



JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES DEVELOPMENT



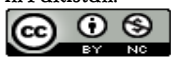
www.jssd.org.pk
editor@jssd.org.pk

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER-BASED EQUITY IN THE CONTEXT OF LEADERSHIP ROLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: EVIDENCE FROM PAKISTAN

Sanober Salahuddin¹ & Dr. Muhammad Yousuf Sharjeel²

¹MPhil. Research Scholar, College of Education, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Ziauddin University

²Director Postgraduate Studies and Research, College of Education, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Ziauddin University Email: muhammad.sharjeel@zu.edu.pk

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Gender Equity; Higher Education Leadership; Vice Chancellor; Leadership Roles; Gender Disparity, Chancellor.	Gender equity in higher education leadership remains an important yet insufficiently explored issue in Pakistan, particularly in relation to access to the highest levels of institutional leadership. This study explores gender-based equity in the appointment and leadership roles of Chancellors and Vice Chancellors in Pakistani higher education institutions. Drawing on a qualitative research approach, the study examines stakeholders' perceptions of gender representation, the institutional, organizational, structural, and socio-cultural factors shaping women's access to senior leadership, and the experiences of women who serve or aspire to serve in senior academic leadership positions. Data generated through semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and experiences across participants' accounts. The findings indicate that women's representation in the highest levels of university leadership is influenced not only by formal qualifications and institutional procedures but also by intersecting socio-cultural expectations, gender stereotypes, organizational politics, institutional practices, and challenges associated with balancing professional and family responsibilities. Women leaders' experiences further demonstrate that access to senior leadership involves navigating organizational cultures and expectations that may not operate equally for men and women. The study highlights the need to move beyond formal commitments to gender equality towards transparent, equitable, and gender-responsive leadership and appointment practices. It recommends strengthening merit-based and transparent selection mechanisms, institutionalizing gender-responsive leadership policies, developing mentoring and leadership-development opportunities for women, addressing discriminatory stereotypes and organizational barriers, and creating institutional environments that support work-life integration. The study contributes contextually grounded evidence to the growing scholarship on gender equity and university leadership in Pakistan.
ARTICLE HISTORY	
Date of Submission: 19-09-2026	
Date of Acceptance: 20-10-2026	
Date of Publication: 22-10-2026	
	
	2026 Journal of Social Sciences Development
Corresponding Author	Dr. Muhammad Yousuf Sharjeel
Email:	muhammad.sharjeel@zu.edu.pk
DOI	https://doi.org/10.59075/jssd.v5i8.400
Volume/Issue	5(8), 2026, 490-518

Introduction

Gender equity in leadership positions remains one of the most significant and widely debated issues in higher education governance across the world. Within universities, leadership roles such as Chancellor and Vice Chancellor play a vital role in shaping institutional vision, policy development, academic excellence, governance, and strategic planning. Although women have made remarkable progress in accessing higher education as students, academics, researchers, and administrators, their representation in the highest leadership positions continues to remain disproportionately low. This imbalance persists despite national constitutions, international commitments, and educational reforms advocating gender equality and women's empowerment. In Pakistan, the issue is particularly complex because deeply rooted socio-cultural norms, institutional practices, organizational cultures, and historical patterns of male dominance continue to shape leadership opportunities and decision-making processes.

Higher education institutions are not merely centers of teaching and research; they are important social institutions where knowledge production, governance, and national development intersect. Leadership within universities reflects broader societal power relations and gender hierarchies. Consequently, understanding gender-based equity in academic leadership is essential not only for institutional effectiveness but also for promoting inclusive governance and sustainable national development. International frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), recognize women's equal participation in leadership and decision-making as fundamental to achieving sustainable development. Despite these global commitments, women in Pakistan continue to encounter visible and invisible barriers that limit their opportunities to attain the highest leadership positions in higher education institutions.

Since the establishment of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2002, Pakistan's higher education sector has experienced substantial growth in terms of universities, academic programmes, and student enrolment. Women's participation in higher education has also increased, resulting in greater representation within academic and administrative positions. However, this numerical progress has not translated into equitable representation in senior executive leadership. Positions such as Vice Chancellor remain dominantly occupied by men, while the office of Chancellor ceremonial and commonly held by provincial governors or other constitutional office holders reflects broader political and structural patterns that have historically limited women's presence in the highest governance positions. This disconnect between increased participation and limited leadership opportunities raises important questions about institutional cultures, leadership pathways, recruitment processes, organizational practices, and gendered power structures within Pakistani higher education.

Contemporary higher education governance increasingly emphasizes inclusive leadership, participatory decision-making, diversity, and institutional accountability. Research suggests that diverse leadership contributes to innovation, collaborative decision-making, organizational responsiveness, and improved institutional performance. Women leaders are frequently associated with relational, collaborative, and inclusive approaches to leadership that enrich

organizational culture and strengthen institutional development. Nevertheless, leadership norms within many Pakistani universities continue to privilege traditionally masculine leadership expectations, reinforcing gendered organizational practices that influence women's leadership experiences and career progression. Exploring gender equity within these leadership contexts is therefore both an issue of social justice and an important consideration for strengthening higher education governance. While national and international reports provide statistical evidence of women's underrepresentation in senior leadership positions, numerical data alone cannot adequately explain how institutional cultures, organizational practices, socio-cultural expectations, and gendered power relations influence women's leadership journeys. Understanding these complex realities requires exploring the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of those directly involved in higher education leadership. Such an approach allows deeper insight into how gender equity is understood, experienced, negotiated, and sometimes challenged within Pakistani universities.

Recognizing the socially constructed nature of gender and leadership, this study adopts a qualitative interpretivist approach. Rather than measuring the extent of gender inequality, the study seeks to understand how women leaders and other key stakeholders experience, interpret, and navigate leadership opportunities and challenges within Pakistani higher education institutions. Through an exploration of participants lived experiences, institutional contexts, and organizational cultures, the study aims to develop a richer understanding of gender equity in leadership and generate contextually grounded recommendations for policy and institutional practice.

Background of the Study

Across the world, leadership within higher education has historically been dominated by men due to patriarchal social structures, unequal educational opportunities, and gendered assumptions regarding leadership. Although women now represent a substantial proportion of the global academic workforce, they remain underrepresented in senior executive positions such as Vice Chancellor, President, Rector, and Chancellor. Existing research consistently demonstrates that women are more visible in teaching, research, and middle-management positions than in the highest levels of institutional leadership.

In South Asia, gender disparities in leadership are intricately connected with broader socio-cultural expectations, gender divisions of labour, family responsibilities, and hierarchical power relations. Pakistan presents a particularly significant context in which increasing female educational participation exists alongside persistent inequalities in leadership representation. Cultural expectations concerning women's domestic responsibilities, limited professional mobility, and restricted participation in influential decision-making continue to shape women's career trajectories and leadership opportunities. Leadership selection and appointment procedures within Pakistani higher education institutions often reflect organizational norms and practices that may unintentionally disadvantage women. Selection processes frequently emphasize uninterrupted career progression, extensive administrative experience, established professional networks, and leadership profiles that have historically been more accessible to men.

Consequently, understanding gender equity requires examining not only formal recruitment procedures but also the organizational cultures, institutional practices, and socio-cultural meanings that shape leadership pathways.

Statement of the Problem

Despite substantial growth in women's participation in higher education as students, academics, and administrators, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions such as Chancellor and Vice Chancellor within Pakistani higher education institutions. Existing literature suggests that organizational cultures, institutional practices, socio-cultural expectations, gendered power relations, and leadership norms continue to shape women's opportunities to access, experience, and sustain leadership positions. Although national policies advocate gender equality and women's empowerment, the implementation of these commitments within higher education leadership structures remains inconsistent.

