


## Breaking the Silence: Unveiling Barriers to Women’s Leadership for Sustainable Development in Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores gender disparities and challenges faced by women in leadership positions in the academic sectors of developing and developed countries, which is a pressing and practical concern. Academic organizations have historically marginalized women in leadership roles. This meta-analysis provides a comprehensive overview of the ways women have experienced gender inequality in countries around the world e.g., Pakistan as a developing country, and the USA as a developed country. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews (PRISMA) served as a guide for a formal systematic review of the literature. Findings were drawn from research studies over the period 2003–2024 in both developed and developing countries. The three databases, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar yielded a total of 89 papers. Leadership in higher education and organizational improvement were key to choosing research for analysis. The findings illuminate the prevalent silent barriers and discriminatory dynamics that women leaders encounter, both in developed and developing countries. Insights from developed countries, such as the USA, reveal progress in promoting gender equality but acknowledge the existing gaps in top-tier leadership roles. Conversely, the challenges faced in academia by women in developing countries, exemplified by Pakistan, are rooted in educational gaps, cultural norms, and economic disparities. The implications of the current findings applied to developed and developing nations, provide a foundation for understanding the global landscape of Women’s Leadership in Higher Education.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the context of higher education, the experiences of women leaders have long been an area of profound investigation and inquiry Eagly and Carli (2003); Selzer and Robles (2019); Islam et al. (2023); Maheshwari (2023); Van Helden et al. (2023)). Despite the significant participation in academia as faculty, the glass ceiling effect continues to inhibit women from rising to the highest levels of academic leadership across the globe Morley (2013) , Brue (2018); Powell and Butterfield (2015); S. Shah et al. (2020); Shaukat et al. (2021); Abdullah and Ullah (2022); Bhatti and Ali (2020); Hinduja et al. (2023), this is not only case in higher education but also across diverse organizations, including Fortune 500 companies Eagly and Carli (2003). This disparity can also be seen in the wage gap within top-tier leadership positions Oplatka (2006); Malik and Courtney (2011); S. Shah et al. (2020); Guliyev (2023)).

This study examines the social, cultural, and organizational factors impacting women's academic leadership in higher education. It uncovers the silent barriers faced by women in leadership roles in developing countries with those in developed nations, offering nuanced insights into gender equality and leadership discourse in academia.

### Leadership as a Gendered Trait

Leadership is mainly perceived as a patriarchal trait, often linked with male members of society (Hannum et al. (2015); M. G. Nakitende (2019); Bhatti et al. (2022); Guiso and Zaccaria (2023)). Both men and women were ranked highly for important leadership skills and traits such as decisiveness, self-confidence, teamwork, communication, and honesty. However, men ranked higher in analytical skills, policy formulation, and decision-making, while women excelled in teamwork, communication, and empathy and the capacity to motivate individuals through non-monetary incentives (Bhatti et al. (2022) ). Research from the United Nations 2018 found positive results in universities where women are leaders, such as enhanced decision-making, financial stability, improved organizational culture, and better relationships Abelha et al. (2020); Islam et al. (2023).

The cultural feminist perspective advocates for gender equality by highlighting the unique strengths of both men and women rather than asserting their sameness. It rejects the dominance of masculine norms and structures, seeking equal rights for women by appreciating the distinct values they bring. Instead of conforming women to a male mold, cultural feminism promotes the recognition and appreciation of women's uniqueness. The underlying assumption is that true equality can be achieved when society acknowledges and respects distinctly feminine characteristics without implying inferiority (Wolff (2007) ).

Surprisingly, in Pakistan, though there is a visible increase in women's participation in higher education degree programs, still there is a very low percentage of women representation in leadership positions (Malik and Courtney (2011); Zarif et al. (2019); Bhatti and Ali (2020); S. Shah et al. (2020); R. Ali and Rasheed (2021); Abdullah and Ullah (2022)). The World Economic Forum ranked Pakistan 145th out of 146 countries in gender equality.

In the pursuit of addressing gender disparities in education and workforce participation, it is evident that there remains a significant knowledge gap, particularly in understanding and mitigating the unique challenges that women leaders encounter in developing and developed countries Oplatka (2006); Jehan (2015); P. W. Miller (2020); Maheshwari (2023). This gap is especially pronounced in developing countries, where women's experiences often differ significantly from those in economically developed or rapidly modernizing nations Oplatka (2006); Cheema et al. (2019); Maheshwari (2023). Thus, the existing body of literature primarily focuses on the latter, leaving a critical gap in our understanding of the contextual factors influencing women's career progression in the former.

