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## Women in Educational Leadership: Challenges and Pathways to Change

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the representation, experiences, and institutional factors influencing women in educational leadership in Lahore, Pakistan. Despite women's significant participation in the teaching workforce, their presence in leadership roles remains disproportionately low. Employing a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, data were collected from 212 female principals, vice-principals, deans, and administrators across public and private schools and higher education institutions in Lahore. A structured questionnaire measured demographic details, perceptions of gender bias, institutional support, and access to mentorship. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, t-tests, ANOVA, and Pearson correlation, with significance set at  $p < 0.05$ . The findings revealed no statistically significant differences between public and private institutions regarding leadership representation or perceptions of gender bias. Similarly, no significant differences were observed across years of experience, and mentorship access was not significantly correlated with reduced perceptions of discrimination. While these results suggest uniformity across groups, the interpretation highlights that this uniformity reflects a pervasive system-wide disadvantage rather than equity. Women consistently encounter gender bias, limited mentorship opportunities, and insufficient institutional support, irrespective of institution type or career stage. The study concludes that structural reforms, gender-sensitive policy interventions, structured mentorship programs, and cultural change initiatives are essential to dismantle entrenched barriers. These findings underscore the need for systemic efforts to advance gender equity in educational leadership in Pakistan, aligning with global commitments such as Sustainable Development Goal 5.

**Keywords:** *Women in leadership; Educational leadership; Gender equity; Lahore; Quantitative study; Institutional barriers; Mentorship; Pakistan*

### Introduction

The increasing global attention to gender equality in educational leadership highlights a persistent gap in Pakistan, particularly in major urban centers like Lahore, where women play a pivotal role in the teaching workforce but remain largely absent from leadership positions. Education is widely acknowledged as a transformative force for personal empowerment and national development. However, when women are systematically excluded from leadership roles within educational institutions, the potential of education to drive gender equity is undermined (UNESCO, 2022). In Pakistan, where social, cultural, and institutional barriers often limit women's mobility and professional advancement, the issue becomes even more pressing. Despite Lahore being a progressive hub relative to other parts of the country, women's representation in senior educational leadership, such as principals of public secondary schools, district



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education officers, and higher education administrators, remains disproportionately low (Ullah et al., 2025). This underrepresentation not only reflects entrenched patriarchal norms but also deprives the education system of diverse perspectives essential for inclusive policymaking and student outcomes. Research has shown that increased female leadership correlates with improved school performance, teacher morale, and policy responsiveness to gender-specific issues (Farooq & Uddin, 2025). Hence, addressing this imbalance is critical not only for equity but also for the broader goals of national development.

### **Overview of Global and Regional Status of Women in Educational Leadership**

Globally, women occupy a substantial portion of the teaching profession, especially at the primary level. However, as the level of education increases, their representation in leadership dwindles. In OECD countries, women hold only 47% of secondary school leadership positions, despite being a majority in the teaching workforce (OECD, 2023). The disparity becomes starker in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, where women are highly underrepresented in decision-making roles across educational hierarchies (UNESCO, 2022). A recent study by Ullah et al. (2025) highlights that in Punjab province, women make up more than 50% of teaching staff in public secondary schools, yet less than 20% of leadership roles (e.g., headteachers, principals) are occupied by women. This gap is even more pronounced in rural outskirts of Lahore, where sociocultural barriers restrict women's access to leadership training, networking, and promotion. Cultural and familial expectations, combined with limited mobility, often discourage women from applying for administrative roles that demand longer working hours, travel, or relocation. A report by Dolonseda et al. (2025) emphasizes that lack of institutional support systems, such as maternity leave, childcare facilities, and mentorship programs, contributes significantly to women's attrition from leadership pathways.

Furthermore, political appointments in education departments are often skewed in favor of male candidates, particularly due to informal power networks and male-dominated selection boards (Meho-Akakpo, 2025). These systemic issues are particularly visible in Lahore's public universities and education directorates, where despite having highly qualified female faculty, men continue to dominate key decision-making bodies such as Academic Councils and Boards of Governors. In contrast, private schools in Lahore have shown slightly more progressive trends. According to data from the Punjab Education Sector Reform Programme (PESRP), a higher percentage of female principals can be found in elite private schools. However, this progress is limited to socio-economically privileged zones and is not reflective of the broader provincial education system (Government of Punjab, 2023).

### **Statement of the Problem**

In Lahore, despite significant female participation in the education sector, women remain drastically underrepresented in leadership roles. This discrepancy signals a major structural issue in the city's education governance framework. The problem is compounded by the intersection of patriarchy, bureaucratic inertia, and inadequate policy enforcement, which collectively create a glass ceiling for women aspiring to lead.



