Pathways to Leadership: A Cross-cultural Analysis of Women Leaders in Pakistan and United States

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of women in leadership roles within higher education institutions in Pakistan and the United States. The main aim is to understand how women describe their experiences in attaining, advancing, and maintaining leadership positions in higher education. It contributes to theoretical understandings of women's leadership and highlighting unique challenges and opportunities in different cultural contexts. This study employs Mezirow's (2003) Critical Reflection Theory as a theoretical framework to guide participants' retrospective storytelling process. Through qualitative research methods including semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis of interview transcripts, the study explores how women navigate their journeys to leadership positions and the challenges they encounter. Despite cultural variations, female leaders in both countries face comparable obstacles such as gender bias and limited training opportunities. To empower these leaders, policies should prioritize formal leadership training, address workplace bias, and support work-life balance initiatives. Policy implications include the implementation of formal leadership training programs, addressing unconscious bias, and supporting family-friendly policies to empower female leaders. Advocacy for legislative measures promoting gender equality in leadership positions is crucial for creating supportive policy environments globally.

Keywords: Cross culture, work life balance, leadership, gender gap, networking, and mentorship

1. Introduction

Globalization shifts in the political landscape, and advancements in technology have significantly influenced leadership paradigms in the twenty-first century (Padilla, 2012). These factors have reshaped organizational models, placing greater emphasis on distributed leadership, and fostering a more relational approach (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Kanter, 2001; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Fletcher, 2004). Current leadership models, often categorized as post-heroic, prioritize transformative elements such as communication and collaboration.

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Cultural disparities pose significant barriers to women assuming leadership roles, particularly in underprivileged nations (Cubillo & Brown, 2003). While rights and opportunities are relatively balanced in Western countries, women in many Asian nations face unequal access to education and legal protections (Insure & Go, 2019; Acker, 2014). Cultural expectations regarding family responsibilities often hinder women's career progression in these regions. In contrast, shared responsibilities in Western countries, including familial duties, contribute to more equal opportunities for women to advance in their careers. Unfortunately, the existing literature lacks comprehensive studies on female leadership in higher education, motivating researchers' aim to provide fresh analysis on the growth of female leadership in both Pakistan and the United States.

Despite global acknowledgment of female underrepresentation in leadership positions, Asia faces prolonged challenges compared to Western nations (Kazmi, 2014). While progress has been made in closing the gender gap, particularly in South Asia, disparities persist, with Pakistan ranking poorly in gender parity metrics (World Economic Forum, 2020, 2021). Limited research on gender inequality in developing countries highlights the need for more comprehensive studies in these regions (Ismail et al., 2011; Abdel & Elsaid, 2012).

Although recent years have seen increased analysis of leadership dynamics worldwide, there remains a dearth of comparative cross-cultural research (Hammad & Alazmi, 2020; Hammad et al., 2022; Dickson et al., 2012). Exploring how national culture influences leadership styles can provide valuable insights into leadership effectiveness across diverse contexts. Additionally, investigating women's experiences in executive leadership roles in higher education can shed light on the pathways and factors contributing to their success, ultimately informing future leadership practices (Briggs, Morrison, & Coleman, 2012; Seidman, 2013; Woollen, 2016; Jones, Hwang, & Bustamante, 2015; Maki, 2015, Vogel & Alhudithi, 2021).

Globalization, political shifts, and technological advancements have profoundly influenced leadership paradigms in the twenty-first century, emphasizing distributed leadership and relational approaches. However, cultural disparities continue to impede women's advancement in leadership roles, particularly in underprivileged nations where unequal access to education and legal protections persist. Researchers' experiences in Pakistan's higher education leadership sector and involvement in American research highlight the importance of cross-cultural insights in understanding leadership development.

