

Women's Leadership Pathways in Higher Education: Role of Mentoring and Networking

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of mentoring and networking in the career pathways of women academic leaders in Pakistan. A qualitative research study was conducted at universities in Islamabad City, and the data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine female academic leaders. The findings reveal that these leaders utilize consistent professional mentoring and networking arrangements to enhance their leadership effectiveness and to survive in a male-dominated higher educational environment. Clearly, networks provide a space for learning and growth, while mentors are a constant source of motivation and inspiration for women leaders to navigate their careers, in the absence of formal training and fundamental leadership socialization. Considering the low representation of women in academic leadership positions in Pakistan and learning from the subjective realities of women in this study, we suggest that formal and informal networking and mentoring programs need to be encouraged in universities. These are pivotal for women academics to pave their way toward senior leadership positions and to increase their representation in top academic management. Moreover, universities may acknowledge the need for developing peer mentoring structures that may be fruitful in enabling women to challenge existing masculine hierarchies in universities.

Key words

women leaders, career development, mentoring and networking, higher education, Pakistan

Introduction

Globally, contemporary trends have witnessed a significant increase in the participation of women at lower and middle levels of management in universities; however, they remain relatively invisible at senior leadership positions and experience slow professional growth (Coder & Spiller, 2013; Madsen, 2012). It is well established that women outnumber and outperform men in many natural and social science disciplines in universities and earn around fifty percent of all doctoral degrees (Johnson, 2017). It is also evident that women are mostly hired upon their professional achievements, whereas men are recruited based on their potential (Cook, 2012). Nevertheless, women academics are less likely to attain professorships in research-intensive universities and are often paid less (Miller & Roksa, 2020; Treviño, Gomez-Mejia, Balkin, & Mixon, 2015).

Several factors are believed to be responsible for gender inequalities in academia, including patriarchal norms, biased attitudes toward women, and lack of trust in women leaders among others (Morley, 2013; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). Redressing these disparities requires concerted efforts and commitments from different stakeholders, including professors and administrators. In this regard, professional networking and mentoring are considered pivotal for facilitating women to move up the leadership hierarchy in universities, in addition to academic excellence (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). The social capital gained through professional networking and mentoring is key to overcoming structural barriers, such as traditional socialization, lack of training, stereotyping, and hegemonic masculine order.

Networking and mentoring are integral aspects of academia. These practices, at least informally, have always been there for faculty as well as managers. Studies indicate that men gain greater advantages from these opportunities in terms of managerial recruitment, promotion, salary, and increments (Britton, 2017; Coder & Spiller, 2013). The difference is that, apparently, women tend to lack informal support, and issues of bias, homophily, and stereotyping influence their career advancement (Johnson, 2017; Meschitti & Lawton-Smith, 2017; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014).

In their discussion of women's career development programs, Van den Brink and Stobbe (2014, p. 171) state that "the support that men receive during their academic careers tends to be taken for granted, while women are expected to advance on their own to prove that they are sufficiently qualified. In contrast, women's programs were visible and scrutinized, leading to the perception that women can-

not succeed on their own merits.” Similarly, other studies report that women academics are socially and intellectually isolated in the universities due to the lack of culture fit and the “boys’ club” tradition that is difficult for them to penetrate (Morley, 2013; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014).

Contextually, Pakistani female academic leaders do not experience similar networking and mentoring opportunities to their male counterparts because of the deep-rooted masculine culture. Many studies have documented the role of these supporting mechanisms in industrial and political organizations in Pakistan (Khalid, Muqadas, & Rehman, 2017; Qureshi & Saleem, 2016); however, the existing literature in the Pakistani context merely focuses on mentoring and networking opportunities for women in academia (Baig, Jabeen, Ansari, & Salman, 2015; Batool & Sajid, 2013) and does not address the challenges of navigating academia as women leaders. Importantly, the existing literature also does not adequately inform those who wish to use mentoring as a means of developing successful leadership careers.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by identifying the existing mentoring and networking opportunities available to women leaders in universities. It explores the role of these supporting mechanisms in the career advancement of female academic administrators in the Federal Capital of Pakistan (Islamabad). Based upon the relevant scholarship and the postmodern theoretical foundation, the core research questions that framed this empirical research are: (1) What kinds of networks and mentors are available for women leaders in universities? (2) How do women leaders view networking and mentoring arrangements in navigating their way to success in the presence of a powerful masculine academic structure?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this empirical study is embedded in the postmodern paradigm. Postmodern thinkers emphasize relativity, fragmentation, uncertainty, and individuality. This study incorporates the theoretical assumptions of Michael Foucault and a prominent feminist scholar, Raewyn Connell, to understand the mentoring and networking opportunities available to female academic managers. Foucault (2000) postulates that power structures are systematically produced and reproduced by organizations using knowledge. Knowledge induces pressure and disseminates widespread discourses in society to safeguard the relationships of power. According to Foucault (1980), power structures operate in all social institutions to regulate individuals’ behavior. In addition, Foucault argues

that discourses are developed in society to define one's position as a subject in the relationship of power. Through this lens, women academics become subjects of the dominant masculine discourses promoted by the patriarchal power structure in universities, which regulates and controls their behavior.

