

PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

Eeman Khurshid

Department of Gender Studies, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi

Dr. Humaira Zulfiqar

Department of Sociology, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi

The purpose of this study is to explore students' perception of female leadership in Pakistan, the factors that affect these perceptions, obstacles to women in leadership positions and the societal and cultural factors which impact on the perception. The findings of the semi-structured in-depth interviews with university students across different disciplines have been analyzed. Twenty university students (10 male and 10 female), aged between 20-25 years, belonging to different academic disciplines and study programs with different socio-economic backgrounds were selected for this study through purposive sampling. Results indicated that there is an increasing trend of acceptance of women as leaders, particularly in the field of education and healthcare while other challenges still persist in the areas of politics and business. The key barriers identified to women's advancement in leadership positions were cultural norms, societal expectations and lack of institutional support. It was found that perceptions were significantly affected by gender, socio-economic status and education of the students, with a high level of agreement among the urban students and students from gender-focused disciplines, for the female leadership position. There is a focus on the importance of education, media and societal change as key vehicles to changing attitudes towards women in power. Recommendations referred to mentoring, tackling gender biases, and institutionalizing more opportunities for women in leadership positions.

Keywords: *Women in Leadership, Gender Equality, Perceptions, University Students, Leadership Barrier, Cultural influence, Gender-Sensitive education*

INTRODUCTION

Leadership has been traditionally considered a domain where men are mostly dominant and where women are often silenced or excluded because they face various cultural, structural and systemic barriers. In recent years, the international discourse on gender equality has become more strident about the critical need for women's representation in leadership roles in political, corporate, and social settings (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). However, in the face of these discussions, the lack of women in leadership positions is a critical issue on the global agenda. As per the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, women account for only 28% of managerial positions globally and have only 26.7% seats in parliament. Moreover, only 8.8% of Fortune 500 companies are directed by female. (Gender Gap Report 2023). These numbers vividly point to the slow progress of achieving gender equality in leadership, but there are many examples of women achieving success in leadership roles around the world. For example: Iceland, Norway and Finland remain balance in gender ratio of leaders for both the political and

corporate landscape (Larsen et al., 2022). Rwanda has an impressive 61% of women in parliament, and what has been achieved through targeted policies (Revisiting Rwanda Five Years After Record-breaking Parliamentary Elections 2018). Likewise, in New Zealand, and Germany, female leaders like Jacinda Ardern and Angela Merkel, have left an indelible mark on the global stage, with their leadership in government bringing benefits to their respective countries (Mayer & May, 2021). The following cases demonstrate the effect that equal opportunities can have on women's lives when they receive them. But obstacles remain as systemic barriers are still present in many areas, slowing progress. This reinforces the need to maintain the momentum for gender equality further, but important steps have already been taken.

However, in a lot of other areas, especially in South Asia and the Middle East, the path to gender parity in leadership is fraught with obstacles (Dubrova, 2024). Socio-cultural norms, institutional barriers and economic disparities all contribute to limit women's access to leadership roles (Mauchi, 2021). Despite the presence of good representation of women in leadership roles, including Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto, South Asia has not done as well as other regions in this regard (Ghani & Ali, 2015). This paradox is emblematic of the disconnect between individual achievement and systemic inclusivity.

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of women in leadership roles among the students of universities in Pakistan, who are the future of this nation and can bring about change in the society. The students of the University are at a crossroads between tradition and modernity; their viewpoint is an important signal of what lies ahead of them in the future. The study aims to understand the attitudes and beliefs of these students to find out the extent to which the societal norms are entrenched (culturally context can be very rigid and influence perceptions of women in leadership roles). In addition, it examines the possibilities of how to address and challenge these norms. But despite these challenges, this research seeks to offer any guidance at all on the trajectory to be taken, as if even a little, to help pave the way forward. The results of this study have implications beyond the Pakistani context and could be applied to other countries, in order to overcome obstacles to women's leadership, and to identify strategies for gender equity. This research will contribute to the larger conversation about women in leadership, and as a reminder to policy makers, educators and civil society of the need to build more inclusive and equitable structures. The empowerment of women to lead is not only a matter of justice but it's also a crucial factor of national progress. This is necessary for the further progress of society to be held in check, for otherwise society's progress is stunted. While there are still difficulties, there is also the potential for change.

