Understanding the Male-Dominated Business Environment in Pakistan: Lived Experiences of Female Interns

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Abstract

This research addresses the gap in the existing literature with regard to female interns' experiences in Pakistan's male-dominated business sector. Keeping gender role theory and Kanter's idea of tokenism at the forefront, this research study examines the experiences and challenges that 20 female interns faced when they ventured into the business world. The research results suggest that even young, modern, and educated women in Pakistan are conscious of the barriers laid down by society for them and opt to remain within those boundaries by choosing a working environment they consider safe for themselves. A safe environment for them is synonymous with an environment with more women, and in the presence of men they conduct themselves according to religious and societal norms. The research also highlighted the importance of religion in Pakistani society; therefore, educated women try to find liberation while staying within the boundaries of progressive Islam.

Key words

Gender role theory, harassment, interns, Islamic values, patriarchy, tokenism

Introduction and Background

Pakistan, at the time of its inception, was a progressive state where women had not only been a part of the political movement that led to the creation of Pakistan, but their roles as teachers, doctors, and government officials were very much encouraged in the newly founded nation. The positive role of women in Pakistani society at the time not only gave a jump start to the Pakistani economy but also sent a message to the world that post-colonial Pakistan was a modern, westernized state (Jafar, 2005; Khan, Naveed, & Jantan, 2018). Women grew and excelled in Pakistani society until the era of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq which began in 1977, and was the starting point for the Islamization of Pakistan. A Pakistan Army four-star

general, Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq became the sixth President of Pakistan and its effective dictator after declaring martial law in 1977 and remains Pakistan's longest-serving president. Even though, according to the tenets of Islam, women are treated as individual beings, who are socially, politically, and economically identifiable and different from their spouses and who can work in the public domain dressed modestly in the presence of the opposite gender (Choudhry, Mutalib, & Ismail, 2019), Zia made his Islamization visible by indoctrinating the populace that it was un-Islamic for women to work outside of their homes; thereby, stigmatizing working women as a cause of moral decay in society and depriving half the Pakistani population of the opportunity to participate in life to their fullest capacity (Jafar, 2005).

Pakistani feminists found themselves battling against the discrimination in the garb of Islam that working women faced. Since Islam dictates values that are not subjugating for women (Vandello, 2016); they started to connect women's education with progressive Islam (Islamic thought which is inclusive in nature) and Islamic history (Khurshid & Saba, 2018).

Pakistani men are assigned the role of breadwinners (Abbasi, Kousar, & Sadiq, 2016; Saigol & Danish, 2016), whereas the role appointed for women is that of a wife and mother (Abbasi et al., 2016; Ansari, 2016) and women working in business organizations are mere tokens (Kanter, 1977). Nevertheless, the latest research on working women in Pakistan shows that the trends in the urban areas of Pakistan are shifting, and working women are increasingly sought after for marriages to share economic pressures (Ansari, 2016; Fulu & Miedema, 2016; Qaisrani, Liaquat, & Khokhar, 2016).

It thus becomes incumbent to understand how has the attitude of Pakistani society changed toward working women. Not much research has been conducted on interns in Pakistan, and there is no scholarly literature available on the experiences of female interns when they enter the job market. These female interns are laying the foundations for women's entrance into the male-dominated Pakistani business environment by stepping out of the gender roles ascribed to them by their families and society where they are often the first women in their families to become a part of Pakistan's workforce. Thus, this study examines the following research questions:

1. How welcoming do female Pakistani interns find the business environment?
2. What challenges do female interns in the business sector face in terms of their gender?

