

## **Thematic Analysis of the Glass Ceiling in Women Career Advancement in Public Sector Universities**

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### **Abstract**

*Women under-representation at the senior management level is observed in the literature despite their academic excellence. Therefore, the persistent under-representation of women in senior leadership positions within Pakistan's higher education sector was investigated in the current study. The research objective was to identify and analyze the specific barriers collectively known as the "glass ceiling" that hinder women's career advancement in public sector universities in Pakistan. A qualitative research design based on a focus group discussion was used. Experienced female teaching faculty members of the designations lecturer, assistant professor, and associate professor participated in the FGD. Thematic analysis was carried out on the collected data to uncover the key challenges related to organizational culture, familial responsibilities, gender bias, and weak professional networks. The findings highlighted the persistent global issue of the glass ceiling. Despite greater participation in the workforce, women encounter invisible barriers that hinder their advancement to senior leadership positions. It was concluded an urgent need for institutional reforms in order to remove the barriers of the glass ceiling. It was recommended that advocating for transparent, merit-based promotion policies is required to dismantle these barriers and foster gender equity in Pakistan's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).*

**Keywords:** Glass Ceiling, Career Advancement, Gender discrimination, Senior Leadership, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Pakistan.

### **Introduction**

Women under-representation among senior academic and administrative staff is one of the pressing obstacles to gender equity in higher education

around the world (Khan & Siriwardhane, 2021). Even though women are becoming more academically excellent, their representation in high-level jobs, including the position of a vice-chancellor or a dean is lower than expected (Abbas et al., 2021; Batool et al., 2021; Coric, 2018). The difference exists even in conditions purportedly neutral in terms of assessment, which implies the existence of invisible, systemic barriers (Meng and Neill, 2021). Literature documents that top leadership or decision making positions are frequently viewed as masculine, affecting women who seek or hold these roles to encounter bias and unfavorable assessments, leading to the phenomenon known as the “Glass ceiling” effect. Such situation prevails in all fields of profession and equally in the universities. In Pakistani universities, the situation of under-representation of women at the top level management or leadership posts are even worsen. To provide an example, out of all 197 public sector universities in the country, extremely few women are appointed as vice-chancellors, meaning only 0.04 percent, and they are usually female-only institutions (Ali & Rasheed, 2021). Such an acute imbalance provokes urgent concerns regarding the equality of these selection methods and indicates the possibility of certain hidden challenges. This study is therefore aiming at examining the lived experiences of female academics to translate the many-fold impacts of glass ceiling on their career paths and to produce empirical evidence-based change initiatives in institutions.

In order to place the context of this exploration, the defining of the main concepts is necessary. The glass ceiling concept refers to the existing but not visible obstacles that limit female employees with higher qualifications and competencies in the organizational structure and do not allow them to reach top leadership positions (Mahat, 2022). Such phenomenon is not a single obstacle but a combination of various interconnected factors. Therefore the term “glass ceiling” can be defined as an imperceptible yet formidable organizational obstacle that hinders women's advancement, irrespective of their skills or achievements. It is perpetuated by gender stereotypes, discriminatory promotion practices, unequal access to mentorship and networks, and societal expectations concerning women's domestic responsibilities (Sunaryo et al., 2024).

One of the main aspects of this glass ceiling is gender discrimination, which can be described as unfair treatment of people grounded not on merit but on gender. Professionally, it can be expressed in prejudiced hiring, advancement, and networking possibilities, all of which hinder the prospects of women who work and their status in society (Ali et al., 2022). The resulting net impact of such discrimination is the direct hindrance to the career progression, which can be defined as the strategic movement through the ranks of an organization, including skill building and acquisition of higher ranking jobs (Shabbir et al., 2017). In women, this natural process is brought under systematical interference.

Moreover, research also showed that glass ceiling adversely impacted both career satisfaction and work engagement. Women who recognized more significant glass ceiling obstacles reported diminished satisfaction with their career advancement and exhibited lower psychological engagement in their work. It indicates that perceived discrimination diminishes motivation, commitment, and well-being (Kim, 2015).