Most existing studies primarily document the numerical underrepresentation of women or examine gender inequality at broader institutional levels. Comparatively little research has explored how women leaders and other stakeholders understand, experience, and negotiate gender equity within the highest leadership positions of Pakistani universities. Consequently, there remains limited understanding of how institutional environments, organizational cultures, recruitment practices, and socio-cultural expectations interact to influence women's leadership journeys. This study therefore seeks to explore the meanings, experiences, and perceptions surrounding gender-based equity in the leadership roles of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor within Pakistani higher education institutions, thereby contributing a deeper contextual understanding of this important issue.

Research Questions

How do higher education stakeholders describe and understand the current landscape of gender representation in the leadership roles of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor within Pakistani higher education institutions?

How do institutional, organizational, structural, and socio-cultural factors shape gender-based equity in leadership positions within Pakistani higher education institutions?

How do women leaders experience and navigate the opportunities and challenges associated with attaining and performing senior leadership roles within higher education institutions?

What strategies and policy recommendations do participants suggest for promoting gender-based equity in leadership roles within Pakistani higher education institutions?

Research Objectives

To explore participants' perceptions and understandings of gender representation in the leadership roles of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor within Pakistani higher education institutions.

To explore the institutional, organizational, structural, and socio-cultural factors that shape women's access to senior leadership positions.

To explore the lived experiences of women serving, or aspiring to serve, in senior academic leadership positions.

Justification of the Study

This study is justified by its academic, institutional, and policy significance. Gender equity in leadership remains an important constitutional, educational, and developmental priority in Pakistan. Exploring the experiences and perceptions of higher education leaders provides valuable insight into how organizational cultures, institutional practices, and socio-cultural expectations shape leadership opportunities for women. The study fills an important gap in the existing literature by focusing specifically on the highest leadership positions, Chancellor and Vice Chancellor which have received comparatively limited scholarly attention in Pakistan. By adopting a qualitative interpretivist approach, the study contributes a deeper understanding of participant's lived experiences and the meanings they attach to gender equity in leadership. The findings are expected to inform institutional policies, leadership development programmes, and governance reforms while supporting Pakistan's commitment to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses on public and private higher education institutions in Pakistan, with particular attention to the leadership roles of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor. While references to lower and middle-level leadership positions may arise during participants' narratives, the primary emphasis remains on the highest institutional leadership positions and the pathways leading to them. The study is geographically confined to Pakistan and explores contemporary experiences within the country's higher education sector. As a qualitative interpretivist inquiry, the research seeks to generate rich, context-specific understandings rather than statistically generalizable findings. It focuses on participants' experiences, perceptions, interpretations, and meanings regarding gender equity in leadership. The findings therefore represent the perspectives of the selected participants within their institutional and socio-cultural contexts. The study also assumes that participants will be willing to share their experiences openly and honestly.

Review Of Literature

The increasing emphasis on gender equity has positioned women's leadership in higher education as a significant area of scholarly inquiry. Universities are expected to exemplify principles of meritocracy, inclusivity, and social justice; however, women's representation in the highest academic leadership positions remains disproportionately low across many higher education

systems. Despite considerable progress in women's educational attainment and academic participation, their transition into executive leadership roles has been considerably slower, suggesting that organizational structures, institutional cultures, and broader socio-cultural contexts continue to shape leadership opportunities. Consequently, understanding gender equity in university leadership requires moving beyond numerical representation to examine the organizational and contextual factors that facilitate or constrain women's progression to senior decision-making positions. The literature on higher education leadership has evolved from documenting gender disparities to critically examining the institutional processes through which these disparities are reproduced. Contemporary scholarship increasingly argues that leadership inequalities cannot be adequately explained by differences in qualifications or professional competence. Instead, they reflect the interaction of organizational practices, recruitment procedures, governance arrangements, gender stereotypes, informal networks, and societal expectations that collectively influence leadership pathways. These perspectives have shifted scholarly attention from individual deficits towards institutional responsibility for creating equitable leadership environments.

Conceptualizing Gender Equity in Higher Education Leadership

Gender equity in higher education leadership has emerged as a critical area of inquiry within educational leadership, organizational studies, and gender research. Although universities are widely regarded as institutions that promote merit, equality, and social justice, evidence from diverse higher education systems indicates that women remain substantially underrepresented in senior executive leadership despite significant gains in educational attainment and academic participation. This disparity has shifted scholarly attention from viewing women's limited representation as an individual issue to understanding it as the outcome of complex organizational, institutional, and socio-cultural processes that shape leadership opportunities and career progression (Acker, 1990; Morley, 2013).

Contemporary scholarship distinguishes gender equity from gender equality, although the concepts are closely related. Gender equality emphasizes equal rights, opportunities, and treatment irrespective of gender, whereas gender equity recognizes that historical and structural inequalities require context-specific measures to ensure fair access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes (UNESCO, 2021). Within higher education, gender equity therefore extends beyond achieving numerical balance in academic employment. It encompasses equitable access to leadership positions, transparent recruitment and promotion systems, participation in institutional governance, professional development opportunities, and organizational cultures that enable individuals to progress based on competence rather than gender. Consequently, gender equity is increasingly understood as both an organizational principle and a governance practice that seeks to eliminate structural barriers while promoting inclusive and accountable leadership.

Leadership in higher education differs from leadership in many other organizations because universities operate through systems of shared governance, academic autonomy, collegial decision-making, and public accountability. Senior leaders are responsible not only for

institutional administration but also for shaping academic vision, ensuring research and teaching excellence, managing organizational change, and maintaining relationships with governments, regulatory bodies, industry, and society. Within this governance structure, the Vice Chancellor functions as the chief executive and academic leader responsible for strategic direction, institutional management, and policy implementation, while the Chancellor occupies the highest governance office, providing institutional oversight and legitimacy through statutory and ceremonial responsibilities. Although these roles differ across jurisdictions, both significantly influence university governance, leadership appointments, and institutional policy, making them central to discussions of gender equity in higher education leadership.

The underrepresentation of women in these senior positions is increasingly explained through organizational rather than individual perspectives. Research consistently demonstrates that women possess qualifications, leadership capabilities, and academic achievements comparable to those of men, yet they continue to encounter organizational barriers that limit progression into executive leadership. These barriers include gendered recruitment and promotion practices, limited access to influential professional networks, unequal mentoring and sponsorship opportunities, implicit bias in leadership evaluations, and organizational expectations based on uninterrupted career trajectories that often overlook the realities of women's professional and family responsibilities (Acker, 1990, 2006; O'Connor, 2020). Such evidence challenges meritocratic assumptions by demonstrating that leadership pathways are embedded within institutional structures and organizational cultures that may unintentionally reproduce gender inequalities.

Scholars have further argued that women's underrepresentation cannot be understood solely through numerical indicators of participation. Concepts such as the glass ceiling, glass cliff, and leaky pipeline illustrate how organizational inequalities accumulate across academic careers. The glass ceiling describes the invisible institutional barriers that restrict women's progression to senior leadership despite equivalent qualifications and experience. The glass cliff suggests that women are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions during periods of organizational uncertainty or crisis, where the likelihood of failure is comparatively greater (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Similarly, the leaky pipeline illustrates the gradual loss of women at successive stages of academic careers due to unequal promotion opportunities, limited institutional support, work-life challenges, and gendered organizational cultures. Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that gender disparities in university leadership emerge through cumulative institutional processes rather than isolated acts of discrimination. Recent leadership scholarships have consequently shifted from deficit-oriented explanations towards institutional transformation. Rather than asking why women do not attain leadership positions, researchers increasingly examine how universities construct leadership, allocate authority, and define merit. Inclusive leadership is now recognized as an essential dimension of effective university governance because diverse leadership teams contribute to broader perspectives, more transparent decision-making, institutional innovation, and greater organizational legitimacy (Morley, 2013; UNESCO, 2021). Universities that integrate diversity into governance structures are therefore better positioned to respond to increasingly complex academic, social, and policy environments.

