

## Barriers to Women's Career Advancement in Pakistan: Insights from Women in Senior Management Roles

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### Abstract

This research delves into the challenges impeding women's advancement into higher management roles within Pakistani workplaces. Employing qualitative methods, specifically semi-structured interviews, with six female higher management position holders in higher education institutions, the study explores the various barriers encountered along their career trajectories and the strategies to overcome them. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, engaging in interviews lasting between 30 to 60 minutes. The findings reveal obstacles such as limited access to continuing education, subtle workplace discrimination, and biased colleague treatment. Additionally, the study highlights the effectiveness of family-friendly policies, such as remote work and flexible scheduling, in assisting women in balancing professional and parenting responsibilities. Furthermore, it identifies the need for women to adopt traditionally male behaviours, like assertiveness, to advance in their careers. This paper contributes by filling a gap in HR management and higher education, in which empirical studies on the status of women faculty and the barriers they face have been limited. Overall, the research underscores the importance of precisely addressing women's career-related challenges in career progression and provides a roadmap for further exploration by scholars in this field.

**Keywords:** Women's Career Development, Academia, Barrier, Underrepresentation

**Introduction**

Despite global efforts to eliminate gender inequality across various domains, the disparity in managerial roles remains a significant challenge worldwide, including in Pakistan. According to the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2021), Pakistan ranks 153rd out of 156 countries regarding gender parity in 'economic participation and opportunity,' with a score of 0.369, indicating nearly full parity. Pakistan has the highest gender difference among South Asian countries, at 55% (Abrar ul Haq et al., 2019). However, the subsection focusing on 'legislators, senior officials, and managers' reveals a stark contrast, with nearly twice as many men as women holding managerial positions in Pakistan. This imbalance diminishes diversity and leads to unilateral decision-making, resulting in human rights violations and neglect. This study aims to explore the barriers contributing to the underrepresentation of women in senior management positions in Pakistan and provide recommendations for improvement. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, specifically semi-structured interviews, the study will target women in senior positions selected through purposive and snowball sampling. By tapping into the experiences and insights of women in leadership roles, the study seeks to identify the barriers they have encountered in their careers and the strategies they have employed for advancement. Leveraging Barbara Risman's "gender as a structure" theory (Risman & Davis, 2013), the study will analyse the data, categorizing them into individual, interactional, and organizational levels to understand the challenges comprehensively. Through this multi-faceted approach, the study aims to develop a theoretical framework for creating a conducive environment for women's career advancement in Pakistan.

**Background Information**

To clarify the rationale behind selecting a specific theoretical framework to investigate the underrepresentation of women in managerial roles, it is imperative to have a foundational understanding of other theories in this domain. The discourse surrounding gender garnered scholarly attention in the early 20th century, with biologists and psychologists attributing differences in masculinity and femininity to supposed changes in hormonal compositions and brain functionalities between the legally recognized genders of that era, namely females and males (Risman & Davis, 2013, pp. 734-735). Midway through the century, social scientists probed this subject, yielding diverse explanations for gender and related phenomena like gender inequality. Two significant theories emerged during this period, offering contrasting perspectives. Eminent sociologists, such as Kanter (1977), as cited in Risman & Davis (2013) and Epstein (1988, as cited in Risman & Davis, 2013), advocated for gender structuralism theory, positing that gender is a product of societal institutions and frameworks. This theory contends that gender equality could be achieved by providing equal opportunities to both genders, somewhat downplaying the intrinsic significance of gender itself. However, critiques surfaced when empirical studies revealed privileged treatment, such as the "glass escalator" phenomenon favouring men in white-collar professions, challenging the purview of gender structuralism theory within labour markets and workplaces (p. 740). Conversely, other scholars spotlighted the active construction, reinforcement, and regulation of gendered behaviours, exemplified by Acker's (1990, 1992), as cited in Risman & Davis (2013) assertion that gender is deeply entrenched within organizational structures. Acker argued that organizational frameworks inherently favour men, even with the inclusion of women, perpetuating barriers hindering women's ascent to higher positions through career progression (p. 741). Nevertheless, the "doing gender" theory encounters limitations in

discerning cues, indicating the absence of systematically gendered behaviours. Alongside these theories, an integrative approach (Risman & Davis, 2013, p. 742) has emerged, emphasizing intersectionality, whereby a mass of social background characteristics collectively shape the construction, manifestation, and consequences of gender in an individual's life track.