Gender Role Theory

The backdrop to this research can be found in gender role theory, which was first presented by John Money and colleagues in 1954. Gender role theory postulates that men and women are given prescribed attitudes, values, interests, and roles in a society that results in masculine or feminine characteristics and behaviors (Schneider & Bos, 2019). Confirming the feminine gender role, women are expected to be caretakers, putting the needs of others before their own and expected to be more sympathetic and empathetic than men (Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002; Schneider & Bos, 2019). Thus, women are expected to be less enthusiastic regarding their own well-being, wants, goals, and ambitions. These views have acted as a glass ceiling for Pakistani women (Ansari, 2016; Waqar, Hanif, & Loh, 2021) and the outcome has been catastrophic for Pakistan. Of those enrolled in higher education institutes, 40% are female, but only 22% of these women become a part of the workforce (International Labour Organization, 2020) meaning more than 75% of Pakistani female degree holders decide to stay at home (Field & Vyborny, 2016). An IMF study estimates that Pakistani GDP could increase by nearly one-third if women's labor force participation rates matched those of men, and if Pakistan merely reduced the gender gap in female participation by 25%, its GDP could increase by 9% (International Labour Organization, 2020).

Gender roles in Pakistan have recently changed as a result of two developing factors: economics and family orientation. With growing economic pressure on families to earn more to achieve a better standard of living, educated women are preferred as partners (Ichino, Olsson, Petrongolo, & Skogman Thoursie, 2019). Second, men who had working mothers have a more modern outlook on gender roles and prefer working partners for themselves (Fernandez, Fogli, & Olivetti, 2004).

The Token: Working Women in Pakistan

The Pakistani woman who goes out to work inevitably becomes what Kanter (1977) calls a "token". Kanter explains group behaviors using the terms "dominant group" and "tokens". The dominant group, according to her, is the more numerous, thereby automatically gaining position to influence and intimidate the tokens, who are few in number. Pakistani working women, who are tokens in the male-dominated working environment, also have to face what Kanter (1977) calls the

"boundary heightening" that takes place when the dominant group exaggerates its differences from the tokens. In the Pakistani organizational context, boundary heightening occurs when the dominant group exaggerates male sexuality and masculinity and use sexual slurs in their language, crack sexual jokes, or, in some instances, simply stare at the women (Arif, Naveed, & Aslam, 2017), leaving the women (tokens) vulnerable to harassment from their male colleagues (Arif et al., 2017; Salman, Abdullah, & Saleem, 2016; Yasmin, 2018). Because such sexual harassment lacks an overt physical dimension, it is not acknowledged by those involved and cause working women to experience psychological issues which in turn affects their job performance (Arif et al., 2017).

Although Pakistan has put sexual harassment laws in place, the non-implementation of these laws has caused women facing harassment at their workplace to not only keep quiet but even to feel guilty about their experiences (Arif et al., 2017). Additionally, workplace harassment is not reported due to societal pressures that may come from families as well as the organizations where they work (Qaisrani et al., 2016; Yasmin, 2018). Therefore, women who choose to work in the business industry in Pakistan have to surmount all the odds to create a space for themselves, even when the majority of these women belong to the middle and upper middle class or in some cases come from affluent families. Women's higher education is considered a privilege in Pakistan, and urban women from the middle and upper middle classes face far less gender discrimination and have greater access to education and employment opportunities (Sathar, Kamran, Sadiq, & Hussain, 2016).

Kanter (1977) also put forward the idea of role entrapment, where the tokens are either asked to take on a role other than what they actually are or are given certain roles to abide by. Kanter further postulates that, in men's minds, women are either "madonnas" or "whores." Young urban middle-class working women do not want to be victims of the patriarchal and traditional society they live in, and they approach their feminism through an Islamic discourse rooted within Islamic jurisprudence (Zubair & Zubair, 2017) and acceptable to the dominant group. They distance themselves from Western feminism—unacceptable to Pakistani society—and look for freedom in more receptive spaces like their own religion, which helps them to maintain their identity as individuals (Zubair & Zubair, 2017). On a broader canvas, the Pakistani working woman has to face family (Yasmin, 2018), economic (Khan et al., 2018), and on-the-job pressures and create for herself a role that identifies her as a "madonna" and not a "whore."

Research Methodology

This qualitative research study was conducted to understand the internship experiences of female undergraduate business school interns in a male-dominated business environment. "The standpoint of women, as members of a group that experiences systematic oppression, is especially valuable, while recognizing that women are a diverse group along lines of ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and so on," (Sprague, 2005, as cited in Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016, p. 160). Any body of knowledge, whatever the topic, remains incomplete if it lacks a feminist viewpoint; including this oppressed group adds significantly to our understanding, (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016) and researchers' perceptions of a social system will be less partial and more authentic if they also study the lives of those women oppressed within that system (Harding, 1992).

