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Breaking the Glass Ceiling: A Comparative Study of Women's Career Progression in Public and Private Sector Universities in District Faisalabad

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the continuation of the glass ceiling and how it affects women's professional development using a comparative, quantitative methodology in public and private Faisalabad educational institutions. Data from 200 faculty members—100 from the public sector and 100 from the private sector—was gathered by a survey. The study sought to identify particular barriers to women's educational advancement, including perceived limits of institutional support, mentoring availability, gender bias, and chances for professional development. Using independent samples t-tests and chi-square tests, a statistical analysis revealed notable variations in the viewpoints and experiences of female faculty members dealing with these problems at both kinds of institutions. Particularly, women in public universities reported more job stability but more institutional rigidity and gender-specific constraints, while respondents from the private sector reported relatively better access to mentorship but felt they had fewer advancement opportunities and higher job insecurity. To promote fair career advancement, these findings highlight the need for strong mentoring programs, open promotion processes, and gender-sensitive regulations. By making policy recommendations targeted at closing the gender gap in higher education institutions, this study adds to the expanding body of research on gender and leadership in academia.



Introduction

The notion of the glass ceiling has been a significant focus in gender studies and organizational research since the 1980s. Women's inability to secure prestigious jobs is due to invisible barriers, which are what it refers to (Eagly & Carli, 2022). When it comes about the career choice or profession then there comes the teaching profession. The teaching profession is the profession where the department of education is trying its best efforts to give good and trained teachers. Further, people in Pakistan like the teaching career or profession because of its altruistic purpose as well (Kamran et al., 2015).

The academic interpretation of this metaphor reflects the ongoing gender disparities in leadership positions, promotions, and decision-making power across universities globally (Morley, 2022). Although numerous measures were taken in the past to promote gender equality through legislation, the issue of gender inequality in career advancement, particularly within academic institutions, continues to be a global problem (UNESCO, 2022).

The topic of gender equality in higher education has gained worldwide attention in recent years. Despite advancements in policy and increased female involvement in academia, women still face systemic barriers that hinder their career advancement, particularly in male-dominated fields like academia (Alon & Gelbgiser, 2020). Women's ascent through academic ranks, which are often hidden by walls, is reflected in the phenomenon known as the "glass ceiling" (Eagly & Carli, 2021). Research has indicated that women are equally qualified, but they often face issues such as unfair hiring practices, inadequate mentoring opportunities, and insufficient support from higher education institutions (Stern, 2022).

In Pakistan, women face a complicated academic landscape that is heavily influenced by deeply embedded conventional gender norms and prevalent socio-cultural expectations (Mahmood & Iqbal, 2021). While public institutions provide benefits such as strong institutional support and increased financing opportunities, they are sometimes marked by inflexible hierarchies that perpetuate gender prejudices (Noreen & Arshad, 2021). Private sector universities, while possibly allowing more flexible work arrangements, are regularly chastised for inequities in salary and promotion procedures, which disadvantage female faculty members (Javed & Iqbal, 2020).

Although women make up nearly 48% of the population, they continue to be greatly underrepresented in leadership positions at universities in Pakistan, including roles like Deans, Heads of Departments, and Vice Chancellors (HEC, 2023). This disparity is driven by cultural and institutional prejudices, particularly evident in public universities, where conventional power dynamics frequently favor men, obstructing the progress of capable female scholars (Noreen & Arshad, 2021). As a result, a comprehensive strategy that tackles both explicit and implicit biases is essential for promoting a fairer and inclusive academic setting in Pakistan. Even though more women are enrolling in higher education, they still encounter considerable obstacles to progressing in their careers, especially when it comes to obtaining senior roles in academia and administration (Higher Education Commission, 2023). According to Cotter et al. (2023), this phenomenon is consistent with the more general idea of the "glass ceiling," which is defined as an imperceptible and enduring barrier that keeps women from achieving top leadership positions, even in settings where they are more prevalent in entry-level roles. Notwithstanding their increasing enrollment, women are still underrepresented in Pakistani universities, which points to the existence of intricate, multidimensional obstacles that need more research. These obstacles could be cultural

norms, societal expectations, discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, a lack of mentorship opportunities, and insufficient work-life balance policies.