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This exclusion has profound consequences. First, it stifles innovation and gender-sensitive pedagogy, as leadership continues to be informed predominantly by male experiences and assumptions. Second, it deprives female educators of role models and mentorship, both of which are vital for leadership development. Third, it reflects poorly on Pakistan's commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 5, which emphasizes women's full participation in leadership across all sectors, including education (UNESCO, 2020).

Moreover, in teacher training colleges and public universities in Lahore, women are often pigeonholed into pedagogical roles while administrative and strategic functions are reserved for male faculty. These trends indicate that the issue is not a lack of qualification or interest, but rather a combination of systemic and cultural gatekeeping.

### **Research Objectives and Guiding Questions**

This study, conducted in Lahore, aims to investigate the current status of women in educational leadership within public and private secondary and tertiary institutions. The overarching goal is to understand both the **barriers and opportunities** that shape women's trajectories in leadership roles.

#### **The specific objectives of this research are:**

1. To evaluate the representation of women in educational leadership positions in Lahore.
2. To identify the sociocultural, organizational, and policy-related barriers that hinder women's advancement.
3. To explore best practices and case examples where women have successfully attained and performed leadership roles.
4. To provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, education managers, and training institutions in Punjab.

#### **Research Questions:**

- What is the current gender distribution in educational leadership positions in Lahore's public and private education sectors?
- What are the key factors (cultural, institutional, and individual) limiting women's participation in educational leadership?
- How do women in Lahore perceive their leadership journeys in education, and what support mechanisms have been effective for them?
- What policy reforms or organizational strategies could facilitate a more gender-equitable leadership landscape in Lahore?

#### **Literature Review**

The exclusion of women from educational leadership has deep historical roots, extending from primary education (K–12) to higher education institutions. Historically, women's involvement in education was primarily limited to teaching roles, often framed within the domestic and nurturing characteristics attributed to their gender (Blackmore, 1999). Educational leadership, by contrast, has long been constructed as a male domain, associated with authority, rationality, and decision-making, qualities culturally coded as masculine. In Pakistan, this exclusion was compounded by British colonial educational models, which reinforced hierarchical and male-centric structures. Educational administration



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during colonial rule prioritized the training of male bureaucrats, leaving women to occupy subordinate teaching roles, mostly in girls' schools (Jalal, 1991). After independence in 1947, these colonial patterns were perpetuated through state structures that failed to reform gender biases in education systems.

At the K–12 level, structural limitations such as separate gendered schooling systems, lack of female role models, and underrepresentation in curriculum development contributed to the marginalization of women in leadership positions (Chisamya et al., 2012). In higher education, the barriers became more rigid. Women faced not only institutional resistance but also familial and societal discouragement against pursuing postgraduate studies or academic administration. During the 1980s, under General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, policies inspired by conservative interpretations of Islam further restricted women's public roles, particularly in leadership (Jafar, 2005). Even in urban centers like Lahore, the representation of women in decision-making roles remained negligible, despite an increase in women's enrollment in universities. These historical trajectories have had lasting implications for the current gender imbalance in educational leadership across Pakistan.

### **Current Representation and Trends**

Today, despite some progress, women remain significantly underrepresented in educational leadership worldwide and in Pakistan. Globally, UNESCO (2022) reports that although women make up 94% of primary teachers, only 45% serve as school heads. The discrepancy widens as one moves up the educational ladder. In Pakistan, women comprise over 50% of the teaching workforce in public schools in urban areas such as Lahore. However, leadership representation remains alarmingly low. A study by Ullah et al. (2025) found that women held only 18% of principal positions in Lahore's public secondary schools. The disparity is even more pronounced in higher education: only about 10% of vice-chancellors or deans in public universities across Punjab are women (Ahmed & Sheikh, 2024).

Regional disparities also persist. Urban private schools tend to have more women in leadership, especially in elite institutions, due to better work environments and more progressive hiring practices (Rafiq et al., 2022). In contrast, public sector institutions and rural districts show lower representation due to mobility issues, cultural restrictions, and inadequate support systems (Farooq & Uddin, 2025). At the national level, female representation in the Ministry of Education and provincial education directorates is limited. Leadership positions are often influenced by political appointments, dominated by men with access to informal networks. Even policies aimed at increasing gender equity often lack proper implementation and accountability mechanisms (Morley, 2013). In comparison, Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Norway have adopted quota systems and gender-sensitive policy interventions, resulting in more equitable leadership representation (OECD, 2023). South Asian countries, including Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, have shown relatively better trends in school-level female leadership through targeted government reforms. Pakistan, however, continues to lag in institutionalizing such practices.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Understanding women's underrepresentation in educational leadership requires