The Sample

The sampling method was purposive in nature because a purposive sample set has firsthand information about the phenomenon under study (Tracy, 2013). Of the 22 interns contacted, using their cell phone numbers provided by the university's internship department, one had left the city after completing her internship, and one could not be contacted via the given phone number, leaving 20 who agreed to be interviewed. These female interns were from a private business school and were either about to complete their business internship or who had recently completed it. All 20 were involved in the service industry and most represented the first instance in their family where a woman had stepped out into a business environment. The data collected showed that the mothers of all interns were housewives with the exception of three, two working as teachers in private schools and one intern whose mother had died. Even though all their mothers had received formal education up to college level, other than R18's mother who had received formal education up to grade 8, most stayed at home.

Participants were assured that though their interviews would be recorded, their identities would remain shielded. All were aged between 21 and 23 and had attended a prestigious private business school in Karachi and belonged to middle- to upper-middle-class families.

Data Gathering and Analysis

Face-to-face interviews lasting 35-45 minutes were conducted (16 at the university campus, 4 at their workplace) to elucidate the lived experiences and viewpoints from the interviewees' perspective and "enable the researcher to stumble upon and further explore complex phenomena that may otherwise be hidden or unseen" (Tracy, 2013, p. 132). The interviews were conducted in English; nevertheless, they did use a few sentences in Urdu to clarify their points, which have been translated into English for the readership. The interview methodology was inspired by Britton (2017), who did not directly ask questions about the topic that she was exploring, but rather waited for the topic to organically become a part of the conversation. Taking cue from Britton, the interviews started off by asking the interns about the organizations where they were interning and how they had found the placement. They were then asked about what tasks they were responsible for during their internship and how their on-job supervisor treated them. Questions regarding gender issues in their workplace were not deliberately asked until the topic itself emerged from the conversation.

As Britton mentioned, such an interviewing methodology has both pros and cons; the disadvantage is that the researcher is prevented from making categorical claims about what respondents thought of the issues under study. The advantages, however, far outweigh this disadvantage because this interviewing methodology helps the researcher understand the relevance and importance in the interviewee's life of the phenomenon under study. Other than these points, this conscious choice to use this interviewing methodology was made because the researcher did not want to make these young girls nervous by asking them directly about the opposite gender at their workplace.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data was cleaned (Saldaña, 2013) and all statements that carried any reference to the opposite gender were listed separately as that was the area of investigation. All respondents, in one way or another, made remarks about male encounters at their workplace or how they avoided such encounters. The statements were then coded. Tracy (2013) defines coding as an "active process of identifying data as belonging to, or representing, some type of phenomenon" (p. 189). Thus, the data was actively coded using the Saldaña (2013) coding manual: first, the data was coded using descriptive and narrative coding; second, categories were formed from the clusters of codes obtained; and finally, clusters of categories formed themes: "A theme is a pattern, concept or a trend (Saldaña, 2013, p. 14)."

As a result, three themes emerged from the data: "Safe business environment," "Interaction with the opposite gender," and "Remaining within the boundaries of societal norms."

Findings

Safe Business Environment

All female interns revealed that their number one priority was to find a safe venue for their internship. By safety, they meant an organization that had more female than male employees. For example, one of the interns (R1) revealed that she was called for an interview at a company and subsequently offered an internship there. However, she turned down the job as the company seemed to be in a secluded area. She also mentioned that she could not see any female presence in the company. Another intern (R2) explained the same thing in the following words:

> *I was a little apprehensive after I went to the interview places where the environment seems to be very questionable, I just didn't like it there. You can call it my sixth sense but mostly I would say the fact that there was no woman at the reception or at the interview (R2).*

On the other hand, the interns expressed their satisfaction with the companies that had female staff, as they did not want themselves to be seen as tokens. When I asked them about their workplace environment, along with other things such as the friendliness of their supervisor, companies' clear policies, and provision of learning opportunities, they also said that the company environment was collegial because there were many women working there. An intern working for a travel agency said:

