google Scholar and other reputable academic databases, including peer-reviewed journals, books, policy documents, and institutional reports relevant to gender, higher education, and boundary-making processes. A purposive selection strategy was employed to identify studies that directly addressed academic identity formation, gendered institutional practices, and symbolic power relations within Pakistani or comparable socio-cultural contexts. The selected literature was subjected to thematic analysis, involving careful coding, categorization, and interpretation of recurring patterns, concepts, and narratives related to symbolic boundaries and gendered experiences in academia. Through this analytical process, six key themes were synthesized to generate coherent findings, from which results were interpreted and conclusions were drawn, enabling a nuanced understanding of how gendered academic identities are constructed, negotiated, and constrained within Pakistan's higher education sector.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Construction of Gendered Academic Identities

Socialization is the process that starts right after the birth of a child. Socialization is not an isolated process rather it is backed by many factors including gender, family and culture of the society and so on (Drewski, Gerhards, & Hans, 2018). In Pakistan, gendered socialization is considered very crucial to make the individual best suited to perform their expected roles in society (Waris, Shoaib, Sharif, & Abdullah, 2025c). Child gets the sense of being male and female throughout a conscious process of socialization by family, parents and society (Wang, Lin, & Shen, 2025). At initial stages of life, boys and girls perceive themselves as different from each other (Wallace & Wallin, 2015). Boys are treated differently than girls. Boys are given the things of specific colors including blue black and white and to the contrary, girls are associated with soft colors such as pink and purple etc. This distinction is further leads to the differences in dressing patterns, speaking style, liking and disliking patterns in everyday choices (Vellamo,



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2023). Educational institutions are the places where students form academic identities on the basis of gendered socialization (Tsouroufli, 2018). Gendered socialization is also backed by the rural and urban setting of the students as well as the public and private sectors of educational institutions (Tapp, 2014). In general, male students are supposed to be more assertive, competent and career oriented in educational settings whereas on the other hand female students are supposed to be obedient, submissive and controlled (Ramaprasad, 2020). In addition to it, male students from urban setting are more confident and polished than those of rural background (Morley, 2016). Same like that, female students from urban settings show more positive and active response in comparison to the female students from rural backgrounds (Morley, 2011). Every educational institution holds its unique culture to reproduce and maintain the gendered identity and expectations that contribute to form academic identity among students (Barrow, Grant, & Xu, 2022). In Pakistan, educational institutions are inherently supportive for male students more than the female in terms of access to the available resources, ease to communicate with others and variety of choices etc. Academic identities of the students are also shaped by the role of self-perception and aspiration (Barnard, Rose, Dainty, & Hassan, 2021). Male students perceive themselves as powerful and earning members of the society although female get the sense of being responsible and caretaker of the family as less important than the male (Ali, Abdullah, & Shoaib, 2026). Same like that, both male and female students take on the responsibility to meet the expectations of the society (Ali, Abdullah, & Shoaib, 2026). How male students and female students should behave, perform and produce is affected by the formed gendered academic identities of them (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026b). These identities are maintained and reproduced through the academic practices of daily routine (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026c). Classroom discussion and participation of male and female students reflect the gendered biasness and self-perception (Shoaib et al., 2026c). Male develops a sense of belonging to the group that is similar to their interest and identity and so is the case of female (Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025b). This sense of self-perception and aspiration guides their behavior in educational institutions especially at higher level (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a). But sometimes these patterns are also challenged to reshape the academic identities among male and female students (Ahmed et al., 2026b). Such as selection of male appropriate research topics by the female students, participation in classroom discussion on contradictory topics for each gender or by showing gender inappropriate behavior are the possible ways to break the existing gendered identities in educational institutions in Pakistan (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a). Sometimes, male and female have strong sense of affiliation to the group of opposite gender and becomes challenging to the existing academic culture (Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025a).