### **Objective of the Study**

Based on the issues highlighted, the primary element of this research is to identify the significant barriers concerning career advancement among women employees in management positions.

- To examine the barriers experienced by women impeding their career advancement at managerial positions.

The research directs to investigate the barriers encountered by women that hinder their progression into managerial positions. This inquiry involves exploring obstacles such as cultural, organizational, and individual. By examining these barriers, the study sheds light on women's challenges in advancing their careers and identifies potential interventions to promote gender equality and encourage women in management roles within educational institutions.

### **Literature Review**

Women are significantly developing in securing top managerial positions in the communal world, linked to positive outcomes such as enhanced innovation, stakeholder orientation, firm performance, and corporate governance. However, women remain underrepresented in academic spheres, facing challenges in achieving status, authority, and career equality. Statistics from the World's Women 2010 report reveal that although women comprise 25% of researchers and 42% of academic institutes and higher education institutions, they remain a minority in academic roles (Ceci et al., 2014). Despite women constituting 60% of graduates globally, only 33.7% of academic staff are women, with UK universities having 42.6% female academic staff. However, only 18.7% reach the professorial level, and 42% work part-time.

In European universities, women hold only 10% of rectors' positions and fill just 20% of the highest research posts. Despite efforts and slogans promoting gender equality in Europe, women's presence in positions of academic excellence and power within academia remains limited. The underrepresentation of women at higher academic and senior management levels in universities remains a significant concern. This issue is particularly crucial from a Pakistani perspective, as the country lags far behind in women's workforce participation and their representation in academic management roles.

Pakistan ranks, unfortunately, in the Gender Equality Index, holding the 153rd position out of 156 countries, as highlighted by (Hausmann et al., 2021). According to Punjab Development Statistics (2013), the number of female teaching staff in general universities of Punjab increased from 708 (40.3% of the total) in 2002–03 to 2132 (42.8% of the total) in 2011–12 (Yousaf, 2018). However, most of these women occupy junior hierarchical positions, and comprehensive data on their distribution across hierarchical levels and fields is unavailable.

Given this context, it is crucial to investigate the challenges and barriers women academics face in Pakistan. This study aims to contribute insights to the existing literature, focusing on the Pakistani perspective of this underexplored issue. It is postulated that increasing the representation of women in higher decision-making positions could significantly reduce

discrimination and enhance gender equality. In a developing and challenging society like Pakistan, retaining talented women in leadership roles is essential, as women often bring non-hierarchical, consultative, collaborative, and interpersonally sensitive approaches to management settings, as emphasized by (Kellerman et al., 2007; Bornstein, 2007).

### **Barriers experienced by women in Career Advancement**

The advancement of women in academic hierarchies is impeded by a heap of barriers spanning across cultures and professions. Despite the growing presence of women in managerial roles, men predominantly occupy these positions. Their barriers can be categorized into cultural, organizational, and individual.

Cultural barriers encompass societal norms, stereotypes, and biases that dictate gender roles and expectations. Organizational barriers arise from institutional structures, policies, and practices that inadvertently or intentionally disadvantage women. Individual barriers pertain to internalized beliefs, self-doubt, and confidence issues that women may experience in male-dominated environments. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that involves challenging cultural norms and stereotypes, implementing gender-inclusive policies and practices within organizations, and providing support and resources to empower women to overcome individual barriers. By demolishing these barriers, we can create a more equitable and inclusive academic environment where women can thrive and contribute fully to their fields.

