

Women Empowerment and Combating Gender Inequality: University Leaders' Role

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate university leaders' role in women empowerment and combating gender inequality. The study has been executed through qualitative approach that is based on interpretivism paradigm. The convenient sampling technique has been used to select 20 women faculty members from two public universities. The semi-structured interview protocol has been used to generate qualitative data. The thematic analysis was applied to find the similarities and differences among participants' response and to develop themes. The research findings reveal that women did not complain regarding empowerment in educational institutions, and they feel themselves empowered. Data highlight that departmental environment is fair, equal opportunities are available regardless of gender, equal compensation is being offered based on grade and productivity irrespective of the gender, paid leaves are being offered to all female and male faculty members. The study further unveils that university leader can further enhance women empowerment and combat with gender inequality through national and international networking with organizations working for this cause, offering extended maternity leaves, developing favorable departmental culture for this cause, and making sure relevant policies are being followed. However, there are still some challenges in enhancing women empowerment and combating with gender inequality including cultural stereotypes, limited resources and funds, and limited representation of women at higher positions. The research recommends that university management and governments should take further initiatives to empower women and reduce gender inequality.

Keywords: University Leadership, Women Empowerment, Gender Inequality.**Introduction**

In Pakistan women comprise around half of the total population. In the core sense, empowerment proficiently offers individuals the competence to define their choices making them able to see unseen problems and determine corrective measures. Personal or institutional development is linked with empowerment. The basic purpose of women empowerment and reduction of gender inequality is to enhance the individuals' life standards irrespective of their cast, race, gender through obtaining equal access on basic health, education, food, shelter, hygiene and progression opportunities (Bibi, 2011). At university level, departments are believed as places where equal participation and supportive culture is promoted lead by the head of department. The academic departments are run by administrative chairs who are considered as leader in this study. It is much needed to explore how head of departments as leaders are playing their role to promote departmental environment that is supportive to fulfill all individuals' aspirations. Heads as professionals and experts in their fields make future plans, mainly for the discipline, and most importantly the institutes which are large communities for them (Lyons, 2018).

The traditional role of a woman that she was playing in the society has been changed now. Women can perform role in all aspects of life and they are doing effectively around the world and this has achieved mainly through education. However, their responsibilities associated because of their family and culture are still there. Women face substantial barrier especially from their elders at home in their progression in career and professional development (Aafreen, 2022). Back in 2018, United Nations conducted a study regarding the female education in the context of SDGs 2030. This research

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highlighted serious concerns regarding women and girls education in Pakistan (United Nations 2018). This study in the context of sustainable development goals focused the for main areas including girls school education, their health, women jobs, and child care and raised serious concerns in this regard. Further, a study explored the women health, wealth, and other demographics highlight that a considerable number of women are spending their life below poverty line (Reiser, 2021). This situation also points out the issue under study that either in society or institutions female are facing serious problems regarding women empowerment and gender inequality.

Male and female are considered as two different segments of the society instead complementary parts who both have to develop a complete picture of the society, and society is incomplete without any one of these. Because of the culture male are given importance in society. Parents focus more on boys' education as compared to girls' education as there is point back in mind that boys would be becoming future support of the parents. Female are believed as not staying at parents' home after marriage, so girls education is not as such priority, and girls are asked to more stick with house business which is not as such acknowledged and considered as work. So, girls are far behind in education as compared to boys especially in rural areas of Pakistan. Consequently, girls are ignored and left with just one option to depend on parents, brothers, and then on husband and their sons (Operti et al., 2014). This is believed a strong reason as barrier in women empowerment and gender equality. Although, there are many different versions of women empowerment definition, but in general it is considered a process where women control and power in their personal life and make their own decisions of the future (Sarfraz, 2020).

Institutions of higher education need to be sensitive regarding women empowerment and reduction in inequality based on gender. Developing a conducive environment for women progression through the principle of equal opportunities and no discrimination on any base may help women to achieve their aspirations. Because of these measures women would be in a position to use their optimal potential to give their best in higher education institutions. Importantly, institutions should develop strict rules and their compliance to keep women safe from unwanted incidents of sexual harassment (Johnson, 2023). Women are believed as agents of welfare of community and a country, so if any discrimination in institution and society prevails, it would not only hurt the women but it will also leave a negative impact on the institutions and society on the whole. For a fair, competitive, and progressive society, it is very important to develop and implement policies based on justice, no discrimination, and success for all. Such initiatives will not only benefit the institutions but may also help to progress the society and world on the whole. Women empowerment, equality, equity, girls education have been considered as critical aspects in which individuals are required to sensitize them, educate them and train them to consider women as equal. Developing laws, policy guidelines, and campaigns to educate people regarding women empowerment and treating them with equality and develop culture that support women progression are very important initiatives that governments and institutions are taking in their capacities (Atuase, 2018).