Theme 2: Symbolic Boundaries in Academic Disciplines

The world of education has been enriched in variety of disciplines throughout the globe (Waris, Shoaib, Sharif, & Abdullah, 2025a). Knowledge is not inherent in nature rather it is socially constructed. Knowledge reflects and supports the interests of those who produce it (Waris, Shoaib, Sharif, & Abdullah, 2025b). In Pakistan many academic disciplines have been introduced especially at higher education level (Shoaib, Waris, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). These academic disciplines are not only divided on the basis of nature of the knowledge but this categorization also carries the hidden meanings of differences and boundaries (Waris, Shoaib, et al., 2025c). At educational institutions symbolic boundaries are created to maintain the gendered identities of male and female



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(Waris, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Symbolic boundaries are hidden, internal and unspoken patterns of behavior and expectations that are accepted by everyone (Shoaib & Abdullah, 2025). Male is considered superior than female at every position. In classroom male student is more likely to speak and represent than female students (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, et al., 2025b). Likewise, male teacher is more confident and recognized as female teacher and male staff is more efficient than the female (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). Although it is not hard and fast rule but these are the general practices observed in Pakistan (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025c). Male is given with more power and more access to the resources and opportunities as they are considered more appropriate (Ali, Shoaib, & Ali, 2025). Categorization of academic discipline also reflects the authenticity and legitimacy of the knowledge (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b). Male dominant disciplines are highly respected and given more worth in job market as compare to the female dominant disciplines (Iqbal, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Being a lawyer or engineer is more respectable than being a teacher or care taker. But even if a female chooses the male appropriate discipline she has to face many challenges to get equal recognition and opportunities that is very difficult in a society like Pakistan (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025c). The knowledge and opinion of the male is considered more authentic and reliable than the female (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b). Although female is better performer at education but when it comes to the practical implication of the knowledge, the male is more reliable (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). Similarly, legitimate knowledge is driven from the powerful and authentic resources and non-legitimate knowledge is produced by the less powerful authorities (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b). The education and knowledge is dominated by the male authority in the whole world so that the knowledge and education backed by men is labeled as true and valuable knowledge (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). Academic disciplines are used as a mean to sustain the existing patterns of differences among male and female and also to strengthen them (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025b). Male dominant disciplines are Science, Engineering, Technology and Mathematics (STEM) etc. are referred as more valuable and important knowledge (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025a). Whereas female dominant disciplines are literature, Arts and Humanities that hold less recognition as a discipline in the society (Shoaib, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). This categorization of the disciplines creates the symbolic boundaries in educational institutions. Each academic discipline practice different academic and epistemic norms (Shoaib, Iqbal, Rasool, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b). STEM disciplines are based on practical, rigid and scientific approach to produce knowledge (Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). These disciplines are best appropriate for the male students as well as are more applicable and helpful in real world. Such disciplines require competition and dedication whereas on the other hand Arts and Humanities are creative and flexible disciplines that are the best options for the female students in Pakistan (Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). Epistemic culture of each discipline also reinforces the gendered differences and inequality in educational institutions (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025c). Male students are treated as more deserving and appropriate for STEM fields rather the female students. Whereas on the other hand male students in Arts and Humanities are considered average and less valuable (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025a). In private institutions, although the female students have more opportunities than public sector institutions but expected gendered identities from the institutions are still there (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025b). These symbolic boundaries in educational institutions are not limited to the institutions only but are linked with the overall culture of the society



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(Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025c). In Pakistan, these symbolic boundaries are accepted as positive in academic disciplines to maintain the gender identity (Shoaib, Batool, Kausar, & Abdullah, 2025).

Theme 3: Gendered Hierarchies and Academic Status

In Pakistan, at higher education level symbolic boundaries results in gendered hierarchies among male and female (Shoaib & Ullah, 2025). Male dominant disciplines are favorable to the men to keep their authority maintained and their power unchallenged (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025). These symbolic boundaries are created with the help of division of academic disciplines as less important and more important (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Female dominant fields are not recognized as intellectual fields because of flexible and subjective approach to study the discipline (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, et al., 2025). Moreover, females are not supposed to be intellectually competent to deal with scientific and technological knowledge as efficient as male (Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Ahmed, 2025). On the contrary, it is believed that male is inherently capable to produce scholarly knowledge (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025b). Selection of the discipline is not only reason that creates differences among male and female but other contributing factors including disciplinary norms of the educational institutions and gendered practices also exist (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025a). Educational institutions in Pakistan privilege the male dominant disciplines and put them at higher ladder of the hierarchy of power and privilege (Ahmed, Shoaib, & Zaman, 2025). STEM fields enjoy more recognition, get more budgets, and are given more respect and value (Shoaib, Ahmed, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). Moreover, the teaching and management staff is also male in these disciplines. Female are excluded unintentionally and are treated as not suitable for technical and scientific fields (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a). On the other side, female dominant fields are not practical and actually helpful in development and progress of society in terms of economy and technology (Shoaib, Kausar, Ali, & Abdullah, 2025). Females are good to get good grades but do not have any meaningful contribution to the knowledge production and development of the society (Shoaib, Rasool, Kalsoom, & Ali, 2025). In educational institutions, men are responsible to hold all respected and meaningful top key positions (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). Power and prestige is associated with the gender as well as the academic discipline (Ali, Shoaib, & Kausar, 2025). Female enjoys bare minimum prestige with reference to their academic discipline and are also paid less than the technical and male dominant disciplines and positions (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025c). These symbolic boundaries work in a cycle to produces and reproduce the hierarchal differences among male and female in Pakistan especially at higher educational level (Shoaib, Ali, & Kausar, 2025).