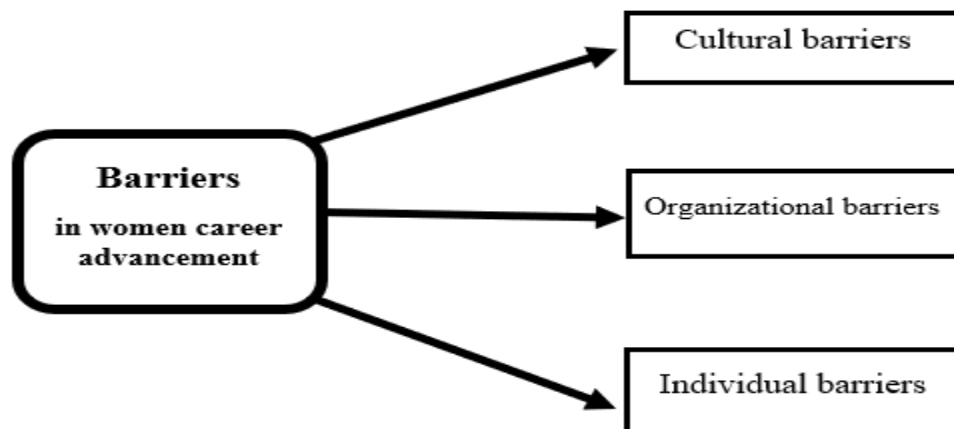


Figure 1: Framework of Barriers to Women’s Career Advancement

### **Cultural barriers**

The hindrances faced by women in achieving prominent academic positions stem from discrimination and cultural bias, as highlighted by (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Heilman, 2001; Schein, 2001). In Pakistan, Alas and Mousa (2016), along with Mousa and Alas (2016a, 2016b) reveal how deeply ingrained cultural norms and societal values shape workplace dynamics, portraying men as primary breadwinners and prescribing traditional gender roles for women. Further exacerbating these challenges is the reinforcement of masculinity within Pakistani society, as illuminated by studies applying Hofstede and Hofstede's (2005) cultural model to the healthcare sector (Mousa, 2017). Within the higher education sector, Mohamed et al (2021); Mousa and Ayoubi (2019) shed light on the difficulty in recognizing women academics as talented due to clashes with cultural expectations.

Mousa (2017, 2018a, 2018b); Mohamed et al (2021) underscore the mounting pressure faced by working women in Pakistan due to cultural biases and discriminatory attitudes, perpetuating inequalities in academic and professional spheres.

These challenges are further compounded by cultural stereotypes that influence individuals from an early age, shaping their behaviours and perceptions. Connell's Hegemonic Masculinity theory (1987) elucidates how societal privileging of a singular form of masculinity maintains male dominance and female subordination. Additionally, gendered childcare and domestic responsibilities expectations limit women's opportunities for advancement within organizations, as Taylor-Abdulai et al (2014) discussed.

Despite strides towards gender equality, gender stereotyping remains pervasive, with many individuals harbouring implicit biases that impact evaluations of individuals and their work, as evidenced by studies such as (Bombuwela and De Alwis, 2013; Faiza, 2013). These biases contribute to inequality by fostering expectations of greater competence from men, resulting in unequal rewards and opportunities even when women possess equivalent qualifications and capabilities (Schwanke, 2013; Ghaus, 2013).

### **Organizational Barriers**

Pakistan is a traditional society with a strong emphasis on male authority, where men typically make decisions regarding various aspects of women's lives, such as their education, choice of field, occupation, and marriage partner. Historically, women in Pakistan have been confined to domestic roles and unpaid work. However, over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in women pursuing higher education and entering the workforce. Despite these advancements, women continue to face various forms of discrimination once they enter the workforce. Women primarily worked in gender-segregated academic institutions. However, with population growth and the expansion of professional education, more women have secured positions in co-educational institutions. Despite these changes, women remain underrepresented in universities, which have traditionally been male-dominated environments. The concept of academic meritocracy may also be biased towards masculine norms, perpetuating practices that favour male academics. The typical career path in academia, which emphasizes research activity and long hours at work, may be structured according to a male-centric view of success. This "male" university culture is characterized by a strong work ethic prioritizing extensive research, teaching, and paper writing. Researchers such as Brink et al (2013); Remler and Perma (2009) have highlighted these challenges and the need to address gender biases in academia.