1.1   Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to understand the interplay between leadership decisions and cultural contexts, highlighting the impact of cultural factors on managerial trajectories. Through an investigation of the experiences of women in higher education administration across different cultures, the research seeks to;

1. explore the pathways to leadership taken by women in diverse contexts
2. examine the factors contributing to their attainment of executive roles.
3. provide insights into effective leadership practices and promote gender equity in leadership globally

2. Literature Review

Culture encompasses a group's shared beliefs, values, customs, and traditions (Northouse, 2021). Research indicates that culture influences leadership dynamics and shapes people's perceptions (Ayman et al., 2012). However, many leadership studies have predominantly focused on North American and Western European paradigms (Hudea, 2014). Leadership extends beyond mere management and requires inspiring others through setting a positive example. In today's interconnected world, cross-cultural leadership, which integrates diverse ideologies, is essential for organizational success, including academic administration. Effective leaders must embody the desired mindset for their communities, fostering collaboration and innovation across boundaries (Hudea, 2014).

In recent years, international efforts have aimed to enhance gender equality and women's empowerment, as evidenced by initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2017). Despite progress, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions worldwide, with disparities evident in sectors like politics and business (Goryunova et al., 2017). This underrepresentation has negative repercussions for communities and nations, highlighting the importance of including diverse perspectives in decision-making processes (Catalyst, 2018). Notably, there is growing support for women in leadership, driven by dissatisfaction with existing power structures (Gerzema & D'Antonio, 2013).

In academia, initiatives to promote women's leadership have gained traction globally, with various countries implementing programs to address gender disparities (Selzer et al., 2017). Autoethnographic studies provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by women in academic leadership roles, highlighting the importance of organizational support and inclusive practices (Vicary & Jones, 2017). Additionally, debates on positive action strategies emphasize the ongoing efforts to advance gender diversity in higher education leadership (Manfredi, 2017). These discussions are crucial for

fostering a supportive environment for women's career progression and leadership development (Burkinshaw & White, 2017).

Research from diverse cultural contexts sheds light on the complexities of women's leadership experiences, emphasizing the need for tailored interventions and inclusive policies (Parker et al., 2018). In India, socio-cultural barriers hinder women's participation in science and technology fields, highlighting the importance of addressing gender stereotypes (Kameshwara & Shukla, 2017). Similarly, studies from China and Saudi Arabia highlight the significance of organizational culture in shaping women's leadership aspirations (Zhao & Jones, 2017; Alsubaie & Jones, 2017).

Overall, promoting women's leadership in higher education is essential for informed decision-making and organizational success (Madsen, 2015). As society strives for gender equality, enhancing women's visibility and engagement in leadership roles remains a crucial priority (Teague, 2015). By fostering inclusive environments and implementing supportive policies, institutions can empower women to contribute their unique perspectives and talents to the advancement of higher education globally.

Mezirow's (2003) Critical Reflection Theory was employed as a key lens to guide the participants' retrospective story-telling process. Mezirow's thesis is based on the idea that critical self-reflection leads new meaning schemes to develop, resulting in learners seeing the world differently than they did previously (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Mezirow's Critical Reflection Theoretical Framework (1990)
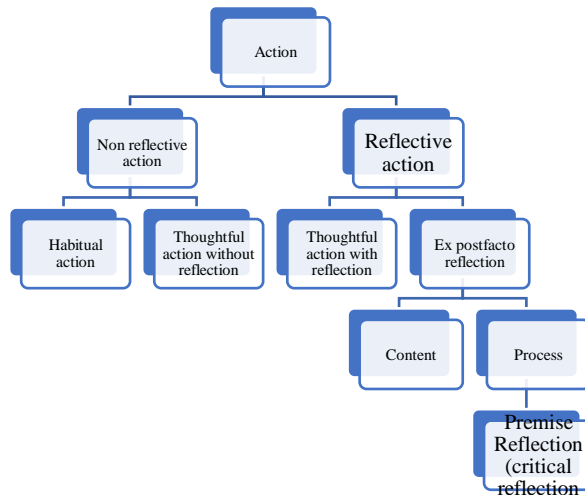
Critical self-reflection and interactive engagement with others demand a heightened level of cognitive functioning, as emphasized by Merriam (2004) and Schwandt (2007). Schwandt emphasizes the importance of reflective processes in adult learning, essential for personal growth and development. Mezirow's Critical Reflection Theory (1987) offers a framework to delve into retrospective perceptions, allowing for a deeper understanding of past experiences and present behaviors. In this study, women leaders were interviewed to recount their professional journeys, shedding light on the factors influencing their leadership development. Mezirow's paradigm enables an exploration of how individuals make sense of their experiences, considering the influence of social, structural, and environmental factors (Wang & King, 2008).