To sum up, the quest for gender equality in leadership is a complicated and multifaceted problem both globally and in Pakistan. This study aims to underscore the perceptions of university students, but also to offer some insights that may be instrumental in understanding the barriers that remain in terms of structure and culture in the path to women's empowerment in leadership. In spite of the progress that has been achieved, the potential of women leaders can only be realised if the collective effort and systemic change is done. This is an important movement in the fight towards a more equitable future as it is one that is concerned with deep-rooted problems that have long been with us.

REVIEW LITERATURE

Gender norms in Pakistan are highly restrictive, sometimes favoring women's role as caregivers over their career preferences. Leadership and decision making is normally considered a masculine domain and therefore women who want to defy it tend to face a lot of hurdles. Moreover, in the society, there are certain images that are created about women in leadership, which are not always positive and many people doubt their capability and decision-making skills (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). This situation further impacts the confidence of the aspiring leader women and the pattern of exclusionary practices that keeps leadership positions mainly male dominated.

There is another theme that is beginning to emerge in the literature and that is the effect of digital visibility and TFGBV on women's leadership. New research has shown that when women take up positions of leadership, they experience an increased degree of harassment and bullying on social media platforms in the form of cyberbullying, gender-based hate speech, intimidation, and reputation attacks. In South Asian societies where there are still strong cultural pressures associated with the visibility of women, the possibility of facing online abuse can dissuade women from taking up positions of leadership that involve public and/or digital visibility. Even though this theme has not emerged strongly from the current literature review, it is certainly an interesting avenue for further research.

Despite all these difficulties, there have been some remarkable examples of women's leadership in Pakistan which are an inspiration to others. One of the most significant examples of a woman who faced significant socio-political barriers and achieved her position of power is Benazir Bhutto, the first female prime minister of a Muslim-majority country (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). Moreover, Malala Yousafzai, the Nobel laureate, and Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, the Academy Award-winning filmmaker have become symbols of their work in education and storytelling, respectively, across the world (Shirazi, 2018). These women are indeed exceptional but they are a small percentage of the reality and mirror the inequality that continues to exist in Pakistan. It is troubling, because it is a reminder of the need for systemic change to enable women to take leadership and to build a more equitable society.

Indeed, the challenges faced by women leaders in Pakistan are multifaceted and complex. The social norms that discourage women from seeking leadership roles also make ambition a deviation from the women's primary family roles. In rural and disadvantaged areas, women's access to education and training, especially in these areas, is limited, reducing their ability to develop the skills they need for leadership (Chaudhary and Dutt, 2022b). Additionally, women's career progression is often hindered in the workplace environment, where issues like gender bias, harassment, and pay disparities continue to be major challenges. Further, women have limited opportunities to participate in professional and leadership roles due to safety issues and decreased mobility in public spaces (Kayani, 2024). To create a more just world, however, these barriers must be overcome. At the same time, however, there is growing recognition of the need for systemic change, as Smith and Sinkford (2022) pointed out. Gender equity is actively promoted in educational institutions, workplaces and civil society organisations and environments are being created for the women to assume leadership. Mentorship programs, gender sensitive workplace policies and awareness campaigns have

started to tackle some of the systemic obstacles; however, significant work remains to be accomplished.

Patriarchal norms are entrenched in Pakistan, making the issue of women's representation in leadership even harder to tackle (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022). Pakistan's ranking of 145th out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2023 is one of the highest gender gaps in the world. Women constitute merely 10% of managerial roles, hold only 5% of parliamentary seats and are nearly non-existent in executive leadership positions within major corporations. These figures are not just indicators of challenges faced by individual women; they are evidence of structural inequalities which limit women's access to education and further professional development from the outset. In this context, however, one has to question the system as a whole. There has been little movement but there is an increasing recognition that something needs to change.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research is as follows:

1. To analyze the perception about women leadership in university and their impact by cultural, social and religious norms among students of Quaid e Azam University of Pakistan.
2. To examine gender, socio-economic and academic field differences in perceptions, and pinpoint factors that are likely to cause these differences.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a qualitative research design to analyze the perception of the university students about women in leadership among Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad. In order to gain in-depth insights into participant's perspectives and get an understanding of the cultural attitudes, gender norms, and lived experiences of women in leaders, the qualitative approach was chosen. The interview guide was pre-tested with six participants to validate and test the instrument's reliability. This preliminary testing phase uncovered issues to address (e.g., question clarity, alignment with research goals), which were incorporated into the guide. The suggestions received were then used to make revisions which led to a shorter and more effective interview guide. The complexities of the topic, however, were a challenge throughout the process as they needed continual refinement and consideration.