Moreover, the current research landscape is lacking in comparative studies that systematically investigate the distinctions and similarities in the challenges faced by women across diverse country groups Oplatka (2006); Roebuck et al. (2013); Avgeri (2015); Maheshwari (2023). This absence hinders our ability to develop a comprehensive perspective on the issue. Additionally, the concept of intersectionality, where gender intersects with factors like race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, is an aspect that has not been sufficiently explored in the context of women's career advancement Shields (2008); K. W. Crenshaw (2013); Johnson and Fournillier (2021). It aims to offer insights for informed policies and interventions.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do societal expectations, cultural norms, and organizational dynamics support women leaders' desires and aspirations in the context of higher education in Pakistan as a developing country and the developed countries such as the USA?
2. How do the silent barriers and challenges faced by women in leadership roles within Pakistani Higher Education Institutes compare to those encountered by their counterparts in developed countries, and in what ways do these challenges impact their aspirations and career progression?
3. What coping strategies do women leaders in developed and underdeveloped countries employ as they navigate the challenges on their journey to leadership positions?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Gender Inequality

Gender inequality, as defined by Guliyev (2023), is a social process, which involves the unequal distribution of rights and resources between women and men. It is shaped by cultural, social, and legal factors Fisher and Naidoo (2016). It manifests through biased rights allocation and stereotypical roles Index (2022). It is distinct from inequalities based on race, caste, or social class, each with unique factors Appelbaum et al. (2003); Guliyev (2023) .

### Theoretical Framework

The current study is guided by three theoretical frameworks derived from the literature review to understand the research problem: (1) Glass Ceiling Theory (2) Critical Feminist Theory, and (3) Role Congruity Theory.

### Glass Ceiling Theory

Women aspiring to leadership and management positions in diverse educational contexts encounter both "glass ceilings" (a condition in which women are not considered for a higher level of leadership roles and they face discrepancies in the promotion and financial incentives) and "glass walls." Davis and Maldonado (2017) or "Glass Cliffs," Selzer and Robles (2019). Glass Wall or Glass Cliff is a situation in which women are kept in a situation where there will be a high risk of failure.

The glass ceiling effect addresses the discrimination women face in the workplace resulting in unequal promotion and pay opportunities compared with men Lee (2002); Longman and Lafreniere (2012); Johns (2013); Powell and Butterfield (2015); Davis and Maldonado (2017); Kulik and Rae (2019). It is a pervasive and invisible barrier at the micro and the meso-level that obstructs women's progress in their careers, despite of their credentials, expertise, or fulfillment of established requirements Jabbar and Imran (2013); Diehl and Dzubinski (2016); Sarwar and Imran (2019); O'connor and Irvine (2020); Abdullah and Ullah (2022). It is evident in academia when more men than women serve in prestigious leadership roles like chancellor, provost, or dean Lahti (2013); Powell and Butterfield (2015); Cheema et al. (2019).

### Critical Feminist Theory

Critical Feminist Theory (CFT) in education provides a wider lens to closely examine the role of leadership through a feminist lens Schiffecker (2022). It explains the role of women in leadership positions and highlights the unique characteristics of female leaders. The researcher explains how power dynamics and systems of oppression like sexism and patriarchy intertwine their way into

society's framework, fueling the gaps in leadership representation between genders Hirudayaraj and Shields (2019).

The CFT further discusses intersectionality. The intersectionality perspective emphasizes that a person's various social identities significantly shape their perceptions and experiences related to gender K. Crenshaw (1989); K. W. Crenshaw (2013); Johnson and Fournillier (2021). In particular, gender cannot be examined in isolation but must be viewed within the broader context of power dynamics inherent in intersecting social identities Bhatti and Ali (2021); Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010). It is of great importance to understand how these intersecting identities affect women's experiences and opportunities K. W. Crenshaw (2013); Johnson and Fournillier (2021).

### **Role Congruity Theory**

Role Congruity Theory explains how societal expectations and norms about gender roles shape perceptions regarding effective leadership Ritter and Yoder (2004). Role congruity theory of prejudice is proposed by Eagly and Karau (2002). According to them, in educational leadership, there may be a perceived incongruity between traditional gender stereotypes and the perceived characteristics of effective leaders. This leads to two forms of prejudices: (1) women are perceived as less favorable for leadership roles as compared to men and (2) it is more difficult for women to become leaders and to achieve success in leadership roles.