Likewise, in understanding the underrepresentation of female academic leaders in universities, it is relevant to take refuge in feminist theory. Several postmodern feminist theorists, such as Tisdell (1998), Collins (2000), and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), seek to criticize the traditional male-centric approach of understanding the causes of women's underrepresentation in institutional structures and help in understanding leadership as an interpersonal and intersubjective phenomenon between men and women. They also criticize the domination of the masculine discourse on leadership (Gordon, 2001; Weiler, 2008). In particular, the concept of "hegemonic masculinity," given by Raewyn Connell, provides a useful framework for understanding women's leadership in the Pakistani context. Connell defines "hegemonic masculinity" as a social norm that promotes the superiority of men and restricts women's role as managers (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). She explains the impact of "hegemonic masculinity" in institutional structures and argues that leadership norms are systematically developed to control women's participation in senior managerial roles. Women who attain such positions of power experience many constraints on their efforts to survive in a male-dominated organizational culture (Connell, 1995).

In this study, using a postmodern feminist lens gives voice to women's lived experiences of mentoring and networking in higher education and allows us to deconstruct women's leadership pathways in a patriarchal institutional culture.

Literature Review

Universities are gendered organizations, where men and women experience differential treatment (Britton, 2017; Treviño et al., 2018). The existing literature on higher education reveals the absence of accountability and transparency in organizational practices (Coder & Spiller, 2013; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). Many studies have identified that female faculty experience disparities in recruitment and promotion processes due to male-dominated selection boards (Morley, 2013; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). Similarly, opportunities for women to become full professors in universities are limited (Blackmore, 2014; Van den Brink, Benschop, & Jansen, 2010). Even when conditioned on the number of publications and citations, women are less likely to receive tenure in highly prestigious

departments, such as economics and computer science (Takahashi & Takahashi, 2015; Weisshaar, 2017).

In response to the existing gender disparities and to overcome such challenges, existing social science research has documented the value of mentors for female managers in their career advancement as well as in developing influential networks within the organization (Madsen, 2012; Schipani, Sworkin, Kwolek-Folland, & Maurer, 2009). Mentoring focuses on the growth and accomplishment of an individual by providing assistance (Jacobi, 1991). Importantly, mentoring is critical for women leaders to get relevant advice and support in advancing up the status ladder in highly gendered organizational arrangements (Madden, 2011).

Historically, mentoring in academic settings has become informal. This may be due to its strength in situated learning and utility in day-to-day life (Karkoulouian, Halawi, & McCarthy, 2008). However, Gardiner and colleagues show the positive outcomes of mentoring for women in academia, such as higher rates of retention, negotiating complex political structures, and networking to receive research grants and promotions (Gardiner, Tiggemann, Kearns, & Marshall, 2007). Hence, formal mentoring programs for women are available to navigate their career trajectories, while men view them as a threat to their hegemony (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Van den Brink & Stobbe, 2014).

The gender of the mentors also matters, as many women feel more comfortable with female mentors (Dunbar & Kinnerley, 2011). Meschitti and Lawton-Smith (2017) suggest gender-homophilous mentoring relationships that female academics seem to find more comfortable. However, relatable female role models are missing in the disciplines of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine (STEMM). It is evident that women are deliberately excluded from important networks due to the existence of masculine hegemony (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). In their study, Thomas, Bystydzienski, and Desai (2014) report that female faculty, having similar roles, serve as mentors for each other. It helps to increase their work satisfaction, provides an opportunity to discover and share real-life issues, and motivates them to work harder. However, an empirical investigation by Salas-Lopez, Deitrick, Mahady, Gertner, and Sabino (2011) makes it clear that women can better learn how to steer their career paths from male mentors, who can teach them how best to survive within a masculine institutional culture.

Generally, women underutilize professional networks because they have few research collaborations and funding agents. Consequently, they remain far behind in their career trajectories compared to their male counterparts (Coder & Spiller,

2013; Gardiner et al., 2007). Similarly, women feel reluctant to engage with male elite networks due to the prevalent gender stereotypes (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). Clearly, networks are never gender neutral; they are part of a hegemonic male order. In their investigation into the potential of networking in developing gender equality in UK and Australian universities, Burkinshaw and White (2017, p. 5) state that women senior managers negotiate and navigate the gendered leadership culture by “fitting in” to the male networks instead of challenging the existing masculine order. However, young women are reluctant to embrace the dominant masculine cultures to pursue their career paths, leading to their downfall. Existing scholarship reports that masculine culture is still prevalent in universities in developed countries that resist women’s professional growth (Morley, 2013; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014).