3. Research Methodology

Through narrative histories of female higher education leaders from the US and Pakistan, insights into their leadership trajectories and critical occurrences emerged. By contextualizing these stories within the broader landscape of higher education administration and societal milieu, the study provides direction for career advancement and development.

3.1 Research Design

Participant observation and qualitative interviews were employed, with ten semi-structured interviews conducted across both countries. Through this research approach, valuable insights into the complexities of leadership paths and the influence of culture on leadership trajectories were uncovered, offering practical implications for advancing women in executive positions within higher education.

3.2 Participants of Study

Participants included vice chancellors, associate vice chancellors, deans, or directors from public sector universities. The study employed a targeted approach to provide a detailed examination of women's experiences in executive leadership. While respecting participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and narratives were organized chronologically to illuminate key themes.

3.3 Interview Process

In-person interviews were conducted with American respondents, facilitating a deeper understanding of their communication styles and work environments, while online platforms were utilized for interviews with Pakistani respondents. The interview process commenced with the selection of female higher education leaders from both the US and Pakistan based on snow ball sampling technique. Once identified, potential participants were contacted and invited to participate in the study, providing them with a clear overview of the

research goals and the interview process. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to scheduling the interviews.

Scheduling the interviews involved coordination between the interviewer and participants to find mutually convenient times. In-person interviews were conducted with American respondents, facilitating a deeper understanding of their communication styles and work environments. For Pakistani respondents, online platforms were utilized for interviews. Preparation for the interviews included familiarizing the interviewer with the research objectives, theoretical framework, and interview protocols. A conducive and professional interview environment was established, prioritizing privacy and minimizing potential distractions. The interview remained from 60 to 120 minutes.

Semi-structured interview techniques were employed to allow for flexibility while ensuring that key topics related to leadership trajectories and critical occurrences were addressed. Participant observation techniques were also utilized to gain additional insights into the participants' experiences and perspectives.

3.3 Interview Protocols

The development of interview protocols involved defining specific research objectives and outlining core themes and topics relevant to the study. Semi-structured interview questions were crafted to address these themes, providing a framework for the discussion while allowing for organic exploration of participants' narratives. The sequence of questions was carefully organized to facilitate a chronological exploration of participants' leadership trajectories and critical occurrences. Probes and follow-up questions were incorporated into the protocol to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences and provide deeper insights into the subject matter.

Table 1

Participants Demographic Information

Participants	Title	Pseudonym	Length of service in the position (years)	Length of service in higher education (years)	Age	Race	Marital Status	Children	Degree obtained
US	Associate VC	Elizabeth	10	22	52	White American	Married	Yes	PhD
US	Assistant VC	Alice	3	18	53	White American	Married	Yes	PhD
US	Dean	Kathleen	15	26	56	White American	Married	Yes	PhD
US	Dean	Teresa	8	28	55	Hispanic	Married	No	PhD
US	Dean	Dora	8	17	48	White American	Married	Yes	PhD
PAK	VC	Nida	10	30	55	Rawalpindi	Married	Yes	PhD
PAK	VC	Ammara	9	30	54	Lahore	Married	Yes	PhD
PAK	VC	Sadia	12	28	53	Peshawar	Married	No	PhD
PAK	Dean	Aisha	10	18	55	Mansehra	Married	Yes	PhD
PAK	Dean	Farah	8	22	50	Rawalpindi	Married	Yes	PhD

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis of the interview data was guided by Mezirow's framework, focusing on identifying similarities and differences in leadership paths across cultures. Pseudonyms were used to respect participants' confidentiality, and narratives were organized chronologically to illuminate key themes and critical occurrences.