The above-discussed theories provide the framework for understanding and analyzing the critical factors contributing to gender disparities in educational leadership, offering knowledge of the complex relationship of societal norms, institutional structures, and individual perceptions.

## **METHODS**

The current study employed a qualitative research methodology. While using a systematic literature review, this meta-analysis adheres to the rigorous standards outlined by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews PRISMA, as shown by its application in the study conducted by Abelha et al. (2020).

### **Data Sources and Search Strategy:**

The databases used for the study included Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, spanning the years 2003 to 2023. The inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed studies available in English. The Boolean search terms used were Pakistan\* AND women OR female AND administrator\* OR leader\*; America\* OR "United States" AND women OR female AND administrator\* OR leader\*; Pakistan\* AND America\* OR "United States" AND women OR female AND

administrator\* OR leader\*; "Leadership\* AND women\* AND higher education\* AND Female\* AND \*Leadership\* AND higher education\* AND \*Diversity\* AND Challenges\*"; "educational leader\*" OR "academic leader\*" OR "educational administration" AND gender AND equity; "comparative analysis" Pakistan "united states" education female leadership; "comparative analysis." To identify relevant studies, a systematic search strategy was employed. Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed articles published in the last 20 years that examined gender disparities in the education sector of developed and underdeveloped countries in general, including challenges faced by women leaders. Exclusion criteria were non-English language publications and research that did not address the specified topics.

The search yielded research from diverse countries, which were categorized by the countries' classification given by the World Economic Situation and Prospects WESP. WESP divides the countries of the world into three broad categories: "developed economies, economies in transition, and developing economies." For this study, we included research from only the countries in each study identified as either developed or developing countries. Countries were selected for inclusion in the study using the United Nations categories using per capita gross national income GNI. The developing country was taken from Asia and Pakistan was taken as a representative country. The developed country included in the study was the United State.

The selection process comprised two phases: title and abstract screening, followed by a full-text assessment. The research team, acting as independent reviewers, conducted the screening to ensure inter-rater reliability. Any discrepancies between reviewers were resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer when necessary. Figure 1 displays the findings. Initially, from all three databases, 5,250,000 documents were identified. After applying filters, 848 highly relevant articles and books were shortlisted. Out of these, 342 were removed from the database due to exclusion criteria and the elimination of duplicate documents. In the next step, 506 documents were sought for retrieval, but 63 could not be retrieved. Afterward, 443 reports were assessed for eligibility, and then 201 documents were excluded from the database due to their focus on factors beyond the study scope. Additionally, 129 documents were excluded because they were older than 2003. Finally, 112 studies are included for review in this study.