> *The environment is good, you can see there are so many girls here (R9).*

An intern working at a private TV channel happily added:

> *I really enjoy here because everyone is very nice and mostly we are girls in this area and we girls have even started exercising in the morning in a vacant room (R15).*

An intern working at a non-profit organization expressed the following view:

> *My supervisor is a female and she usually prefers female interns because she is more comfortable with girls (R16).*

Thus, the interns welcomed the presence of women around them as it made them feel secure; in fact, there were interns who said that they had decided to apply to schools instead of the various companies as the education industry and especially schools are dominated by women. Hence, four of the 20 interviewees said that they would not work in the corporate sector and would prefer a teaching job (R1, R2, R13, R14). They thought that the work schedules in the corporate sector were very demanding, and at times, they reached home late at night. Second, they had very little opportunity to advance in their organization as, after marriage, keeping up with such hours would be impossible for them. Third, they said that women were not treated equally to men and, according to one intern, were even presented as "show pieces."

Some jobs in particular were not considered safe for women. For example, an intern who went to a multinational FMCG [fast-moving consumer goods] company was asked to go into the market and find out what types of milk and cream different shops were selling and what prices they were charging. She said that she conducted the market research with her father, as it was unsafe to go alone, and after two visits to the market and two weeks of her internship, she quit the job. She said:

> *I was not interested. Like, I can't do this. I had to quit and I discontinued because I just couldn't do this, going to the milk shop and asking them about milk and cream. It was not safe and how many times could my father go with me? (R9)*

Another intern claimed that she was one of the first women to participate in oil sales. She mentioned that industrial marketing was not a job that women usually do and added:

> *In our country, where practice is only in sales and marketing, females don't see their careers as much, normally it's a male-dominated industry ⋯ a lot of girls are in offices but they don't have girls in fields of marketing and sales. (R19).*

When asked about her experience, she said that she enjoyed the work and it was a learning experience for her, but added that this job was good for the internship period only and she would not want to take it up as a permanent job. It was difficult to be on the move all the time and then there were all sorts of people that you had to meet and the market was full of men, so the job was not an easy one and required immense mental and physical strength. She concluded by saying that the job was not meant for women due to the excessive male presence.

Interaction with the Opposite Gender

Even though none of the interns complained of any physical or verbal harassment from any of their male colleagues, it was surprising to know that they were very much conscious of their presence and what they experienced or feared they might experience does come under the definition of harassment. They were always afraid that the dominant group of men, might exert their presence upon them, as explained by Kanter (1977). An intern working in the sales department of a computer firm pointed out, the best thing about her company was that everyone was working in their cubicles, so no one looked at anyone.

> *The best thing about this company is that everyone is busy in their work and no one has an eye on you (R17).*

An intern working in a commercial bank described her experience as follows:

> *My internship was on rotational basis and there were two departments that were in back offices, I was reluctant to go there. ···there were three, four men working there, they never said or did anything but I felt uncomfortable without any female around (R4).*

This intern asked her supervisor to excuse her, saying that she wanted to be moved to the main area because there was more learning there. However, the supervisor understood her underlying intentions, denied her request, and said to her that in her workplace she had to act professionally and the supervisor, who was male, denied her request to be moved. She said that she continued to work and completed her internship but was very uneasy during this time.

Another female intern narrated an incident of a rather serious nature that occurred while working in a four-star hotel. According to her:

> *There was a guy, he used to stare a lot. But what could you do, so I decided to handle it, so I thought that I should ignore it as I could not complain it to anyone. I thought such type of people must be in all organizations but I did not like it, because I was not used to such behavior (R18).*

When asked why she feared that her complaint would go unheard, she said that it was difficult to prove a stare, and if asked, he would just say that it was a false allegation. She also felt that because she was there for only six weeks, this could be ignored. This was a serious problem, yet she felt helpless and the only way remaining for her "to handle the situation" was to remain quiet about it.