This research aimed to explore the experiences of women in executive leadership positions within higher education administration and finance in Pakistan and the United States. Through life story interviews, the study reconstructed their journeys to executive roles, focusing on their acquisition, advancement, and evolution within these positions. Interview questions were tailored to elicit nuanced responses, resulting in the identification of common themes across participants as well as unique individual experiences.

The thematic analysis procedure employed in this study began with the meticulous transcription of interviews conducted with female leaders from both Pakistan and the United States. Researchers immersed themselves in the data, repeatedly reviewing transcripts to grasp the nuances of participants' narratives. Through open coding, significant phrases and quotes relevant to the research objectives were identified and assigned initial codes, facilitating the systematic organization of the data. These initial codes were then grouped into broader themes based on shared meanings and patterns, with careful consideration given to the coherence and relevance of each theme. Through iterative analysis, themes were reviewed; refined, and defined, ensuring they accurately captured the essence of participants' experiences. The final set of themes was synthesized into a cohesive narrative, elucidating the relationships between themes and uncovering overarching patterns in the data. To enhance the validity of the analysis, member checking or peer debriefing may have been conducted, allowing for feedback from participants or colleagues familiar with the research.

A: Common Themes

4.1   Gender Disparities, Stereotypes, and Bias

The study reveals a significant gender gap in leadership, with women often perceived as less competent by male colleagues. This leads to self-doubt and reduced motivation to pursue leadership roles.

Teressa felt confident in her abilities and being prepared gave her even more confidence. Higher education is primarily a male-dominated setting.

"There's been a few times when people have said things like. Oh, you're young. Other opportunities will come up. It is annoying because it's like you don't judge people on opportunities based on how old they are. You judge them

based on what they can do. I don't like that I don't like being judged for how you look." (Teresa)

"My first tenure track position was at the University of Wisconsin, and at the opening faculty meeting for the entire college, the department Chair of Economics had the opportunity to introduce the two new faculty in economics. He stood up in front of everyone, and he said this is William Blank and now he's published in the Journal of Macroeconomics. His PhD is from the University of Iowa. And we are so pleased that he's on our faculty. Then he introduced me and said this is Michelle Traywick. She's married and has no children. There was some bias there and that was troubling. For the most part I ignored. People who were not supportive. When I left that job after one year, I only stayed one year. I scheduled an appointment with the department chair so. I could tell him. What he had done. Because he didn't realize he had done it. It wasn't unconscious bias against women. He was a man of a generation. Women were somehow less and I needed to point it out to him. But I didn't do it till I was leaving. Because he had too much power over me." (Dora)

"In my experience, gender-related challenges mostly centered around communication in larger groups. While leading a predominantly female department, I felt less of this, but in meetings with other departments, I sometimes felt my contributions were overlooked. These were minor instances, but I didn't face major obstacles directly linked to my gender." (Dora)

"The main challenge I faced as a woman was feeling comfortable in meetings and working with others, especially when I was the only woman in the group." (Alice)

"I had no particularly challenging circumstances. I had male coworkers while I was the chair, and I got along with them. a little, but not much, from the office side." (Sadia)

"I was leg-pulled by my female colleague in college days when I was foreseen by them as someone who can lead them in coming years."

"Facing difficulties is not uncommon for a Women in a traditional society like ours." (Aisha)

"No doubt it is challenging in our setting. However, I made my image as reserved woman when I was faculty member. It helped me a lot." (Nida)

"Yes – as recent as five years ago a senior male administrator sent me a "helpful" (being sarcastic here) article about how to dress. I ignored it."(Kathline)

"Generally, when somebody tells me I cannot do something, oh boy, that's a motivation for really doing something right. I do not get discouraged when people tell me that I cannot do something for whatever reason. Your English is not good. You're Hispanic, you're a woman. Anything right. Instead, I will do it. Even better. And I will show you that you were wrong about me." (Elizbeth)

4.2   Family-Work Balance

Participants acknowledged the significance of family and work-life balance in their decision-making. Women in the study who remained in or re-entered the workforce aimed to achieve a harmonious balance between work and family life. Elizabeth, for instance, found it challenging to juggle her job and family responsibilities when her children were younger.