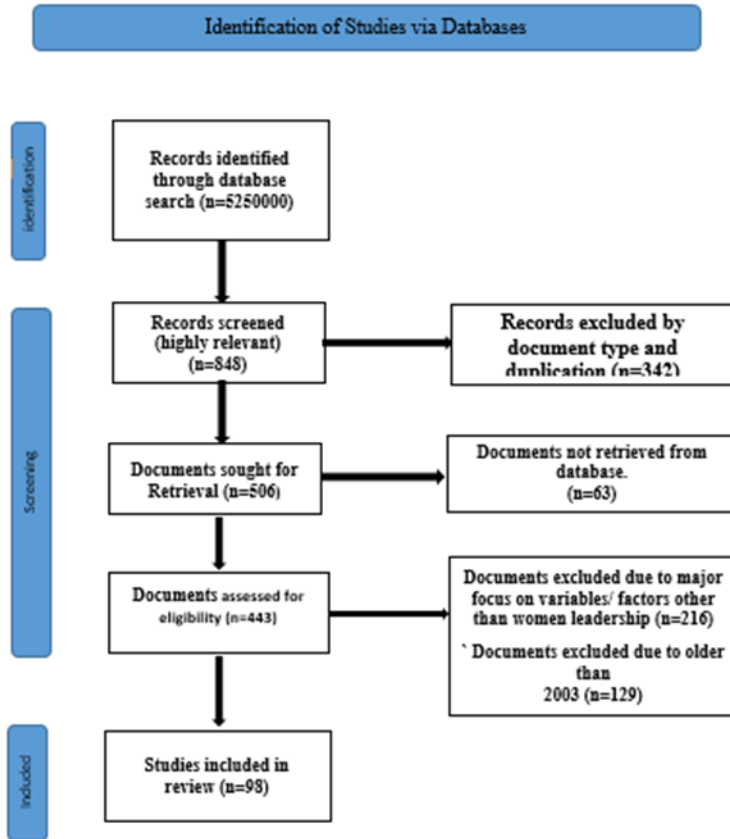


Figure 1: Identification of Studies via Databases

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data were extracted from selected studies, including information such as publication details, research objectives, methodologies, key findings, and evidence regarding gender disparities and challenges faced by women in the education sector. A standardized data extraction form was employed to ensure consistency. From the perspective of the critical research paradigm, in the context of research on women's leadership, the researchers analyzed the data under three main themes, (1) desire, women's aspirations for leadership positions, their motivation to succeed, and their aspirations and coping strategies for personal and professional growth; (2) silence, the unspoken experiences and challenges that women leaders face in male-dominated environments; and (3) coping with pain, the emotional and psychological toll of gender-related discrimination, harassment, and the glass ceiling.

The examined literature was then further divided into three themes for analysis, grounded in the theoretical framework: (1) Desires and Aspirations of Women Leaders in the Context of Higher Education, (2) Silent Barriers and Challenges faced by Women in Leadership Position, and (3) Coping Strategies Employed by Women Leaders in the Face of Discrimination and Pain Points.

## RESULTS

### **Theme 1: Desires and Aspirations of Women Leaders in the Context of Higher Education**

Women seek leadership positions due to societal shifts toward gender equality, personal ambition, impact aspiration, and role models influence M. Nakitende (2012); Hannum et al. (2015). Women with leadership aspirations, willingly accept leadership positions for various reasons such as economic independence, access to education, changing cultural norms, hierarchal climbing, career success, and achieving high occupational status Oplatka (2006).

### **Societal Shifts Toward Gender Equality**

In the USA, societal shifts reflect positive progress in overcoming biases against women in leadership roles Hannum et al. (2015); Selzer and Robles (2019); Bradshaw et al. (2024). Societal factors such as policy initiatives, family support, and economic development are considered instrumental for women's access to leadership positions Lester (2015); M. G. Nakitende (2019). Institutional work-life balance policies aim to support employees in managing their professional and domestic roles Roebuck et al. (2013); S. Naz et al. (2017); Seema et al. (2020).

Similarly, Oplatka (2006) and Malik and Courtney (2011), observed gender equality policies in developing countries like Nepal, Somalia, India, Yemen, Bangladesh, Morocco, the Gambia, and Pakistan. In Pakistan, family support is considered a crucial factor in women's success in leadership positions Khalid et al. (2017). In this regard, parents', siblings' and in the case of married women, spouse's support play an important role in the advancement of women in academia and create work-life balance Khalid et al. (2017); Saleem and Ajmal (2018); Fazal et al. (2020); Seema et al. (2020); R. Ali and Rasheed (2021). Researchers reported that, in most cases, parents are considered role models for women leaders Malik and Courtney (2011); Zarif et al. (2019); R. Ali and Rasheed (2021).

Gender-supported policies such as National Gender Policy Framework-2022, and Leadership development programs such as "Capacity Building Program for Emerging Women Leaders" (Higher Education Commission. (n.d) from Higher Education Commission Pakistan are playing a critical role in promoting Gender inclusion in HEIs.

### **Personal Ambition and Desire for Positive Impact**

Personal ambition, coupled with a desire for growth and societal impact, can propel women toward leadership M. G. Nakitende (2019). This inner drive becomes a powerful force in their aspiration for influential roles and often includes a desire to bring positive change among female leaders in both developed and underdeveloped countries M. Nakitende (2012). Despite barriers, women are achieving senior-level positions because of their inner motivation and high self-esteem M. G. Nakitende (2019). In Pakistan, women leaders are participating in every walk of life specifically in academia Oplatka (2006); Malik and Courtney (2011); Zarif et al. (2019); Lashari (2023); Islam et al. (2023).

