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Women Leaders in Administration: Challenges, Coping Strategies, and Pathways to Success

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Abstract

Women's educational leadership in Pakistan is becoming visible. Lived experiences of women leaders of public secondary schools are yet to be explored. This study has a qualitative phenomenological research design with the aim to explore the experiences of eight public secondary school head teachers in Sialkot, Punjab, to identify their problems in the access and execution of administrative roles and coping strategies. The participants were chosen by employing purposive sampling and interviewed using a self-developed semi-structured interview guide. Data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis using the six phases described by Braun and Clarke. The two broad themes that emerged were: Obstacles to access and carry out administrative positions, and Overcoming obstacles: coping strategies, resilience, and suggestions to future leaders. Women leaders described various multi-layered obstacles, such as pressure from family and in-laws, work-life balance and double burden of household and work roles, traditional gender norms and community expectations, structural and institutional barriers, as well as lack of resources and financial difficulties. In parallel, they spoke of transformative contributions that they individually contributed to school improvement in the areas of enrolment, learning environment, infrastructure development and community engagement. In order to handle these tensions, participants sought to use open-door communication, to motivate their staff through recognition and inclusion, along with staff spiritual resilience in the Islamic faith and leadership through the Islamic moral framework as well as problem-solving and peer support. The study finds that women's presence in the school leadership is both impactful at the institutional level and costly at the individual level, and that their greater sustainability and equity are possible only through a range of systemic changes to policy and funding, staffing, leadership development, and gender norms in education.

Keywords: *Women's School Leadership, Lived Experiences, Barriers to Administrative Roles, Transformative Leadership, Coping Strategies*

Introduction

Women's education leadership is critical to influence the school culture, staff effectiveness and consequently, student outcomes, leadership of many societies remains male-dominated.

The number of women holding leadership positions in schools, colleges and universities has grown over the last few years, which provides new opportunities, but feminist theory shows that inequities still exist (Mareque et al., 2022). In an environment where societies are dominated by male norms, women traditionally have no leadership role other than that of being teachers at local schools and 'second in command' in others (Hakimi et al., 2024). It is therefore important to understand women's experiences and routes into leadership to guide leadership development and policy-making to be more inclusive.

One of the common themes in the literature is women's difficulties when it comes to balancing work and life, especially for those who hold leadership positions. Women leaders are likely to face dual pressures such as professional duties and family responsibilities, which can lead to increased stress levels and, in certain instances, mental strain (Dzingwa & Terblanche, 2024; Bano & Subba, 2025). Women may not be able to sustain their leadership roles because of limited institutional flexibility, insufficient support systems and the absence of formal procedures and rules for navigating the work–family interface. In parallel, women are often less able to access mentoring, professional development, and networks of support than men, and there is high recognition of the value of such supports for a successful leadership journey (Smilgienė & Masiliauskienė, 2024; Nolan & Guo, 2022).

Women and leadership scholarship more broadly demonstrates the importance of considering structural norms in understanding women's opportunities and experiences of leadership. Women's roles in society as having more responsibilities for family and home than for their career aspirations continue to affect their leadership pathways, even in the education sector, as Goryunova and Madsen demonstrate. Gender disparities in leadership and promotion are prevalent in academia and other workplaces, reflecting entrenched gendered cultures and promotion processes (Avolio et al., 2024). Diehl et al. (2025) add that a number of obstacles to women in leadership are felt at the group and organizational level, with subtle biases, identity-based discrimination and expectations of what an "ideal" leader is, combining with gender and other identities.