Theme 4: Boundary Work and Gendered Inclusion/Exclusion

In educational institutions, the division of work is symbolic that represents the power structure, authority and status of male and female especially in Pakistan (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b). Gender is used as criteria to create boundaries in distribution of roles and duties (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b). Male are assigned to different types of work and duties that complement their physique, capabilities and gendered expectations of the educational institution and discipline as well (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a). Likewise, females are given with non-technical and easy to go types of duties. Institutional work is not limited to the academics only but it includes management, administration teaching staff and students as well (Shoaib & Bashir, 2025). Male oriented tasks and jobs are more



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valued and respected because their duties are comparatively tough than female (Shoaib, Shamsher, & Iqbal, 2025). Moreover, some works are best suited for the male and some are best suited for the female because of the nature of the work and cultural boundaries (Shoaib, 2025b). This distribution and differences among male and female creates a boundary about who is best for what and who will perform what (Shoaib, 2025a). Boundary work is followed by not only the gender but the hierarchy of power and prestige is also involved (Shoaib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025b). For example, when it come the admission of the students, the male students are preferred for male dominant fields such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) etc. and female students are prioritized for female appropriate fields such as Arts and Humanities (Shoaib, Tariq, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025). This process of Inclusion or Exclusion in sometime written and formal and sometime it is unintentional (Shoaib, Iqbal, & Iftikhar, 2025). Physical activities or technology based work is preferred to be done by the male than the female as male have more expertise for such kind of work (Shoaib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025a). Same like that, teaching staff is selected on the basis of academic qualification but gender is hidden contributing element (Shoaib, Shamsher, & Iqbal, 2025). Uncertainty, male and female both have the credential for the same job, possibly female is excluded if the field is male dominant (Shoaib & Zaman, 2025). Institutional expectations and criteria also provide the basis for inclusion and exclusion of the male and female. Written rules and regulations along with institutional norms and culture support the procedure of selection of competent individual (Shoaib, 2024e). Male are preferred for high responsibility or technical job and female are preferred for non-technical and non-scientific job mostly (Shoaib & Ullah, 2021a). Limitation to work is not just guided by gender but power and status also affecting the formation of boundary (Ali, Zaman, & Shoaib, 2024). Male belonging to a higher position will not likely to perform the duties of lower position and same like that female belonging to a lower position is not allowed to deal with high level roles and duties (Shoaib, Zaman, & Abbas, 2024). Interplay of power and gender at educational institution is not only structural but it is observed and initiated at micro level (Shoaib, 2024d). Face to face interactions of male and female belonging to different positions creates the sense of boundaries (Shoaib, 2024b). In classroom, male teacher is more likely to communicate with male student openly and avoid direct interaction with female students (Shoaib, 2024c). This kind of behavior sets a boundary between male teacher and female student (Shoaib, 2024a). Same like that interaction between male and female staff is also shaped by the power and gender dynamics (Shoaib, 2023b).

Theme 5: Institutional Practices and Gendered Cultures

Gendered practices at educational institutions are merely not the product of the gendered socialization and academic identities backed by the disciplinary cultures of the institutions (Shoaib, 2023a). But there is a formal mechanism to produce these differences through written rules and regulation in Pakistan (Shoaib, 2021). In Pakistan, both government and private sector institutions have policies that are inherently influenced by the local culture of male dominancy (Shoaib, Usmani, & Abdullah, 2023). Institutional policies and norms highlight and support the gendered differences at higher education level (Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022). For instance, transportation provided by the college and universities are separate for male and female students and staff. Moreover, male and female prefer to be affiliated with the group of same gender (Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2022). Male and female avoid direct and frank interaction in public. Sports policies and programs are also gendered biased (Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2023). Male students are selected in male dominant sports such as jumping; running,