An intern complained that when she was working in a telemarketing firm, she had to call her potential clients and tell them about their product. According to her, some male clients would try to extract personal information from her.

> *It often happens that they start asking you personal questions such as "What's your cell number?" "Where do you study?" and it becomes difficult to bring them to the point. So that's when I had to change my tone and talk in an aggressive manner (R11).*

She continued by describing an incident with a client where he started to discuss his personal and professional life with the intern, and for 20 minutes he kept on talking about everything except what was relevant at that moment; so she tackled the situation by saying to him:

> *"Let's do this, I will answer all your questions but first please share your email address with me so that I can at least send you the company profile. Then I will talk to you and you can look at the email and let me know if there are any queries." As soon as he gave me the email, I said, "Thank you sir for your time" and I put the phone down (R11).*

She added that it was difficult to handle such clients.

An intern revealed,

> *When I was working in the bank and new interns were recruited, they (the female interns) were given positions according to their dress-up and looks. The ones who dressed well and were good-looking were given the front desk and those who were not so well dressed or good looking would be asked to sit inside the offices (R5).*

She further elaborated, "*The worst part was when one of the managers said that the boss likes pretty girls so this girl (naming one of the female interns) should go to him (R5).*"

Another intern shared her experience at a commercial bank:

> *Ma'am, whenever a client would come, they would call me and say that you go and talk to him. When I asked, "Why me?" they said, "You are a girl and the client will enjoy talking to you and you will be able to convince him" (R8).*

Instances like the ones quoted above made the girls change their field, and they decided to pursue their master's degree in education rather than in the business field.

Remaining within the Boundaries of Societal Norms

The interns seemed to know very well how society views a well-cultured girl. They knew their boundaries and were in no way rebellious toward them; on the contrary, they were trying to conform to the norms. Surprisingly, attire was one of the most important aspects that emerged. The interns implied that as long as they were fully covered and dressed according to societal and religious norms, they felt safe even in the most male-dominated environments. Hence, an intern working in the male-dominated environment of an IT company stated:

> *We must dress in a modern and elegant way but not give wrong vibes. So, I make sure that I am wearing loose-fitted clothes that are stylish as well (R17).*

An intern who had interned at a bank reflected and added that she started to wear hijab after experiencing the men's attitude toward women and how they discussed their appearance behind their backs. She said,

> *I started to wear hijab during my internship because I did not want to be looked upon as the other girls were being looked at. By wearing hijab I wanted to tell them that I am very religious and to stay away from me (R5).*

An intern working in the marketing department of a pharmaceutical company said that it was very important in her company that all employees were dressed

well, but the problem occurred when at times women were judged by the way they dressed and men were not.

> *It is important that you dress well but it is equally important that they must not consider you as show pieces but should look at your potential. It doesn't happen with boys, they have to dress well too, but it happens only with women (R20).*

An intern working in the sales department of an oil company attributed her success at her internship to her dressing and conduct and said:

> *I was able to perform the sales job in areas where there were mostly men because I was wearing abbaya (outer coat type garment). Also, the way I am, I don't wear any makeup and I keep a serious face when I talk to men (R19).*

An intern working at a travel agency believed that the benefits of working in female-dominated environments were many, and that one was able to dress according to one's own whims and wishes. As another intern elaborated:

> *When you are in female majority environment, you don't have to worry about where your duppata (scarf/stole) is or who is looking at you and who is not (R10).*

Thus, dressing was both a problem and a solution. The interns seem to imply that, as long as their attire looked appropriately moral and appeared to conform to religious norms, they were safe from the unwanted advances of their male colleagues. It can be said that when those in power try to practice their power over women through religion, they use that same religion to push their boundaries.

Discussion

The theoretical bases of gender role theory and tokenism helped to understand how these young women were not rebelling against the societal norms that were meant to bind them; rather, they were using them to liberate themselves. They used their education to go beyond the gender role ascribed to them by society and ventured into the business arena, which is fundamentally a male-dominated

domain. They had to uphold the integrity of their family, as they were among the first women to push the boundaries of gender roles and become a part of the Pakistani business sector. They were well aware that they needed to reflect the morals of a good family and not let their family down. They never shared their unwanted office experiences with their parents, as they were afraid that their parents would ask them to stay at home and would not understand their point of view. Since their mothers were mostly housewives, they did not understand the workplace dynamics, and in almost all cases thought that their daughter should get married instead of pursuing a job in the business sector.