In this context, women leaders in mathematics schools experience barriers which can be seen at macro (societal and cultural), meso (institutional and organizational) and micro (individual and interpersonal) levels. Macro-Level (Gender Stereotypes, Conservative Community Norms); Meso-Level (Policy and Structural barriers, including lack of staffing, funding, and promotion systems) and Micro-Level (Internal barriers: Identity, Confidence, Perceived value) (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024, Diehl et al., 2025). Their stratification becomes interwoven with local religious and cultural norms and expectations, resource limitations and shifting politics on inclusion and equality of gender in public education in Pakistan. It is therefore the objective of this study to delve into understanding the lived experiences of the female head teachers of government secondary schools at depth, not only in terms of significant challenges/barriers they have faced in their professional life, but also in terms of their ways of carrying out leadership and maintaining it in their background.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the barriers women face in accessing and performing administrative roles.
2. To explore how women leaders navigate, cope with, and respond to these barriers in administrative settings.

Research Questions

1. What barriers do women encounter in accessing and performing administrative roles?
2. How do women leaders cope with and overcome challenges in administrative positions?

Literature Review

School leadership plays a greater role in school improvement, safety and student well-being and the importance of women's leadership in schools is increasingly being acknowledged in literature. Leadership practices have been explored in the previous literature (Ghaffar et al., 2025; Jamil et al., 2024). Research underscores the importance of collaboration, community involvement, and relational leadership for socializing safer schools, improved relations and comprehensive development (Baharun et al., 2021). Al Husna & Uddin (2025) and Nadeem (2024) found that women's leadership has been linked with transformational and relational approaches that prioritize collaboration, trust-building, and teacher development, which can positively influence a school's students' achievement and staff morale. The extent to which women's leadership translates to other specific outcomes like creased bullying, better reporting mechanisms, improved student performance, however, sparsely documented from an empirical perspective (Nolan & Guo, 2022).

With the problem of work–life balance dominating the educational leadership research field, it seems essential to place this issue on the management agenda. The impossible expectations directed by women leaders to be an "ideal mother" and "ideal worker", as described by Dzingwa and Terblanche (2024), have been known to cause stress and even burnout at times. Johnson (2021) comments about black women in educational leadership, and Lekchiri and Kamm's (2020) findings on women in male dominated industries exemplify how gender, race, and occupational stereotypes combine to create greater pressures for women in leadership roles. These tensions reveal a conflict between structural norms and entrenched gendered divisions of domestic labor, and yet the specific need of women to navigate and negotiate these demands makes them the main carriers of the burden.

Throughout the years, transformative leadership has been referred to in the context of women in education. Al Husna and Uddin (2025) further observe that female leaders often display characteristics associated with positive teacher motivation and student behaviour, like articulating vision, inspiring staff, emphasizing individual development and building positive cultures of collaboration. Nadeem's (2024) distributed leadership research highlights the importance of inclusive leadership practices in driving school improvement, irrespective of the gender of the leader, yet also suggests that women are more likely to practice participatory ways of leadership.

Simultaneously data accumulated by research in both sectors, corporate and educational, show that groups with a higher ratio of women in leadership have been found to exhibit better performance, equity and inclusive cultures (Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2022; Nadeem, 2024). However, despite these contributions, the number of women in educational leadership positions is still low. Avolio et al. (2024) describe women's underrepresentation in positions of power and prestige in the academic world as almost a universal phenomenon, citing structural, cultural and organizational issues. Despite the studies that have been carried out in Pakistan and internationally, which suggest that women are better leaders when it comes to increasing the growth of institutions, creating inclusive spaces and contributing to SDGs,

the stereotype continues to exist, and there is still a problem of promotion practices (Mareque et. al. 2022, Rafiq et. al. 2024, Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2022).

It can be concluded that to change perceptions of women's leadership, systemic interventions are needed to encourage gender diversity in educational institutions, specifically created leadership development processes for women and support for a work–life balance. In this regard, women's voices in the context of phenomenological research can enhance understanding of the manifestation of these issues of macro level in the context of everyday school leadership practice.