When my children were smaller, I had problems. Working late and attending conferences means that family support is crucial for raising children. When my children grew older and became independent. (Elizabeth)

Finding a balance between work and life may be difficult for anybody, but it can be especially difficult for those who are family caregivers and have duties outside of the home (American Association of University Women, 2016; Maki, 2015; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

Sometimes the hours are long. Or so you have to figure out how to be at home with your family like in the evening after school and if you have extra work to do, you have to do it at night after the kids go to sleep or early in the morning. I don't think that's necessarily just for women, but certainly, something that I felt. There's kind of that feeling of guilt if you're not around and sometimes you have to go with dinner for lunch for work and so you can't be at home for dinner. (Elizbeth)

My work-life balance was possible only due to setting my priorities. (Aisha)

I prioritized my family over my career, which prevented me from regretting neglecting my primary responsibility towards them. Additionally, I had the support of my husband. (Farah)

My husband always remained at my back. Without his unconditional support the journey was not even possible. (Farah)

I'm lucky that my husband doesn't mind that I'm at work all the time or that I'm working after hours that I'm working. (Teresa)

I had a friend who was pregnant. I was pregnant. She was pregnant then I covered for her while she was on maternity leave, and she covered me when I was on maternity leave. (Elizbeth)

When I was younger and my children were younger, it was challenging because traveling meant extensive preparation, such as making their lunches in advance and arranging everything for their care while I was away. These additional responsibilities were not typically faced by males in similar situations (Dora).

4.3   Preparation for Leadership

Many participants in the study highlighted the lack of formal training for leadership roles and the reliance on experiential learning. Despite the absence of structured leadership development programs, participants felt equipped for their roles through active involvement in university functions and various committees. This hands-on experience provided them with competence in areas such as budgets, student affairs, personnel matters, and strategic planning. Additionally, pursuing certificates and engaging in career-related activities such as committee work, networking, and mentorship were instrumental in their preparation for higher education leadership roles. Participants emphasized the importance of firsthand experience at each level of the organization, highlighting the value of understanding the challenges faced by those below them. Mentorship emerged as a key factor in their success, with many attributing their achievements to the guidance and support of others who had similar positions or were more senior.

"I never received formal training for leadership roles; they simply came my way. Through active involvement in university functions like the Senate and various committees, I gained competence in areas such as budgets and student affairs." (Elizbeth)

"I think that I was able to be successful due to the mentorship of others. Either other people who had similar positions or people who had positions that were kind of one step above and beyond mine." (Kathleen)

"No training, my 30 years job experience helped me a lot. I learnt from my colleagues and my bosses." (Ammara)

4.4 Leadership Styles

Despite possessing ideal leadership skills, women in US society are often viewed as second-class citizens in leadership competitions. Every interviewee said that their own leadership style was collaborative and facilitative. One of them said her approach is in line with situational leadership; it is typically facilitative, and she supports shared governance. She is, however, at ease switching their leadership styles to a more authoritarian and decisive top-down style in times of crisis to provide the necessary orders and direction.

"Teamwork, keeping in mind the bigger picture, and having good intentions is more important to the leader than his own interests. No shortcuts here; this will improve your reputation." (Ammara)

"I believe in teamwork and participation of all stakeholders in decision making." (Nida)

"My leadership and management style varies from time and time and from quarter to quarter." (Teresa)

"In a team environment I consider myself a team leader and give equal respect to each member. (Sadia)

"I support collaboration and the involvement of all team members in the decision-making process." (Alice)

"Set by example, transformational leadership style, encourage people to grow (Dora)"

B: Different Themes

4.5 Networking (US)

The interviewees had shared extensive networks in addition to mentors, and many of their employment prospects came from outside sources. All the women were ready to apply for or accept positions, but the opportunity arose through a series of fortunate events, as was explained below.

There's a position that's posted and people can apply for it rather than just saying, oh. Here's the interim Dean position, and it's going to be Jane. I'm saying that because I've gotten most of my jobs that way, where it was, we want you to do this. (Alice).