A purposive sampling method was used for the study to choose 20 participants, 10 males and 10 females from different socio-economic backgrounds. The sample had a wide variety of perspectives and experiences which allowed for a broader range of examination of how gender and socio-economic status affect perceptions of women in leadership. In order to make sure that the participants would be relevant for the purpose of the research, certain inclusion criteria were set while conducting the sampling procedure. Inclusion criteria for the research were met by those participants who were: (a) enrolled as undergraduate or postgraduate students at a university in Pakistan; (b) 20 years old or above; (c) voluntary and ready to provide informed consent; and (d) fluent in English/Urdu language to understand and answer the survey/questionnaire.

A structure for an interview was developed to guide the discussions in order to cover some important points: Participants' perceptions of the capabilities of women in leadership

roles, expectations set on female leaders by society, the problems faced by women in leadership and potential solutions to promote gender equality in leadership. Interviews were held in Urdu, as it was important to ensure participants felt comfortable and able to be themselves. The participants' informed consent was obtained, including their consent to have the interviews recorded on audio and to have their responses analyzed. The challenges of this research, however, are clearly seen as it travels the fine balance of gender, socio-economic status and perceptions of leadership.

The data were gathered through a semi-structured questionnaire that involved 20 open-ended questions aimed at examining the perceptions of university students towards women in leadership, the variables behind such perceptions, obstacles faced by women in their role as leaders and any suggestions for developing gender-sensitive leadership within Pakistani societies. With a semi-structured form of data collection, the interviewer could remain consistent during interviews, while the respondents were free to speak about their experience and opinions. Examples of some of the interview questions are provided below: "How do you see women in leadership roles in Pakistan?", "Which variables do you think determine the acceptance of women leaders?", "What are the obstacles that hinder women to become leaders?", and "What changes should be made to encourage women to lead in Pakistani society?"

Throughout the study, ethical issues were emphasized. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were respected and a safe and non-judgemental space was created for open and honest responses from participants. The analysis of interview data was done according to the six phases of thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This includes familiarization with the data, generation of codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally the production of the report. Familiarization with data meant that all interview transcriptions had to be read several times to ensure the researcher became very familiar with the data before coding started. Coding of data was done manually by the principal researcher and no qualitative data analysis software was used at all in the process. Codes were generated systematically within the entire data set then grouped into categories due to conceptual similarities within codes.

In findings, the ultimate themes arose, supported by illustrative quotes from participants which added depth and authenticity. But it was not smooth sailing: capturing a wide range of viewpoints was key. The conclusions are very impressive, but have to be read with great care due to the complexity of the context.

FINDINGS

This section is based on the results of exploratory research which focused on the perception of university students on women's role in the leadership positions in Pakistan. The research examines the influence of gender, cultural values and education in such perceptions and the barriers and opportunities for women in leadership. The findings of the present study are presented in the context of the theoretical frameworks such as Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) to provide understanding of students' attitudes toward female leadership in universities in Pakistan. Social Role Theory suggests that expectations of acceptable role behaviors for men

and women are shaped to a great extent by norms and values of society and, in many societies, traits that are perceived as masculine are associated with leadership, and vice versa. This theory highlights that when there are deviations from these set norms, it could generate flawed assessment of women in leadership roles. Based on this, Role Congruity Theory suggests that women may experience a double-bind, as they are expected to demonstrate feminine traits to be fewer effective leaders, yet demonstrate masculine traits to be less likeable.

These biases underscore the barriers that women encounter on their journey towards acceptance and success in leadership positions. To further deepen this analysis, the study includes Intersectionality, a concept that explores the interaction between multiple identities (gender, class, ethnicity and religion) to understand their perceptions and experiences of leadership. In the context of Pakistan (where cultural and societal norms are firmly entrenched in patriarchal and religious frameworks), these intersections are crucial for grasping the additional layers of discrimination that women leaders confront. Therefore, these theories allow the study to explore the attitude of the students with regard to the cultural norms, stereotypes and intersecting identities which can inhibit women from achieving leadership roles. The research aims to provide a comprehensive insight into the challenges faced by women in leadership, combining these viewpoints. This, in turn, seeks to provide gender-based leadership information for development strategies in academic and professional contexts. Yet equality is hard to achieve, because the entrenched norms continue to perpetuate inequalities.

