

## **Studying Intersectionality in Research on Minority and Ethnic Women's Leadership in Higher Education in Pakistan**

### **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

*This paper contributes to the study of gender, leadership, and identity by investigating how gender, ethnicity, and class may either hinder or facilitate access to leadership positions, both during and after assuming a leadership role. This paper specifically focuses on experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders in public and private universities of Pakistan. The author employs an approach of intersectionality to leadership methodology by using their own autobiographical account as a starting point for the research. The findings are analysed through the lenses of feminist, intersectional, and critical auto-biographical theory. The paper introduces the literature, describes the research design, and discusses the initial findings, highlighting the key themes that emerged from the data. The results indicate that minority and ethnic women face greater challenges and obstacles in their roles as leaders compared to their majority counterparts. Additionally, minority and ethnic women perceive their ethnicity as having a significant impact on their identities, their perceptions of leadership, and their experiences as leaders.*

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Educational Leadership, Female leadership, Higher Education

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the study of gender, leadership, and identity. However, a significant research gap exists when it comes to understanding the experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders within Higher Education Institutions [HEIs] in Pakistan. The under-representation of women in leadership roles within these institutions, coupled with a lack of comprehensive intersectional analysis, restricts our comprehension of the challenges and opportunities faced by these women in Pakistani academia. This research seeks to fill this crucial gap by delving into the interplay of gender, ethnicity, and class to provide a deeper insight into access to leadership positions and experiences in academia within the context of Pakistan. Pakistan's diverse ethno-cultural landscape makes the exploration of race a broader and multifaceted project, beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, this research focuses on gender and ethnicity as the primary lenses through which to examine these issues. The paper assumes and acknowledges that Pakistan is a diverse nation with a multitude of ethnic and religious communities, therefore, I have specifically aimed to examine the experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders, including but not limited to individuals from Christian, Hindu, Ahmadi, Hazara, Ismaili, Bohra, and other minority backgrounds. The choice of these groups is not exhaustive but serves as representative examples to illustrate the diversity within Pakistan's academic

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landscape. It is important to acknowledge that the challenges and experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders may vary significantly among different groups. Factors such as religious affiliation, cultural practices, and regional dynamics can contribute to distinct forms of marginalization and empowerment. For instance, Christian women leaders may face unique challenges related to religious discrimination, while Hazara women leaders might confront issues tied to ethnic identity and security concerns. Hindu women leaders also may have their own set of challenges stemming from cultural differences and societal norms. These variations in experiences of the various minority and ethnic groups are essential to understanding the nuances of marginalization. By exploring the specific challenges faced by various groups, we can gain insight into how intersecting identities, including gender, ethnicity, and religion, shape the leadership experiences and opportunities of minority and ethnic women in Pakistani academia.

By addressing these nuances and variations, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the diverse challenges and opportunities encountered by minority and ethnic women leaders within the chosen context. It is our hope that this research will shed light on the complexities of their experiences and contribute to more inclusive and equitable leadership practices within HEIs in Pakistan.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The study of gender, leadership, and identity has been a longstanding subject of scholarly inquiry, with roots dating back to classic works by pioneering scholars such as Eagly and Mladinic (1994), and Eagly and Karau (1995). Over the years, this field has evolved, and more recent studies, including those by Funk et al. (2023), Hobgood and Draucker (2022), and Holland and Lemke (2022), have continued to contribute to our understanding of these complex dynamics. The profound impact of gender on individuals' access to leadership positions and their experiences within these roles has been well-documented in both classic and contemporary literature (Tabassum and Nayak, 2021). The persistent gender disparities across various sectors, including academia, have been explored extensively. Earlier works by scholars such as Eagly and Mladinic (1994), and Eagly and Karau (1995) laid the groundwork for identifying barriers and challenges faced by women in leadership, followed by recent scholars such as Gandhi and Sen (2021) and Maheshwari and Nayak (2022), who shed light on the influence of societal norms, stereotypes, and structural inequalities that hinder women's progress in leadership roles.