Research Methodology

It was a qualitative study with phenomenological research design in which the lived experiences of women in school leadership were explored how they see and manage obstruction on management were also studied. Phenomenology was suitable in this research as it is about the subjective meaning and experiences of the participants about a phenomenon (Regmi, 2024). It is pertinent to mention that eight female Head Teachers were selected from government schools of Sialkot, using purposive sampling; the participants had direct experience towards administrative roles as allied to the objectives of the research. Semi-structured interviews of a literary nature, using a self-developed interview guide based on the literature and research objectives, were used to collect data; the interviews were of a duration of 30–40 minutes and, upon interviewee consent, were audio recorded. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed. The six-stage iterative approach of reflexive thematic analysis, described by Braun and Clarke (2022), was applied, involving: familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme defining and naming, and report writing. Ethical aspects concerning confidentiality and anonymity, privacy and voluntary participation were fully respected during the research process.

Findings of the Study

Based on the objectives of the study, two major themes were extracted with associated subthemes, each grounded in rich, participant-generated data and each directly aligned with the study's research objectives. All participant quotations are presented below as per themes and sub-themes.

Theme 1: Obstacles to Accessing and Performing Administrative Roles

The first theme is about the obstacles women leaders faced. According to the results, different barriers women faced included family and in-law pressure, work-life conflict, and the double burden of domestic and professional responsibilities, societal gender norms and conservative community expectations, institutional and policy-level inadequacies, and financial and resource constraints. Further explanation is as follows in the form of sub-themes:

Family and In-Law Pressure

The first sub-theme extracted from the data was family and in-laws' pressure. One of the participants explained her perspectives in the following words:

This is a very difficult question. I don't have a maid at home. I have four sons. One thing I feel guilty about is that the women who stay at home, and leave their children at the door, and love them, and pray for them we have to do that in the kitchen as well. And I think my love for my children hasn't been quenched. I tell him, I don't want my daughter-in-law to be a working

lady. I want her to be a domestic lady. She should be educated, but she should spend more time with her family (Participant 1)

Participant No. 2 explained the pressure of the family openly, being both honest about the barrier and how the support of her husband helped her to overcome it: *"Yes, my in-laws have put me under tremendous pressure, but my husband helped me. So, yes, I was granted this chance."* Participant No. 4 explained how marriage fundamentally reorganized her relationship to professional development and instituted responsibilities that she identified as inhibiting even in a generally supportive domestic relationship:

Things have changed after marriage, you see, you have a lot of obligations. You can even have a partner with you, yet somehow, I have a problem with in-laws and children. I am too busy to continue with my studies.

Another participant (6) was mindful of how her own career decisions had been influenced by gendered family expectations, both by choosing to stay at home after marriage and then becoming a leader, and how she now saw her decision to do so as a source of loss and blessing:

I would say, as I am a woman, as I got married, everybody was telling me to take a government job, but I chose to stay at home, and Alhamdulillah, it worked out, and now I have a job and a house.

Work-Life Conflict and the Burden of Double Duties

All participants gave deep personal and emotional perspectives about work-life conflict and the burden of double duties in the following words:

This is a very difficult question. I don't have a maid at home. I have four sons. One thing I feel guilty about is that the women who stay at home, and leave their children at the door, and love them, and pray for them we have to do that in the kitchen as well. And I think my love for my children hasn't been quenched. I told him, I don't want my daughter-in-law to be a working lady. I want her to be a domestic lady. She should be educated, but she should spend more time with her family (Participant 1)

Another participant provided her perspective in the following way:

A lot. A lot. Because if a housewife is working five jobs as a mother, as a cook, as a sweeper, as a housewife a working woman is working ten jobs. Because her mind is about the kids, cooking, her husband, maintaining the house, and her job. The problem with the job, how to deal with it, how to solve it, what to tell the kids in the morning. In your mind, while taking care of the kids at home, all this was going on. It was going on (Participant 3)

Participant No. 3 admitted that family criticism of neglect was a factual and painful payoff of complete institutional commitment - a price she was willing to pay but one she bitterly regretted: *"Undoubtedly it is the greatest challenge. Family is disregarded. My children and family have grievances. They are not content. And I am really sorry about it. So it is extremely difficult to keep everything in balance."*

Societal Gender Norms and Conservative Community Expectations

Another barrier was social gender norms and conservative community expectations. One of the participants had faced in the beginning of her leadership journey, reflecting a systemic rather than personal problem as: *"Yes, I faced gender bias and lack of opportunities in the beginning."* (Participant 5).