Gendered Views on Leadership: Women Confined to Nurturing Roles

Most of the participants, both male and female, agree that women are capable of good leadership, especially in areas like education and health care and social welfare. Female Student, Age 25, BS Economics (P13) articulated:

I think women are wonderful leaders particularly in healthcare and education because they're nurturing and caring and empathetic. Women are more suited to care and emotional support and these are jobs that are more appropriate for women in leadership roles.

For women, though, leadership in traditionally male dominated fields such as politics and business were viewed as more threatening. Just half of the respondents felt confident that women can play a leadership role in these areas. Male Student, 23 years, BS Mathematics (P02) expressed,

I believe women can be strong leaders in the areas where they are traditionally strong, such as education or healthcare, but that's not the case in politics or business – that's where they're still not accepted as a leader; it's more of a challenge.

The results echo societal stereotypes limiting women's leadership potential, primarily because of traditional gender roles. Less support for women in leadership roles was found for male students, indicating the widespread and stigmatizing nature of hegemonic masculinity, which defines leadership as a domain of male dominance. This view is in line with the theories of Connell (2005) who argues that hegemonic masculinity is embedded in the idea of leadership as a masculine space, thus limiting the opportunities for women. The findings suggest that while there is some improvement in the leadership role of women among university students in Pakistan, there are significant cultural, social and institutional barriers that remain. This is also supported by Bandura (2002) who asserts that cultural visions of women's roles and

responsibilities are particularly influential in our ideas about what women can and should do. These ingrained conceptions are still limiting women's potential to lead, especially in areas where this is seen as being associated with dominance, power and authority.

Faith and Leadership: The Religious Debate on Women in Leadership

The religious perception is very influencing and significant in people perception of women in leadership position in Pakistan where religious perception combined dictates gender expectations. The perceptions of leadership are deeply entrenched in the social fabric of the nation, and these perceptions may have an impact on the views of leadership of men and women alike (Alharthi, 2024). Though Islamic teachings offer examples of powerful female leaders, often times, they are surrounded by misinterpretations by a male-dominated society, which constrain women's contribution to society. A Male Student, Age 24, BS Sociology (P03) spoke:

In our religious context, leadership is a role traditionally associated with men because of the beliefs related to gender, I believe that it is religion that is heavily influencing these beliefs, particularly in Pakistan where women are expected to be at home and caregivers to the family. The perception of women in leadership is not in line with women as caregivers, whilst Islam allows women to lead, in the modern context, there are many who feel uncomfortable with women in positions of power.

This quotation reflects the conflict between religion and society. While there are examples of women in leadership roles in Islam, many of these examples are overshadowed by cultural norms that limit women's visibility and participation in public leadership roles (Ali, 2000, p. 97). Such understandings, which are deeply rooted in a patriarchal tradition, reduce women's opportunities to lead, especially in male-dominated areas such as politics and business. Religious views are also complex, Female Student, Age 24, BS Mathematics (P15) added.

Islam preaches justice and equality and that there are examples of influential women in Islamic history. Islam believes in equality and justice, and that there are influential women in Islamic history. But in our society the meaning of religion is given an interpretation that narrows the roles of women, particularly their roles in leadership. Sometimes there are barriers for women who wish to lead because of what religious texts mean in the patriarchal perspective. I personally think that religion shouldn't restrict the ability of women to lead, but there is an association of leadership, in our culture, with men.

The respondent highlights the dual nature of religious teachings in which Islam teaches about justice and equality, which in theory can enhance women's leadership, but on the other hand, patriarchal interpretations limit the teachings to reinforce gendered expectations on leadership. This conflict between beliefs and culture in Islam has illustrated the complex relationships of women in leadership (Ali, 2000). Religious perceptions in Pakistan have a considerable impact on attitudes of the society towards women in leadership. Despite the examples that are present in the foundational literature of Islam of strong women leaders, a patriarchal interpretation of religion continues to pose challenges to women leaders (Writer, 2015). This theme demonstrates how religious beliefs can provide empowerment and can be barriers to empowerment when they are interpreted or applied in a cultural context.