From the perspective of the present study, gender equity in higher education leadership is conceptualized as a multidimensional organizational phenomenon shaped by the interaction of institutional governance structures, organizational culture, socio-cultural expectations, and individual leadership experiences. Consistent with the qualitative interpretivist paradigm, the study does not view gender equity merely as the numerical representation of women in leadership positions but seeks to understand how women leaders and key stakeholders experience, interpret, and negotiate opportunities, barriers, and organizational practices associated with the leadership roles of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor in Pakistani higher education institutions. This conceptualization provides the foundation for examining gender equity as a socially constructed and context-dependent phenomenon embedded within the governance and organizational realities of Pakistan's higher education sector.

International Literature on Gender Equity in Higher Education Leadership

Higher education institutions are widely recognized as centers of knowledge production, innovation, and social transformation. As such, they are expected to promote principles of equity, diversity, and merit-based leadership. Nevertheless, international scholarship consistently demonstrates that women remain significantly underrepresented in the highest levels of university governance despite substantial progress in educational participation and academic employment. This persistent disparity has shifted scholarly attention from documenting women's representation towards understanding the institutional, organizational, and socio-cultural processes that shape leadership opportunities within universities (Morley, 2013; O'Connor, 2020).

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes gender inequity in higher education leadership as a structural rather than individual phenomenon. Earlier explanations frequently attributed women's underrepresentation to limited career aspirations, insufficient leadership experience, or work-family commitments. More recent research challenges these assumptions by demonstrating that women possess qualifications and leadership capabilities comparable to those of men but encounter organizational processes that systematically constrain their advancement (Acker, 1990, 2006; Morley, 2013). Recruitment procedures, promotion criteria, leadership evaluation systems, and informal networks frequently reward uninterrupted career trajectories, extensive administrative experience, and established professional relationships that have traditionally been more accessible to men (Acker, 1990; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). These institutional arrangements create cumulative advantages for male academics while limiting women's opportunities to acquire the experiences and visibility required for executive appointments. Organizational culture represents another recurring theme within international literature. Researchers consistently report that leadership continues to be associated with characteristics such as authority, decisiveness, competitiveness, and independence, attributes historically constructed as masculine. Women aspiring to senior leadership therefore face a persistent double bind: they are expected to demonstrate assertive leadership while simultaneously conforming to traditional expectations of collaboration, empathy, and modesty. Failure to satisfy either expectation may result in reduced perceptions of leadership effectiveness and legitimacy (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Blackmore, 2013). These contradictory expectations

illustrate how gender stereotypes continue to shape organizational perceptions of leadership despite formal commitments to equality.

International research further highlights the importance of informal organizational processes in determining leadership progression. Access to influential professional networks, senior mentors, leadership sponsors, and strategic decision-making forums has consistently been identified as a critical factor in career advancement. However, women often report exclusion from these informal structures, limiting opportunities to develop leadership experience, institutional visibility, and professional credibility necessary for appointments to executive positions (Morley, 2013; O'Connor, 2020). These findings suggest that leadership advancement depends not only on individual competence but also on organizational relationships that distribute opportunities unequally. The literature also demonstrates that gender inequities accumulate throughout academic careers rather than emerging only at the point of senior appointments. The concepts of the glass ceiling, glass cliff, and leaky pipeline collectively explain how invisible organizational barriers, precarious leadership opportunities, and cumulative career attrition restrict women's progression into executive leadership (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Rather than representing isolated obstacles, these phenomena illustrate the interaction of organizational structures, gender norms, and institutional expectations that influence women's leadership trajectories over time. Consequently, contemporary scholarship increasingly rejects explanations based on individual capability and instead emphasizes the systemic nature of leadership inequality.

Recent studies have also challenged conventional assumptions regarding leadership effectiveness by demonstrating that diverse leadership teams contribute positively to institutional governance. Women leaders have frequently been associated with transformational, participatory, and collaborative leadership approaches that encourage innovation, ethical decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and organizational learning. Such leadership practices are increasingly recognized as essential for universities operating in rapidly changing academic and policy environments (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Bryman, 2007). Nevertheless, organizational cultures often continue to evaluate leadership according to traditional masculine norms, creating a disconnect between effective leadership practices and prevailing institutional expectations.

Global Gender Gap Report 2025

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025 provides a comprehensive global benchmark for assessing gender parity across four dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The report places Pakistan at 148th out of 148 countries, making it the lowest-ranked country globally in terms of overall gender parity. Pakistan's weakest performance is observed in political empowerment, reflecting the continued underrepresentation of women in decision-making and senior leadership positions despite modest gains in parliamentary representation. Similarly, economic participation and opportunity remain constrained by low female labour force participation, limited access to senior managerial positions, and persistent wage disparities. Although educational attainment has shown gradual improvement, particularly in literacy and

enrolment, these advances have not translated into equitable access to leadership positions within higher education or other institutional settings. From a leadership perspective, the report highlights the persistent scarcity of women occupying executive and governance roles, reinforcing the existence of structural and institutional barriers that impede women's progression into top leadership positions. In contrast, several high-performing countries, particularly the Nordic nations, demonstrate that sustained policy commitment, inclusive governance, and institutional support can significantly enhance women's representation in leadership and public decision-making. For Pakistan, these findings underscore the need for comprehensive gender-responsive policies and organizational reforms to promote equitable representation in senior academic leadership, including the positions of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor in higher education institutions.

South Asian Literature on Gender Equity in Higher Education Leadership

South Asia presents a distinctive context for examining gender equity in higher education leadership because the region combines rapid expansion of higher education with deeply rooted patriarchal social structures, hierarchical institutional cultures, and unequal gender relations. Although countries such as India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Pakistan have made considerable progress in expanding women's access to higher education, this progress has not been accompanied by proportional representation in senior university leadership. Across the region, women remain concentrated in junior and middle-level academic positions, while executive leadership roles—including Vice Chancellor, Rector, President, and governing board positions—continue to be dominated by men. Consequently, South Asian scholarship increasingly argues that educational advancement alone is insufficient to dismantle the structural and socio-cultural barriers that shape leadership opportunities (Morley & Crossouard, 2016; UNESCO, 2021).

A recurring theme within South Asian literature is the influence of patriarchal social norms on women's leadership trajectories. Gendered expectations concerning family responsibilities, caregiving, mobility, and public authority continue to shape women's professional careers long before they become eligible for senior leadership positions. Researchers argue that these expectations restrict opportunities to accumulate administrative experience, develop professional networks, and participate in institutional decision-making, thereby limiting women's progression into executive leadership despite comparable academic qualifications (Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, & Ballenger, 2007). Rather than operating independently, socio-cultural expectations and institutional practices reinforce one another, producing cumulative disadvantages across women's academic careers.

The literature further highlights the role of governance structures and appointment procedures in perpetuating gender disparities. In many South Asian higher education systems, appointments to senior leadership positions are influenced not only by academic merit but also by political considerations, institutional networks, and administrative experience. Such processes often lack transparency and may unintentionally favour candidates with greater access to influential professional networks, opportunities that have historically been more accessible to men. Consequently, women frequently encounter barriers that extend beyond individual competence

and reflect broader organizational and governance arrangements (Morley, 2013; O'Connor, 2020).