### **Individual Barrier**

When considering individual barriers, two significant perspectives emerge regarding the underrepresentation of women in senior positions within academia. Some argue that women lack the necessary skills, interests, or time to engage in rigorous scholarly work. Secondly, there is the assertion that men deliberately discriminate against women to maintain their authority. However, the reality is more nuanced, with subtle dynamics operating at individual and institutional levels (Bombuwela & De Alwis, 2013; Batool et al., 2013; Acker, 2006; Bailyn, 2003). Notably, there are evident disparities, or "gaps," concerning women's academic responsibilities, household chores, and family obligations. Many female academics feel burdened by disproportionate service duties within their departments, often investing more time than their male counterparts in childcare, housework, and elder care (Bombuwela & De Alwis, 2013; Robbins & Simpson, 2009; Side & Robbins, 2007). Some women may sacrifice

their careers to prioritize their roles as wives and mothers, while others take maternity leave or request shorter workdays to care for their children. Consequently, these factors can impede their prospects for advancement. Simplistic explanations for these trends include interruptions in women's careers due to parental leaves Acker & Armenti (2004) or their inability to remain in positions long-term due to home and parenting responsibilities, often resulting in women being hired with less experience than their male counterparts.

### **Methodology**

The chosen methodology for this study is a qualitative research approach, specifically semi-structured interviews with senior management position holders' females in higher education institutions in Pakistan. Inclusion criteria encompass three key components: participants must be women, currently employed in senior management roles within the higher education sector, and possess at least three years of full-time managerial experience. Exclusion criteria comprise individuals who do not meet the inclusion criteria and those unwilling to participate in the study. Given the underrepresentation of women in senior positions, I anticipate that identifying suitable participants and conducting the recruitment process will require significant time and effort. Accordingly, each interview is projected to last between 30 to 60 minutes, resulting in transcriptions of 2000 to 6000 words. The interviews were conducted face-to-face to ensure confidentiality and convenience. Participants were encouraged to interview face to face, although they could enable it upon request. The interview questions were prepared in English, allowing the interviewees to choose their preferred language, Urdu or English. The targeted number of participants was based on saturation and was selected through non-probability sampling methods such as purposive and snowball sampling. Therefore, the researcher has leveraged her social network to identify potential participants and requested assistance contacting acquaintances in senior management positions. Following initial interviews, participants were asked to refer other women in senior management roles who may be interested in participating in the study. Some respondents rescheduled interview times, while others declined due to time constraints.

Before starting the interviews, participants were given an informed consent form via email and instructed to review its contents. They were explicitly asked for consent to record the interview, and audio recordings were made only with their explicit agreement. Participants were also asked to reaffirm their consent both before and after the recording commenced. The interview questions were structured into two sections: the first focused on gathering demographic information. The second section delved into the various barriers they encountered in their careers. Participants were prompted to discuss barriers within their family, workplace, and broader society.



**Table 1 Research participants: Designation and length of experience**

Participants	Pseudonym	Overall work experience	Current position Work experience	Current position	Gender
WCA-P1	DSA	26 years	5 years	Dean	Female
WCA-P2	DNS	23 years	6 years	Director	Female
WCA-P3	DFJ	22 years	4 years	Director	Female
WCA-P4	MBY	25 years	8 years	Additional Registrar	Female
WCA-P5	DNR	20 years	4 years	Deputy Registrar	Female
WCA-P6	MS	30 years	13 years	Assistant Registrar	Female

As mentioned above, six interviews have been conducted with representatives of the target population. Each interview was transcribed using NVivo-12 software and carefully reviewed multiple times to familiarize the researcher with the subject matter. Noteworthy narratives emphasized points and highlighted vital aspects intentionally addressed during the interviews. Subsequently, a separate file was created, with pseudo names assigned to the respondents in the second column. Subsequent columns were labelled obstacles, recommendations, and additional insights. Relevant information from the transcriptions, including significant quotes, was then coded and organized within the respective cells. This systematic approach facilitated the analysis of interview transcriptions. The analysis identified three overarching categories of themes through inductive and deductive coding and analysis. Confidentiality and privacy were essential concerns of this research; therefore, the participants' identity and their institutes and departments' names were converted into pseudo-names and identities. Participants were given informed consent forms and told that their participation in this study was voluntary. They are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time.