Male And Female Attitudes towards Leadership

There is a considerable differential in perceptions about women's leadership capabilities between genders. The men in response often showed a lack of belief in the leadership potential of women, particularly in areas commonly associated with power and leadership, like politics and corporate management). Male Student, Age 24, BS Environmental Sciences (P04) expressed: *In areas of responsibility such as politics or business, where things are most competitive, it is more difficult for women to gain respect; leadership in these roles requires a hard demeanor that society does not expect of women.*

This is a clear sign of entrenched gender biases that usually link leadership qualities to male gender. Despite these biases, societal attitudes are shifting and can begin to influence attitudes and expectations of women in authority.

Females, however, expressed more positive and optimistic statements in their attitude towards the potential of women in leadership. Female Student, Age 25, BS Business Administration (P19) said

There is a lot more to be done when it comes to letting women excel in the fields of politics and business; I feel like there are women that can do just as much as men, and we should support each other and provide more opportunities for them to do that.

The difference in perceptions also serves as an example of the impact of gender socialization and expectations. Gender education and gender sensitization campaigns were identified as key in changing attitudes (United Nations, 2013). Amongst the female students, one who actively involved in gender studies and feminist theories observed,

My involvement in a program that focuses on the promotion of gender equality has brought to light the significant role of women's presence in leadership. The theories that we study, and especially feminist theories, have shown me the great potential that women have in that field.

But the path is fraught with obstacles; while there may be indications of progress, the route is still fraught with numerous challenges.

However, for males who had less exposure to gender-inclusive education, traditional gender stereotypes were often reiterated. Male Student Age 24, BS Mathematics (P08) said:

I have never really thought about it before until I started studying gender and leadership – I used to think that men are more suited to be leaders in society, but education will be the key to bring about a change in attitude.

These statements emphasize the long-lasting effects of gendered expectations and the importance of education in overturning stereotypes. Exposure to feminist theory and gender sensitive training can help to change attitudes towards a more inclusive approach to leadership and contribute to an increase in gender equality in leadership roles. But if there is to be a change in systems, it will take effort and commitment to sustain it: if it isn't, old beliefs may remain. There is a long way to go, but progress is being made towards equality.

Cultural and Societal Expectations

Students' views have been shaped by cultural values to a great extent. Often the traditional gender roles, especially in the rural areas is considered as a significant barrier in the way of

women's progression in leadership. For example, Female Student, Age 23, BS Media and Communication (P11) from a rural community described:

In our village, women are expected to stay at home and care for children and work in a leadership role in the workplace is not something that people really support because they think that women are naturally caring for children. It's difficult to change that perspective.

Likewise, Male Student, Age 24, BS Mathematics (P09), who was also from a rural area, stated this attitude:

The men in my village believe that leading a group or company is a man's job. Leading a group or company as a woman? It is not something that's accepted. There is a lot of thinking that women should be in the home and run the home. It is difficult for women to confront that.

The cultural norms on the role of women, as a care taker and homemaker is seen as limiting opportunities for women leaders (Zulfikar et al., 2024).

Female Student, Age 25, BS Psychology (P20) hailing from an urban environment observed:

There is a significant difference in the way people think about the role of leadership in urban settings, versus smaller towns: In urban areas, leadership is more about skills and competence; in more rural settings, women are often seen as primarily mothers or homemakers, thereby limiting the opportunities available for women to be leaders. This must change, and leadership should not be a place where women are not permitted to be leaders.

The students from the urbanized regions, however, seem to have a greater acceptance of women leaders and perceive leadership as a set of skills and not a gender attribute.

Male Student, Age 24, BS Engineering (P06), a city dweller, spoke this point:

In the city, people are more accepting of women's leadership, I think, because it's more about the person, not the gender. I believe that there are more opportunities for women to be successful in leadership positions, especially in business or politics; it is more about the individual than about gender.

The study reveals that these gaps in perception between rural and urban are attributable to the exposure that has been experienced from progressive gender norms. Female Student, Age 22, BS Education (P12) remarked: *The exposure people in urban areas have, to a wide variety of ideas and perspectives, is significantly different, and change in attitudes in the rural areas will take time and patience.* This highlights the importance of interventions to build women's leadership to be regionally tailored to the specific cultural context. For example, Male Student, Age 23, BS Sociology (P10) said,

If we are to have women in leadership in rural areas, we need to go the extra mile; it's not just about saying that women can lead it's about changing the perception of their roles in society in rural areas. It's more progressive in urban areas, but it's going to take effort in the villages.