However, Hargreaves and Anderson (2014) point out that successful women take advantage of networks, mentors, and professional training to attain and maintain senior leadership positions. In her study on empowering Muslim women, Grine (2014) mentions the story of a woman who made good use of professional coaching and networking to overcome her job stress in addition to becoming confident and empowered. Her case provides a great example of agency for women intending to succeed in their professional lives. However, such opportunities are not available for many women in developing countries. A study conducted by Chanana (2013) in India reported that women’s teaching and research abilities were undervalued at the time of university appointments. Moreover, networking is more challenging for women because of the codes of sexual propriety. Consequently, women are absent in higher educational management. Similarly, Oti and Oyelude (2006) demonstrate that female academicians experience work-life conflicts that hinder their professional growth in Nigerian universities. Hence, collegial support, networking, and job shadowing bring job satisfaction and determine leadership careers, particularly for junior women academics.

In her study of female managers in Asian universities, Morley (2013) demonstrates that mentoring must be contextualized according to the needs of women. Moreover, women should challenge the traditional male model of mentoring, which tends to reinforce patriarchy and marginalize women in academic leadership. Ismail and Rasdi (2007) find that high-flying women in Malaysian universities effectively utilize their peer relationships with other women to get emotional and social support to survive in male-dominated academic workplaces.

At the national level, Pakistan is a developing country that continues to reinforce systematic subordination of women by the force of patriarchy. Women are

responsible for caretaking and domestic activities that are neither recognized nor compensated (Fakhr & Messenger, 2020; Farooq et al., 2020). According to the Human Development Report (2020), Pakistan ranks 135 among 162 countries in the Gender Inequality Index (GII), 2019, as compared to India and Bangladesh, which are ranked 123 and 133, respectively. Although women's participation in higher education has continued to rise over the past two decades, they are still underrepresented in positions of power (Shah, Bashir, & Amin, 2020); the top management in Pakistan's universities is predominantly masculine, which reinforces gender disparities (Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Women are traditionally perceived as weak, submissive, and dependent, and therefore unable to cope with leadership roles despite having strong academic and professional credentials (Farooq et al., 2020; Quraishi & Kalim, 2008; Shah & Shah, 2012).

The scholarship also highlights the significant role of networking and mentoring in career advancement in Pakistan. According to Arif (2011), networking is a proactive approach to achieving success by utilizing powerful contacts to obtain necessary work resources, experience, and knowledge. However, studies have reported a lack of mentoring and networking arrangements for Pakistani women in academia. For example, in a quantitative investigation of female managers in higher education, Batool and Sajid (2013) revealed that women's slow professional advancement is the consequence of structural barriers, such as weak networking and mentoring practices, biased recruitment and promotion processes, and persistent gender inequalities.

Likewise, another quantitative research study by Baig et al. (2015) highlights that in a well-reputed university in Lahore, Pakistan, mentors are mostly male and are generally not willing to work with women. Cross-gender mentoring practices are not appreciated because of the prevalent stereotypical beliefs. Farooq et al. (2020) report that most public sector universities in Islamabad practice informal selection and promotion procedures that rely more on personal networking instead of merit. It is also found that the absence of women mentors, as well as the inability of women to forge influential bonds and networks, dent their career prospects in the masculine organizational structure.

Fakhr and Messenger (2020) demonstrate that female academics in Pakistani universities have restricted mobility due to the prevailing religious and cultural settings; therefore, they cannot socialize with their male colleagues outside their immediate workplaces and are consequently excluded from influential networks and experience slow career growth. Similarly, Quraishi and Kalim (2008) find that women avoid developing professional networks with their male colleagues due to

Pakistan's rigid religious and socio-cultural ethos. A qualitative study about the career advancement of women by Shah et al. (2020) emphasizes the need for developing relational and network support for women from among senior female academics to confront the strongly embedded stereotypical beliefs.

The reviewed literature provides sufficient background to understand the networking and mentoring experiences of women leaders in Pakistani academia. Many studies have ignored the postmodernist lens to explore these phenomena but this approach does provide a significant explanation of the existing hegemonic male order in academic leadership. Therefore, this study incorporates the postmodernist stance to reveal the subjective realities of women leaders in the socio-cultural context of Pakistan.

Methodology

Research Design

This paper is drawn from a doctoral dissertation by the first author that explored the lived experiences of women university leaders in Islamabad (the Federal Capital of Pakistan). It incorporated an interpretive qualitative approach to reveal how leadership is defined and experienced in a male-dominated structure. However, this study only presents the data related to the mentoring and networking experiences of female managers.