The challenge of working with uneducated community members who did not understand or value the school's educational mission was also a difficult task as a barrier. Participant 2 explained this perspective in the following way:

You take it as a challenge. You have to deal with certain kinds of communities. I mean, if you don't have educated parents, they will not understand why you are calling their children daily, why you are teaching them, or why you're taking an interest in them. I mean, that community doesn't cooperate in that way (Participant 2)

Participant No. 4 explained the specific strength of conservative views in the rural communities where she had to demonstrate her abilities in the face of deeply ingrained beliefs about the right role of women:

I study hard, and I live in a rural community, so there, you know, the mindset of people is not so wide. They are conservative. So, I need to show them all that I can do anything, and her daughter wants to change too, and they have to be educated.

Participant No. 2 mentioned the difficulty of dealing with uneducated members of the community who did not comprehend or appreciate the educational mission of the school, which would cause a continual tension between institutional leadership and community participation: *"You have to handle some types of communities. I mean, without educated parents, they will never realize why you are calling their children every day, why you are teaching them, or why you are even interested in them."*

Barriers to an Institutional and Policy-Level

Other barriers at the institutional/policy level were also reported by the participants, such as staffing, limited school funding, lack of science laboratories, infrequent teacher recruitment, heads not being allowed to take holiday leave, and the lack of career development opportunities. Such organizational weaknesses subjected female leaders to the unfair strain of making systemic contributions by financing them personally and stretching themselves to fill the gaps.

Participant No. 1 provided an evidence-based and critical assessment of the policy of government school funding, claiming that even a small per-student monetary investment would change institutional circumstances:

Our syllabus is certainly very good. One thing is that it is true that education should be free, but our country is not that liberal in it. We must raise only 20 rupees as Faroge Talim Fund, then, even when the condition of the schools will be changed, then, money will certainly matter. We have no funds or resources.

Participant No. 2 highlighted staff deficiency as the most operationally crucial institutional obstacle and explained how the lack of a full teaching staff put the head teacher in an untenable situation:

The lack of staff is the greatest challenge that I have had to face. And without a full staff, you can do nothing. I mean, you cannot say that our class is short. Because you already know that you do not have staff. You must go there yourself. So, when you go there yourself, you are the person who will use that seat publicly.

Participant No. 4 recounted the infrastructure crisis that was caused when an elementary school building was converted into a high school with no building renovation, leaving more than a thousand students without enough classroom space.

The infrastructure of the school, student strength, is so great, but there are not enough rooms, nor is the high school enough. It is small since it was an elementary school, and now it is a high school. I say, is it possible that you can imagine it?

Resource and Financial Limitations

Several of the respondents cited financial constraints, both self-individual and institutional, as some of the major impediments to their career advancement and institutional expansion. Participant No. 7 outlined how monetary necessity had been a driving force to enter the education sector, and thus her leadership pathway was situated in the backdrop of economic need and not professional aspiration: *"I am in a poor family, so I always believe that I have a great motivation to contribute to my family financially."*

Participant No. 7 mentioned the huge personal financial cost to the school infrastructure enrichment that had been necessitated, which is also a trend, where female leaders have filled in state funding holes with personal and community resources mobilization:

My big achievement is that I provided an easy time to my students during the summer season by installing a 3KV solar system in my school, since I got funds through my family, and I provided my school with a 3KV solar system, so obviously, my teachers are working hard through their contribution.

Theme 2: Overcoming Obstacles - Coping Strategies, Resilience, and Advice to Future Leaders

Identified the coping strategies through which these women navigated their barriers, including open-door communication leadership, creative staff motivation and recognition practices, Islamic spiritual resilience, systematic problem-solving, and the wisdom of collective experience shared generously with future generations of women leaders. The following are further sub-themes.