Barriers to female leadership

There are many obstacles for women to become leaders. The main barriers identified by the participants include societal expectations, limited capacity of male stakeholders and lack of

leadership development and mentorship. Female Student, Age 24, BS Media and Communication Studies (P18) shared her experience:

One of the biggest challenges I've encountered is lack of support from my family to pursue a career; in our culture families think that you should focus on household responsibilities. It's very difficult to convince them that you want to take on a leadership role.

Male Student, Age 23, BS Urdu (P01) commented:

Men in many families still believe they are in charge and responsible for providing for the family, and women are expected to put family above work, and it's frustrating to see so many good women that can't go forward because they don't have the support of their families.

More than half of those who participated said that lack of family support is a major issue for women who wish to seek leadership roles, especially in conservative settings. Some of the respondents also noted, that women face more criticism and scrutiny than men which can scare them off from leadership opportunities. Female Student, Age 23, BS Media and Communication (P11) expressed:

I think women are judged more harshly than men when they're in positions of leadership and if they make a mistake, it's on them but if men do the same, it's just a part of being a leader. In a similar way.

Male Student, Age 25, BS Sociology (P05) said, *When women is a leader, their decisions are on more micro-scrutinising and they have to prove themselves more often and more time; when men lead, they are given more leeway.* When it comes to barriers, the findings are similar to previous studies on gender and leadership in that social expectations and lack of mentors and development opportunities are seen as major obstacles women face when advancing in their career (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Neither the media nor the public is spared of close observation and criticism of women's behavior in their leadership positions, reinforcing the idea of 'gendered expectation of behavior' (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Female Student, Age 23, BS Media and Communication (P11) explained:

Perfectionism is another challenge that women experience as leaders, not too forceful, not too soft, the right balance exists whereas not so for men. This creates an unnecessary pressure for women to perform and to be taken seriously as a leader.

This finding highlights the urgent need to make institutional changes that address these structural inequalities and create a more conducive setting for women leaders.

Male Student, Age 25, BS Sociology (P05) proposed: *While there have been strides, there is still a lack of support for women in leadership. The women in the system will face similar challenges as leadership roles, unless the system changes.*

Opportunities For Women in Leadership

On the brighter side, at least half of the students, approximately 55%, found the rise of women leaders in Pakistan from the political to the business world as a positive development that reflects acceptance of women in leadership positions. Female Student, Age 22, BS Sociology (P14) said: *"Women like Benazir Bhutto and Malala Yousafzai have proven that women can be powerful leaders, as they have faced enormous challenges and overcome them. I feel inspired to join the group of leaders in my community or maybe even a bigger group with political and*

business initiatives. Likewise, Male Student, Age 21, BS International Relations (P07), thinking about the same thing, said, "It's inspirational to see women such as Benazir Bhutto and Malala taking such strides forward. This is a testament that leadership is not limited to males and if more women are given the chance, they could go far too. These are great role models and it's a good thing to see. Also, a significant percentage of participants recognized the importance of higher education as a means to empower women to take on leadership roles. Female Student, Age 24, BS Arts and Design (P16) highlighted:

Education is essential I feel increasingly empowered in my leadership ambitions, partly because of the education I'm getting. In university we study leadership and social justice; I believe this will really help me in my future leadership ambitions." It is, however, a great benefit to women today to be able to purchase a car they can afford. There are some stumbling blocks but this is an important base.

Male Student, Age 24, BS Law (P08) added:

I have witnessed a significant rise in the number of women becoming leaders in my university; I think as long as we continue to create opportunities for women in the education field, this number will keep growing." Furthermore, there has been a heightened awareness of women role models in different fields, which have been cited as a motivational factor in a woman's pursuit of a leader position.

Female Student, Age 24, BS Gender Studies, (P17) expressed: *"It inspires me when I see women in positions where they can fly, like business and politics, and I feel that if they can, I can. It helps me to overcome my fears of taking a leadership role. Though there are ongoing difficulties, the positive outlook of many of the students on women's leadership capabilities provide a positive pathway for change.*

Male Student, Age 24, BS Sociology (P03) added:

There is definitely room for transformation in the area of leadership. More women are in leadership and I believe that as long as they get the proper support, the number of women in leadership will continue to grow as there is significant growth in the perception of society regarding women in leadership.