Challenging stereotypical gender roles, indigenous patriarchal practice, and conservative religious discourse and countering it with progressive feminist ideology, these young women stepped out into the business world (Zubair & Zubair, 2017), but ended up as tokens in male-dominated organizations (Kanter, 1977). It is assumed that educated Muslim women will inevitably be in a position to empower themselves and be an agent of change for society, but in reality, these educated women end up striving to create a safe space for themselves within that society's oppressive traditional structure (Khurshid & Saba, 2018). Even though extremist factions portray Islam as a religion that supports patriarchy, findings from this research demonstrate that young Muslim interns did not condone or legitimize men's authoritative and inappropriate behavior on the basis of Islam. Surprisingly, the struggle of these young Muslim women was no different than that of women living in more developed countries and although Western values are often contrasted with those of Islam, the fact is that for many followers of progressive Islam this contrast is non-existent (Vandello, 2016).

The findings of this research clearly indicate that young interns were victims of role entrapment (Kanter, 1977). The dominant group at their workplace and society at large accepts Islamic interpretation; therefore, the interns, like other working women in Pakistan, approached their feminism through an Islamic discourse rooted within Islamic jurisprudence (Zubair & Zubair, 2017). Hence, the interns frequently talked about how they dressed and behaved according to the Islamic norms, yet the representation of the Islamic values by them was not due to their devotion to their religion, but because they were trapped in certain roles where they would rather be labeled "madonnas" than "whores" (Kanter, 1977). They distanced themselves from the Western feminism Pakistani society finds repugnant and looked for freedom in more acceptable spaces like their own religion, which helped them maintain their identity as individuals (Zubair & Zubair, 2017) and peace with the dominant group and society as a whole.

In Pakistan, the social and cultural norms require division of the genders and minimal contact with the opposite gender (Ansari, 2016; Qaisrani et al., 2016; Saigol & Danish, 2016). The findings revealed three reasons why female interns preferred to work in organizations with more female staff and with female rather than male bosses. First, the organizational environment was considered work-friendly if there were more female staff; second, minimal contact with the opposite gender that society requires of them could be ensured (Arif et al., 2017) and third, they assumed the role of a dominant group instead of mere tokens and felt liberated. Kanter (1977) argues that in the presence of the dominant group, tokens seek invisibility where they do not want to be noticed. The same thought was brought forward when the interns said that the cubicles helped them stay away from the gaze of men, or when an intern said that not wearing makeup helped not to get noticed.

Even though the female interns conducted themselves according to the pre-scribed norms of society, they still faced inappropriate behavior not only from their colleagues but also from their clients, because working women are considered as going against the gender roles appointed by society and stigmatized as being more liberal (Abbasi et al., 2016; Sultan, Khawaja, & Kousir, 2016). Hence, men consider their inappropriate advances toward working women to not only be legitimate but also sought after by these women. Workplace harassment in such a social setting is not an unknown phenomenon (Qaisrani et al., 2016) and is called "boundary heightening" (Kanter, 1977). Thus, boundary heightening was seen where a female intern was made to feel uneasy due to a male colleague's continuous stare, or the intern who had to face inappropriate remarks in a telephone conversation with a potential client. It is worth noting that none of the interns reported these experiences as sexual harassment; rather, they were of the view that their working environment was safe. These results are aligned with the results of research conducted by Salman et al. (2016), who claimed that Pakistani women are reluctant to discuss their sexual harassment experiences, and most workplace harassment went unreported by women because they are afraid to be victimized by the organizations they worked for (Yasmin, 2018). The female interns were aware that reporting such incidents would give them a bad name and that no action would be taken against the harasser; also, such an outcry would jeopardize the invisibility they sought.