Recent scholarship also suggests that formal equality policies have produced only modest improvements because institutional cultures have been slower to change than regulatory frameworks. Morley and Crossouard (2016), drawing on Chanana's work, report that women academics in India experienced interrupted career trajectories and limited access to leadership opportunities. Similar patterns emerge in Bangladesh, where women's educational participation has improved significantly, yet senior university leadership remains overwhelmingly male. Researchers have identified organizational hierarchies, limited mentoring opportunities, and gendered assumptions regarding leadership capability as major constraints on women's advancement. In addition, socio-cultural expectations surrounding women's domestic responsibilities continue to influence career progression, particularly during the mid-career stages that are critical for developing leadership credentials.

Evidence from Sri Lanka presents a comparatively different picture. Higher levels of female educational attainment and favorable social indicators have contributed to greater participation of women in academic careers than in many neighboring countries. Nevertheless, women remain underrepresented in executive university leadership. Studies suggest that institutional traditions, informal decision-making networks, and persistent gender stereotypes continue to influence leadership appointments, indicating that improvements in educational participation do not automatically translate into equitable governance.

Although Nepal has undertaken significant higher education reforms aimed at expanding educational access and promoting social inclusion, women's representation in university leadership remains limited. Existing research links this disparity to broader structural inequalities, including restricted access to leadership development, traditional gender norms, and limited institutional mechanisms to support women's advancement into senior decision-making roles. These findings reinforce the broader regional argument that policy commitments alone are insufficient without organizational transformation and effective implementation.

Across South Asia, scholarship increasingly converges on the conclusion that gender inequity in higher education leadership is shaped by the interaction of organizational structures, governance practices, and socio-cultural expectations rather than by deficiencies in women's qualifications or leadership capacity. This perspective closely aligns with Acker's (1990, 2006) Gendered Organizations Theory, which explains how organizational processes and institutional norms reproduce unequal access to authority, and Harding's (1991) Feminist Standpoint Theory, which highlights the importance of understanding women's lived experiences in revealing institutional inequalities that may remain invisible in quantitative indicators alone. Consequently, qualitative approaches have gained increasing recognition within regional scholarship as a means of exploring how women experience, interpret, and negotiate leadership pathways within complex institutional environments.

Pakistan Literature on Gender Equity in Higher Education Leadership

Pakistan's higher education sector has experienced substantial transformation over the past two decades, particularly following the establishment of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2002. Institutional expansion increased public investment, and wider access to higher education have significantly improved university enrolment, research productivity, and academic infrastructure. Women's participation has also increased considerably, with female students constituting a substantial proportion of enrolment in many universities and an increasing number entering academic careers. Despite these advances, women's representation in senior university leadership has remained disproportionately low, revealing a persistent gap between educational participation and institutional authority (Higher Education Commission [HEC], 2023; UNESCO, 2021).

Existing Pakistani scholarship consistently suggests that this disparity cannot be explained by differences in educational attainment or professional competence. Instead, researchers identify a complex interaction of organizational, socio-cultural, and governance-related factors that influence women's progression to senior leadership positions. Although women have increasingly assumed responsibilities as lecturers, assistant professors, department heads, and deans, relatively few occupy the highest executive offices of Vice Chancellor or participate in university governing structures where strategic decisions are made. This pattern indicates that leadership inequality is embedded within institutional arrangements rather than reflecting an absence of qualified women.

Scholars have also questioned the transparency and inclusiveness of leadership appointment processes within Pakistani universities. Appointments to Vice Chancellor positions involve statutory procedures and search committees; however, studies suggest that informal professional networks, political considerations, administrative experience, and institutional visibility continue to influence selection outcomes. Because women have historically had fewer opportunities to occupy influential administrative roles or develop extensive institutional networks, these appointment processes may unintentionally reproduce existing gender disparities despite formally merit-based criteria. This finding reinforces the argument that organizational systems, rather than individual capability, shape leadership opportunities.

Institutional culture represents another important concern within Pakistani higher education. Research indicates that leadership continues to be associated with traditional notions of authority, decisiveness, and hierarchical control, characteristics frequently aligned with masculine leadership stereotypes. Women leaders often encounter greater scrutiny regarding their leadership style, decision-making, and professional competence than their male counterparts. They are frequently expected to demonstrate exceptional performance while simultaneously conforming to prevailing cultural expectations concerning femininity and family responsibilities. Such contradictory expectations create additional pressures that are less frequently experienced by men occupying comparable positions.

Recent Pakistani studies have further highlighted the limited availability of institutional mechanisms designed to support women's leadership development. Formal mentoring programmes, structured leadership training, succession planning, and sponsorship initiatives remain underdeveloped across many higher education institutions. Consequently, women often rely on personal resilience, informal support systems, and individual determination rather than systematic organizational support when pursuing leadership opportunities. This absence of institutional capacity-building reinforces existing inequalities by limiting women's access to experiences and networks that facilitate advancement into executive leadership.

Recognizing that a safe and inclusive workplace is fundamental to achieving gender equity, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan introduced the *Policy on Protection against Sexual Harassment in Higher Education Institutions* in 2020. The policy requires all public and private higher education institutions to establish transparent mechanisms for preventing, reporting, and addressing harassment while ensuring confidentiality, protection from retaliation, and institutional accountability (Higher Education Commission [HEC], 2020). By promoting a respectful and discrimination-free academic environment, the policy aims to remove organizational barriers that hinder women's professional growth and participation in leadership. Although the policy primarily addresses workplace harassment, its broader significance lies in fostering an institutional culture that supports equal opportunities and fair career progression. For women aspiring to senior leadership positions, such as Vice Chancellor and Chancellor, effective implementation of this policy is essential for creating an enabling environment where leadership advancement is based on merit rather than constrained by gender-based discrimination. However, achieving substantive gender equity requires not only policy compliance but also sustained institutional commitment to inclusive governance and organizational change. Policy developments have undoubtedly strengthened the national commitment to gender equality. Constitutional guarantees, national education policies, the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010), HEC gender initiatives, and Pakistan's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), collectively provide an important policy framework for promoting women's participation in education and leadership. Nevertheless, Pakistani scholarship consistently argues that policy commitments have not yet translated into proportional representation within university governance. Implementation remains uneven across institutions, and organizational cultures often continue to reproduce traditional gender hierarchies despite progressive policy intentions.

Although the existing literature has significantly advanced understanding of women in Pakistani higher education, several important limitations remain. Much of the research focuses on women's educational participation, faculty experiences, career progression, or middle-level academic management rather than on the highest executive leadership positions. Studies specifically examining the offices of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor are extremely limited, despite the central role these positions play in university governance, strategic leadership, and institutional decision-making. Furthermore, existing Pakistani research has relied predominantly on quantitative surveys and descriptive analyses, offering relatively limited insight into how women

leaders themselves interpret organizational cultures, appointment processes, institutional power relations, and leadership experiences. These limitations demonstrate the need for qualitative research capable of exploring the lived experiences of women occupying or aspiring to senior university leadership. Guided by Acker's Gendered Organizations Theory, the present study examines how organizational structures and governance arrangements shape women's access to executive leadership. Simultaneously, Harding's Feminist Standpoint Theory provides a framework for understanding how women leaders' experiences generate unique insights into institutional practices that remain obscured within quantitative measures of representation. By focusing specifically on the leadership roles of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor, this study addresses a significant gap in Pakistani higher education research and contributes contextually grounded evidence to debates on gender equity, university governance, and leadership reform.

Research Gap

The preceding review demonstrates that gender equity in higher education leadership has received increasing scholarly attention at international, regional, and national levels. International research has substantially advanced understanding of the organizational, structural, and cultural factors influencing women's leadership by demonstrating that gender disparities are shaped less by individual capability than by institutional arrangements, leadership norms, and governance practices (Acker, 1990; Morley, 2013; O'Connor, 2020). Similarly, South Asian scholarship has highlighted the continued influence of patriarchal social structures, gendered organizational cultures, and governance systems on women's progression into senior university leadership. Studies from Pakistan further reinforce these findings by documenting persistent gender inequalities despite improvements in women's educational participation and supportive policy commitments.