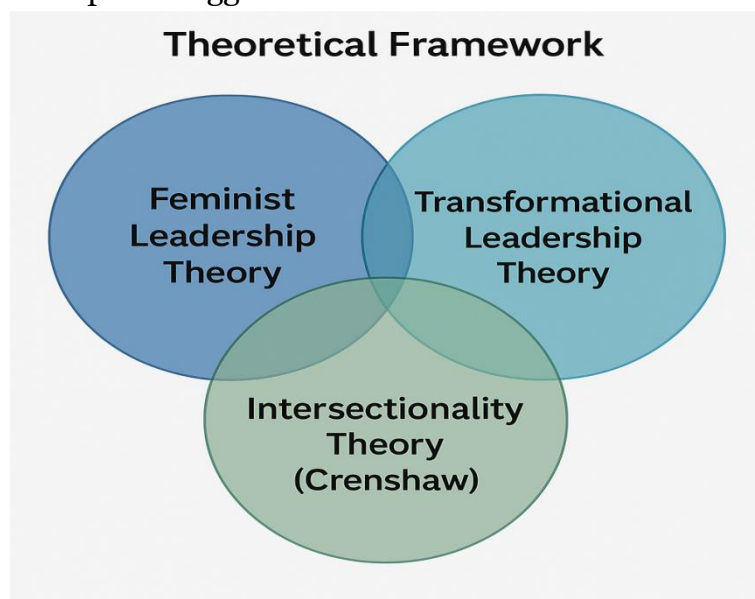


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a solid theoretical foundation. Three prominent frameworks have shaped recent research in this area: Feminist Leadership Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Intersectionality Theory. Feminist leadership theory critiques traditional leadership models for being exclusionary, hierarchical, and rooted in patriarchal values. It emphasizes relational, ethical, and inclusive leadership practices, traits often demonstrated by women but undervalued in male-dominated systems (Blackmore, 2013). In the context of Lahore, this theory highlights how women's collaborative leadership styles are often overlooked due to entrenched masculine standards of authority.

Transformational leadership theory, developed by Burns (1978) and expanded by Bass and Avolio (1994), defines effective leaders as those who inspire, motivate, and develop followers through vision and personal example. Research shows that many women adopt transformational leadership styles, focusing on team building, mentorship, and community engagement (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In educational settings, especially schools and colleges, such leadership approaches can improve outcomes and foster a more inclusive environment (Aldhilan et al., 2025).

Intersectionality theory, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), examines how overlapping identities, such as gender, class, ethnicity, and religion, compound forms of marginalization. In Pakistan, intersectionality explains why women from rural, lower-income, or minority backgrounds face even greater obstacles in accessing leadership roles than urban, upper-middle-class women. A woman educator in Lahore may face gender-based discrimination, but her experience will differ from that of a woman in southern Punjab or interior Sindh who may also contend with ethnic or sectarian bias (Raza & Khokhar, 2022). These frameworks help deconstruct the structural, cultural, and psychological factors that reinforce gender disparities in educational leadership and suggest multidimensional interventions.



**Figure 1: Theoretical Framework**



### **Known Barriers to Women's Advancement**

Numerous interrelated barriers contribute to the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership in Pakistan. These include gender bias and stereotyping, work-life balance issues, institutional and policy-level barriers, and informal network exclusion. Gender bias and stereotyping remain pervasive across all levels of the education system. Women are often perceived as less assertive or capable of handling the “tough” responsibilities of leadership. These stereotypes influence selection panels, colleagues, and even students, reinforcing the belief that men are “natural leaders” while women are better suited for supportive or teaching roles (Morley, 2013). In Lahore, anecdotal and survey-based evidence suggests that female teachers are less likely to be nominated for administrative promotions, even when qualifications and experience are comparable to male counterparts (Ahmed & Sheikh, 2024).

Work-life balance and caregiving responsibilities also constrain women's leadership aspirations. Traditional gender roles assign women the primary responsibility for domestic duties, limiting their availability for leadership positions that require extended hours or travel. In the absence of institutional support, such as on-site childcare, maternity leave, or flexible schedules, many capable women opt out of administrative pathways (Dolonseda et al., 2025; Aldhilan & Rafiq, 2025). This burden is especially pronounced in dual-role families in urban areas like Lahore, where professional women must juggle full-time jobs and caregiving without adequate support systems. Institutional and policy-level barriers also hinder progress. Leadership positions are often awarded based on tenure, political patronage, or recommendations from predominantly male networks. There is also a lack of transparent criteria for leadership selection in education departments. Additionally, many professional development and leadership training opportunities are not equally accessible to women, either due to geographic restrictions or gendered gatekeeping (Farooq & Uddin, 2025).

Informal networks and mentorship gaps are significant barriers to women's advancement. In Pakistani institutions, promotions and leadership appointments often depend not only on merit but also on relationships, networking, and informal endorsements. Women, especially those without family connections in the field, frequently find themselves excluded from these male-dominated circles. The scarcity of senior female mentors further limits younger women's opportunities to receive guidance and professional support (Meho-Akakpo, 2025).