### **Role Model Influence**

Studies conducted in developed countries, including those by Hannum et al. (2015); M. G. Nakitende (2019) Selzer and Robles (2019); and Block et al. (2019), comply with and validate that successful women leaders are perceived as having role models by aspiring leaders and those role models provide inspiration, guidance, and a roadmap for women aspiring to break through traditional barriers. Mentoring by senior women leaders motivates others to join leadership positions Hannum et al. (2015); Bradshaw et al. (2024).

In Pakistan, female role models protect their followers from typical stereotype threats and encourage them to challenge the stereotype Khalid et al. (2017), Khokhar (2018). Khokhar (2018) further adds that the presence of women in leadership positions is seen not just as a symbol of gender equality but also as an effective catalyst for change and empowerment within the university setting.

## Economic Independence

According to M. Nakitende (2012), financial gain is a motivating factor to introduce more women leaders in higher education in the USA. Guliyev (2023) reports that in European countries, women achieve economic independence and gender equality through education and careers.

Studies conducted in Pakistan reported that the pursuit of economic independence is a driving force behind women's leadership aspirations. Leadership roles offer financial stability, making them a strategic path for women seeking economic autonomy Malik and Courtney (2011); R. Ali et al. (2015); A. Naz and Ashraf (2020); R. Ali and Rasheed (2021); Abdullah and Ullah (2022).

## Access to Education

Accessible education transforms women, providing them with skills and confidence for leadership. It breaks historical barriers and opens diverse opportunities for women Longman and Lafreniere (2012); Bennell (2023). According to Hannum et al. (2015), since 1979, women's enrollment has been increasing in higher education institutes: for instance, since 2005, 50% of women with PhDs worldwide earned them in the USA.

Ali et al. (2015) reported that in Pakistan, parents expressed strong support for their daughter's higher education, recognizing it as a key enabler of empowerment, personal development, and employment opportunities. This support is closely tied to broader societal and economic benefits, including enhanced personal autonomy and increased contributions to social development Khokhar (2018).

In essence, these driving factors create a dynamic and multifaceted landscape that propels women toward leadership roles, contributing to the ongoing evolution of gender dynamics in professional spheres.

## **Theme: 02: Silent Barriers and Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership Positions:**

### **Glass Ceiling**

Pervasive cultural norms and traditions hinder women's educational and leadership opportunities exacerbating gender inequality. Developed countries showcase female success in leadership but face ongoing challenges, striving for gender equality Brue (2018). In the USA, despite the overwhelming female presence in the teaching profession, women in leadership roles still encounter an invisible labyrinth of systemic barriers, hindering their ascent to the highest positions Bain and Cummings (2000); Baxter and Wright (2000); Lee (2002); Jackson and Callaghan (2009); Longman and Lafreniere (2012); Davis

and Maldonado (2017); Selzer and Robles (2019); Azizi et al. (2022). Only 23% of women leaders are serving as University Presidents however 40% of women leaders are working as Dean and Provost position women Silbert et al. (2022) Retrieved from: <http://www.aauw.org>. According to the report, this shortage of women leaders in HEI is not because of a lack of qualified and competent women but because of discriminatory attitudes against women. The study further studied that, 70% of women presidents have withdrawn from the leadership position. The Situation is not different in Europe, only 22% of academic leadership are female in European higher education institutes Van Helden et al. (2023). These figures not only underscore the extent of the gender gap in leadership positions but the workplace environment as well which is not supportive for women.

Women in developing countries confront distinct challenges on their path to leadership positions as educational gaps are a key impediment to women's advancement Sarwar and Imran (2019); S. Shah et al. (2020). In Pakistani higher education institutes, male-dominated workplaces and gender-biased attitudes, discourage women's participation in leadership positions Bhatti and Ali (2020); R. Ali and Rasheed (2021). Women leaders in academia experience a lack of autonomy due to the existence of a highly constrained male-dominated bureaucracy in the system, which affects their leadership skills and practices Bhatti and Ali (2020); Abdullah and Ullah (2022).