Despite these contributions, significant conceptual, methodological, and contextual gaps remain. First, much of the international literature has been generated within Western higher education systems, where governance structures, institutional autonomy, accountability mechanisms, and gender equality policies differ considerably from those operating in developing countries. Consequently, the applicability of these findings to Pakistan must be interpreted cautiously, given the country's distinct socio-cultural norms, legal frameworks, governance arrangements, and political context. Second, existing South Asian and Pakistani studies have concentrated predominantly on women's participation in higher education, faculty career progression, or middle-level academic leadership. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining the highest executive positions particularly the offices of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor despite their central role in institutional governance, strategic decision-making, and higher education policy implementation. This represents a significant gap in understanding how gender equity is experienced and negotiated at the highest levels of university leadership. Third, the methodological orientation of existing research has been largely quantitative or descriptive, emphasizing patterns of representation, leadership statistics, and institutional trends. While such studies provide valuable evidence regarding the extent of gender disparities, they offer limited insight into how women leaders themselves interpret organizational cultures, appointment

processes, leadership expectations, informal power relations, and the barriers and opportunities encountered throughout their leadership journeys. Consequently, the voices and lived experiences of women occupying or aspiring to occupy senior university leadership positions remain insufficiently explored within the Pakistani context.

Fourth, previous research has rarely integrated organizational and feminist theoretical perspectives to explain gender inequity in university leadership. Although structural barriers and socio-cultural challenges have been widely acknowledged, relatively few studies have simultaneously examined how organizational systems reproduce gender inequality and how women lived experiences reveal these institutional processes. Integrating Acker's Gendered Organizations Theory with Harding's Feminist Standpoint Theory provides a more comprehensive analytical framework for understanding both the structural dimensions of gender inequality and the experiential knowledge of women leaders. The present study addresses these gaps by adopting a qualitative interpretivist approach to explore gender-based equity in the leadership roles of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor in Pakistani higher education institutions. Rather than measuring representation alone, the study seeks to understand how organizational structures, institutional governance, socio-cultural expectations, and women lived experiences interact to shape leadership pathways. By focusing on the highest levels of university leadership and drawing upon the perspectives of women leaders and key stakeholders, the research contributes contextually grounded evidence to the literature on gender, leadership, and higher education governance in Pakistan. It also extends existing scholarships by linking organizational theory with participants lived experiences to generate a more nuanced understanding of gender equity within higher education leadership.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is informed by two complementary theoretical perspectives: Joan Acker's Gendered Organizations Theory (1990, 2006) and Sandra Harding's Feminist Standpoint Theory (1991). Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for examining both the organizational processes that shape gender inequality and the experiential knowledge through which women interpret and negotiate leadership within higher education institutions. Acker's Gendered Organizations Theory challenges the assumption that organizations operate as gender-neutral institutions. Instead, it argues that organizational structures, recruitment systems, promotion practices, leadership norms, and everyday institutional processes are historically embedded within masculine assumptions that influence access to authority and decision-making. Within higher education, these organizational processes may privilege traditional leadership pathways, informal networks, and career trajectories that systematically advantage men while constraining women's progression to senior executive positions. Consequently, the theory shifts analytical attention from individual explanations of women's underrepresentation towards the institutional mechanisms through which gender inequality is reproduced. In the context of the present study, Acker's framework provides a valuable foundation for examining how governance structures, appointment procedures, organizational culture, and institutional practices influence

gender equity in the leadership roles of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor within Pakistani universities.

Complementing this organizational perspective, Harding's Feminist Standpoint Theory argues that knowledge is socially situated and that individuals occupying marginalized positions often possess distinctive insights into systems of power and inequality. From this perspective, women leaders' experiences are not merely personal narratives but constitute valuable sources of knowledge that reveal organizational dynamics, institutional barriers, and leadership processes that may remain invisible within formal policies or statistical indicators. Harding further contends that incorporating the perspectives of marginalized groups strengthens the objectivity of research by broadening understanding of social reality. Accordingly, the present study adopts a qualitative interpretivist approach that privileges participants lived experiences as a means of understanding how women perceive, experience, and navigate leadership within Pakistani higher education institutions. The integration of these two theoretical perspectives provides a robust conceptual foundation for the study. While Acker's theory explains how organizational structures and institutional arrangements shape gender inequality, Harding's theory explains why women lived experiences are essential for understanding those organizational realities. Together, they enable the study to move beyond documenting gender disparities towards explaining the interaction between organizational systems, socio-cultural expectations, institutional governance, and women's leadership experiences. This integrated framework is therefore well aligned with the study's research questions, qualitative methodology, and interpretivist epistemological stance.

Conceptual Framework of the Study





Source: Acker (1990, 2006) and Harding (1991).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the present study is developed from the integration of Acker's Gendered Organizations Theory (1990, 2006) and Harding's Feminist Standpoint Theory (1991). These complementary perspectives conceptualize gender equity in higher education leadership as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of organizational structures, socio-cultural influences, institutional governance, and women lived experiences. Rather than viewing women's underrepresentation in senior leadership because of individual capability or ambition, the framework recognizes it as the outcome of interconnected organizational and societal processes that influence leadership opportunities and career progression. Drawing upon Acker's theory, the framework assumes that university governance structures, recruitment and appointment procedures, organizational culture, leadership norms, and informal institutional practices may reproduce gendered inequalities by privileging traditional leadership pathways and masculine conceptions of authority. Simultaneously, Harding's standpoint perspective emphasizes that women leaders' experiences provide unique insights into these institutional processes, revealing barriers, opportunities, and strategies that may remain hidden within organizational policies or quantitative indicators. Their perspectives therefore constitute an essential source of knowledge for understanding how gender equity is experienced and negotiated within higher education institutions.

Guided by these theoretical assumptions, the study conceptualizes gender-based equity in university leadership as the outcome of four interrelated dimensions: institutional governance and organizational structures, socio-cultural norms and gender expectations, leadership experiences of women, and institutional policies and support mechanisms. These dimensions collectively influence women's access to the leadership positions of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor, shape their experiences within executive leadership, and ultimately determine the extent to which higher education institutions promote equitable and inclusive governance. Figure 2.1 illustrates the conceptual relationships underpinning the study. To address these limitations, the study adopts Acker's Gendered Organizations Theory and Harding's Feminist Standpoint Theory as complementary theoretical perspectives. Together, these frameworks provide an analytical lens for examining how organizational structures and socio-cultural contexts shape women's leadership opportunities while recognizing women's lived experiences as a valuable source of knowledge for understanding institutional inequalities. The conceptual framework developed from these theories guides the exploration of gender-based equity in the leadership roles of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor within Pakistani higher education institutions. Building upon the theoretical and empirical foundation established in this chapter, Chapter Three presents the methodological framework of the study. It explains the interpretivist research paradigm, qualitative research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, thematic analysis, strategies for ensuring trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and the methodological rationale underpinning the investigation.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative interpretivist approach to explore gender-based equity in the leadership roles of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor within Pakistan's higher education institutions. The study was guided by the premise that gender equity in university leadership is shaped by organizational practices, institutional governance, socio-cultural expectations, and the lived experiences of women leaders. Consequently, understanding these complex and context-dependent realities required an approach capable of capturing participants' interpretations, meanings, and experiences rather than measuring predefined variables. Consistent with the study's research questions and theoretical framework, the research employed an exploratory qualitative design using semi-structured interviews to examine how women leaders and key stakeholders perceived leadership pathways, organizational barriers, institutional cultures, and opportunities for promoting gender-equitable leadership. This methodological approach enabled an in-depth exploration of experiences that are not readily observable through quantitative indicators or institutional statistics, thereby providing a richer understanding of the processes influencing women's access to senior leadership.