Population and Sampling

In Pakistan, there are co-educational as well as women-only universities. Women-only universities, as the name indicates, offer admissions exclusively to female students, and in such universities, the faculty members are predominantly women. However, the population of this study includes female managers working in co-educational universities. These universities admit both male and female students and employ men and women. The selection of participants from co-educational universities assisted in exploring the discursive nature of mentoring and networking for women leaders in comparison to men in academia. It is important to mention here that none of the women participants held the top leadership position, that is, vice-chancellor. This highlights the invisibility of women in top university management. Potential participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The sample included women with the following characteristics:

(1) at least one year's experience in university management, (2) officially designated as dean and chairperson, and (3) employed in a faculty position as assistant, associate, or full professor.

Table 1
Brief Profile of the Participants

Sr. No.	Name	Designation	Demographic Profile	Work Experience (Years)	No. of Mentors (Current)
1	Sobia	Chairperson, Associate Professor	43 years old, married, two children	20	2
2	Nida	Chairperson, Assistant Professor	37 years old, married, no children	12	1
3	Yasmeen	Chairperson, Assistant Professor	40 years old, unmarried	20	3
4	Fozia	Chairperson, Assistant Professor	35 years old, unmarried	07	3
5	Manahil	Chairperson, Associate Professor	41 years old, married, three children	18	2
6	Sidra	Dean, Professor	54 years old, widow, two children	23	2
7	Urooj	Dean, Professor	52 years old, married, two children	20	3
8	Samreen	Chairperson, Associate Professor	43 years old, married, two children	18	2
9	Natasha	Chairperson, Assistant Professor	38 years old, married, three children	9	2

Source: Interviews with the participants

The table above presents a brief profile of the participants. It shows that of the nine women, only two were deans. Moreover, most of the women ($n = 7$) were 40 or above; only two were under 40. In terms of marital status, six were married, two unmarried, and one was a widow. They had a minimum of seven years and a maximum of twenty-three years of work experience in the higher education system. The majority reported having mentors at the time of the interview; however, none of them had had formal mentoring experience.

Data Collection

An in-depth interview technique was applied to examine the role of mentors and networks in the career trajectories of the women in this study. For this purpose, an interview guide was developed to focus on the research questions during the interviews. This study documents the stories of nine women, serving as key line managers in universities. Each interview took approximately 60–70 minutes and was conducted at each participant's workplace, where they felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts. The interviews were conducted during the summer of 2019, a time deliberately chosen because almost all universities in Pakistan have a summer break for students and faculty; therefore, senior management are likely to be available.

Data Interpretation and Analysis

Michael Foucault's approach to discourse analysis guided the entire process of interpretation and analysis. All interviews were audio-recorded and carefully transcribed. Urdu transcripts were later translated into English and cross-checked by a language expert to minimize any discrepancies. Subsequently, descriptive coding was conducted to extract themes from the data. Field notes were also utilized to jot down important information, as well as the first researcher's observations. During the entire process of analysis, we were particularly interested in identifying and understanding the discourses that seemed relevant to the participants' mentoring and networking experiences.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

The postmodernist approach guided us to use reflexivity as a tool to ensure trustworthiness in this study (Creswell, 2014). Our positionality as academicians helped us to understand the experiences of the participants in a more nuanced way. Being reflexive provided insight into the discourses related to networking and mentoring relationships in universities. Our positionality enhanced the entire research process, as it helped us to unfold the existing power hierarchies influencing women's professional growth in universities. Similarly, we were well aware of our ideologies and the need for objectivity; therefore, we made our position known to the participants and remained careful during the interpretation process.

Research ethics were also considered to protect the rights of all stakeholders and to ensure the integrity of the research (Hammersley, 2015). For this purpose,

the identities of participants and universities were kept anonymous. Moreover, the data were stored on a personal password-protected laptop belonging to the first author to protect the data. In addition, written informed consent was obtained from the participants.

Results

The key findings of this study are presented under two core themes for a discursive understanding of the mentoring and networking experiences of women managers in higher education.