Intersectionality has emerged as a critical framework for understanding the intricate interplay between gender, ethnicity, and class in shaping individuals' experiences (Showunmi, 2020). This concept recognizes that individuals possess multiple intersecting social identities, resulting in unique experiences of privilege and oppression. In the context of leadership, intersectionality emphasizes the need to examine how gender intersects with other social categories, such as ethnicity and class, to comprehend the distinct challenges faced by minority and ethnic women leaders (Nair and Vollhardt, 2020). While studies on gender and leadership have made significant contributions over the years, research focusing specifically on minority and ethnic women leaders remains limited, particularly in the context of

Pakistani universities. The experiences of these women are influenced by multiple dimensions of identity, including gender, ethnicity, and cultural background (Nguyen, 2020). Existing literature suggests that minority and ethnic women leaders may face compounded challenges due to the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity, which may further marginalize their access to leadership opportunities (Thacker and Minton, 2021). This study also employs a unique approach by incorporating autobiographical perspectives in leadership research. By drawing from the author's own experiences as a starting point, this research employs a critical autobiographical analysis. Such an approach allows for an intimate exploration of the researcher's lived experiences and provides insights into the personal and professional challenges faced by minority and ethnic women leaders. This autobiographical lens adds depth and authenticity to the study, capturing the nuanced complexities of leadership experiences within the specific context of Pakistani universities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws upon feminist theory, intersectionality theory, and critical auto-biographical theory to analyse the findings. Feminist theory provides a lens through which to understand gendered power dynamics and challenges prevalent patriarchal structures within leadership contexts (see Allen, Goldberg, and Jaramillo, 2022). The Intersectionality theory allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how gender intersects with ethnicity, class, and other social categories, shaping the experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders (see Rodriguez, Guenther, and Faiz, 2023). Critical auto-biographical theory enables a reflexive analysis of the author's own experiences while considering broader socio-political contexts (see Burke, 2021).

### **Research Gap**

The existing research on gender, leadership, and identity has neglected the experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders in Pakistani universities. Existing literature overlooks the intersectionality of gender with ethnicity and class, limiting knowledge about the challenges faced by these women. This study aims to bridge the research gap by examining the unique experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders in HEIs in Pakistan. Autobiographical approaches are underutilised in leadership studies, and this research seeks to address this gap by incorporating the author's personal account. By adopting an intersectional lens and utilising autobiographical approaches, this study aims to offer a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding gender, ethnicity, class, and leadership experiences in Pakistani universities. The findings can inform inclusive and equitable leadership practices in higher education.

### **Research Questions**

This study examines the experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders in public and private universities in Pakistan, focusing on the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class. The research questions guiding this inquiry are as follows:

1. What challenges do minority and ethnic women leaders face in assuming and navigating leadership positions in Pakistani universities?
2. How does ethnicity influence the identities, perceptions of leadership, and experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders?

3. What key themes emerge from the intersectional analysis of gender, ethnicity, and class in relation to the experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders in Pakistani academia?
4. What are the implications of these findings for promoting inclusive leadership practices and creating a more equitable and diverse academic environment in Pakistan?

Through these research questions, this study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and complexities encountered by minority and ethnic women in leadership positions in Pakistani universities.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders in public and private universities in Pakistan. Qualitative research methods provide an in-depth understanding of individuals' lived experiences, allowing for rich and nuanced insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by minority and ethnic women in leadership positions (Hendren and colleagues, 2023). The study utilizes an intersectional approach to leadership methodology, based on Showunmi's (2020) method of incorporating the author's own autobiographical account as a starting point for the research.

### **Data Collection**

The primary data collection method employed in this study is semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility in capturing participants' perspectives while allowing for a systematic exploration of the research questions. The interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of minority and ethnic women leaders from various public and private universities in Pakistan. The sample was selected based on criteria such as ethnicity, leadership role, and years of experience to ensure diversity and breadth of insights. The interview questions were designed to elicit participants' experiences, challenges, and perceptions related to gender, ethnicity, and class in leadership positions. The questions were informed by the research questions and the relevant theoretical frameworks of feminist theory, intersectionality theory, and critical auto-biographical theory. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the collected data, focusing on identifying patterns, themes, and categories within the interview transcripts (see, for example, Lester, Cho, and Lochmiller, 2020). The analysis was guided by feminist theory, intersectionality theory, and critical auto-biographical theory. The process began with multiple readings of the transcripts to familiarize the researcher with the data. Initial codes and themes were identified, followed by organizing and refining the codes to develop comprehensive themes that capture participants' experiences. To ensure rigour and trustworthiness, member checking and peer debriefing techniques following Hamilton (2020) were employed. Member checking involves sharing preliminary findings with participants to validate the accuracy and relevance of identified themes. Peer debriefing includes seeking input and feedback from

other researchers or experts in the field to enhance the rigour and credibility of the analysis (idem).

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study adheres to ethical guidelines and principles following Kingston (2020) to ensure the protection and well-being of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the study.

### **Limitations**

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations of this research design. The qualitative nature of the study limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Additionally, the sample selection from specific public and private universities in Pakistan may not capture the entire range of experiences within the country.