The methodological choices were informed by Acker's (1990, 2006) Gendered Organizations Theory, which conceptualizes organizations as gendered institutions that reproduce inequalities through formal and informal organizational practices, and Harding's (1991) Feminist Standpoint Theory, which recognizes women's lived experiences as valuable sources of knowledge for understanding institutional power relations. These complementary perspectives aligned with the

interpretivist orientation of the study by supporting an inquiry into how participants experienced and interpreted gendered organizational realities within Pakistani higher education. This chapter presents the methodological framework underpinning the study. It outlines the philosophical assumptions, research design, study context, participant selection, data collection procedures, thematic data analysis, strategies employed to ensure trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and researcher reflexivity that guided the investigation.

Philosophical Positioning of the Study

This study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through individuals' experiences, interactions, and interpretations. Gender equity in higher education leadership is neither fixed nor objectively measurable in isolation from the institutional and socio-cultural contexts in which leadership is practiced. Rather, it is understood through the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences of organizational processes, leadership pathways, and institutional power relations. Consequently, an interpretivist approach was considered appropriate for examining how participants perceived and experienced gender-based equity within the leadership structures of Pakistani higher education institutions. The study was further informed by a constructivist epistemological perspective, which recognizes knowledge as socially produced through interaction between the researcher and participants. From this perspective, the experiences of university leaders are not treated as objective facts but as contextually situated interpretations shaped by organizational culture, governance arrangements, professional experiences, and socio-cultural expectations. Understanding these perspectives required direct engagement with participants through in-depth conversations that allowed them to reflect upon their leadership journeys, institutional practices, and perceptions of gender equity.

The ontological position of the study assumed the existence of multiple realities rather than a single universal truth. Participants occupying different leadership positions—including Vice Chancellors, former Vice Chancellors, deans, departmental chairpersons, Higher Education Commission officials, and women aspiring to Vice Chancellor positions—interpreted organizational realities from different institutional and professional standpoints. These diverse perspectives were considered complementary sources of knowledge that collectively contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of gender equity in higher education leadership.

This philosophical positioning aligned closely with Acker's (1990, 2006) Gendered Organizations Theory, which conceptualizes organizations as socially constructed systems that reproduce gender inequality through institutional practices, and Harding's (1991) Feminist Standpoint Theory, which emphasizes the value of marginalized perspectives in understanding organizational power relations. Together, these theoretical perspectives provided an appropriate foundation for interpreting participants' experiences and analyzing the organizational and socio-cultural factors influencing women's access to senior university leadership in Pakistan.

Research Design and Participant Selection

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design within an interpretivist paradigm to investigate gender-based equity in the leadership roles of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor in Pakistan's higher education institutions. The design was selected because the study sought to understand how organizational structures, institutional governance, socio-cultural expectations, and leadership experiences shape women's access to senior executive positions. Rather than measuring the prevalence of gender inequality, the research aimed to explore how university leaders interpreted, experienced, and negotiated gendered organizational realities. Such questions required an in-depth examination of participants' perspectives within their institutional contexts, making qualitative inquiry the most appropriate methodological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participant selection followed a purposive maximum variation sampling strategy, enabling the inclusion of individuals with direct knowledge and experience of university governance and leadership. Purposive sampling is widely recognized as appropriate for qualitative research because it facilitates the selection of information-rich participants capable of providing detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). To capture diverse institutional perspectives, participants were selected from different leadership positions across Pakistan's higher education sector, including a serving female Vice Chancellor, former Vice Chancellors, a senior official from the Higher Education Commission (HEC), a female Dean, women aspiring to Vice Chancellor positions, and male and female departmental chairpersons. This diversity strengthened the study by allowing gender equity to be examined from multiple organizational and professional standpoints rather than from a single leadership perspective.

A total of 15 participants were interviewed. The final sample comprised one serving female Vice Chancellor, three former male Vice Chancellors, one senior HEC official, one female Dean, two female Vice Chancellor candidates, three female departmental chairpersons, and four male departmental chairpersons. Participant recruitment continued until information power was achieved, whereby successive interviews yielded recurring patterns and sufficient depth to address the research objectives (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). This approach aligns with contemporary qualitative research, which emphasizes the richness and relevance of participants' experiences over statistical representativeness. Selection of participants was guided by predetermined inclusion criteria. Participants were required to possess substantial experience in higher education leadership, governance, or policy, either through current or previous executive roles or through demonstrated involvement in university administration and decision-making. Individuals without direct experience of higher education leadership or governance were excluded, ensuring that all participants could provide informed reflections on organizational processes, leadership pathways, and gender equity within Pakistani universities. The final sample reflected a broad spectrum of institutional experiences across public and private higher education institutions, providing a comprehensive understanding of how gender equity is perceived and experienced at different levels of university leadership. Such diversity enhanced the credibility of the findings by enabling comparison across organizational roles, institutional

contexts, and gendered experiences, thereby contributing to a more nuanced interpretation of leadership within Pakistan's higher education system.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Current or former senior university leaders (e.g., Vice Chancellors, Deans, Chairpersons)	Individuals without leadership or governance experience in higher education
HEC officials or policymakers involved in university governance	Administrative staff with no strategic leadership role
Individuals with knowledge of leadership appointment processes and governance	Participants are unable to provide informed perspectives on the research topic
Willingness to participate voluntarily and provide informed consent	Individuals unwilling to participate or provide informed consent

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, enabling participants to describe their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of gender equity in higher education leadership. Semi-structured interviewing was considered particularly appropriate because it provided sufficient flexibility to explore participants' individual leadership journeys while ensuring that all interviews addressed the core issues aligned with the research objectives and theoretical framework. This approach facilitated the exploration of organizational practices, leadership pathways, socio-cultural influences, institutional barriers, and policy perspectives that could not be adequately captured through structured questioning. An interview guide was developed based on the study's four research questions and informed by Acker's Gendered Organizations Theory and Harding's Feminist Standpoint Theory. The guide included open-ended questions exploring participants' perceptions of gender representation in university leadership, organizational cultures, appointment procedures, leadership experiences, institutional support mechanisms, and recommendations for strengthening gender equity within higher education. Follow-up and probing questions were used throughout the interviews to encourage clarification and deeper reflection on issues emerging during the discussion.

A total of 15 interviews were conducted between September 2025 to March 2026 through a combination of face-to-face and online meetings, depending on participants' geographical location, professional commitments, and personal preferences. Each interview lasted approximately 40–50 minutes, providing sufficient opportunity for participants to discuss their experiences in detail while maintaining consistency across interviews. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the measures adopted to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Written or verbally informed consent was obtained before the commencement of each interview. Audio recording was undertaken only when participants granted explicit permission. In instances where recording was not permitted, detailed contemporaneous field notes were maintained to ensure an

accurate account of participants' responses. This flexible approach respected participants' preferences while ensuring comprehensive documentation of the data collected.

To enrich the interview findings, document analysis was undertaken as a supplementary source of evidence. Relevant policy documents, including Higher Education Commission (HEC) policies, university statutes, leadership appointment procedures, and national policy documents relating to higher education governance and gender equality, were reviewed to provide contextual understanding and facilitate triangulation during data interpretation. These documents were not analyzed as a separate dataset but were used to contextualize and support the interpretation of participants' narratives. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher maintained a reflexive field journal to document contextual observations, emerging insights, methodological decisions, and reflections on participant interactions. These notes contributed to the transparency of the research process and informed subsequent stages of thematic analysis by providing additional contextual information beyond the interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic yet flexible approach for identifying, interpreting, and reporting patterns of meaning within qualitative data while acknowledging the active role of the researcher in the analytical process. Given the exploratory nature of the study and its interpretivist orientation, this approach enabled an in-depth examination of participants' experiences of gender equity in higher education leadership without reducing their perspectives to predetermined categories.