### **Cultural Expectations and Norms of Conformity**

Researchers reported that, in developed and developing countries, contemporary women still bear more family and household duties, which have been associated with their limited access to power and authority in society Samo et al. (2018); Williams et al. (2016); Mazerolle and Barrett (2018); M. G. Nakitende (2019); Selzer and Robles (2019); Block et al. (2019); Brue (2018); Dickens et al. (2019) ; Evans et al. (2019) . In another study, Lester (2015) stated that women leaders, especially those with children, leave academia at higher rates compared to men to perform their domestic stereotyped roles. According to Morley (2013); Hannum et al. (2015); M. G. Nakitende (2019); Block et al. (2019); Bradshaw et al. (2024), stereotyping and fixed gendered roles limit women's progress in academia. According to them, societal perception is that women are associated with domestic and childcare responsibilities, while men are associated with the professional world. Women who envision themselves in leadership positions often anticipate negative impacts on their private lives, including relationship issues and a lack of time for family responsibilities. According to Evans et al. (2019), in a situation in which women are the only childcare provider, the absence of on-site childcare facilities and late-night faculty meetings create a discouraging environment for female faculty at HEI.

Access to higher education is a critical factor in least-developed countries, according to Malik and Courtney (2011); Mansoor and Bano (2022); Guliyev (2023), women's access to higher education is restricted from their families because parents invest in higher education for their sons, but not their daughters.

Pakistani society is patriarchal in nature. In a patriarchy, social role expectations and cultural norms surrounding marriage age and domestic roles act as formidable barriers, fostering silence among women in leadership roles in developing countries S. J. A. Shah (2010); R. Ali et al. (2015); Bhatti and Ali (2020); Samo et al. (2018); Abdullah and Ullah (2022); S. J. Ali and Zardari (2023); Islam et al. (2023); A. U. Rehman et al. (2024). Another interesting yet painful finding by S. Rehman and Roomi (2012); Bhatti and Ali (2020) suggested that, due to their career aspirations, women in developing countries are not considered for marriage, just because of the stereotyped role of a good wife. Furthermore, in organizational settings, these same women are not appreciated for their hard work and face criticism of their skills and abilities Malik and Courtney (2011); S. Rehman and Roomi (2012); Bhatti and Ali (2020); Islam et al. (2023). Consequently, women often opt for silence, weaving fear into the complex dynamics that sustain gender disparities Woolston (2021); Samo et al. (2018).

### **Structural Barriers:**

#### **Lack of institutional support and facilities**

Longman and Anderson (2018), address various obstacles that hinder women's advancement in leadership roles in their study, such as inflexible scheduling, exclusion from strategic dialogues, tokenism, limited or no access to professional networks and mentorship, and the added responsibility of household and elder care. Findings are supported by Hannum et al. (2015). What is more, women on average are assigned heavier course loads, service, and supervisory assignments as compared to their male colleagues Hannum et al. (2015). Along with all of these, they are expected to be collaborative, democratic, and participative, promoting teamwork and culturally competent Davis and Maldonado (2017). Research suggests that women derive significant benefits from mentor-protégé relationships with individuals of the same gender Selzer and Robles (2019).

According to S. J. A. Shah (2010) and Khokhar (2018) in Pakistan, silence at the workplace is a byproduct of entrenched gender bias and the absence of supportive facilities like childcare, transport, and accommodation. Women face the stereotype that their primary role is housekeeping, perpetuated by preconceived notions held by employers in Pakistan Bhatti and Ali (2020).

For women with family responsibilities, the challenges are amplified due to geographical mobility and blurred time boundaries Bhatti and Ali (2020); Islam et al. (2023) .

### **Fear of Reprisal**

The fear of reprisal, a common reason for silence, keeps women leaders across the globe from addressing issues like wage discrimination, workload, recognition, and mentoring Powell and Butterfield (2015); Hannum et al. (2015) . This fear becomes a significant barrier, preventing open discussions about workplace discrimination. Women in leadership face a “double-bind” where assertiveness is seen as toughness and compassion as a weakness, challenging their competency Oakley (2000); Selzer and Robles (2019); S. Madsen and Longman (2020) .

In developing countries, this complex dynamic often forces women leaders into silence as a survival strategy to avoid backlash Oakley (2000); Maheshwari (2023). For example, women leaders, may become doubtful about their use of authority; they worry their assertive attitude will cause them in trouble and they would be at a loss. As a result, they adopt silence at the workplace Samo et al. (2018) .

### **Collaborative Silence: Unveiling Wage Discrimination**

Silence, unintentionally, may also contribute to the perpetuation of discrimination. The complicity embedded in remaining silent inadvertently supports existing power structures, hindering progress toward gender equality within leadership. According to the report by K. Miller and Vagins (2018), full-time working women in the U.S. earn 84% of men's wages, and at the present pace of progress, pay equality is not projected until 2088. The gender-based wage gap persists in higher education, with some developed countries making strides to address this disparity, such as the USA. In the USA, certain universities have initiated efforts to bridge this gap. While progress is evident, there remains much work to be done in achieving true gender pay equity across academic institutions worldwide Cañas et al. (2019).