However, leadership can transcend gender and prominent female icons such as Benazir Bhutto and Malala Yousafzai have been cited over and over as an example. This is a significant discovery because it means that if they have the resources, training and mentoring, perceptions of women in leadership can be changed. Female Student, Age 23, BS Political Sciences said: *"Being able to see women like Malala achieve success gives me hope that if they can do it, I can do it as well and that with the right mentorship and determination, women can overcome the barriers society places in their way.*

Educational Influence

Education has been seen as a key factor in changing perceptions. Students from "gender equality" fields (such as gender studies, social sciences and humanities) are more likely to be supportive of women in leadership than students from other "traditional" fields (such as engineering and business). The importance of women's leadership and the challenges faced by them is discussed in my gender studies classes, it has really shaped my thinking and made me believe that women can lead like men and more students should have this type of education to

provide them support for their leadership. But this imbalance calls for more extensive educational changes.

Male Student, Age 24, BS Engineering (P06) agreed:

My educational studies have given me this understanding that leadership is not just for men, but for those who possess the necessary skills and vision. This has really motivated me to support women in leadership because I feel they need to be enabled to do so, and I feel much more empowered to do so, as a result of this exposure to these critical ideas.

This reinforces the idea that studying and engaging in gender issues and practices can have a significant impact on attitudes towards women's leadership.

As highlighted by Female Student, Age 25, BS Economics (P13): *"I am more aware of the systemic barriers that are faced by women and this increased awareness has contributed to my passion for supporting women in leadership roles - Education is indeed the backbone of changing society's attitudes. Yet, it is essential to note that education is a key factor but the road to gender equality is not simple.*

Male Student, Age 24, BS Engineering (P06) added:

Leadership is not a word that comes to mind when I think of engineering in my engineering classes. But a recent guest speaker from the Women Rights Movement was an eye opener considering how many problems the Women's face. I believe that these conversations can be woven into the curriculum of a wider array of courses and have the potential to completely shift attitudes towards women in leadership positions. This study underlines the importance of education, media representation and cultural change in achieving gender equality among leaders. Education is very powerful,"

Female Student, Age 24, BS Mathematics (P15), *"The more we learn about women's history, their contributions to leadership and the barriers they face, the more we understand their potential; and we must help them on their journey.* The growing acceptance by the university students shows that there is hope for positive change, although there are significant challenges to overcome in rural and conservative areas.

Male Student, Age 23, BS Sociology (P10) remarked:

While there is resistance in more conservative parts of the world, I have a positive outlook that these views of women in leadership can change with education, and I think we will see that change more and more, given this incremental exposure. So I think that's a really important issue and it is going to take time but as I continue to be exposed to it I think there is a potential for change.

DISCUSSION

This study indicates that there are shifts in how university students perceive female leaders in Pakistan. However, such shifts seem inconsistent and are largely influenced by stereotypical perceptions that are based on gendered cultural values. Despite the general consensus by the participants that women have the necessary leadership skills, their perceptions of women leaders depended on the industry where women showed their leadership skills. While women were better received in educational institutions, in health care and in social welfare sectors, women in politics, business and other male-dominated sectors continued to receive tough challenges. Results from this study are consistent with what is predicted by Role Congruity Theory, where prejudice against women occurs when there are incongruences between leadership role demands and feminine values. In the current study, there seems to be more

congruence between leadership roles in caring industries and feminine roles while those with authority, competitiveness and power are male roles.

These results also show that the issue of gender continues to be a significant variable that affects perceptions. Men showed higher propensity to adhere to the conventional assumptions about the nature of leadership in politics and business in comparison to women, who held the view that women could become good leaders. The reason why this difference exists can be explained by Social Role Theory, since people learn gender roles due to socialization and use these roles when judging about what is expected from men and women in certain situations. The experiences of the participants reveal that gender studies, feminism, and gender awareness can break these assumptions. Those students who were more educated in the matter of gender equality realized better what structural constraints there are and supported the idea that women should hold leadership positions.