Following each interview, the researcher personally prepared the interview transcripts from audio recordings where permission had been granted and from detailed contemporaneous notes where participants preferred not to be recorded. Personal transcription enabled close familiarity with the data and facilitated repeated engagement with participants' narratives throughout the analytical process. Each transcript was read several times alongside the researcher's field notes to develop an overall understanding of participants' experiences before formal coding commenced. Data analysis followed a hybrid inductive–deductive strategy. During the initial stage, coding was undertaken inductively, allowing concepts and patterns to emerge directly from participants' accounts. Meaningful statements relating to leadership pathways, organizational practices, institutional culture, appointment procedures, socio-cultural expectations, gender stereotypes, and leadership experiences were manually highlighted and assigned descriptive codes. Coding was conducted manually through repeated reading of transcripts, annotation of key ideas, and comparison across interviews rather than through qualitative data analysis software. This manual approach allowed the researcher to remain closely engaged with the data and to refine codes continuously as new insights emerged.

The analytical process was iterative rather than linear. Individual interviews were analyzed independently before codes were compared across participants to identify similarities, differences, and recurring patterns. Through constant comparison, related codes were grouped

into broader conceptual categories, which were subsequently refined into candidate themes representing shared meanings across the dataset. Themes were reviewed against the complete dataset to ensure that they accurately reflected participants' narratives and addressed the study's research questions.

Once the thematic structure had been established, a deductive phase of analysis was undertaken to interpret the findings through the study's theoretical framework. Themes concerning organizational practices, recruitment processes, institutional culture, and leadership norms were interpreted using Acker's Gendered Organizations Theory (1990, 2006), which explains how organizational structures and institutional practices reproduce gender inequality. Themes relating to women's leadership experiences, perceptions of organizational power, identity, and strategies for navigating institutional barriers were interpreted through Harding's Feminist Standpoint Theory (1991), recognizing participants lived experiences as valuable sources of knowledge for understanding gendered organizational realities. Integrating these complementary theoretical perspectives enabled the findings to move beyond description towards a deeper explanation of the organizational and socio-cultural processes shaping gender equity in university leadership.

Throughout the analytical process, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal documenting emerging interpretations, methodological decisions, and analytical reflections. These records supported transparency in theme development and facilitated critical reflection on the researcher's influence on data interpretation. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, emerging interpretations and overarching themes were discussed verbally with selected participants to confirm that the findings reflected their experiences while maintaining the confidentiality of all participants. This process of participant validation strengthened the trustworthiness of the final thematic interpretation.

Ensuring Trustworthiness and Research Ethics

The trustworthiness of this study was established using the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, personal transcription of interviews, repeated reading of transcripts, and the use of verbatim quotations during analysis. Emerging themes were also discussed verbally with selected participants to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences while preserving the anonymity of all respondents. This process strengthened the authenticity of the findings without compromising confidentiality.

Dependability and confirmability were supported through a transparent and systematic analytical process. The researcher maintained detailed field notes, a reflexive journal, and an audit trail documenting methodological decisions, coding procedures, and theme development throughout the study. Continuous comparison across interviews ensured that themes were grounded in participants' narratives rather than the researcher's assumptions. Transferability was facilitated by providing rich descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and

organizational settings, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar higher education contexts.

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Informed consent was obtained before each interview, and permission for audio recording was sought individually. Where participants declined recording, detailed field notes were prepared to ensure accurate documentation of the discussion. To protect participants' identities, all interview data were anonymized using role-based pseudonyms, and identifying institutional information was removed from transcripts and research records. Digital data and research documents were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes. Given the interpretivist nature of the study, researcher reflexivity remained integral throughout the research process. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal to critically examine personal assumptions, methodological decisions, and potential influences on data interpretation. This ongoing self-reflection enhanced analytical transparency and contributed to a balanced interpretation of participants' experiences, thereby strengthening the overall integrity and trustworthiness of the study.

Findings

Research Question 1: Gender Representation in Leadership Roles in Pakistan

The first research question explored participants' perceptions and understandings of the current landscape of gender representation in the leadership positions of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor within Pakistani higher education institutions. The thematic analysis revealed two interrelated themes: (i) persistent underrepresentation of women in senior academic leadership and (ii) perceptions of merit, equity, and symbolic representation. Collectively, these findings indicate that although women's participation in higher education has expanded considerably over recent decades, their representation in the highest institutional leadership positions remains disproportionately low.

Theme 1: Persistent Underrepresentation of Women in Senior Academic Leadership

Participants consistently perceived that women remain significantly underrepresented in the offices of Chancellor and Vice Chancellor across Pakistani higher education institutions. While acknowledging the increasing number of women entering academia and occupying middle-management positions, respondents emphasized that progression to executive leadership continues to be limited. This imbalance was viewed not as an issue of educational attainment or professional competence, but rather as a reflection of longstanding institutional and societal structures that continue to favour male leadership. Several participants observed that although women constitute a substantial proportion of university faculty and, in some disciplines, student enrolment, these gains are not mirrored in institutional governance or executive decision-making. Consequently, leadership at the highest level was perceived to remain predominantly male, reinforcing existing patterns of gender inequality within higher education. The findings suggest that women's underrepresentation extends beyond numerical imbalance and reflects broader

issues of access to leadership opportunities. Participants repeatedly described a "leaky leadership pipeline," whereby women successfully enter academia but encounter progressively greater barriers as they move towards senior administrative positions. This perception indicates that representation should be understood not only in terms of participation but also in relation to equitable access to positions of institutional authority and influence.

Theme 2: Merit, Equity, and Symbolic Representation

A second prominent theme concerned participants' interpretations of merit and gender equity in leadership appointments. Most respondents rejected the notion that women should be appointed solely to achieve numerical balance. Instead, they argued that leadership appointments should remain merit-based while ensuring that women are provided equitable opportunities to compete for senior positions. Participants often differentiated between *equality* and *equity*, emphasizing that equitable leadership depends on removing structural barriers rather than lowering standards or making symbolic appointments. Several respondents cautioned that appointing a small number of women to senior roles may create the appearance of inclusivity without addressing the institutional practices that continue to limit broader female representation. Participants also emphasized that genuine gender equity requires transparent recruitment procedures, objective leadership selection criteria, and institutional recognition of women's professional capabilities. In their view, increasing the number of women in Chancellor and Vice Chancellor positions should be regarded as an outcome of fair and inclusive governance rather than a symbolic demonstration of institutional diversity.

Summary of Findings for Research Question 1

Overall, the findings demonstrate that participants perceive gender representation in the leadership of Pakistani higher education institutions as improving gradually but remaining substantially unequal at the highest levels of governance. Although women have made considerable progress in educational participation and academic careers, this progress has not translated into proportional representation in Chancellor and Vice Chancellor positions. Participants attributed this disparity to systemic rather than individual factors and emphasized that meaningful gender equity requires transparent institutional processes that ensure equal opportunities for qualified women to attain senior leadership roles.