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cricket etc. and female are selected mostly for debate, literary programs or other creative activities (Shoaib, Fatima, & Jamil, 2021). These are the unsaid expected norms in Pakistani educational institutions that promote the gendered boundaries among male and female (Shoaib, Tariq, Shahzadi, & Ali, 2022). Along with this, academic evaluation of both students and teachers is also influenced by the gendered culture in Pakistan (Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021). Teaching skills vary from gender to gender and also differ in terms of qualification and credentials (Shoaib, Iqbal, & Tahira, 2021). Though Female teachers have lesser exposure to the outside world and their knowledge is confined to the theoretical and indigenous knowledge only rather male teachers have a lot of experiences and exposure to the variety of the environments (Shoaib & Ullah, 2021b). Thus male teacher is more efficient in their job as compare to female teachers at higher level institutions. Male students prefer male teachers as their instructor because they both share the common gendered identity and are easy to interact and communicate with each other and avoid opposite gender as teacher (Shoaib & Ullah, 2019). So is the case of female students and teachers. Male teacher is more career oriented and have a lot of contribution in all academic related activities including curricular and co-curricular and extracurricular activities (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013). Most of the scholarly work is published by the male teachers only. Female have very fewer contribution in intellectual and scholarly work as female just focus on limited and short term goals (Shoaib, Latif, & Usmani, 2013). Evaluation of the students' academic activities is also influenced by gendered cultures. Female are considered more intelligent and high performer in written activities such as exams, assignment and quizzes whereas male students show good performance in technical and experimental subjects (Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, et al., 2025b). In general girls get good grades than male students but lack the practical skills. Workplace environment asserts significant impacts on the gendered identities and gendered cultures (Shoaib, Kausar, et al., 2025). For instance, private sector institutions are more open and advance for male and female as compare to public sector universities (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025b). Gendered identities are not very harsh and rigid in high standards and private educational institutions but as for the public sectors and universities of backward areas are more inclined to practice the gendered bases differences at every level (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025c). Workplace culture influences the academic identities of genders through reinforcing or challenging the already existing gendered expectations (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025a).

Theme 6: Gendered Expectations in Academic Performance

Academic performance of male and female students is affected by the gendered stereotypes that prevails and believed in educational institutions especially at higher level (Shoaib, 2024d). It is believed that females are more responsible towards academic performance and must achieve higher grades (Shoaib, 2024b). On the basis of this stereotype, female students have more pressure to fulfill the institutional as well as cultural pressure (Shoaib, 2024c). Another notion is that male student should pursue STEM Field as it ensures more job opportunities in future. Thus male students feel anxious to meet the social expectations regardless of their interest in those academic disciplines (Shoaib, 2024a). In Pakistan, gender is considered very important in shaping the institutional norms and expectations in both public and private sectors of advanced and backward areas (Shoaib, 2023b). Female students are categorized as more intelligent, obedient and good for emotional and creative tasks. These expected patters form the disciplinary cultures of the institution and set female apart from the other category of male students (Shoaib, 2023a). Male are recognized as confident, more expressive and



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sharp in technical activities (Shoaib & Ullah, 2021a). Students are not the only who create a sense of self perception of intelligence and competence but other personals like teaching staff and administrative staff also develop the sense of gendered differences among male and female. In Pakistan, the educational institutions are dominated by the male figure (Shoaib & Ullah, 2021b). Female students are visibly larger in number than the male students, yet they have less recognition and are pushed back. Male figure is dominant on overall system of educational institutions as male holds more powerful and demanding positions in the hierarchy of power (Shoaib, 2024d). And even after acquiring a significant position and power the female is always perceived and treated inferior and less competent than male (Shoaib, 2024e). Male is prioritized in overall society and especially in educational institutions because male is more rational in decision making and they act autonomously (Shoaib, 2024c). Decisions taken by female authority is not always accepted and even counter checked by any other male authority. In Pakistan, structural and cultural basis of education institutions is male. Male is considered as Ideal Academic authority especially in Pakistani culture (Shoaib, 2024a). Moreover, gendered differences are visible in rewards and recognition of students. Male and female are systematically dealt differently in terms of academic evaluation and outcome (Ahmed et al., 2025). These differences are not specifically based on the academic ability of male and female but based on the gendered expectations and cultural influences (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024). Female figure is encouraged in a way that they do not become the challenge or threat to the autonomy and power of the male. And male figure is treated as the ruling and dominant figure (Shoaib, 2025a). Female are high achiever in academic evaluation but practically male are more suitable and preferred for the real roles in society (Shoaib, 2025b). Gendered differences among male and female figure at higher education level in Pakistan are remarkably visible (Shoaib & Abdullah, 2025). These differences are bases on various factors gendered socialization, disciplinary cultures and perceived expectation of male and female students (Shoaib & Bashir, 2025).