Communication, Accessibility, and Open-Door Leadership

The first sub-theme was extracted from communication, accessibility, and open-door leadership. Open-door policy was perceived as the cornerstone of one of the participants' leadership practices making herself personally reachable to parents, teachers, and students always:

Every head teacher should try to meet the parents personally when they come with different queries. There should be no obstacle to reach your office. They should talk to your gatekeeper and then ask you so that they can reach you directly. I give everyone my personal contact details regarding any queries or complaints. I personally think that is the best way. (Participant 1)

In the view of another participant, carefully chosen language was the most powerful and cost-effective tool available to a school leader for reducing conflict and building cooperation: *"You can buy anything with this tongue. Like, what you say affects others' minds, and they follow your instruction. Give respect to others, and your challenges have been lessened automatically."* (Participant 6).

Participant No. 4 recounted a very basic, very classy conflict prevention technique to provide an amicable, respectful school atmosphere where issues are resolved on their own before a formal intervention is required: *"The best way to avoid difficulties is to be friendly to your school, practice politeness, ask questions, and provide them answers to their problems."*

Staff Motivation Through Recognition, Celebration, and Inclusion

The next sub-theme was staff motivation through recognition, celebration, and inclusion. In the view of a participant, monthly staff lunch party — funded personally — is her signature strategy for building team cohesion, surfacing problems early, and celebrating school achievements:

I give my staff a lunch party for the whole staff at the end of the month, where we discuss school growth and all kinds of issues and achievements, etc. So that's how I motivate them, and they have less conflict with each other (Participant 2)

According to another participant, a powerful dignity-based approach to teacher management never criticizing a teacher in front of others is rooted in a deep understanding of how institutional respect shapes professional loyalty:

I never misbehave or insult my teacher in front of anyone nor in front of any parents nor in front of any teacher. Because if I disrespect them, they keep a grudge in their heart, and of course, that is harmful for school. I often motivate them by praising them in the assembly, and I clap for them. That's how I appreciate them (Participant 3)

Participant No. 6 shared a lovely and surprisingly successful small-scale recognition approach to giving teachers who worked hard chocolates and sweets, which involves a blend of material reward and personal warmth:

Clap at them during meetings of the staff, and who are industrious, I present them with chocolate to the best part, so Masha Allah, each month of the last two years, I must give them a great deal of sweets.

Spiritual Resilience and Faith-Based Motivation

The third sub-theme was spiritual resilience and faith-based motivation. In the view of a participant, Tawakkal (trust in God) and the lessons of Hadith as the practical ethical framework through which she navigated leadership challenges:

With the help of Allah Almighty, my willpower has helped me a lot to manage challenges. I just believe that Tawakkal plays a great role in all situations. During my responsibility, the lessons I took from Hadith and Islam, I applied and got success. (Participant 3)

In the view of another participant, transformative infrastructure achievement raising Rs. 13–14 lakh from the community is a manifestation of divine support for sincere, purpose-driven leadership: *"When we make a decision for God, He makes a path for us. That's why we say, God helps those who have learned. It's definitely like that."* (Participant 1)

Advice to Future Women Leaders

One of the participants explored that the most philosophically grounded advice urging future leaders to approach the role as a moral mission rather than an exercise of authority is: *"I must say that teaching is not a profession, but it's a noble mission through which our next generations can achieve achievements in the future. So please take that seat to facilitate others, not to bully others."* (Participant 1)

Similarly, in the view of another participant, a sharp, ethics-first directive rooted in institutional experience: *"Of course, women have to aspire to leadership roles without any hesitation. One piece of advice I would like to give them don't cheat others, especially your institute. Do not do corruption ever, because it is very shameful."* (Participant 3).