Women's career advancement is hampered in Pakistani educational institutions by a complex web of organizational, cultural, and structural restrictions (Batoool & Qureshi, 2022). Systemic biases frequently appear in the process of selecting leaders, where informal connections and preconceived thoughts regarding women's dedication to their careers result in men being preferred, despite women having better qualifications. Additionally, the absence of supportive workplace environments intensifies the problem; numerous institutions do not provide sufficient childcare options or flexible work arrangements, complicating women's efforts to juggle work and family obligations. Additionally, women frequently encounter limited mentorship opportunities, in part due to the small number of senior female faculty members and cultural norms that may discourage senior male faculty from providing mentorship. Gender biases significantly influence how women's abilities are perceived, which restricts their access to research funding and leadership positions. Although both public and private sector universities grapple with these issues (Noreen & Arshad, 2021), the specific ways they manifest can vary. For example, private institutions may be more affected by market-driven factors that can influence hiring and promotion processes, whereas public universities might face bureaucratic challenges that disproportionately impact women trying to navigate the system. Addressing these multi-faceted barriers requires a comprehensive approach that tackles institutional biases, fosters supportive environments, and actively promotes gender equality at all levels of Pakistani education

Punjab's fast-growing educational center, Faisalabad, is a relevant example for examining these distinctions. Women professors are essential to academia at a number of the city's public and private universities. Anecdotal data and early studies, however, indicate that female academics encounter several professional challenges in both fields (Khan et al., 2022). For example, some female professors have described feeling excluded from informal networking opportunities that are crucial for career advancement.

Women have made remarkable strides in gaining access to higher education as students and early-career professionals; nonetheless, their presence decreases in senior academic positions (UNESCO, 2022). For example, although women represent 60% of lecturers at universities in Faisalabad, they account for only 25% of full professors. Studies indicate that systemic obstacles like unclear promotion guidelines, insufficient maternity support, and gender-biased assessment criteria obstruct women's advancement in universities (Batoool & Qureshi, 2022).

Promotion policies frequently do not have established criteria and depend significantly on subjective evaluations, which can disadvantage women. In addition, the lack of sufficient childcare options and flexible work policies hinders women's ability to manage their careers and family duties. Cultural standards—often based on patriarchal values—further restrict women's opportunities for leadership by perpetuating stereotypes that undermine their abilities in management positions (Ali & Ahmed, 2023).

These stereotypes can appear in subtle ways, such as when women's contributions are ignored or disregarded during meetings. Such dynamics are especially ingrained in public sector universities, where strict systems and male-dominated cultures prevail, leading to a decrease in female leadership. Tackling these issues demands a comprehensive strategy, including changes in policy to enhance transparency in promotion practices and shifts in culture to confront gender stereotypes. Female academics in Pakistan face considerable barriers to career progression, with mentorship

and professional networks recognized as vital but frequently unattainable resources (Khan & Iqbal, 2022).

Universities in Pakistan's private sector offer more flexibility and fewer red tape, but they also face particular difficulties. Due to the widespread use of contract employment, which lacks the security associated with tenure-track roles, women often face job instability. Additionally, female academics, especially those balancing work and family obligations, may be disproportionately impacted by the limited benefits offered, such as inadequate health insurance, inadequate retirement plans, and limited access to research funding (Javed & Saeed, 2021).

Their access to crucial leadership positions, like department heads, research grant leaders, and participation in prestigious university committees, is limited by the lack of senior mentors and inclusive professional networks. Additionally, this lack of support reduces their visibility in academic settings, leading to fewer publications, conference presentations, speaking engagements, and awards (Shakir & Hassan, 2023). As a result, female academics might experience fewer opportunities for collaborative research, lower pay, and slower career advancement.

Conversely, public universities are criticized for their drawn-out and politically swayed promotion procedures, despite offering pension benefits and job stability. Due to implicit biases in the promotion criteria, a lack of transparency in the decision-making process, and the underrepresentation of women on promotion committees, these procedures may disadvantage women and result in promotions that are delayed or denied. Women's career paths are significantly impacted by the interplay of these institutional differences, which also affects their overall job satisfaction, salary growth, and research productivity. A comparative approach is required to understand these differences, looking at the unique opportunities and challenges found in public and private university settings to inform particular interventions, like tailored mentorship programs and legislative changes meant to foster a more equal academic environment. Although gender is the main focus, it is important to understand that intersectional factors like socioeconomic status and marital status may make the challenges faced by Pakistani women academics even more severe (Rafiq & Tariq, 2022).

Women's career advancement in public and private universities in the Faisalabad district is analyzed and compared in this study using feminist organizational theory and human capital theory. Feminist organizational theory highlights the structural obstacles that women face as a result of gender-based power dynamics, whereas human capital theory emphasizes the value of education, experience, and skills. This study aims to pinpoint particular challenges and opportunities particular to each industry by examining the institutional and individual factors that influence women's career paths in these various fields. Finally, this comparative analysis seeks to advance scholarly discourse on gender equity in higher education and offer practical suggestions for institutional changes and regulations that support women's career growth in these institutions (Acker, 1990; Becker, 1993).