### **Methodology**

This section outlines the methodological approach used to examine the representation, experiences, and institutional factors affecting women in educational leadership positions in Lahore. It details the research design, sampling strategy, data collection tools, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations, all in the context of a quantitative empirical study.

### **Research Design**

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to systematically explore trends and relationships concerning women's leadership in educational institutions across Lahore. The quantitative approach was chosen



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for its capacity to produce generalizable results across a sizable population and to facilitate comparisons between institutional types, leadership levels, and socio-demographic groups. A descriptive design enabled the capture of prevailing perceptions, institutional environments, and demographic characteristics at a single point in time. Quantitative research in educational leadership allows researchers to uncover patterns and statistically test relationships between variables, such as years of experience and perceived access to leadership opportunities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This method was particularly suitable given the study's objectives to identify statistically significant trends in representation and assess factors like institutional support, perceived bias, and policy implementation.

### **Sampling Strategy**

The target population for this study included female principals, headmistresses, vice-principals, deans, and administrative officers working in both public and private secondary schools, colleges, and universities in Lahore. Given the diversity of educational institutions in the city, a stratified random sampling technique was employed. The stratification was based on three key variables: type of institution (public vs. private), level of institution (secondary vs. tertiary), and geographic zones (central, northern, southern, eastern, and western Lahore). This approach ensured proportional representation across various educational environments and minimized sampling bias (Etikan & Bala, 2017). An estimated sample size of 250 respondents was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula, assuming a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Out of the 250 distributed questionnaires, 212 were returned and deemed complete and valid for analysis, yielding a response rate of 84.8%. The final sample included 125 participants from school-level institutions and 87 from higher education, with a near-equal distribution between public and private institutions. This stratified strategy ensured the inclusion of diverse perspectives and enhanced the validity of the findings.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data was collected through a structured, self-administered questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions to facilitate statistical analysis. The questionnaire was designed based on existing instruments used in gender and leadership studies, particularly adapting items from Eagly and Carli's (2007) research on women and leadership in organizational contexts. It was divided into four sections: demographic details, professional background, perceived leadership barriers, and institutional support mechanisms.

The questionnaire was distributed in two formats: physical copies were delivered to schools and universities, and an online version was disseminated via institutional email and professional WhatsApp groups. Respondents were given one week to complete and return the questionnaire. Before the full rollout, a pilot test was conducted with 15 female leaders (excluded from the final sample) to ensure clarity, cultural relevance, and time efficiency. Based on the pilot feedback, minor adjustments were made to improve readability and flow. The instrument's reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a value of 0.82, indicating strong internal consistency. The questions addressed a wide range of leadership-related issues, including access to mentorship,



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experiences of gender bias, workload perceptions, decision-making roles, and the presence of formal support policies in their institutions. Likert-scale items (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) were used to quantify perceptions and attitudes toward key issues.

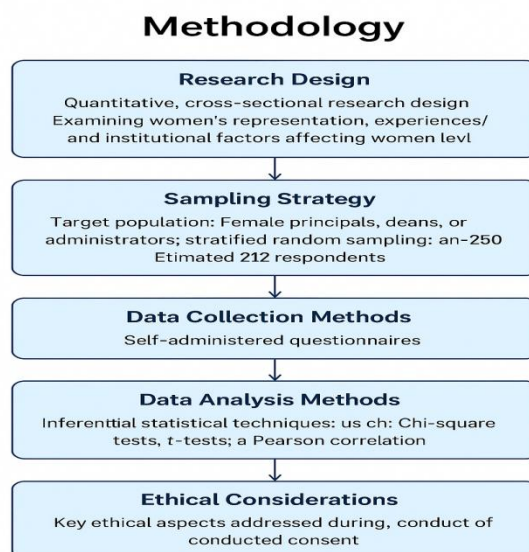
### **Data Analysis Methods**

The quantitative data collected were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26). The data analysis process began with data cleaning, coding, and verification to address missing values or inconsistencies. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize demographic characteristics and to illustrate the overall distribution of leadership roles among the participants. To test associations between independent and dependent variables, a range of inferential statistical techniques was applied. Chi-square tests were conducted to examine relationships between institutional type (public vs. private) and leadership representation. Independent samples t-tests assessed differences in perceived barriers and institutional support between school and higher education leaders. Further, Pearson correlation analysis was employed to identify relationships between variables such as years of experience, mentoring access, and perceived leadership preparedness. In line with standard quantitative practice, statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ . Results from these tests were used to validate or refute assumptions about the structural barriers and support systems encountered by female leaders. These statistical outputs form the basis of the findings discussed in the subsequent section.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical integrity was a central concern throughout the research process. Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection. All participants were provided with an informed consent form explaining the purpose, voluntary nature, confidentiality, and anonymity of the study. They were assured that their responses would be used solely for academic purposes and that participation posed no physical or psychological risks.