As a leader, it's crucial to recognize and nurture talent within your team. This means being comfortable with your own leadership to encourage others to pursue opportunities for growth and advancement (Kathleen).

I also developed a network outside my university. It was in this network that I could be completely candid about my own context. I also had colleagues who made simple suggestions. (Teresa)

4.6   God's Plan (Pakistan)

Many Pakistani women affirmed their belief in God. They all acknowledged the presence of God in the possibilities that came their way, and most of them believed that everything that occurred in their lives was part of God's divine plan. When many of the women talked about events in which they had faced some form of difficulty during the interviews, they mentioned relying on their faith in God to help them.

I maintained my faith, and with Allah's help, I overcame obstacles. I stayed focused on my work, persevered to achieve my goals, and avoided complaining during challenging times, knowing that few would offer genuine support. Instead, I relied on Allah's grace and mercy, which surpassed my own abilities and answered my prayers (Farah).

I have a strong belief in God Allah put me here, and Allah will take me away. (Farah).

"There are a couple of traits that inherently I have such as positive approach to life, optimism, and patience. Of course, support of family and blessings of Almighty." (Aisha)

4.7   Workplace Conflicts: Female Rivalry (Pakistan)

The rivalry amongst women was a recurring subject throughout the interviews. All the women acknowledged that it had been difficult for them to lead males, but in their interactions with other women, they had come with disloyalty, bias, and criticism.

Even though my career remained throughout in the women-oriented institutes I faced hurdles, prejudice, biasedness, and long-kept grudges. The challenges were from men, women, and the system alike. (Farah)

I was leg-pulled by my female colleague in college days when I was foreseen by them as someone who can lead them in coming years. (Aisha)

"My female coworkers did not accept me as a department head. They consistently displayed their negative behavior and worked against me." (Ammara)

4.8   Importance of Mentorship and Coaching (US)

Many female leaders credited early career mentoring for helping them recognize their talents and develop their leadership philosophies. They appreciated how their mentors consistently pushed them beyond their comfort zones to achieve more.

I had a Dean who mentored me while I was his Associate Dean. He was my boss. But he took a lot of time to provide me with confidence. He provided financial resources for me to pursue professional development opportunities. (Dora)

Some of the respondents stated that they had gained knowledge from various people they had encountered while pursuing careers in leadership.

"Yes, I have had many people (a dean, a chair) who have given me advice on how to handle a difficult situation or how to evaluate opportunities. I also developed a network outside my university. It was in this network that I could be completely candid about my own context." (Elizbeth)

"I got a coach, and this coach was excellent, and this person was very helpful in trying to help me navigate the objectives that I wanted to achieve." (Cathline)

Overall, female leaders from US side appreciate support and encouragement that comes from mentors and try to emulate leadership traits of their mentors.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings emphasize the resourcefulness and adaptability of women in preparing for leadership roles within higher education. Despite the lack of formal training programs, participants demonstrated a proactive approach to acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge through hands-on experience and self-directed learning. This highlights the importance of providing opportunities for experiential learning and mentorship to support women's leadership development. Many organizations offer leadership development programs to prepare individuals for leadership roles (Furman, 2012; DeFrank-Cole et al., 2014; Lumby, 2014). Women often feel unprepared and underkilled for administrative positions without such programs (Morris & Laipple, 2015). Turner et al. (2013) highlight that women are frequently responsible for navigating their leadership journey alone. By leveraging their existing expertise and seeking

mentorship from experienced leaders, women can effectively navigate the complexities of higher education leadership roles. However, the reliance on informal networks and experiential learning also points to the need for greater institutional support and investment in leadership development programs tailored to the unique needs of women leaders in academia.

Women also face comments on their physical appearance, with hair color being used to estimate age. The predominance of men in leadership exacerbates these disparities, forcing women to combat stereotypes and biases. Women often face marginalization, chauvinism, and condescension in male-dominated environments (Carnes et al., 2015, Howard, 2018).

Balancing leadership responsibilities with family obligations, particularly for those with children, posed challenges. With nearly all participants being mothers, managing work and family commitments was a recurring issue. The work-life balance journey, from aspiring to start a family to navigating employment decisions, was complex (Long, 2008; Parker, 2015).