In Pakistan, women are also paid less than their male colleagues for the same positions Farooq et al. (2020); Jabbar and Imran (2013). This phenomenon persists in private sector institutions, public sector universities have equal pay scale for male and female.

### **Silence due to Negative Self Perception**

Due to discriminatory attitudes in the workplace, women leaders often develop imposter syndrome, a feeling in which, women doubt their achievements, skills, and competencies. They lose their confidence and avoid senior management positions Hannum et al. (2015); Block et al. (2019).

In Pakistan, Bhatti et al. (2022) highlighted factors such as a lack of Professional development, mentoring, and a discriminatory environment, develop negative self-perceptions among women leaders. Samo et al. (2018) reported that women leaders exhibit, a hesitant attitude in decision-making due to a culture in which their opinions are not taken seriously.

In summary, the environment often forces women leaders into silence to navigate the complex dynamics of gender in leadership, highlighting the need for empowering women to express their leadership confidently S. R. Madsen (2012); S. Madsen and Longman (2020).

### **Theme 03: Coping Strategies Employed by Women Leaders in the Face of Discrimination and Pain Points**

Some of the coping strategies employed by women leaders through skill enhancement and professional development, hiding and distancing, adopting masculine traits, and work-life integration Lester (2015); S. Naz et al. (2017); Seema et al. (2020). This discussion section addresses each of these findings from the literature.

#### **Resilience Building**

Women leaders often focus on developing resilience to navigate challenges. They draw strength from familial bonds, mentorship, and cultural diversity, fostering emotional strength and adaptability Longman and Lafreniere (2012); Powell and Butterfield (2015); Davis and Maldonado (2017); Chance (2022). In the USA, resilience training programs that focus on leadership skills, stress management, and work-life balance are seen as vital for empowering women in academia to overcome obstacles and advance in their careers S. Naz et al. (2017); Johnson and Fournillier (2021).

In Pakistan, resilience among female leaders often involves navigating socio-cultural norms and institutional barriers, with strategies that include forming supportive networks and mentorship from senior women academics Malik and Courtney (2011); Malik (2011); Bhatti and Ali (2021). Women leaders employed various coping mechanisms to manage stress. These included exercise, religious practices, and relying on personal and professional support networks Khokhar (2018).

#### **Network and Mentorship**

Building strong professional networks seeking mentorship provides women leaders with valuable support. They cope with challenges by establishing strong connections with peers and mentors to seek guidance, advice, and a platform to share experiences Brue (2018); Bradshaw et al. (2024). Research suggests that women derive significant benefits from mentor-protégé relationships with

individuals of the same gender Hannum et al. (2015). However, in male-dominated fields, such mentoring dynamics can be challenging to establish due to the scarcity of female mentors.

### **Advocacy and Visibility through Skill Enhancement and Professional Development**

Women leaders employ advocacy as a coping strategy by actively promoting their achievements and contributions to prove themselves. Increasing visibility helps counter stereotypes and challenges gender biases Block et al. (2019). By focusing on professional development, they enhance their competence and confidence, overcoming obstacles S. Madsen and Longman (2020).

### **Hiding and Distancing:**

In the context of workplace discrimination, women leaders employ diverse coping strategies, such as downplaying threats, internalizing discrimination, over-efforting to defy stereotypes, and seeking isolation for protection, showcasing intricate responses to discrimination Block et al. (2019). According to M. G. Nakitende (2019), women leaders tend to downplay inequalities in their workplace as women leaders minimize or underestimate the seriousness of discrimination or challenges they face in the workplace due to their agency. This coping strategy involves not acknowledging the full extent of the threat posed by discriminatory behavior or attitudes, perhaps in an attempt to maintain a sense of resilience or to avoid confronting uncomfortable realities.