To maintain confidentiality, no names or personally identifiable information were collected. Questionnaires were coded numerically, and data was stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. Furthermore, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any repercussions. Special care was taken to ensure cultural sensitivity and gender-responsiveness in both the language of the questionnaire and the conduct of data collection, particularly in settings where male staff may dominate administrative structures. These precautions were designed to ensure that respondents could engage with the research process openly and without fear of reprisal, as a whole process shown in Figure 2 below.



**Figure 2: Methodological Procedure**

**Table 1: Leadership Level by Institution Type**

Institution Type	Higher Education	School	All
Private	42	47	89
Public	51	72	123
All	93	119	212

This cross-tabulation of Table 1 shows the distribution of leadership roles across public and private institutions. Public institutions had a slightly higher representation in both school and higher education leadership positions, with a total of 123 leaders compared to 89 in private institutions. School-level leadership dominates overall.

**Table 2: Mean Scores by Institution Type**

Institution Type	Gender Bias Score	Institutional Support Score
Private	3.73	2.96
Public	3.78	2.95

Table 2 displays the average perceived gender bias and institutional support across public and private institutions. On a 5-point Likert scale, women in public institutions reported slightly higher gender bias (mean = 3.87) than those in private institutions (mean = 3.73). Institutional support was marginally better in private settings (mean = 3.00) compared to public institutions (mean = 2.83).

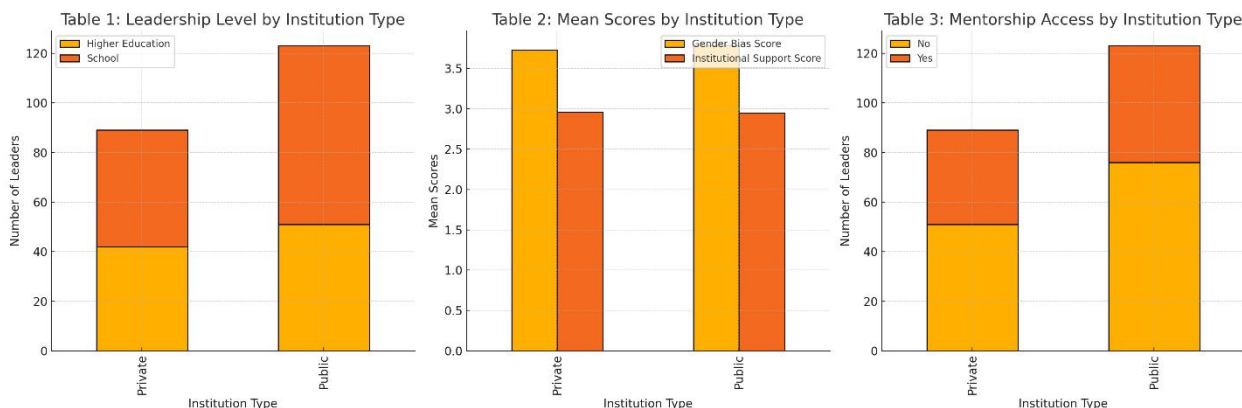
**Table 3: Mentorship Access by Institution Type**

Institution Type	No	Yes	All
Private	51	38	89
Public	76	47	123
All	127	85	212

Table 3 summarizes the distribution of mentorship access among female leaders across public and private institutions. Only 47 of 123 public sector leaders (38%)



and 38 of 89 private sector leaders (43%) reported having access to mentorship, as shown in Figure 3 below.