## **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

### **Challenges and Obstacles Faced by Minority and Ethnic Women Leaders**

The analysis of the data revealed a range of challenges and obstacles faced by minority and ethnic women leaders in public and private universities in Pakistan. Participants highlighted various systemic barriers, including biased selection processes, lack of mentorship opportunities, and limited access to networks that perpetuate gender and racial inequalities in leadership positions. Additionally, participants noted the existence of implicit biases and stereotypes that hindered their credibility and undermined their authority as leaders.

### **Ethnicity and its Impact on Identity and Perceptions of Leadership**

The findings indicate that ethnicity significantly influenced the identities and perceptions of leadership among minority and ethnic women leaders. Participants reported that their ethnicity shaped their self-perception, influencing their confidence levels and how they perceived their own leadership capabilities. Moreover, participants expressed that their ethnicity often defined how they were perceived by others, both within and outside their institutions, and impacted their interactions with colleagues and subordinates.

### **Experiences of Minority and Ethnic Women Leaders**

The experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders revealed distinct patterns and themes. Participants described a sense of isolation and marginalization, reporting that they often felt excluded from informal networks and decision-making processes. They also highlighted the need to navigate cultural expectations and stereotypes, often being burdened with additional responsibilities due to cultural norms and expectations. Moreover, participants shared instances of encountering resistance and opposition when attempting to implement change or assert their leadership authority.

### **Intersectional Analysis of Gender, Ethnicity, and Class**

The intersectional analysis of gender, ethnicity, and class underscored the complex interplay of these factors in shaping the experiences of minority ethnic women leaders. The findings

revealed that the challenges faced by participants were not solely attributed to their gender or ethnicity but were also influenced by their socio-economic backgrounds. The intersectionality of these factors created compounded barriers, further marginalizing their access to leadership opportunities and reinforcing existing power dynamics within the academic setting.

### **Implications for Inclusive Leadership Practices**

The findings of this study have important implications for promoting inclusive leadership practices within HEIs in Pakistan. They highlight the need for targeted interventions to address the specific challenges faced by minority and ethnic women leaders. These interventions should focus on enhancing access to mentorship, fostering networks of support, and implementing policies and practices that mitigate biases and stereotypes. Moreover, creating a more inclusive and equitable academic environment requires recognizing and valuing the diverse perspectives and experiences brought by minority and ethnic women leaders.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The findings of this study hold significant theoretical implications for the fields of gender studies, leadership theory, and intersectionality. By delving into the experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders in the context of public and private universities in Pakistan, this study contributes to the existing body of literature in the following ways:

#### **Advancing Intersectionality Theory**

This study adopts an intersectional approach, considering the interplay of gender, class, and the varied experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders within Pakistan. The findings underscore the profound significance of intersectionality in comprehending the complexities and compounded barriers faced by these women. By weaving intersectionality theory into the analysis, this study furthers the development of intersectionality as a lens for examining the intricate dynamics of gender, class, and their intersections within leadership contexts.

#### **Extending Feminist and Critical Auto-biographical Theory**

The analysis of data through the lenses of feminist theory and critical auto-biographical theory deepens our understanding of the experiences and challenges encountered by minority and ethnic women leaders. This study extends these theoretical frameworks by incorporating intersectionality as a pivotal aspect, emphasizing the specific barriers and obstacles faced by these women. These theoretical implications contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender, power, and identity in leadership research.

#### **Challenging Essentialist Notions of Leadership**

The findings challenge essentialist notions of leadership by demonstrating how gender, class, and ethnicity intersect to mould leadership experiences and opportunities. This challenges the traditional understanding of leadership as a neutral and universal concept, highlighting the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse leadership styles and perspectives. By exploring the experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders, this study contributes to the theoretical re-conceptualization of leadership, underlining the need for more inclusive and contextualized leadership theories.

### **Highlighting Power Dynamics of Structural Inequalities**

The analysis of challenges faced by minority and ethnic women leaders underscores the power dynamics and structural inequalities inherent within the academia. The findings accentuate the urgency of addressing these systemic barriers and biases that hinder the advancement of women leaders from minority and ethnic backgrounds. This contributes to the theoretical understanding of power relations and structural inequalities within organizational settings, calling for a more critical examination of leadership practices and structures.

### **Bridging Gap Between Theory and Practice**

This study bridges the gap between theory and practice by providing practical insights and recommendations for fostering inclusive leadership practices within HEIs. The theoretical implications of this study inform the development of interventions, policies, and strategies aimed at promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in leadership roles. By bridging theory and practice, this study contributes to the implementation of real-world changes that support the advancement of minority and ethnic women leaders.