Research Question 2: Organizational, Structural, and Cultural Factors in Leadership

The second research question explored participants' perceptions of the factors influencing gender-based equity in leadership positions within Pakistani higher education institutions. The analysis revealed that participants viewed women's underrepresentation in senior leadership as the outcome of interconnected institutional, organizational, structural, and socio-cultural influences rather than individual capability or professional competence. Four dominant themes emerged: (i) organizational politics and governance, (ii) socio-cultural norms and gender expectations, (iii) work-life balance and family responsibilities, and (iv) gender stereotypes and unconscious bias. Collectively, these findings illustrate the complexity of women's leadership

pathways and the multiple barriers that shape equitable access to Chancellor and Vice Chancellor positions.

Theme 1: Organizational Politics and Governance

Participants consistently identified organizational politics as one of the most significant barriers to achieving gender equity in senior academic leadership. Leadership appointments were frequently perceived as being influenced by informal networks, political affiliations, personal connections, and institutional power dynamics rather than transparent and merit-based selection processes. Participants suggested that these governance practices often disadvantage women by limiting their visibility, access to influential networks, and opportunities to compete fairly for executive positions. Several respondents further observed that decision-making within higher education institutions continues to be dominated by established leadership circles, where informal relationships frequently shape appointment processes. Such practices were perceived to reduce institutional transparency and reinforce existing gender disparities in leadership representation. Overall, participants emphasized that improving gender equity requires governance reforms that strengthen transparency, accountability, and fairness in leadership selection and succession planning.

Theme 2: Socio-Cultural Norms and Gender Expectations

Participants widely acknowledged that socio-cultural norms continue to exert a substantial influence on women's leadership opportunities. Deeply embedded cultural expectations regarding women's domestic and caregiving responsibilities were perceived to shape both institutional attitudes and individual career trajectories. Many participants argued that leadership remains socially constructed as a predominantly masculine role, resulting in greater scrutiny of women's leadership capabilities and commitment. Respondents also highlighted that women pursuing senior leadership positions frequently encounter resistance rooted in traditional beliefs about gender roles. These expectations often create additional pressures for women to demonstrate competence beyond that expected of their male counterparts while simultaneously fulfilling societal expectations outside the workplace. These findings suggest that socio-cultural influences extend beyond individual experiences and continue to shape organizational perceptions of leadership suitability within higher education institutions.

Theme 3: Work-Life Balance and Family Responsibilities

Another recurring theme concerned the challenge of balancing professional leadership responsibilities with family and domestic commitments. Participants acknowledged that senior leadership positions require extensive administrative responsibilities, decision-making, and public engagement, which may conflict with the disproportionate caregiving expectations traditionally placed upon women. Rather than questioning women's leadership capabilities, participants emphasized that inadequate institutional support, limited family-friendly policies, and inflexible organizational practices often make career progression more difficult for women aspiring to executive leadership roles. Consequently, work-life balance was viewed as a structural issue requiring institutional rather than individual solutions. Participants therefore

stressed the importance of flexible organizational policies, supportive leadership cultures, and equitable workload distribution to facilitate women's advancement into senior academic leadership.

Theme 4: Gender Stereotypes and Unconscious Bias

Participants further identified persistent gender stereotypes and unconscious bias as significant barriers to equitable leadership representation. Women were frequently perceived as needing to demonstrate higher levels of competence, credibility, and leadership effectiveness than their male colleagues to receive comparable recognition. Such perceptions were considered to influence recruitment, promotion, performance evaluation, and leadership selection processes. Several respondents also suggested that stereotypical assumptions regarding women's emotional disposition, decision-making style, or leadership capacity continue to affect institutional judgments, often resulting in unequal opportunities for advancement. These biases were viewed as subtle yet pervasive, reinforcing gendered expectations that favour traditional models of leadership. Participants emphasized that addressing these biases requires sustained institutional awareness, gender-sensitive leadership development, and organizational commitment to equitable evaluation and promotion practices.

References

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004002002>
- Acker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender & Society*, 20(4), 441–464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243206289499>
- Barnacle, R., Sidelil, L. T., Cuthbert, D., & Latham, K. (2026). Gender equality in higher education: Can leaders drive change? *Higher Education Research & Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2026.2638277> (Taylor & Francis Online)
- Bryman, A. (2007). Effective leadership in higher education: A literature review. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(6), 693–710. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070701685114>
- Dahlvig, J. E., & Longman, K. A. (2020). Women's leadership in higher education. In N. S. Niemi & M. B. Weaver-Hightower (Eds.), *The Wiley Handbook of Gender Equity in Higher Education*. Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119257639.ch2> (Wiley Online Library)
- Gallegos, A., Abensur Pinasco, C., Luna Victoria Mori, F. M., Perez Palacios, E. E., Teodori de la Puente, R., & Valencia-Arias, A. (2026). Impact of female leadership on educational quality in higher education: A systematic review of the literature. *Discover Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-026-01652-1> (Springer)
- Harding, S. (1991). *Whose science? Whose knowledge? Thinking from women's lives*. Cornell University Press.
- Higher Education Commission. (2020). *HEC's new policy on protection against sexual harassment effective from July 2020. News & Views*. <https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/news/Documents/NewsViews/2020/July-Sept-2020.pdf> HEC News & Views (July–September 2020)

- Higher Education Commission. (2020). *Policy on protection against sexual harassment in higher education institutions*. Higher Education Commission, Pakistan. <https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/policies/Pages/HARASSMENT-POLICY.aspx> (Higher Education Commission policy page)
- Higher Education Commission. (2020). *Policy on protection against harassment in higher education institutions*. HEC policy page (HEC)
- Kohtamäki, V., Zheng, G., & Jinia, N. (2024). Gender inequality in academic leadership: Bangladesh, China and Finland. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 78, 78–92. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12447> (Wiley Online Library)
- Meza-Mejia, M. del C., Villarreal-García, M. A., & Ortega-Barba, C. F. (2023). Women and leadership in higher education: A systematic review. *Social Sciences*, 12(10), 555. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12100555> (MDPI)
- Morley, L. (2013). The rules of the game: Women and the leaderist turn in higher education. *Gender and Education*, 25(1), 116–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2012.740888>
- Morley, L., & Crossouard, B. (2015). *Women in higher education leadership in South Asia: Rejection, refusal, reluctance, revisioning*. British Council.
- Mushtaq, N., Riaz, M. F., & Awan, R.-u.-N. (2025). *Exploring the factors affecting women's participation in leadership positions in higher education institutions of Pakistan*. *NUST Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.51732/njssh.v11i1.243> (NUST Social Sciences Journal)
- O'Connor, P. (2020). Why is it so difficult to reduce gender inequality in higher education? *Administrative Sciences*, 10(2), Article 26. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci10020026>
- O'Connor, P. (2020). Why is it so difficult to reduce gender inequality in male-dominated higher educational organizations? A feminist institutional perspective. *Science and Technology of Human Values*, 45(2), 207–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03080188.2020.1737903> (Sage Journals)
- Ryan, M. K., & Haslam, S. A. (2005). The glass cliff: Evidence that women are over-represented in precarious leadership positions. *British Journal of Management*, 16(2), 81–90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2005.00433.x>
- Shakeshaft, C., Brown, G., Irby, B. J., Grogan, M., & Ballenger, J. (2007). Increasing gender equity in educational leadership. In J. Murphy (Ed.), *The educational leadership challenge: Redefining leadership for the 21st century*
- UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. (2021). *Women in higher education: Has the female advantage put an end to gender inequalities?* UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377182> (UNESCO Documents)
- Wang, T. (2026). Demystifying underrepresentation of women leaders in higher education: Comparative perspectives on gender-based leadership barriers and gender equality. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 56(2), 274–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2025.2500300> (Taylor & Francis Online)

- World Economic Forum. (2025). *Global gender gap report 2025*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2025/> (World Economic Forum)
- Wu, A. (2025). Breaking the glass ceiling: Statistical evidence of the gender effect in higher education leadership. *School Science and Mathematics*.