Methodology

This study uses a descriptive and quantitative approach to compare the career advancement of female faculty at public and private universities in District Faisalabad. To guarantee representation across academic ranks and university types, 200 female faculty members (100 from each sector) were chosen through a stratified random sample. Demographics, perceived career barriers (such as gender bias, work-life balance, and mentorship access), and indicators of career advancement

(such as promotions, publications, and leadership roles) comprised the three sections of a structured questionnaire used to gather data. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure the responses. The questionnaire's reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 following a pilot study, and its content validity was validated through expert review. Data collection involved both electronic and physical distribution of the questionnaire, and ethical approval was obtained prior to commencement. This research aims to identify key barriers and achievements, and to understand potential differences in career trajectories for women in academia across public and private institutions.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the sample. The sample consisted of 200 female faculty members, with an almost equal distribution between public and private sector universities. The majority of participants were aged between 30–40 years (52%) and held MPhil degree (48%) and PhD degree (32%).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Public Universities (n = 100)	Private Universities (n = 100)	Total (n = 200)
Age (Years)			
20-30	18%	12%	15%
30-40	54%	50%	52%
40+	28%	38%	33%
Qualification			
MPhil	46%	50%	48%
PhD/Post Doc	30%	34%	32%
Designation			
Lecturer	50%	60%	55%
Assistant Professor	30%	25%	27.5%
Associate Professor/ Professor	20%	15%	17.5%

Independent Samples t-Test

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the career progression barriers between female faculty in public and private universities. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Independent Samples t-Test on Career Progression Barriers

Variable	Public Universities	Private Universities	t-Value	p-Value
Access to Mentorship	M = 3.56, SD = 0.85	M = 4.12, SD = 0.91	-4.35	0.000
Perception of Gender Bias	M = 4.01, SD = 1.02	M = 3.45, SD = 1.10	5.22	0.000
Institutional Support	M = 3.21, SD = 0.95	M = 3.89, SD = 1.05	-3.47	0.001
Promotion Opportunities	M = 2.68, SD = 1.15	M = 3.46, SD = 1.13	-5.65	0.000

Female faculty in private universities reported significantly higher access to mentorship ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.91$) compared to those in public universities ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.85$), with a t -value of -4.35 and $p < 0.05$.

Perceptions of gender bias were significantly higher in public universities ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.02$) compared to private universities ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.10$), suggesting that gender-related barriers are more pronounced in public institutions ($t = 5.22$, $p < 0.05$).

Public sector universities showed lower levels of institutional support ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.95$) than private sector universities ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.05$), indicating that public universities may lack the resources and policies needed to support women's career progression ($t = -3.47$, $p < 0.05$).

Promotion opportunities were significantly lower in public universities ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.15$) than in private universities ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.13$), reflecting the slow and politicized promotion processes in public institutions ($t = -5.65$, $p < 0.05$).

Chi-Square Test of Association

A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between designation and perceived promotion opportunities. The results, presented in Table 3, indicate a significant association between designation and promotion opportunities in both sectors.

Table 3: Chi-Square Test for Designation and Promotion Opportunities

Designation	Perceived Promotion Opportunities	χ^2	df	p-Value
Lecturer	Low (35%), High (65%)	12.45	2	0.014
Assistant Professor	Low (25%), High (75%)	8.90	2	0.031
Associate Professor and above	Low (15%), High (85%)	10.23	2	0.021

The chi-square tests revealed significant relationships between designation and perceived promotion opportunities in both public and private universities. Specifically, faculty in higher academic ranks (Assistant Professor and Associate Professor) were more likely to perceive better promotion opportunities than those at the Lecturer level ($\chi^2 = 12.45$, $p = 0.014$).

Discussion

The findings show that women still face challenges to professional development at both public and private institutions in Faisalabad, notwithstanding notable variations between sectors. Women seeking mentoring and professional development have more opportunity of success since private sector organizations often have more flexible organizational structures and less formal hierarchical systems. Public universities, with their more traditional administrative structures, provide less institutional support and show clearer gender biases, though. The study's main findings underline how still a major obstacle to women's progress in higher education, especially in the public sector, gender bias is (Cotter et al., 2023; Batool & Queshi, 2020). The dominant organizational culture is the main cause of gender inequality in academics. Moreover, the extensive promotion procedures at public universities imply that reforms aimed at professional growth should be less politically loaded and more open. These results make it imperative for public and private organizations to create more inclusive and encouraging surroundings to help women advance their careers free from gender-related obstacles. Rather than relegating women to academic roles, institutions should

set mentoring programs, streamline promotion policies, and provide gender-sensitive training to help destroy the glass ceiling.

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