Academic sources note that the glass ceiling includes a number of barriers, which together create the glass ceiling towards their career advancement. First, there is a traditional family structure and societal barrier. Traditional gender roles place an unequal number of tasks in the home and family responsibility on the women, restricting their access to the networking and career-building activities that are often out of regular working hours (Seo et al., 2017). This limitation gives rise directly to the second significant obstacle, which is, lack of networking. Career mobility heavily depends on professional networking and in most cases, women lack access to powerful informal networks. Such networks are often patriarchal and cannot be optimally aligned with the family-related obligations of women, which is a serious structural drawback (Mwashita et al., 2020; Lahiri et al., 2023). In addition, the organizational climate in universities tends to enhance these problems. Pakistan is a patriarchal society whereby academic cultures are mostly considered masculine and unfriendly to women leaders. The barriers to an upward movement of women are also comprised of systemic barriers and unsupportive policies (Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017; Khader et al., 2022). The subjective experience of perceived gender bias, the feeling of being treated unjustly due to the discrimination, based on one

being an individual of a certain gender is the outcome of incessant having to slog through this hostile environment. This feeling can facilitate non-engagement and anger and devaluation of professional desires, introducing an inner block into the outer ones (Ensher et al., 2001; Reyes et al., 2023). These, combined with each other, create a self-feedback loop that makes the glass ceiling self-perpetuating. Therefore to guide this inquiry, the current study addressed the following research questions;

What is the perception of glass ceiling among female faculty in the public sector universities?

What are the principal factors that generate the glass ceiling effect on their career advancement within Pakistani public universities?

### ***Research Methods***

The research design based on focused group discussion method was used in this study was based on a qualitative research design in order to get a holistic, exploratory insight into the challenges that women encounter. A semi-structured focus group discussion is a qualitative research method in which a moderator facilitates a small group (6-8 experts) using a flexible framework of open-ended questions to examine their perceptions, experiences, and attitudes regarding a specific topic. This approach balances a predetermined structure with conversational flow to produce comprehensive, interactive data on group dynamics and collective understandings. In FGD, multiple forms of questions are asked, including short and structured questions, probing questions and open questions to have in-depth knowledge and insight of the respondent, and to get the various view points on the single topic in one sitting.

The research involved semi-structured focus groups (discussions) with female teaching faculty in a public sector university, university of Sargodha (Punjab) of designations of lecturer, assistant professor and associate professors having at least 10 years of teaching experience in the Pakistani system of higher education. Total 8 teaching faculty (2 lecturers, 3 assistant professor, 3 associate professors participated in the FGD lasted for 90 minutes. All the participants were having 10 to 20 years of teaching experience in the higher education institutions/public sector universities belonging to faculties of social sciences, sciences and engineering. Such a

purposive sampling meant that participants were guaranteed of having enough career experience to reflect on.

The FGD was carried out at the place of work of all the participants to make them comfortable and were recorded in digital device with the consent of the participants. Recordings have then been transcribed word-to-word.

The procedure followed for the thematic analysis was as;

**FGD transcripts → Initial codes were generated → Categories identified → Themes generated → Interpreting and Reporting**

After making the transcriptions of the FGDs, initial codes were generated from the responses of each respondent for each question. In fact, they were read several times so that the content of the transcripts became familiar to the researcher, preliminary codes were created to recognize common patterns. By grouping these codes to identify the underlying patterns, major themes were extracted directly answering the questions of the research. Afterwards, these were categorized, analyzed and interpreted, and lastly, they were grouped into general themes. Throughout the whole process, confidentiality of the participants, their personal details and data provided were ensured by following all the ethics of the research.

### *Results*

The analysis revealed four central themes that encapsulate the barriers to women's advancement, providing direct answers to the research questions.

#### **1. *Perception and Reality of the Glass Ceiling***

All the participants were agreed that the glass ceiling is a real phenomenon that exist in their career lives. They referred to it as an invisible phenomenon but very widespread and powerful agent of the social and organizational structure. One of the respondents (R4) remarked, this is something that we can see yet we cannot know how important it is at that point in time, she needs to encounter these things in an extreme manner compared to other people.

R2 commented that "Glass-ceiling effect is not very known term to even university teachers working in science and technology fields. Now-a-days, in Pakistan, through media and workshops & seminars conducted by the women development center of the university, these issues and terms are

highlighted and thus we came to know this phenomenon though it has been existed since the first day we started job”. Further, most of the respondents were of the view that GC does not exist in a legal document form in Pakistan.