Furthermore, one primary limitation of this methodology is its inherent time-consuming nature, which restricts the ability to include a more significant number of respondents despite providing a thorough understanding of individual cases. Additionally, the analysis of interviews may lack complete objectivity as specific points could be overlooked or subject to varying interpretations. Another limitation pertains to the composition of the target viewers. While the selection aimed to understand how individuals overcome barriers, the majority of interviewees ended up being single and holding higher education degrees, mainly from recognized institutions. Consequently, the study may only scratch the surface of barriers, highlighting the need for further research targeting women of varying educational backgrounds and parental statuses to depict the obstacles hindering their career advancement comprehensively. This indicates a significant gap for future research endeavours within the Pakistani context.

### Data Analysis

To analyse the data, the author adopted the following three-step process: familiarization with the data, coding the data, and creating themes Strauss & Corbin (1990); the same approach

was used by (Hennekam et al., 2020). The author transcribed all the interviews into a simple Word document to become familiar with the data. This involved examining the data collected from each university separately through NVivo-12 software. Subsequently, the data collected from the interviews were combined, and the researcher constructed themes. The researcher paid attention to the respondents' contexts and the themes emerging from the data. This aligns with Weick (1989); Alvesson and Kärreman (2011), who promote a greater focus on respondent sense-making by considering the respondents' discourse as a social tie that links researchers, respondents, and the concept under consideration. Kvale (1983) clarifies that an interview subject continuously yields and contains meaning on real-world phenomena. The researcher attempted to attain the maximum benefit from the interviews. Alvesson (2011) highlights that the collected data cannot be easily codified, but analysis that guarantees rational interpretation is nevertheless occasionally possible. Subsequently, the author used NVivo to code his transcripts independently and form the descriptive codes. Furthermore, the author used coding to develop patterns from the descriptive codes and subsequently ensure that the meanings the respondents communicated and engaged in were indeed and sufficiently reflected. Lastly, the author converted descriptive codes into themes (Morrow, 2005).