Mentoring: An Inspirational and Motivational Source for Women

The results reveal that mentors are a constant source of inspiration and motivation for women leaders in universities. The majority of the participants explained that in the early stages of their careers they experienced low self-esteem and lack of confidence due to their traditional family socialization. However, their mentors facilitated them in identifying their latent abilities and encouraged them to excel in their careers. For instance, one participant stated:

I believe that my mentors helped me to enhance the academic and managerial skills that are necessary for professional growth. (Urooj, Dean, Professor)

My mentors facilitated me by extending my professional networks and encouraged me to recognize capabilities that had previously been repressed by my family and community. (Sobia, Chairperson, Associate Professor)

Women in Pakistani society are traditionally socialized to conform to feminine norms and are often perceived as dependent, emotional, and less confident (Farooq et al., 2020; Quraishi & Kalim, 2008; Shah & Shah, 2012). Such stereotypical attitudes often nurture self-doubt among women about their leadership identities, and fear of being unsuccessful or criticized makes them reluctant to take such roles. It is clear that women, who were formerly marginalized because of traditionally gendered socialization and lack of leadership training, became strongly motivated by their mentors. They learned to identify their covert talents and utilized them effectively in their personal and professional lives. Moreover, they be-

came aware of new opportunities that facilitated them in determining their professional goals. The literature also reports the significant impact of mentoring in professional networking, retention, and getting greater research funding (Gardiner et al., 2007; Ramaswami, Huang, & Dreher, 2014).

In particular, the participants emphasized the important role of peer mentoring in confronting the hegemonic academic structure of recruitment and promotions.

The previous chairperson of this department, who is also a very good friend of mine, is my mentor in this leadership position. When I joined this department, she assisted me in learning new professional roles and dealing with a complex work environment that was most challenging for me. (Nida, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

Two female departmental chairs are my mentors who keep identifying and polishing my personal and professional skills. (Yasmeen, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

I have a woman mentor who guides me in relation to new career opportunities and policy developments. I feel very comfortable discussing my career prospects with her. (Manahil, Chairperson, Associate Professor)

These subjective reflections clearly manifest the benefits of peer mentoring for women leaders. It paved the way for their leadership careers by giving them confidence, the courage to respect themselves, and the determination to work hard in pursuit of their professional goals in a way that members of the powerful masculine hierarchy would be unlikely to facilitate or encourage. They become resilient, and determined to endure all kinds of social pressures. These findings resonate with those of previous studies that found that gender-homophilous mentoring brings positive outcomes for women in academia (Meschitti & Lawton-Smith, 2017; Van den Brink & Stobbe, 2014). In the cultural context of Pakistan, peer mentoring is a great resource for female faculty and managers to learn new teaching, research, and leadership skills, as well as removing the self-doubts about their capabilities that are reinforced through the agency of men in academia (Morley, 2013; Shah et al., 2020). We argue that in societies like Pakistan, where masculine discourses of leadership permeate academic organizations, women unfold such domains to learn contemporary academic, research, and leadership skills at their workplaces.

Many participants also shared the advantages of cross-gender mentoring. They reported having some male mentors who successfully navigated their career paths.

I have had effective male mentoring experience in my professional life. One of them is my Ph.D. thesis supervisor, who is a great researcher and a brilliant academician. He particularly assists me in planning and managing various research projects. (Yasmeen, Chairperson, Assistant Professor).

I am strongly motivated by my father, who is a college principal. He guides me about work and time management. (Samreen, Chairperson, Associate Professor).

I had both male and female mentors at different times. They encouraged me to work hard, prove my credibility in a male world, and learn from my mistakes. (Urooj, Dean, Professor)

These women's stories unfolded the power of cross-gender mentoring in their professional success, revealing that women upon becoming part of academic leadership, benefit from diverse learning experiences from both male and female mentors. Importantly, the participants mentioned that they remain very careful while interacting with men, due to the hegemonic masculine discourses that question women's relationship with their male counterparts. For this purpose, they confide in their families to avoid any misconceptions. Almost all the women considered their research supervisors to be mentors. They guided them in relation to their career paths and helped them recognize their inner strengths and weaknesses as they endeavored to navigate the existing academic power structures. These findings are contrary to the studies of Baig et al. (2015) and Fakhr and Messenger (2020), which maintain that women academics in Pakistan have limited opportunities for cross-gender mentoring because of the fear of being stigmatized. It is also important to mention that these differences may be due to the existing cultural diversity in Pakistan. However, women leaders in this study were confident and resilient in changing the traditional gender discourses that restrain women's mobility and professional networking.

Networking: A Route to Success

The women in this study were also associated with various formal and informal networks that they found beneficial in navigating their career paths. Women also described the opportunities and impediments in developing professional networks. The following stories unfold these discourses.

I don't have a lot of formal networks due to my busy family and professional life; however, I have developed many informal networks. They help me gain knowledge about new plans and policies and encourage me to develop as a successful leader. (Sobia, Chairperson, Associate Professor)

I have good communication skills; therefore, I quickly develop strong personal and professional connections. I feel that it is very useful for keeping me aligned with contemporary academic and managerial practices, as well as accomplishing work more professionally. (Yasmeen, Chairperson, Assistant Professor).