These initiatives at the institutional and country level are helping women and encouraging them to participate in all type of tasks and perform their role in all aspects of life (Rehman, 2022). Further, women are becoming able to perform multi-task from the beginning of their professional career. On the other hand, work-family balance emerged as important challenge for working women. Studies highlight that imbalance in work-family time and attention by the women has serious negative impact on women health, professional growth and satisfaction in the job (Tanwar, 2022).

Organizations where women are working at higher administrative positions have more collegial working environment, better planning strategies, efficient execution of routine tasks, and better performance of the employees. Rules that support the women empowerment and discourage gender inequality augment in the improved performance of women at workplace (Summara, 2021). Like other academics, women also need and aspire for higher administrative working positions. Opportunities to work at leading positions increases their motivation, satisfaction and performance in the job. So, higher authorities of the higher education institutions should equally give opportunities to women to work at top management positions to help women excel in profession and personal life (Daniel, 2013). Although in South Asian culture especially in Pakistan women are believed more suitable for house tasks, but there is a strong arguments that if women can run the home efficiently, administrative post in the organization is less difficult for them to run. Women empowerment and gender inequality issue are more prevalent in the societies where culture provides base that women is

inferior and men are more powerful, have more respect, and men have the right to lead (Naz, 2021). This review provides the strong base to investigate the issues of women empowerment and gender inequality in Pakistani university context.

Research Aims

The research is aimed at:

1. Exploring the current status of women empowerment and gender inequality in universities.
2. Identifying the ways leaders can combat with gender inequality and enhance women's empowerment in universities.
3. Investigate the challenges university leaders face in combating with gender inequality and enhancing women's empowerment.

Methodology

This study has employed qualitative research method. The interpretivism research paradigm provided base for the selected methods according to the nature of the study. This paradigm is used because it offers a holistic picture of truth through investigating participants' personal experiences and accounts. This paradigm unveils the reality that is defined by the individuals who have first experience of the phenomenon. In qualitative truth is revealed through gaining participants' own perspectives (Fraenkel et al., 2019). The convenient sampling technique has been used to select 20 women faculty members from two public universities. The interviews were taken from faculty members who were voluntarily willing to give their opinions. The semi-structured interview protocol has been used to generate qualitative data. The thematic analysis was applied to find the similarities and differences among participants' response and to develop themes. The authors took prior permission from the respective faculty members and their heads to conduct the interviews. The respondents have been ensured anonymity and confidentiality of the data.

Findings and Qualitative Data Support

Major themes, findings and qualitative data support is presented under this heading.

Current Status of Women Empowerment and Gender Inequality

Equal Opportunities and Compensation

Most respondents point out that the environment in their department is fair as they are receiving equal opportunities and compensation. A respondent stated that:

"Honestly I and my other female colleagues are receiving same progression opportunities and we are being compensated same as male are being compensated which shows a fair treatment regardless of gender" (R7). "Both male and female get equal paid leaves and other leaves according to the university rules (R19)".

Professional Development

Professional development trainings are given to all the academic staff without discrimination.

"I get chances of my growth in profession decided by a committee comprised on both female and male faculty members. Same committee gives equal chances to male faculty as well" (R11).

Mentorship Programs

Many participants said that their heads offer time to time such opportunities that help them to excel in their career. Participants consider these opportunities as mentoring activities.

"In my university I found reasonable opportunities at university level and departmental level for my mentorship in my workplace" (R3).

Leadership Development Programs

Majority respondents state that their immediate and higher management run different programs to develop them as leaders.

"I appreciate my head and higher authorities who continuously structure such programs that give us motivation, inspiration, new knowledge and skill to develop us as future leaders, and these programs are equally accessible to all male and female faculty of the department" (R16).

Measures to Enhance Women's Empowerment and Combat with Gender Inequality

Encourage National and International Networks

Collaboration by the university leaders with both national and international platforms which are working for women empowerment and reducing for the gender inequality is a good measure to deal with such issues.