When describing their leadership philosophies, they frequently utilized terms like "inclusive," "flexible," "collaborative," and "team based." Two of them also identified as "servant leaders." The views of each respondent are consistent with current leadership theory, which supports Greenleaf's (1977) Servant Leadership and Yukl's (2010) Flexible Theory. Eagly et al. (2003) found that female leadership styles are more transformational, and that women Research suggests that female leaders are more likely to use rewards to incentivize performance, focusing on qualities that predict effectiveness (Eagly, 2007). However, women still face obstacles accessing leadership roles and encounter prejudice and opposition when they do (Eagly, 2007).

In the US, many women's prospects for development came not just from their superiors but also frequently from their network of peers and acquaintances. It is crucial, though, that the person be completely ready for a certain position. To meet the requirements for the post, particularly the minimum requirement, Elizbeth concluded, "You must be thoroughly prepared yourself".

This study supported Tanenbaum's (2011) findings that American women view one another as competition rather than allies. Women contribute to the devaluation of women, according to a previous study on organizational oppression by Aschcraft and Pacanowsky (1996) that looked at how women practiced in workplaces. The bias of other women, according to Kaiser and Spalding (2015), is a barrier that could also impede the advancement of women. Women in my study discovered, like the women in Dunn's et al (2014) study, that peers and coworkers made deliberate attempts to impede their promotions. They talked about power struggles with men and women who were on the same

level as them as well as with members of their teams, as well as difficulties with coworkers who felt intimidated by their professional advancement. However, this study also discovered that many of the challenges women faced included other women.

Mentorship emerged as a recurring theme among the five American women leaders interviewed. Two women described their mentors as diverse in expertise and background. The interviewees emphasized the importance of having a range of formal mentors, regardless of gender. According to nearly all US respondents, effective leadership hinges on both having a mentor and mentoring others. The emphasis on intergenerational relationships among leaders may stem from the significance of role modeling for female leaders. Additionally, family values and responsibilities may play a role. It is found that Pakistani women don't naturally build networks.

This study reveals that female leaders in the U.S. and Pakistan encounter similar challenges despite cross-cultural differences. Despite facing gender and age discrimination, underestimation, and negative evaluation, female leaders in both countries demonstrate efficiency and high performance. The findings contribute to understanding the pathways of women leaders in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in both countries. Common themes among respondents include respect for the same leadership style, workplace issues, work-life balance, and leadership development. However, disparities exist in problematic female coworkers, mentorship and coaching, networking, and faith in God. Overall, female leaders face challenges related to family responsibilities, age and appearance bias, minority group treatment, communication in large groups, negotiation, unfair treatment, and personal life judgments.

Most of the participants had no formal training. They worked hard and learnt from their experience (learning by doing). They have provided opportunities, or they have taken advantage of small leadership opportunities and voluntary engagement in leadership. Female Pakistani leaders value leadership coaching, a solid reputation, family support, published work, optimism, patience, and a great CV in terms of publications, research funding, and M.Phil and PhD students.

6. Recommendations

This study has outlined following recommendations based on conclusions;

1. Develop and implement formal leadership training programs tailored to the needs of female leaders in both Pakistan and the United States. These programs should focus on skill development, confidence-building, and navigating challenges specific to women in leadership roles.

2. Encourage professionalism and cooperation among female coworkers towards female bosses in Pakistan. Additionally, male leaders should actively support and provide opportunities for women to step into leadership roles, fostering a more inclusive and supportive work environment.

3. Facilitate mentorship and networking opportunities for women in both countries to enhance their leadership skills, boost confidence, and expand professional networks. Women should actively engage in mentoring and networking to further their career progression.

4. In the United States, female executives should address issues like the glass ceiling openly and advocate for policies that promote gender equality in leadership positions. Providing salary negotiation training can empower women to negotiate fair compensation.

5. Future research should explore women's leadership paths across career stages, analyze success and failure stories across Asian countries, conduct more studies within Pakistan, and compare leadership styles across developing nations.

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