The above narratives clearly demonstrate the importance of effective networking for women in attaining and maintaining executive positions in universities. They considered it an opportunity to learn different leadership skills and adjust to a leadership environment that is predominantly patriarchal. As many women had less time for formal networking due to their multiple identities, informal networks seemed more appropriate for them because they can be developed quickly. Pakistani women prioritize family over work and hence find less time to engage with formal networks (Fakhr & Messenger, 2020; Farooq et al., 2020). Moreover, the participants also mentioned the strongly embedded mobility issues that confine women to the household and impose restrictions on autonomous travel and social networking. Independent women are therefore often stigmatized and repressed by powerful patriarchal institutional and community structures. It is evident that men utilize tools such as victimization and harassment to subjugate these women and to maintain traditional power hierarchies in academia.

Interestingly, these women clearly had effective communication skills; therefore, they established strong professional relationships in their workplaces. Likewise, the women in this study highlighted the influence of their leadership status in developing instrumental networks, as it helped them understand power dynamics and overcome the structural barriers to their professional growth. As a participant stated,

I believe that my leadership status has revealed some amazing opportunities for networking and mentoring. I often organize research-oriented workshops and seminars that facilitate in developing formal networks with experienced researchers, academicians, administrators, and influential political personalities. (Fozia, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

I am connected with some powerful managers, academics, and research funding organizations. Unfortunately, I was formerly isolated from such opportunities as a faculty member. (Samreen, Chairperson, Associate Professor).

The above stories reflect the influence of strong masculine hierarchies that restrain the engagement of junior female faculty with formal as well as informal networks. This, in turn, hinders their professional growth. However, women who have succeeded in penetrating the prevalent structural barriers and achieving leadership tenure have opportunities to network within and outside their workplaces. They frequently interact with senior management on various academic and administrative platforms due to their managerial roles. They also benefit from their leadership position while organizing seminars and conferences and the resulting research alliances inform them about new academic and research prospects. Furthermore, they connect with influential and political acquaintances that facilitate them in attaining and maintaining top leadership positions in highly established and reputable higher educational institutes. The participants reported that senior leadership positions, like vice-chancellor and dean, are highly political in the university structure; therefore, they must develop instrumental networks to get tenure. However, they also identified a strong male hegemony in universities that restricts women from attaining the most senior leadership positions.

The subjective realities of these women managers reflect the fact that mentors and professional networks serve as valuable social capital for them in academia. The findings reveal that leadership positions provide numerous opportunities for the development of influential networks. It particularly benefits them in establishing their research profiles—a major prerequisite for attaining top leadership positions in reputable Pakistani universities, in addition to the academic background and administrative experience, as explained by Bagilhole and White (2011) and Morley and Crossouard (2016).

The participants also reported the influence of the hegemonic masculine discourses and power structures in universities that designate all women as being “other” and thereby isolate them from senior management roles in academia. However, it is evident in this study that women leaders confronted these structural barriers by conforming to the social standards as a “good woman,” besides balancing their personal and professional identities. In Pakistani society, a “good woman” is the one who confirms the traditional feminine expectations as a housekeeper, wife, and mother (Ansari, 2016, p. 536). Burkinshaw and White (2017) also

noted in their study in the UK and Australia that female senior managers negotiate and navigate the gendered leadership culture by adjusting to the male networks, instead of challenging the existing masculine order. However, such efforts are still not recognized by the powerful masculine hierarchies in Pakistan's academia (Fakhr & Messenger, 2020; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). The participants in this study revealed that they had to prove their credentials to succeed in the male world and that mentoring and networking serve as valuable social capital for them to improve their administrative skills, gain tenure, and advance their leadership careers.

The participants also mentioned their primary responsibility as homemakers, due to which they cannot spare sufficient time for formal networking. The patriarchal culture limits women's mobility and imposes greater domestic pressure. Therefore, women are supposed to balance their family life in addition to their professional commitments. The following excerpts highlight this discourse.

I believe that I am far behind in professional networking in comparison to my male counterparts because it requires time and devotion. Unfortunately, even in the current phase of my professional life, I cannot find sufficient time for this activity because of my domestic commitments. (Sidra, Dean, Professor).

I have overwhelming household responsibilities due to which I cannot find much time for networking. (Natasha, Chairperson, Assistant Professor). Many family norms stigmatize women who get involved with male associations. However, it is obvious that the promotions in this university are strongly linked with an individual's networking with the senior administration, which is predominantly masculine. (Manahil, Chairperson, Associate Professor).

It is evident that women's subjective realities are filled with masculine discourses of power and hierarchy; however, they added several dimensions beyond a segmented reality. For instance, the participants revealed that they wish to extend their professional networks, but society prioritizes their role in the family. Maintaining a work-life balance is critical; therefore, they find only limited time for instrumental networking. The existing scholarship also confirms that domestic commitments are a major constraint for women aspiring to senior academic and managerial positions in Pakistan. Women who stay late in offices and dedicate less time to their family are often the targets of intense disapproval from rigid and powerful religious and cultural structures (Bhatti & Ali, 2020; Farooq et al., 2020).