“I suggest that our higher management should take the initiatives at university level and also my head of department should take the initiative at the department level for the collaboration with local and foreign organizations that work for the improvement of female empowerment in institutions and overcome the discrimination with women based on gender” (R1).

Evaluation Programs

Faculty members highlight that evaluation of relevant policies is the important measure that guarantees whether policies work on a practical level or not.

“Head of depart should devise a mechanism to evaluate whether policies and regulations are implemented in the spirit they are developed” (R8).

Maternity Leaves

Participants suggested that higher authorities should design policies for extended maternity leaves and for other female specific problems.

“A female can understand the problems of a female, so I request the higher authorities to constitute a committee that should deal with the maternity and other medical leaves of the faculty, usually I recommend that maternity leaves should be extended to help the women deal with associated problems” (R14).

Department Culture Improvement

Qualitative data reveal that head of department need to develop department culture conducive for women empowerment and reduction of gender inequality.

“At university department level women empowerment means all females are receiving opportunities of all types without discrimination. For this purpose a positive departmental culture is very important and HoD is the key role in development of conducive, equitable, and fair culture in the department” (R13).

Challenges University Leaders Face in Enhancing Women's Empowerment and combating with Gender Inequality

However, there are still some challenges in enhancing women empowerment and combating with gender inequality including cultural stereotypes, limited resources and funds, and limited representation of women at higher positions. These findings are supported with below evidence from qualitative data.

“With all my positive mindset and neutral mind I still feel that cultural stereotypes in some way are causes of discriminatory treatment with females in universities and it also has negative impact on women empowerment” (R5).

“Lack of especially financial resources, infrastructure, and weak policies are some challenges in my view that are barrier for women empowerment and one reason of unequal behaviors of institutions with women” (R20).

“Being a senior female academician I can see that women are considerable in less number working at higher positions in universities which might be a challenge for the said issue because women are accordingly in less number in policy making bodies” (R17).

Discussion

The findings showed those leaders in universities or any other institution of higher education have the understanding of gender inequality and women empowerment, and have relevant policies in place. Previous research also highlight that leaders offered equal space to all employees irrespective of gender and develop conducive environment for women progression (Jordan, 2018). Faculty’s view about their leader is positive because they design fair structure, give research allowances, arrange seminars and training, facilitating staff for their academic achievements arranging honor ceremonies for those who achieve or won some awards on a national and international level. This acknowledgement and appreciation boosts the self-esteem of faculty to work more hard and fulfill their dreams (Jordan, 2018). A leader's performance is affected by their power of decision-making, which indirectly dictates a leader's policies and affects their academic position. Many other factors like modes of communication, social and cultural impact on faculty, and mainly facilitation grants also affect the position and performance of an academic leader. The way leader develops and offers equal progression in career to faculty, it develops the perception of faculty about their head. Past studies also point out that the way leader offers supportive culture to the faculty in the department, it

develops the faculty opinion about their leader (Schiro, 2012). This research highlights that mentoring programs and leadership development programs by the leader for the faculty are considered as positive initiatives. The past research also support that if leader helps faculty to develop as future leaders, it increases their performance (Vecchio, 2010).

The efforts a head of department or a university head exerts to develop and implement the policies to enhance women empowerment and reduce gender inequality, and keeps continuous check and balance to check whether these policies are in true spirit being implemented develops a positive image of the leaders in the faculty's mind. This not only leads to improved performance of the faculty, but it also increases faculty's commitment to the institution. Similarly, past studies acknowledge the leaders' efforts for the implementation of policies regarding women empowerment and gender inequality as a positive initiative which leaves good impact on faculty performance (Salandan, 2015). The barriers such as cultural stereotypes, less resources, and poor implementation of policies regarding women empowerment and reduction in gender inequality are considered as challenges in this regard. However, initiatives taken by the head for equal opportunities and reduction of these challenges promotes the positive culture in the department which leads toward improved performance of the faculty and department (Hordan, 2013).

Recommendations

- University management needs to constitute all committees with equal representation with reference to gender.
- Head of department and institutional management should constitute committees comprised on female only to deal with the female-specific issues.
- An awareness campaign by the governments, HEC, and PHEC is required to educate society and employees working in institution of higher education to dilute and ultimately eliminate the influence of cultural stereotypes that affect the women empowerment and gender equality negatively.
- For a specific period extra funds and resources must be allocated for female only to take women at the men level.

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