Another respondent R1 highlighted its inner roots by saying that “the phenomenon continues in terms of religion, geography, language, economic position, and even in the power lines”. Most respondents R1, R5, R6, & R7 commented that whenever there is financial benefit or responsibility with authority, always men are preferred and whenever there is tasks required just labor then these are assigned to the female teachers”. And in addition, “these kind of labor are usually orally conveyed, therefore no concrete acknowledgement of such tasks” (R3). Another teacher added to this comment, it means whether you are an educated or uneducated woman, you work mostly without acknowledgement and “when there will be any benefit, men will be there to hike the opportunity” (R8). Further, the *Gender disparity in employment* was also quoted.

Table 1.

*Generated Themes*

<b>Initial Code</b>	<b>Themes</b>
i. Unawareness of Glass Ceiling concept	1. Glass ceiling and documentation
ii. Data reporting challenges	
iii. Social setup	2. Formal & informal labor
iv. Pay discrepancies	
v. Gender disparity in employment	3. Gender discrimination
vi. No acknowledgement	4. Hiking one’s opportunity
vii. Lack of opportunity	

**2. Multifaceted Career Advancement Challenges**

All the respondents mentioned that they face more challenges than their counterpart male colleagues in their career path. Foremost challenge or discrepancy what they face is lack of updated information which provide the basis for the decision making. R6 and R8 added that men are more informed and have updated information. They have this benefit due to their social networking in women are lacking behind. Social networking also facilitate men in their daily task due to social relationships (R1, R2, R4

added). However, there are social and cultural barriers due to their gender therefore women lack in social networking and consequently, lots of women don't progress in their career because they don't have the information they require (R3, R5, R6, R7 and R8 mentioned). Therefore, the most notable obstacles were perceived to be unavailability of important information and ineffective professional networks.

All the respondents were of the view that they observe negligible representation of women at top level management positions. R4 commented even in the public sector universities we never witnessed any women to become the vice chancellor. R7 added that I think one public sector university in Baluchistan had a female VC. Why there is always a male vice chancellor for a public sector university of general category? R1 raised the point. R3 commented most of the time women don't feel confident to apply for the post of VC of public sector University of both sex. That is why women VC can be seen in women universities only. R2, R5, R6 and R8 commented that although there is high percentage of female students taking admissions in universities these days but virtually zero representation of women in leadership roles.

Moreover, the connecting issue was the economic progression. All the respondents were of the view that economic progression is linked with the career progression therefore, women also lack in it as well. Both economic constraints and desertion of the profession were cited whilst one respondent stated that too many women had been retiring at the same level of bureaucracy that they had been hired at regardless of how many years they had worked.

**Table 2.**

*Themes generated for Multifaceted Career Advancement Challenges*

<b>Initial Code</b>	<b>Themes</b>
i. Unavailability of important information	5. Information and Network deficit
ii. Ineffective professional networks	
iii. Social and cultural barriers	
iv. Gender disparity at top position	6. Gender inequality

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- |                                      |                               |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| v. Struggle for recognition          | 7. Lack of career progression |
| vi. Stagnation in career progression |                               |
| vii. Lack of Economic benefits       | 8. Economic disparity         |
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**3. *Familial and Societal Expectations***

For women, family responsibilities are documented as the core responsibility and the responsibility towards family was considered a major external constraint. Therefore, to investigate this aspect, panels of female faculty was asked about its role in the career advancement for women. All the respondents mentioned the responsibility of households and gender expectations as some of the main limitations for the career advancement especially in the early years of women career after their marriage, carrying the children and mental adjustments with in-laws as compare to men. Almost all the participants of FGD mentioned that their focus was more on their child birth and nursing of their offspring rather than their career advancement as this responsibility is of women culturally and socially. One respondent R3 mentioned that Lack of accommodation is another challenge especially for the single parent. It is almost impossible in our society to live alone with her children in the residences outside the premises of the university due to security issues. Many respondents reported that they faced the gender discrimination and as well as discrimination on the base of their marital status especially in case of residence allotment. Therefore, an unbiased policy of residence allocation purely on the basis of length of the service must be implemented in the public sector universities.

These cultural expectations restrict movement and time to pursue the career building processes beyond the household, which is a direct contradiction of the career building requirements.