It shows that gendered discourses are systematically reinforced through the given interpretations of the religious subtext in Pakistani society to disempower women in organizations.

It is also clear that women need to focus on their research and professional networks in the preliminary stages of their professional lives. Simultaneously, the majority of women get married and struggle to adjust themselves to a new family life. They experience childbearing and childrearing issues, in addition to the challenge of managing domestic work. All these factors establish a pipeline effect that results in the slow career progression of female academicians. These findings coincide with the work of White (2012), who identified the pipeline effect as being strongly embedded in academia. She argues that if more women were to complete their doctoral degrees and embark on their academic careers at an early age, they would be able to achieve tenure earlier and compete in the academic hierarchy. Consequently, their representation in top management would continue to improve over time. However, scholarship reveals that only a few women in Asian countries have successfully overcome this pipeline effect, as most of them publish fewer papers and risk being under cited in academia (Farooq et al., 2020; Morley & Crossouard, 2016).

The need to maintain work-life balance and manage multiple identities has been consistently reported by the participants in this study. They were unable to participate wholeheartedly in the networking and mentoring activities because of the existing gender discourses that prioritize marriage and domestic responsibilities for women. All these factors contribute toward the underrepresentation of women at top management positions in universities, whereas men pursue their professional life successfully in this patriarchal society. Therefore, women have to negotiate not only the power structures around them, but also the internalization of their role as homemakers.

Discussion

This study explored the subjective realities of women academic leaders to understand the influence of mentoring and networking opportunities on their professional growth in higher education. The debate that emerged from this study is well supported by the scholarship on women's networking and mentoring practices in academia worldwide. The findings of this empirical investigation contribute to the existing scholarship on women's leadership due to the unique socio-cultural context of Pakistan, where men's hegemony is prevalent in workspaces, including

universities. The data show that meritocracy is replaced by the discourses of masculinity in several Pakistani universities. Therefore, social capital gained through professional networking and mentoring is pivotal for women to receiving tenure and climbing up the managerial ladder to achieve academic excellence and access to leadership opportunities. This is particularly true for women working in the STEM disciplines in higher education. As Shabib-ul-Hasan and Mustafa (2014) noted in their study, while women have attained proficiency in disciplines such as science, math, and medicine, they are still underrepresented at senior levels in high-demand professions in Pakistan. Similarly, this study found that only three of nine women were serving in management positions in the STEM disciplines, and two of them reported being the sole such presence in their departments. The language of the participants (i.e., being careful while interacting with men, keeping at a distance, maintaining a studiously neutral tone, etc.) was filled with the discourses of their environment as outsiders; hence, they have constructed their subjectivities within the religious and cultural norms of society.

In this study, the postmodern feminist and Foucauldian stances enabled women's voices to be heard and their narratives highlight the existence of power structures in academic organizations. These power structures exclude women from the mainstream hierarchy by institutionalizing the existing gender disparities through biased recruitment and promotion processes, as well as by limiting their access to instrumental mentoring and networking (Fakhr & Messenger, 2020; Farooq et al., 2020). It is evident that the hegemonic patriarchal spaces produce knowledge that aims to suppress women's voices in academic institutions. The subjective reflections of the participants illustrate the undoubted importance of mentors in developing constant motivation, courage, and inspiration, as well as reducing occupational stress. Clearly, mentors pave the way for women's leadership careers in higher education in addition to strengthening their academic skills.

Unlike previous studies conducted in Pakistan, which reported a lack of professional mentoring opportunities for women (Baig et al., 2015; Batool & Sajid, 2013), many participants in this study had more than one mentor and some of them were men. The participants reported effective mentoring experiences with these men. Wray (2007) argues that gender relations and the choices available to women are largely influenced by ethnic and cultural differences; therefore, it is important to consider the contextually situated social norms that affect the choices available to women. Pakistan represents a diversity of cultures in its various provinces that reflect the varied status of women (Raza & Awang, 2020). This study was conducted in the Federal Capital of Pakistan (Islamabad), a metropolitan area

distinguished by its liberal norms in relation to women's education and employment. The findings enable us to argue that for women in Islamabad, engaging in cross-gender mentoring and networking is not considered offensive if practiced within certain limitations. It is evident that the participants remain very careful while cross-gender networking and being mentored or acting as mentors themselves due to the prevalent discourse of stigmatization that questions women's relationship with their male counterparts. For instance, they wear traditional feminine attire, keep a safe distance, and maintain a neutral. Moreover, they keep their family in their confidence in dealing with conflicting hierarchies.