In the Pakistani society today, gender role theory can be seen in play (Abbasi et al., 2016) and women, even when working outside, are not spared household responsibilities (Sultan et al., 2016). For this reason, in Pakistan, teaching is consid-

ered a good field for women as it has fewer on-the-job hours, helping women to balance their household chores and professional life (Saigol & Danish, 2016). After working for a brief period in the corporate sector, many of the young female decided to take up teaching as a profession due to the ingrained belief that the more distance one keeps from the opposite gender, the more chaste one is (Qaisrani et al., 2016; Saigol & Danish, 2016).

It was also noted that interns, in line with gender role theory, believed that there are some tasks only men could do such as conducting market surveys or being in sales was better for men than for women. One reason was that these tasks involved more interaction with men but unfortunately, limiting their contacts to only women is exclusion from certain types of jobs and business ventures (Ansari, 2016; Fulu & Miedema, 2016). The other reason may be that women have preconceived ideas about their limitations, and that they legitimize the existing social frameworks either by augmenting the differences between men and women or by justifying them through recognizing biological differences (Icart & Pizzi, 2013). Due to this global stigma women find themselves running into a glass ceiling, which hinders the skill acquisition process they require for high-level business management jobs (Fulu & Miedema, 2016). They therefore end up in jobs with less capitalization than men and are concentrated in the service and retail sectors (Icart & Pizzi, 2013).

The mentality of men and women has not changed, even after studying in co-education systems and achieving higher education, and gender discrimination still exists in the most educated environments. The Pakistani urban women are struggling to make their place in Pakistani society and its economy (Hameed, Haseeb, Iqbal, Mihardjo, & Jermsittiparsert, 2022). It will take time and a change of mindset to undo what previous regimes have fed their people in the name of Islam. A true understanding of Islam is needed to give women their due rights in society.

Conclusions and Recommendations

No research has been conducted in Pakistan on female interns' struggles with respect to gender issues when they enter the job market, and this study therefore fills a gap in the literature in this aspect. In the context of this research gap, the present study sought answers to two questions: how welcoming do women find the Pakistani business environment, and what gender-related challenges do female business interns face. The study revealed the answers to these questions. The

working environment for women in Pakistani organizations depends on the organization's gender profile and culture. An organization is considered more welcoming if the number of women working there is significant. In addition, women prefer female bosses and are more at ease with them.

Even when women work shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts or colleagues, they cannot let their guards down and must always watch their dress, speech, and body language in front of their colleagues. It must be kept in mind that Pakistan is new to the idea of women working alongside their male counterparts in a business environment, as for many families this is the first generation of women who have ventured into a male-dominated business environment. The Pakistani business environment is currently male-dominated, and women are merely tokens there.

Serious measures are needed to bring about a change in Pakistani society, to ensure educated women are treated with respect and dignity and considered equal colleagues in their workplaces. The government needs to understand the economic price being paid as a result of the non-participation of educated women in the Pakistani workforce. Recommendations can therefore be divided into two types: those for the masses and those for organizations. For the masses, recommendations include educating the masses through TV and other entertainment sources regarding the importance of the positive role of working women in the development and prosperity of the country. Second, the narrative of progressive Islam needs to be brought to the forefront, where people must be educated about what Islam demands as opposed to the cultural origins of attitudes regarding women.

It is impossible to bring about real change in organizations without ending their hierarchal structures as they exist today. Therefore, organizations need regular training sessions to incorporate a more inclusive culture in their organizations and create a woman-friendly environment. Second, clear anti-harassment policies should not only be chalked out but also implemented. Pakistan will only be able to make full use of its human capital if women are given an equal opportunity to grow and unleash their potential to benefit society as a whole.

Limitations

Little if anything has been published on the experiences of female interns in Pakistan. Even though much work has been done with regard to women in the media and medical industries, women in the business sector is a neglected area.

This meant that there was little basis for comparing the results of this study. In addition, the industries represented by the internships interviewed were not equally represented, and all were from the service sector. Further studies need to be carried reflecting a broader range of working environments.

Future Research

It would be interesting to note what changes Pakistani women working in the corporate sector for a decade or more have seen in the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of their colleagues and management with regard to gender equality.

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