**Table 3.**

*Themes generated for Familial and Societal Expectations*

<b>Initial Code</b>	<b>Themes</b>
i. Family responsibility	12. work-family balance
ii. Household courses	
iii. Child birth and nursing of children	

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iv. Missing career opportunities due to limited mobilization	13. Limited mobilization
v. Baised residence allocation	14. Social constraints
vi. Cultural expectations	15. Cultural expectation

**4. Lived Experiences of Bias and Exclusion**

Participants were of the view that glass ceiling at the workplace adversely impacted both on their career satisfaction and work engagement. Two faculty members who were remained on the same designation for more than 14 years recognized more significant glass ceiling obstacles consequently diminished their satisfaction and hope in their career advancement and now they exhibit lower psychological engagement in their work. Another respondent R4 stated that though I have published more than 80 research papers in highly reputed journals yet I am still an assistant professor and this lead to psychological demotivation in me. These findings corroborate previous research indicating that perceived discrimination diminishes motivation, commitment, and well-being.

**Table 4.**

*Themes generated for Familial and Societal Expectations*

<b>Initial Code</b>	<b>Themes</b>
i. Lower satisfaction and hope	16. Dissatisfaction
ii. Low Psychological engagement	17. Psychological disengagement
iii. Hopelessness due to delay in promotion	18. mental well being

***Discussion***

This paper aimed to understand what creates a glass ceiling effect and what particular obstacles women have in Pakistani state universities; the answers to this question can be given directly, as it was found that it is not an isolated issue but a complex of interdependent cultural, organizational, and social issues.

It is attested by the perceived presence of an omnipresent glass ceiling, which can be regarded as a facilitating psychological and practical inhibitor. The participants had a direct experience of gender bias in promotion processes, meaning change is needed in the mind sets of those

in charge of the university concerning the females. The mentioned obstacles, including poor networking, professional stagnation, and information gaps, are the side effects of the organizational culture that has not yet been properly adjusted to the idea of women in leadership. Importantly, these professional obstacles are further reinforced by well-established family and social norms that overburden women proportionately with household roles, which is upheld by the existing body of literature (Seo et al., 2017).

The male colleagues were viewed to have better access to information and informal networks. A female, as one of the participants described, cannot spend much time outside the home with a group of people. The gendering experience of networking and biasedness is a direct demonstration of the masculine culture of universities mentioned in the literature (Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017). This becomes self-perpetuating because a dearth of female role models in senior roles socializes male leadership, which revitalizes informal networks and female-averse biases. As a result, the results are highly consistent with other available reports that suggest that these factors together suppress the progression of women to the career ladder (Ali et al., 2022; Imtiaz et al., 2018).

### ***Conclusion***

This paper supports the argument that the glass ceiling in the face of highly qualified women in the HEIs of Pakistan is a multi-layered arrangement: the perception of prejudice, the higher-order organizational culture, and traditional family values, and the lack of professional networking opportunities. Although women have the same qualification, they have been virtually locked out of the top decision-making in the country, which has led to wastage of talent and outlook of the higher education industry of this country and hindered the overall economic growth of the country.

The main suggestion is that personal merit is not enough to beat these systemic challenges. The only solution to this disparity is a planned institutional level intervention to break the systems and cultures that perpetuate inequality.

### ***Recommendations and Way Forward***

targeted to the policymakers at government level, Higher Education Commission (HEC) and the university administrators in Pakistan.

To alleviate the glass ceiling effect and ensure gender equity, the subsequent action HRM can be recommended to the university governing bodies, Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan, and policymakers:

**1. Institute Public and Justified Policies of promotion:** lay down and clarify promotions and selection of policies to senior posts which are transparent and uniform. This should be coupled by blind review of applications and mandatory bias training of selection committees in such a way that judgments based on non-qualification, experience and leadership aspects are not made.

**2. Bring in Supportive Institutional Policies:** HEIs should introduce the policy of family-friendliness, child care places on their campuses, flexible working options, and robust maternity/paternity leaves. Such institutional backup is central in overcoming the dilemma of dual burden that women undergo.

**3. Establish Structured Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs:** Colleges should include programs that would assist in connecting mid-career females with senior leaders (men and women). These programs should focus on leadership education, strategic network and sponsorship as an active case building in optimization of women advancement.

**4. Gender Representation Objectives established by Mandate:** Policymakers should be speculative about assigning and monitoring gendered Agendas of females in high administration and academic administration posts beyond the tokenism attribute of value addition to substantive inclusion.

**5. Develop an Organizational Culture of Inclusion:** The management of the University must make sure they promote gender diversity by instating zero-tolerance to discrimination, establishing women faculty conferences and honoring women who become successful in leadership.

All these measures will assist the Pakistani HEIs to transform their role of strengthening gender inequality to become an engine of equitable

development and, ultimately, contribute to improving the society as a whole the education system.

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