Several international researchers, such as Salas-Lopez et al. (2011), also found that males can help women to better navigate their career paths by teaching them different techniques to attain and maintain leadership positions within the male-centric leadership culture. However, no prior study has highlighted the positive role of cross-gender mentoring for female managers in Pakistani academia. Moreover, these women also had an adequate peer mentoring practice within their universities, which helped them deal with powerful male hierarchies and encouraged them to strive for their professional goals. These findings are in line with the reviewed scholarship that reveals that peer mentoring increases work satisfaction among female faculty and managers (Morley, 2013; Thomas et al., 2015).

Importantly, the findings indicate an absence of formal mentoring practices in Pakistani universities, practices that would benefit women leaders. Many participants highlighted the need to develop professional coaching programs in universities. The previous literature also indicates that many effective job-embedded professional coaching programs in various developed countries of the world enhance the leadership skills of women and help them survive in the contemporary competitive and research-intensive academic environment (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Gardiner et al., 2007).

Clearly, in the absence of fundamental leadership socialization and training, networks and mentors benefited them in adjusting to the highly competitive hegemonic regimes. The gendered socialization patterns in Pakistani society prioritize women's role in the family and develop self-doubt, making them believe they are dependent, emotional, and less competent. Similarly, leadership training is unfortunately missing in Pakistani universities (Bhatti & Ali, 2020). The dominance of traditional socialization norms in Pakistani society is clearly consistent with Foucauldian discursive formation and Connell's explanation of gender disparities. We argue that formal networking and mentoring help women become aware of their strengths in addition to their weaknesses, weaknesses that are not only en-

twined within the socio-cultural context and situations but also the powerful masculine discourses and culturally shaped narrative conventions.

The analysis revealed that the participants were only able to engage in formal networking to a limited extent because of work-life conflicts. They found informal networking to be more appropriate because of their multiple identities as wives, mothers, and professionals. It is clear that women recognized the significance of formal networks in their professional growth, particularly in the initial stages of their careers. They also admitted that maintaining a work-life balance is critical in the preliminary stages of their professional life because they need to develop their research profiles as well. Nevertheless, at the same time, they struggle to adjust to their familial and marital roles. Consequently, they experience time constraints on formal networking and mentoring. The hegemonic masculine domains impose all these domestic commitments solely on women, which in turn enhances their own power in the institutional hierarchies. The reviewed scholarship also indicates the necessity of formal networking for career advancement in academia and that women have access to fewer instrumental networks due to domestic and mobility constraints (Arif, 2011; Ramaswami et al., 2014)

Hence, the results of this empirical investigation provide useful insights into the lived experiences of female academic managers in gaining access to mentoring and networking opportunities in universities. The findings of this study may be valuable for all concerned stakeholders in universities in terms of improving mentoring and networking practices for women in academia. Nevertheless, the study has some limitations, as some participants declined to participate in this empirical investigation due to unavailability or lack of interest. Their narratives could have had important implications for understanding the issue at hand.

Conclusion

Building on the theoretical contribution of Connell (2000), this study argues that hegemonic masculinity in Pakistani academia is an established norm that operates through institutional structures. Leadership norms are also developed by power structures to control women's participation in positions of power. Such power structures are systematically produced and reproduced by organizations using knowledge (Foucault, 2000). The experiences of female academics in this study provide a space to critique the existing hegemonic power structure of society, which excludes women from mainstream hierarchal organizations through biased recruitment and promotion processes where men are favored over women and

gender disparities are evident.

This paper concludes that access to instrumental networks and mentors is critical for the success of female leaders in universities. Such access provides opportunities for women to become visible in a powerful masculine academic structure. The participants had both male and female mentors who provided them with excellent supporting mechanisms within the co-educational environment. Moreover, peer mentoring facilitated them in the presence of dominant masculine discourses that hinder women's access to top managerial positions in universities.

It is also evident that women find less time to develop formal networks due to their overwhelming domestic and professional commitments; however, informal networks are found to be extremely valuable for women in seeking to achieve their career goals. Clearly, the dominant masculine ideology criticizes women's engagement with male networks; therefore, these women prefer to maintain professional identities that do not influence their feminine roles within society. These women are well aware of the socio-cultural context influencing their lives as women, and they maintain professional relationships with men in academia within the limits of societal expectations.

The scholarship on the mentoring and networking experiences of women leaders in higher education in Pakistan remains limited. It is therefore recommended that similar studies are needed in other universities in the country, that is, public/private and elite/non-elite, to obtain a comparative insight into the issue. Moreover, this study identified a lack of formal networking and mentoring arrangements in universities. To address this, formal gender-sensitive mentoring and networking programs are required. Importantly, there is a strong need to acknowledge the need to develop peer mentoring structures that can be fruitful for women in challenging the existing masculine hierarchies in universities.

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