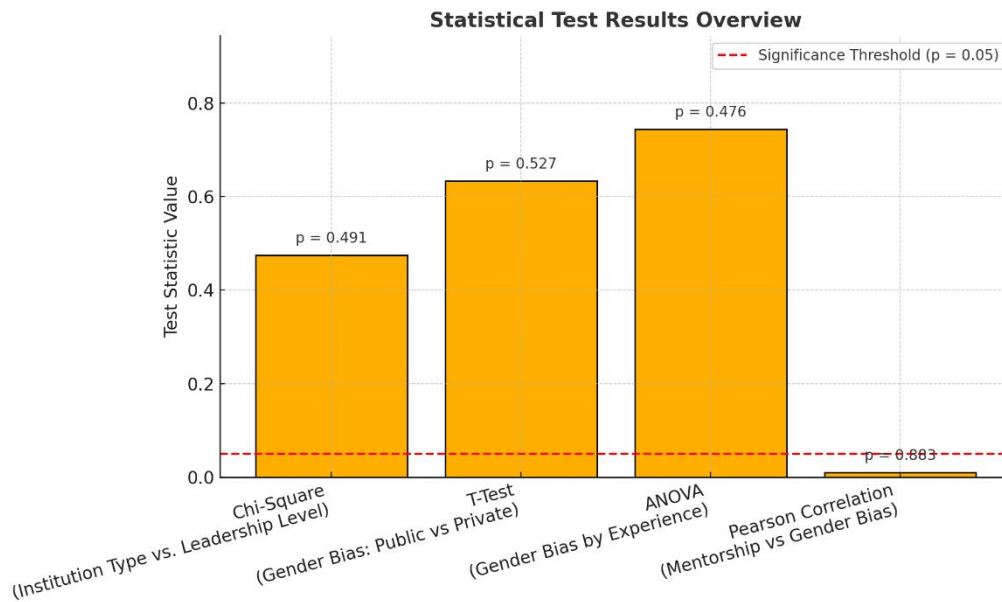


**Table 4: Statistical Test Results on Leadership Variables**

Test	Test Statistic	p-Value
Chi-Square Test: Institution Type vs. Leadership Level	0.475	0.4907
Independent Samples T-Test: Gender Bias (Public vs Private)	0.6332	0.5273
ANOVA: Gender Bias Score by Experience Group	0.7446	0.4762
Pearson Correlation: Mentorship Access vs Gender Bias	0.0102	0.883

The results of the inferential statistics in Table 4 reveal no statistically significant differences or associations among the examined variables. The chi-square test did not show a significant relationship between institution type and leadership level ( $\chi^2 = 0.475$ ,  $p = 0.491$ ), indicating that the distribution of female leaders across public and private institutions in Lahore is relatively uniform. Similarly, the independent samples t-test comparing perceptions of gender bias between public and private sector leaders yielded a non-significant result ( $t = 0.633$ ,  $p = 0.527$ ), suggesting that women in both sectors perceive gender bias at comparable levels.

Further analysis using ANOVA revealed no significant differences in gender bias scores across different career stages, as grouped by years of leadership experience ( $F = 0.7446$ ,  $p = 0.476$ ). This finding implies that perceptions of gender-based challenges in leadership remain consistent irrespective of how long a woman has been in the education sector. Lastly, the Pearson correlation between access to mentorship (coded as a binary variable) and perceived gender bias was found to be negligible and statistically insignificant ( $r = 0.0102$ ,  $p = 0.883$ ), indicating no meaningful linear relationship between these variables. The lack of statistical significance across all tests suggests a notable uniformity in women’s leadership experiences, regardless of institutional type, experience, or mentorship access. However, these results may also point to limitations in sample size or the need to explore more nuanced variables, such as organizational culture, intersectional identity factors, or implicit biases, that were not captured in this quantitative analysis.



## Discussion

The findings of this study contribute important insights into the continuing discourse on gender inequality in educational leadership, particularly within the context of Lahore, Pakistan. The statistical analysis indicated no significant associations between institutional type and leadership level, nor were there significant differences in perceived gender bias across public and private institutions. Similarly, differences based on years of experience and mentorship access were not statistically significant. While these results may initially suggest uniformity in women's experiences across institutional settings, a deeper interpretation highlights structural and cultural dynamics that sustain barriers to women's advancement, consistent with national and international research.

One of the most striking outcomes is the relative uniformity of leadership representation across public and private institutions. The chi-square test revealed no significant relationship between institution type and leadership distribution. This result aligns with studies conducted in Pakistan that emphasize how systemic and cultural barriers transcend institutional boundaries. Whether in government-run schools, private colleges, or higher education institutions, women face similar forms of gender discrimination and limitations to leadership opportunities (Kaka & Hashmi, 2025). This indicates that structural inequities are not isolated to particular institutional settings but are embedded within broader patriarchal frameworks of education governance. Although the descriptive statistics revealed slightly higher gender bias scores in public institutions compared to private ones, the t-test results confirmed that these differences were not significant. This reinforces the argument that patriarchal stereotypes and systemic sexism cut across institutional categories (Shoukat, Awan, & Qadeer, 2025). Women leaders are often perceived through a gendered lens, with their leadership abilities judged against masculine norms of authority. These perceptions are deeply entrenched in both state institutions, which are bureaucratically rigid, and private institutions, which are often controlled by patriarchal boards of trustees or male-dominated management. The ANOVA results, which showed no significant differences in perceived gender



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bias across years-of-experience groups, suggest that longevity in the profession does not necessarily shield women from discriminatory experiences. This is consistent with global studies showing that female leaders, regardless of seniority, continue to encounter implicit and explicit biases that undermine their authority (Morley, 2013). In Pakistan, Ahmed and Sheikh (2024) similarly reported that female deans and department heads in Lahore universities face persistent stereotypes despite decades of professional experience and advanced qualifications. This reflects the persistence of what Eagly and Carli (2007) describe as the “labyrinth” of leadership, a complex, ongoing series of barriers that women navigate throughout their careers.