Participant No. 6 put the most realistic and down-to-earth evaluation - he recognized the expenses but testified to the benefits: *"Yeah, it is worth joining it, you should."*

Participant No. 5 provided support based on individual perseverance: *"Never surrender on your ambition, work hard, and stay confident."*

Discussion

This study's results offer a complex picture of women's school leadership: a transformative, expensive, replicating and expanding presence across diversity that aligns with insights resonating from the broad literature on gender and leadership. The interviews revealed that women's leadership involvement contributed to the expansion of enrolment, enhanced learning environments, infrastructure development, and community engagement, which is consistent with the findings of other studies that show how women leaders can be a factors of change in the overall learning environment in the education institutions (Showunmi, 2021; Mareque et al., 2022; Al Husna & Uddin, 2025). Simultaneously, their experiences of family and in-law pressure, work–life conflict, conservative community values and lacking institutional support align with the evidence on women's leadership journeys, which highlights influences include gender based norms, constraints and lack of support systems (Dzingwa & Terblanche, 2024; Goryunova & Madsen, 2024; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024; Rafiq et al., 2024). The coping strategies pursued by participants (open door communication, staff motivation through recognition, faith based resilience, and ethical/ service oriented leadership) embody both transformational leadership principles and distributed leadership concepts, and demonstrate how women can lead in ways that are both moral and a matter of civilizations, rather than positional (Keohane, 2020; Nadeem, 2024; Agrawal et al., 2020). However, the emphasis on personal sacrifice, informal resource mobilizing and individual resilience shows potential evidence for reform of system issues of policy, funding and leadership preparation and ultimately for more formal, gender-responsive support for women in educational leadership as suggested in the literature.

Conclusion

This study helps to understand the lived experiences of women head teachers in government secondary schools of Sialkot, and that leadership is an outcome of prolonged action, sacrifice and commitment towards student/school. In this context, women leaders do much more than take care of the day-to-day affairs of the school, but they are oriented to the complex interpersonal, cultural and structural dynamics and work to enhance enrolment, learning, school climate and infrastructure. Their experiences illustrate that leadership is not just a title but an evolving process and skill that matures over years and is honed with ethical decisions and withstanding competing, opposing forces. But they may also be costly: work-life balance is sacrificed; there is emotional strain, and some of them place the responsibility for the entire institution beyond the available resources.

These results also point to a relationship between the various barriers at the personal, institutional and societal level. In fact, work–life balance is proposed as one of the main struggles, not to mention the burdens imposed by systems, set promotion practices, and the ingrained gender norms on women who may be in high-ranking, demanding roles (Dzingwa & Terblanche, 2024; Diehl et al., 2025). In some cases, women leaders have supportive family members behind them, but the burden is still mainly on the women, sometimes resulting in trade-offs and burnout on the personal side. However, their leadership approach in education, which is based on communication, recognition, inclusivity and faith-based resiliency, does produce positive school culture, and a positive impact on student success,

such that it becomes both an equity and an educational quality issue to support the leadership of women in schools. It is therefore important to address systemic gaps related to policy, funding, staffing and leadership development to ensure gender justice and sustainability of effective school leadership.

Recommendations

The following are some recommendations based on the findings:

- Review promotion and appointment rules with respect to leadership roles in schools to ensure that they are based on explicit, merit-based, gender-neutral principles and to actively seek out and correct discriminatory practices that block women from accessing leadership.
- Expand and fairly allocate more resources to each child based on school type and level to ensure head teachers are not compelled to use their own or community resources to cater for a lack of basic infrastructure and resources.
- Replace ad hoc contractual hiring with routine, competitive and permanent hiring of teachers to ensure proper manning; to ease workload over issues of teacher employment and to provide more stable circumstances for teaching.
- Develop institutional pre-service and in-service leadership programmes whereby experienced women leaders are involved as mentors, skills-based workshops are organized, peer learning networks are created, and specific consideration is given to features such as work–life balance and gender related challenges and hurdles.
- Embed culturally and religiously based conceptions of women's leadership into discourses about leadership training and development; legitimize women's leadership and leadership practices based on participation and recognition from school and district assessment systems.

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