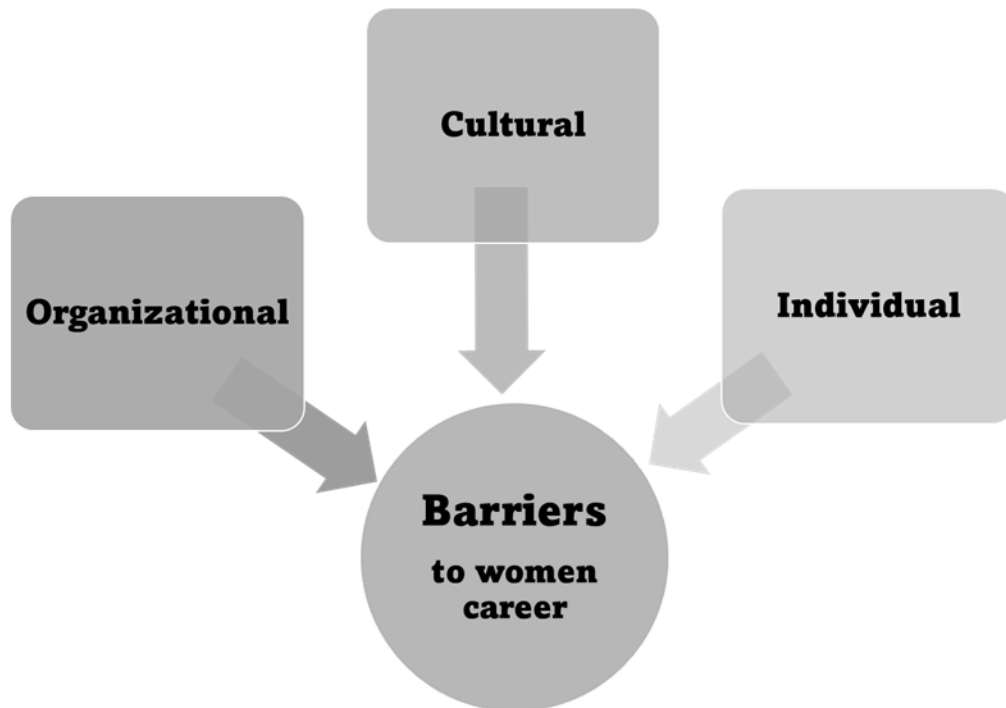
### **Findings and Discussion**

The study uncovers many challenges hindering women's advancement into higher management positions within Pakistani workplaces. Cultural barriers, deeply ingrained in societal norms and biases, perpetuate gender inequalities by dictating traditional gender roles and expectations. Organizational barriers embedded within institutional structures and workplace culture further impede women's progress through biased practices and male favouritism. Additionally, individual barriers stemming from internalized beliefs and societal pressures hinder women's confidence and decision-making abilities. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of the obstacles faced by women in their professional journeys, highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions to dismantle these barriers and foster gender equality in Pakistani workplaces.

Participants of the study expressed some concerns related to career advancement. Academics shared common interests in some themes, which were grouped as subthemes under the main themes of barriers. Barriers were those hurdles that influence the academic journey of women toward a career.

Barriers to women's career advancement encompass a spectrum of challenges, including cultural, organizational, and individual obstacles. Cultural barriers are rooted in societal norms, stereotypes, and biases that shape perceptions of gender roles and capabilities, often favouring men over women in management and professional settings. Organizational barriers arise from institutional structures, policies, and practices that perpetuate gender inequalities, such as biased hiring and promotion processes, lack of equal opportunities, and inadequate support for work-life balance. Individual barriers manifest as internalized beliefs, self-doubt, and confidence issues that hinder women's assertiveness and advancement in male-dominated environments. Together, these barriers impede women's progress in their careers, perpetuating gender disparities in the workplace.





**Cultural Barrier:** Cultural barriers in women's career advancement encompass obstacles stemming from entrenched cultural norms, attitudes, and preferences that prioritize men's roles and expectations over those of women. These barriers manifest in various forms, including societal expectations regarding gender roles, biases favouring men in professional settings, and the burden of traditional home responsibilities disproportionately placed on women. These cultural barriers create a challenging environment that may hinder women's ability to advance in their careers and achieve their professional goals.

During the interview regarding women's career advancement in the context of barrier research, participants WCA-P5 and WCA-P3 expressed their experiences as follows

*“Cultural and Social Norms deep-rooted in society with traditional gender mindset, assigning specific responsibilities to men and women” (DNR)*

*“The cultural norms, cultural mindset, and social values in a society hinder women's progress in their career” (DFJ)*

These statements highlight how embedded cultural and social norms, deeply ingrained in society, preserve traditional gender roles and expectations, dictating specific responsibilities for men and women. The first statement emphasizes the traditional mindset that assigns distinct roles and duties based on gender. In contrast, the second statement underscores how these cultural norms and values impede women's career advancement. In essence, both statements underscore the influence of societal expectations and beliefs on women's professional opportunities and progress.

**Organizational Barrier:** Organizational barriers in women's career advancement encompass impediments inherent within the organizational framework, comprising formal rules, policies, and structures, as well as informal aspects of work culture and instances of gender bias favouring men. These barriers collectively obstruct women's advancement within organizational hierarchies, limiting their professional growth and development opportunities. About organizational system research participants WCA-P4 and WCA-P6 stated that

*"Work practice and its culture is a barrier" (MBY)*

*"All are the males except me. They still have the same mindset and culture here.*

*Therefore, they do not take me to some important meetings" (MS)*

One more participant WCA-P5 added

*"Favouritism towards man is too much" (DNR)*

These statements collectively highlight the existence of barriers within the workplace culture that hinder the advancement of women. The first statement suggests that the prevailing work practices and culture present obstacles for women in their professional pursuits. The second statement reflects an individual's experience of being marginalized in the workplace due to gender, with the predominantly male workforce maintaining a traditional mindset and culture that excludes her from important meetings. This underscores the persistence of gender-based exclusion and unequal treatment within the organizational setting. The third statement points to the prevalence of favouritism towards men, indicating a systemic bias that further disadvantages women in their career progression. Overall, these statements underscore the challenges women face in navigating workplace dynamics characterized by entrenched gender biases and unequal opportunities.