Theoretical Insights

This study is theoretically grounded in sociological perspectives on symbolic boundaries, gender, and academic identity, which together provide a robust framework for understanding how gendered inequalities are constructed and sustained within higher educational institutions in Pakistan. At the core of the analysis is the concept of symbolic boundaries, as developed by Lamont and Molnar (2002), who define them as conceptual distinctions that social actors use to categorize people, practices, and spaces. These boundaries shape perceptions of legitimacy, worth, and belonging, often preceding and justifying more visible social inequalities. In academic institutions, symbolic boundaries operate through norms of good scholarship, professional demeanor, disciplinary hierarchies, and institutional prestige, which appear neutral but are frequently gendered in practice. Such boundaries help explain how women academics subtly positioned as less authoritative or less committed, despite formal equality in qualifications and roles.

The study also draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of field, capital, and habitus to understand academic space as a competitive social field structured by power relations (Bourdieu, 1988). Academic capital such as credentials, publications, networks, and symbolic recognition is unevenly distributed and often aligned with masculine norms of productivity, mobility, and visibility. Habitus, shaped by gendered socialization, influences how male and female academics perceive their place within the field and how they navigate institutional expectations. In the Pakistani context, gendered habitus interacts with cultural norms around respectability and family roles, reinforcing symbolic



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boundaries that advantage male academics. Similarly, feminist theories of gender as a social construction further inform the analysis by emphasizing that gendered identities are produced and reproduced through everyday practices and institutional arrangements (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The concept of doing gender highlights how academic interactions such as classroom authority, collegial engagement, and leadership roles become sites where gender norms are enacted and evaluated. Female academics often face contradictory expectations: to demonstrate competence and authority although simultaneously conforming to norms of modesty and rationality, thereby intensifying boundary-making processes.

Additionally, Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations provides critical insight into how seemingly gender-neutral institutions are structured around implicit male norms. Academic institutions, through their evaluation systems, career trajectories, and informal networks, often reproduce gendered divisions of labor and power. These organizational logics contribute to the normalization of symbolic boundaries that marginalize women's academic identities, particularly in leadership and decision-making spaces. Finally, the study engages with the sociology of education and knowledge by recognizing universities as sites of cultural reproduction (Bernstein, 2000). What counts as legitimate knowledge and who is recognized as a legitimate knower are deeply entangled with gendered power relations. In Pakistan's higher education sector, these processes are further shaped by postcolonial legacies, disciplinary hierarchies, and Global South academic positioning, adding layers of complexity to gendered boundary-making. Together, these theoretical perspectives enable a nuanced understanding of how symbolic boundaries shape gendered academic identities at both structural and interactional levels. They provide the conceptual tools necessary to analyze how power operates subtly within higher educational institutions and how gendered inequalities are reproduced, negotiated, or contested in everyday academic life.

Conclusion

This study concludes that higher educational institutions in Pakistan are not merely neutral spaces of knowledge production but socially structured environments where symbolic boundaries play a decisive role in shaping and differentiating gendered academic identities. These boundaries operate through institutional cultures, disciplinary norms, informal networks, and everyday interactions that define who is recognized as a legitimate academic and whose contributions are rendered less visible or credible. Despite formal commitments to meritocracy and gender equality, academic practices often remain aligned with masculine norms of authority, productivity, and mobility, thereby placing disproportionate symbolic and emotional burdens on female academics. The findings reveal that women in academia continuously negotiate contradictory expectations of professional competence and culturally prescribed respectability, resulting in heightened surveillance, self-regulation, and constrained career trajectories. At the same time, academic identity formation emerges as a dynamic and contested process, where symbolic boundaries are not only reproduced but also selectively challenged through acts of resistance, negotiation, and boundary-crossing. By foregrounding the cultural and symbolic mechanisms underlying gendered inequalities, this study emphasizes that sustainable gender equity in Pakistan's higher education sector requires more than policy reforms; it necessitates a critical reconfiguration of institutional norms, evaluative criteria, and everyday academic practices that currently sustain exclusionary boundaries and unequal power relations.



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