In addition, the findings underscore the intersectionality of perceptions of female leadership. The socio-economic background and the place where respondents lived had an effect on their understanding of women's possibilities to become leaders. Urban respondents saw leadership as related to competence and abilities, while rural and more conservative respondents talked about women's duties to be good mothers, homemakers, etc. Such differences provide evidence of the validity of the Intersectionality Theory, because women's opportunities to become leaders depend not only on their gender but also on the interplay between gender and social class, geographical location, education, and culture. Thus, the findings imply that one type of intervention is not enough to encourage women to become leaders.

The findings further reveal the importance of family and institutional support. Among the factors that hinder women from moving up, the lack of family support, mentoring, gender discrimination, constant monitoring, and poor leadership development were mentioned. Women in the role of leaders have been noted to be expected to strike a challenging balance of being assertive enough to be taken seriously but at the same time being sufficiently feminine to be socially acceptable. This corresponds to the double-bind phenomenon according to Role Congruity Theory. The increased monitoring of the decisions of women also shows that individual achievements are not sufficient to overcome gender inequality among female leaders. The culture of institutions, the recruitment process, mentoring, and opportunities for promotion should also change.

At the same time, the study indicates immense potential for transformation. It turns out that female leaders and public figures are seen as examples to be inspired by and proof that leadership is not necessarily male. Nevertheless, the mere presence of such representation does not seem to lead to real equality in the context of the current research. The results show that representation should be combined with access to education, mentoring, leadership training, institutions, and cultural change. All in all, the study shows that university students have a unique place in relation to traditional views on the issue and new approaches to gender equality. It appears that despite the continuing effect of patriarchal tradition on the perception of women's leadership qualities, their growing educational experience, changing social attitudes, and increased visibility create the ground for transformation. Thus, real change presupposes not only promotion of women's role in leadership but also cultural and institutional change.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study reveals the progress made and challenges that remain in the journey towards gender equality in leadership, through the lens of university students' perceptions in Pakistan. Many students, especially coming from urban and higher socioeconomic backgrounds, voiced their support of women in leadership positions, but deeply rooted cultural and societal beliefs persist in influencing and limiting attitudes. Some of the key challenges faced by women in accessing leadership opportunities are traditional gender roles, lack of support from male counterparts and limited access to leadership training, particularly in male-dominated fields such as politics and business. While the difficulties faced are substantial, the report highlights the positive opportunity for change. Education is a crucial ingredient for changing attitudes, particularly students who are involved in gender specific education tend to be more supportive of women in leadership. Furthermore, the emergence of female leaders in Pakistan is a positive sign that can inspire and lead the way to more acceptance of women in leadership roles, as increased visibility can drive change.

The leadership experience of women from the standpoint of intersectionality also entails the effect of the interplay between the element of gender and occupational and socio-cultural factors. Women leaders in South Asia generally have better chances of being accepted in spheres like education and healthcare since the occupations are directly related to feminine social roles involving nurturing, caring, and services to others. The profession of teaching is seen as a family-friendly occupation due to its stable nature, and healthcare is viewed as a socially prestigious career sphere that is in line with the caring role of women. Therefore, leadership in these areas can be considered more congruent with gender norms compared to leadership in male-dominated spheres such as business, engineering, or politics. It means that women's acceptance as leaders depends not only on gender but also on the interconnection between gender and profession.

The results suggest that efforts to improve women's leadership in Pakistan should focus on addressing both cultural barriers and the institutional barriers in educational and employment context. Mentoring (which is essential), building a supportive culture and addressing gender norms are essential to increasing opportunities for women's leadership. This study, however, has some merits and shortcomings that should be noted as it provides insights into the perception of university students about women in leadership, yet it also has the following limitations. Firstly, the sample consisted of university students, and that may not be representative of the views of the general population. Younger people in education will often have different perceptions to older people or people outside of cities. Further, the exploratory design of the study indicates that the results reflect only a moment in time with respect to the perceptions, and that the root causes of the perceptions – psychological and sociocultural factors – have not been fully explored.

There is potential for further research studies to be conducted in the field in greater detail. A more comprehensive sample is needed that includes people from rural areas and different professions to gain deeper insights into the perception of women in leadership among different groups of people. The study could also explore how these perceptions are shaped by the media, family and community and how gender equality and leadership education affects them in the future. Although it is an ambitious plan, it can fill the existing gap and future research could help create a more attractive and nurturing environment for women in leadership roles in Pakistan and elsewhere.

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