### **Adopting Masculine Traits**

In contemporary corporate environments, women in middle and upper management strategically adjust their outward presentation to downplay their femininity. Research indicates they may delay gender-specific responsibilities like marriage and childbirth and minimize social engagements to balance work life Rosa and Clavero (2022). This often involves adopting shorter hairstyles and masculine clothing to enhance credibility, aligning with organizational norms favoring such traits Dickens et al. (2019); Oakley (2000); Mansoor and Bano (2022). According to Bhatti and Ali (2020), women used to be louder while interacting with male colleagues or manage careful interaction with males, using a bit harsh and louder voice tone, to avoid humiliation and harassment from male colleagues.

## Work-Life Integration

Female leaders use flexibility policies to balance work-life conditions such as working from home, flexible working hours, compressed workweeks, and reduced hours and adjunct faculty positions Lester (2015); Williams et al. (2016).

## DISCUSSION

This comprehensive review of the research on women in higher education found overall that women's leadership aspirations uncover shared influences in both developed and developing nations: inclinations toward gender parity, personal drive, and inspiration drawn from female role models Islam et al. (2023); Developed nations show advanced progress, emphasizing diversity's value in leadership M. Nakitende (2012); Hannum et al. (2015); S. Madsen and Longman (2020), however developing countries actively pursue gender equality in education, driven by economic independence Farooq et al. (2020); Bhatti et al. (2022); Maheshwari (2023). Regarding challenges faced by women leaders, progress in developed countries coexists with ongoing discrimination, bias, and stereotypes Hannum et al. (2015); Davis and Maldonado (2017); Chance (2022).

Whereas, developing countries face unique challenges tied to educational gaps, patriarchy, and cultural expectations Morley and Crossouard (2015). Globally, fear of reprisal, workplace discrimination, and lack of mentorship complicate women's advancement. Cultural norms contribute to silence, impacting women's roles and expectations worldwide Davis and Maldonado (2017); Islam et al. (2023). Coping strategies for women leaders worldwide include resilience building, networking, mentorship, advocacy, and visibility through professional development Hannum et al. (2015); Bradshaw et al. (2024). These strategies manifest in various forms depending on the distinct contexts of developed and developing countries, influencing their effectiveness. Globally, women leaders also adopt masculine traits and strive for work-life integration, facing unique challenges and support systems in their environments Hannum et al. (2015); S. Naz et al. (2017); Mansoor and Bano (2022). Moreover, coping mechanisms such as hiding and distancing vary in response to discrimination, shaped by specific cultural and situational contexts Leach and Livingstone (2015).

In the higher education literature, researchers highlighted the importance of promoting work-life balance. There is a need for the implementation of effective institutional policies, such as pausing the tenure clock, flexible working hours, or hybrid working, this will create a supportive workplace for all faculty members, regardless of gender to support work-life balance (Lester, 2015).

## Practical Implications

The current study offers practical insights for supporting gender-inclusive leadership. There is a need to address biases and discrimination against women faculty at the institutional level. Developing countries must introduce gender-friendly educational reforms to empower women in leadership along with implementing leadership training programs emphasizing resilience and negotiation skills. In developed countries, universities should implement flexible work arrangements, acknowledging the diverse challenges women face in balancing personal and professional responsibilities. What is more, policymakers should advocate for equal pay, and family-friendly policies, and address workplace discrimination. These actions can foster more equitable and supportive environments for women in leadership globally.

**Recommendations for Future Research** Future research in the area of women's leadership must address some important issues in developing countries such as "queen-bee syndrome", "glass cliff" and sticky floor" along with supporting and challenging factors faced by women in developing countries through quantitative and mixed methods research approaches. The study strongly recommends Longitudinal studies to track women's leadership paths. The impact of leadership training for women leaders and cultural influences on leadership experiences is imperative. Additionally, for developed countries, it is crucial to expand research on intersectionality for women of color and examine male colleagues' role in promoting gender-inclusive leadership for nurturing women's success and advancing gender equality globally.

## CONCLUSION

This study exposes a complex interplay between, personal aspirations, changing societal norms, and mentoring opportunities to promote women's leadership in higher education. While women leaders are struggling for impact and independence globally, there are specific challenges and supporting factors varying significantly between developed and developing countries. These findings suggest that the perceived negative consequences and increased personal demands may hinder women from expressing their aspirations for leadership roles. There is a dire need for higher education institutions to recognize and support the aspirations of women leaders by supporting access to education, encouraging economic independence, and providing robust support systems that include training, mentoring, and equality along with equity. Addressing these areas effectively will not only empower women to achieve their leadership potential, but it will also serve to enrich the institutions and societies they aim to lead.

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