**Individual Barrier:** Individual barriers in women's career advancement pertain to challenges related to abilities, including issues such as lack of confidence, limited decision-making power, lack of competence, and lack of boldness. These barriers reflect personal hurdles that may hinder women's professional growth and success.

Concerning individual barriers, WCA-P2 and WCA-P1 shared their views

*"It is the communication skills. This lack of confidence which needs to be developed from the house" (DNS)*

*"She loses her confidence level, self-esteem getting down and decision-making power affected badly and these all things give her psychological pressure" (DSA)*

Participant WCA-P6 expressed her views as

*"Abilities do not matter against the mindset which considers females inferior to men. Such people believe that women have been created to serve men. She does not have decision-making power; she is a coward. She is not bold" (MS)*

These statements collectively highlight the detrimental impact of societal expectations and gender biases on women's confidence, self-esteem, and decision-making abilities. The first statement suggests that a lack of confidence, often stemming from societal conditioning, mainly affects women's communication skills and needs to be addressed starting from the home environment. The second statement underscores how the erosion of confidence and self-esteem due to societal pressures can severely impair a woman's ability to make decisions and cope with psychological stress. The third statement delves deeper into the underlying mindset that perpetuates gender inequality, emphasizing that despite a woman's abilities, she is often deemed inferior to men and stripped of decision-making power. This mindset not only undermines women's capabilities but also reinforces harmful stereotypes of female passivity and weakness. Overall, these statements illuminate the pervasive impact of societal

expectations and gender biases on women's psychological well-being and professional development.

### **Implications and Future Research of the Study**

The implications of this study are multifaceted and hold significance for various stakeholders. Firstly, the findings shed light on the systemic barriers hindering women's advancement into higher management positions within Pakistani workplaces, raising awareness about women's challenges in their professional journeys. This awareness is crucial for policymakers, organizational leaders, and human resource professionals, who can utilize the insights to develop gender-inclusive policies and practices to foster a more equitable and supportive work environment. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of addressing cultural norms and biases that perpetuate gender inequality, advocating for societal shifts towards more inclusive attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore, identifying strategies women employ to overcome these barriers provides valuable guidance for aspiring female leaders and mentors, offering tangible examples of resilience and perseverance in the face of adversity. Overall, the study serves as a call to action for stakeholders at all levels to collaborate in dismantling systemic barriers and creating opportunities for women to thrive in senior management roles, ultimately contributing to greater gender diversity, organizational effectiveness, and societal progress.

Future research should delve into longitudinal studies tracking the impact of gender-inclusive policies, explore intersectionality with other diversity dimensions, conduct sector-specific comparative analyses, investigate the role of mentorship and sponsorship, examine male assistants' contributions, and assess emerging trends like remote work. Such investigations will deepen our understanding, inform interventions, and promote gender equality in Pakistani workplaces and beyond.

### **Conclusion**

The comprehensive analysis of barriers to women's career advancement in Pakistan, particularly in higher management roles, reveals a complex interplay of cultural, organizational, and individual factors hindering women's progress. Cultural norms and societal expectations perpetuate traditional gender roles and biases, while organizational structures and workplace cultures often favour men and marginalize women. Additionally, individual challenges such as lack of confidence and societal perceptions of female inferiority further compound these barriers. Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires concerted societal, organizational, and individual efforts to dismantle gender biases, promote inclusivity, and provide support and resources for women's career development. By implementing gender-sensitive policies, fostering inclusive work environments, and challenging societal stereotypes, Pakistan can create opportunities for women to thrive in managerial positions and contribute fully to organizational success. This calls for a collective commitment to gender equality and empowerment, ultimately leading to a more equitable and prosperous society.

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