The Pearson correlation analysis found no significant relationship between mentorship access and perceptions of gender bias. This finding warrants careful interpretation. On one hand, it suggests that access to mentorship does not automatically reduce perceptions of bias; on the other hand, it highlights the possibility that mentorship opportunities available to women in Lahore may not be sufficiently empowering or transformative. Research in Pakistan has shown that mentorship often occurs informally and is mediated through male-dominated networks that exclude women (Pirzada, Shafaat, & Mahar, 2025). Where mentorship does exist for women, it may not address the systemic barriers that perpetuate gender inequality. This underscores the need for structured mentorship programs designed with a gender equity lens.

Taken together, these results highlight an important paradox: while statistical uniformity appears across institutional types, leadership levels, and career stages, this uniformity reflects a shared condition of disadvantage rather than equity. Women leaders consistently encounter gender bias, limited mentorship, and inadequate institutional support regardless of sector or seniority. The non-significance of statistical tests should not be misinterpreted as the absence of barriers; instead, it indicates that barriers are pervasive and evenly distributed across the system.

### **Connections to Existing Literature**

The study’s findings are consistent with recent scholarship on women’s educational leadership in South Asia. For example, Farooq and Uddin (2025) argue that Pakistani institutions exhibit deeply entrenched gendered hierarchies that marginalize women leaders, regardless of qualifications. Similarly, Pirzada et al. (2025) show that women in rural Sindh who attain leadership positions continue to face societal skepticism and institutional resistance, suggesting that the problem is not merely one of representation but of recognition and legitimacy.

International research also resonates with these results. Studies in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East demonstrate that women leaders are often confined to less prestigious roles and denied equal access to institutional decision-making (Morley, 2013; OECD, 2023). UNESCO (2022) likewise reports that even in contexts where women dominate the teaching profession, they remain underrepresented in leadership, mirroring the patterns observed in Lahore. The non-significant differences across institutional categories underscore the persistence of patriarchal norms as a cross-cutting barrier. Shoukat et al. (2025) note that gender biases in Pakistan are not confined to specific organizations but are woven into the cultural fabric of both public and



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private life. Bughio (2025), examining rural Sindh, observed that structural barriers, such as mobility restrictions, family expectations, and lack of institutional support, create uniform challenges for women, regardless of whether they work in state or private schools. The current study confirms these patterns in an urban context like Lahore.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The implications of these findings are multifaceted. First, the lack of institutional differences suggests that policy reforms need to target systemic cultural change rather than focusing exclusively on particular sectors. This aligns with Ahmed and Sheikh's (2024) recommendation for integrated gender equity policies that cut across both higher education and school systems. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education Commission must collaborate to design and implement gender-sensitive leadership training programs, ensuring that women are not only represented but also empowered within leadership roles.

Second, the findings highlight the urgent need for structured mentorship and networking programs. While mentorship access was not significantly correlated with reduced perceptions of bias, this may reflect the inadequacy of current mentorship opportunities rather than their irrelevance. Evidence from other contexts shows that well-structured mentorship programs can significantly enhance women's leadership trajectories by providing role models, career guidance, and access to professional networks (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Designing such programs with a focus on women in Lahore could address the gaps identified in this study.

Third, the results point to the importance of institutional accountability mechanisms. Gender bias remains persistent despite years of legislation supporting women's equality in Pakistan (Sadiqa, 2025). This suggests a gap between policy and practice. Institutions should be mandated to report annually on gender representation in leadership, implement transparent promotion processes, and establish grievance mechanisms for women who encounter discrimination. The consistency of barriers across career stages underscores the need for continuous interventions. Leadership training and policy reforms should not be confined to entry-level or mid-career professionals but should extend across the career trajectory. By institutionalizing gender-sensitive professional development at multiple stages, education systems can better dismantle the labyrinth of barriers faced by women leaders.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as respondents' perceptions of gender bias and support may be influenced by individual expectations and experiences. Second, the study was limited to Lahore, which, as an urban and relatively progressive hub, may not fully reflect the realities of rural or smaller urban centers. Future studies should therefore adopt a comparative regional approach to capture the diversity of experiences across Pakistan.

Additionally, while the study focused on quantitative analysis, the absence of significant findings in statistical tests highlights the value of qualitative methods. Research by Kaka and Hashmi (2025) demonstrates how qualitative



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insights can uncover the lived experiences of women leaders that may not be visible in quantitative data. Future research should therefore adopt mixed method designs to triangulate numerical trends with rich narratives, providing a more holistic understanding of women's leadership experiences.