### **Organizational and Policy Recommendations**

The findings of this study carry profound implications for organizations, particularly HEIs, in their pursuit of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion within leadership positions. Based on the research findings, I propose the following recommendations, which not only draw from the theoretical underpinnings of our study but also present actionable steps for bridging the gap between theory and practice, while considering the unique challenges posed by various ethnicities and minorities:

1. HEIs should establish mentorship programs tailored specifically to support minority and ethnic women leaders. These programs should go beyond generic mentorship by providing tailored guidance, support, and networking opportunities. Mentors should be selected based on their expertise, commitment to diversity, and cultural sensitivity. By fostering such mentoring relationships, organizations can effectively enhance the professional development and advancement of minority and ethnic women leaders. This recommendation bridges the gap between theory and practice by translating the theoretical importance of mentorship into a practical, targeted intervention.
2. HEIs should prioritize comprehensive diversity and inclusion training for all staff, including leaders, faculty, and support staff. Such training should aim to raise awareness about biases, stereotypes, and the specific challenges faced by minority and ethnic women leaders. It should promote an understanding of intersectionality, inclusive decision-making, and strategies to mitigate bias in evaluations and promotions. This approach ensures that theoretical concepts around intersectionality are transformed into practical tools for creating a more inclusive environment within academia.
3. HEIs should actively cultivate inclusive networks and communities that provide robust support and networking opportunities for minority and ethnic women leaders. Establishing affinity groups, resource centres, or digital platforms can facilitate connections, knowledge sharing, and collaboration. These spaces should be designed

to be safe and inclusive, empowering leaders through connections, experience sharing, and learning. By implementing these inclusive networks, organizations translate the theory of inclusive leadership into tangible support structures.

4. HEIs must critically evaluate their selection and promotion procedures to identify and address biases and barriers faced by minority and ethnic women leaders. This could involve revising criteria for leadership positions, ensuring diverse representation in selection committees, and considering blind evaluation processes. Transparent and inclusive procedures provide equal opportunities based on qualifications, regardless of gender or ethnicity. This recommendation bridges the gap by operationalizing the theory of unbiased evaluation and merit-based advancement into organizational policies.
5. HEIs should develop policies specifically designed to address the intersectional challenges faced by minority and ethnic women leaders. These policies should aim to dismantle systemic barriers, promote equitable workloads, and recognize their unique contributions. Examples include flexible work arrangements, family-friendly policies, and targeted professional development opportunities. These policies foster an inclusive environment that values diverse identities and experiences, bringing the theoretical framework into practical policy implementation.
6. HEIs should actively seek collaborations with external organizations and institutions specializing in diversity and inclusion. These partnerships provide access to invaluable resources, support, and best practices. Collaborations also facilitate knowledge-sharing, leading to innovative solutions and strategies for promoting inclusive leadership practices. By collaborating externally, HEIs bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and the practical implementation of inclusive policies, creating a more inclusive academic environment.

In summary, this paper effectively bridges the gap between theory and practice by translating theoretical concepts of intersectionality and inclusive leadership into practical, actionable recommendations. These recommendations are tailored to address the unique challenges faced by various ethnicities and minorities within academia, providing a roadmap for HEIs to foster a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive leadership landscape.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study contributes significant insights into the experiences of minority and ethnic women leaders in Pakistani universities, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges they face due to gender, class, and ethnic dynamics. The findings underscore the critical need to address systemic barriers and biases that hinder the equitable representation of minority and ethnic women in leadership positions within academia. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of intersectionality theory in understanding the compounded obstacles faced by these leaders and calls for a re-conceptualization of leadership that values diverse perspectives and experiences. The practical recommendations outlined in this study provide a bridge between theory and practice, offering actionable steps for organizations, particularly HEIs, to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion within their leadership ranks. The recommendations are designed to address the unique challenges posed by various ethnicities and minorities while fostering a more inclusive academic environment: While the

recommendations provide practical steps for organizations to promote diversity and equity, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study, such as the limited sample size and potential biases introduced by the researcher's autobiographical account. Additionally, the absence of quantitative data limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research may consider comparative studies, longitudinal analysis, exploration of intersectionality within organizational culture, and the evaluation of the impact of policy interventions. In summary, this study advances intersectionality theory, deepens our understanding of gender, ethnicity, and class dynamics in leadership, and offers practical solutions for creating more inclusive academic environments. By addressing these issues, organizations can create environments that value diverse identities and experiences, ultimately supporting the success of minority and ethnic women leaders in academia and beyond.

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