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine the representation, experiences, and institutional factors affecting women in educational leadership in Lahore, Pakistan. By adopting a quantitative approach, it provided evidence on the uniformity of women's leadership experiences across institutional types, leadership levels, and years of experience. The findings revealed no statistically significant differences between public and private institutions in terms of leadership representation, perceptions of gender bias, or access to mentorship. Similarly, the analysis found no variation in experiences of bias across career stages, nor any significant correlation between mentorship and perceptions of gender discrimination.

At first glance, the absence of statistically significant results may suggest that barriers are diminishing or that differences between groups are less pronounced. However, a deeper interpretation reveals that this uniformity is not indicative of equity but of systemic disadvantage. Women across institutions, public and private, secondary and higher education, share the experience of being marginalized in leadership pathways. The barriers are pervasive and deeply embedded within Pakistan's educational structures, reflecting the broader patriarchal cultural norms that shape professional life.

The consistency of bias across career stages indicates that professional experience does not automatically reduce discrimination, which challenges assumptions that women "grow into" acceptance over time. Instead, women's professional legitimacy continues to be contested regardless of their tenure or seniority, a phenomenon also documented in other South Asian contexts (Kaka & Hashmi, 2025). Likewise, the finding that mentorship access was not significantly correlated with reduced bias highlights limitations in the current structures of mentorship available to women. These are often informal, male-dominated, and insufficiently equipped to dismantle systemic barriers (Pirzada, Shafaat, & Mahar, 2025). Taken together, these findings reinforce the argument made by Eagly and Carli (2007) that women's journey into leadership resembles a labyrinth rather than a ladder. Progress is possible but fraught with persistent challenges. The fact that barriers cut across all institutional and professional categories in Lahore demonstrates the need for systemic and structural reform, rather than piecemeal or sector-specific solutions.

### **Recommendations**

The results of this study highlight that women in educational leadership in Lahore experience a uniform set of challenges across institutional types, leadership levels, and career stages. Although the statistical analysis did not reveal significant differences between public and private institutions, this very consistency reflects the pervasive nature of structural and cultural barriers. Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made to improve women's representation and empowerment in leadership roles. First, there is a pressing need for systemic gender-sensitive policy reforms. Current education policies in Pakistan emphasize equity in principle but lack effective enforcement



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mechanisms. Both public and private institutions should be mandated to adopt transparent promotion processes and merit-based criteria for leadership selection. The introduction of gender quotas, while sometimes controversial, has proven effective in several international contexts for accelerating women's entry into leadership (OECD, 2023). Implementing similar measures within Pakistan's school systems, universities, and education ministries could provide a structural push toward more equitable representation. However, quotas should not be seen as a stand-alone measure; they must be complemented by reforms that ensure women leaders are empowered to actively influence decision-making processes rather than serving as symbolic figures (Ahmed & Sheikh, 2024).

In addition to policy reforms, there is a strong need for structured mentorship and networking programs. This study found no significant relationship between mentorship access and perceptions of gender bias, which may reflect the inadequacy of current informal and male-dominated mentorship structures. International research demonstrates that formalized mentorship, when designed with a gender-sensitive lens, can be transformative by offering women role models, professional guidance, and access to decision-making networks (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Educational institutions in Lahore should develop structured mentorship initiatives that not only connect emerging female leaders with senior role models but also provide training on leadership competencies, negotiation skills, and institutional governance. Collaboration between universities, teacher training institutions, and civil society organizations could support the development of sustainable mentorship platforms that directly address systemic barriers.

Equally important is the establishment of institutional accountability and monitoring mechanisms. The persistence of gender bias despite existing legislation reveals a significant gap between policy formulation and implementation (Sadiqa, 2025). Institutions should be legally required to publish gender-disaggregated data on leadership positions, report annually on progress toward gender equity, and implement transparent performance evaluations. Independent monitoring bodies, perhaps under the jurisdiction of the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan or the Punjab Education Department, should evaluate compliance with gender equity mandates. Furthermore, grievance mechanisms must be developed to ensure that women who experience discrimination or bias can report their experiences without fear of reprisal. Institutional accountability is essential for moving beyond symbolic commitments to meaningful structural change.

Work-life balance and supportive infrastructure also emerged as critical areas for intervention. Women in educational leadership often struggle to balance professional responsibilities with caregiving roles, particularly in the absence of supportive policies. Institutions should therefore provide family-friendly measures, including flexible working hours, maternity leave, and on-site childcare facilities. Such initiatives have been shown in other contexts to improve women's participation and retention in leadership (Morley, 2013). By reducing the burden of managing dual roles, these measures could enable women in Lahore to pursue and sustain leadership careers without sacrificing their personal responsibilities.



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