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**‘Othering is perilous’ the paradox of women career progression in Higher Education of Pakistan: A cross-cultural study**

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**Othering is perilous’ the paradox of women career progression in Higher Education of Pakistan: A cross-cultural study**

**Purpose** This paper focuses on the experiences of women academics in Pakistan using the lens of hegemonic masculinity to understand their experiences of career progression.

**Method** Twenty semi-structured interviews were undertaken with women academics in Pakistani Business Schools. The interviews were recorded for full transcription and this data is supported by field notes and the researcher’s reflective diary. A snowball technique was used to identify women to participate in this research. The women interviewed occupied different levels of academic positions. The transcripts are analysed using a thematic analysis method.

**Findings** The qualitative research findings reveal that women appear to be under-represented at senior levels within Pakistani business and economics schools. Further, the findings of interviews highlight that hegemonic masculinity operates through Pakistani Universities’ culture, promotion practices, lack of networking opportunities, and work-life imbalance. Women academics reported a sense of powerlessness and otherness from the dominant culture within Pakistani academia.

**Research implications** This study illustrates the significance of hegemonic masculinities sociological perspective in explaining women's career and experiences in academia. This study argues that gender inequality in higher education must be considered the broader sociological context including (cultural influence) within which higher education operates.

**Originality/value of the paper** This paper adds to our understanding of how societal, organisational and individual factors interact to perpetuate gender inequality in higher education. In addition, it addresses a lack of research that focus on women academics in Pakistan are largely absent from the women in Pakistan literature.

**Key words: women, progression; othering; higher education; Pakistan**

**Introduction**

It has been widely reported that women are excluded from senior positions in higher education (Brink et al., 2010; Goode and Bagilhole, 1998; Harris et al., 1998; Knights and Richards, 2003; Shaw and Cassell, 2007). These studies highlight the lack of transparency (in selection and promotion processes) and (gender) stereotypes, masculine working patterns and research activities that they make career advancement more difficult for women. These studies also demonstrate that women experience gender discrimination, vertical and horizontal segregation in higher education.

This study is a part of broader comparative study between UK and Pakistan. Since, at this point, the study is in developmental stage, only, career progression patterns and experiences of women academic in the context of Pakistan are under discussion. According to Yasmeen (2005) Pakistani women academics and female higher education students assert that women academics face entrenched stereotypes in both their working and social roles. In Yasmeen’s study women participants suggested that male domination with in the labour force, specifically, in universities, coupled with prevailing patriarchal customs in Pakistani society are major constraints to women’s rights and careers. This paper examines the challenges and constraints academic women face in their progression in Pakistan, as the constraints continue to affect women's career opportunities in Pakistani higher education (HE) are identified as an under-researched area. The paper begins by reviewing the extant literature on women's careers in academia.

**Factors influences women career progression in academia**

Women academics’ underrepresentation at senior levels may be due to structural or hierarchical inequalities (Bagilhole, 2002; Cech and Blair-loy, 2010), for example government policies; ineffective equality policies (Bagilhole, 2002); societal structures that frame gender roles and responsibilities (Kantor, 2002); academic mobility opportunities (Bagilhole & White, 2008).

At the organisational level, factors are equally enmeshed with macro-level influences, for example, women are treated differently (unequal treatment and rewards in the promotion process) from men within the male-dominant culture in British universities (Wilson, 2005). Furthermore, limited formal informal networking opportunities (Emmerik *et al*., 2006; Doherty and Manfredi, 2010), lack of mentor (Gibson, 2006). Due to the existing academic environment and political structure women report feeling isolated and marginalized (Gibson, 2006).

It is important to consider that individual (agency) response of different issues and constraints within and outside workplace (Syed and Ozbilgin, 2009). In this study, micro-level influences are based on women’s self–perceptions and motivation in academia. Macro-level factors such as societal norms and values may influence the individual in their roles.

Existing literature on women's career in academia often focuses on one factor or the other but this research adopts Syed and Ozbilgin’s (2009) relational framework to craft the conceptual framework of this study. An enquiry is therefore made into the extent to which macro (societal), meso (organizational), and micro (individual) factors influence the academic career trajectory of women in both a Pakistani context.

This conceptual framework is employed to investigate women career in academia. Inspired by Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity (2005), the framework conceptualises how women can navigate those challenges that place barriers in their career progression; these hegemonic practices embedded in social structures and institutionalize in HE. Furthermore, women's agency is situated within the different structures and responds to those issues and challenges are result of hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity (HM) can be defined “*the currently most honoured way of being a man*” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.832). It allows for an understanding of hegemony of masculine values in society and organization affects gender diversity practices. It helps in understanding how hegemonic masculinity influences women’s career advancement and obliges them to occupy non-senior positions.

**Pakistani women and higher education**

Pakistan, like other Muslim countries, is an orthodox Islamic state. Commonly shared cultural norms exist across Pakistani society, such as women's limited access to “mobility and access to education, legal information and services” (Critelli and Willett, 2010; 409). Pakistani society is patriarchal based on the gender code of behaviour, family patterns and decisions making (authority). This can be seen in the context of marriage and the husband's assumed superiority (Jilani and Ahmed, 2004), family honour, access to economic, education and employment opportunities (Critelli and Willett, 2010) which all are formed in a way to keep hegemonic control over women (Moghadam, 1992). These patriarchal practices which are culturally embedded are commonly accepted practices (Critelli and Willett, 2010).

Gender discrimination in Pakistani academia is described by Munir and Sajid (2010), who argue that “as Pakistani culture is male-dominated, women are generally under-employed and are socially disadvantaged” (p.85). The current presence of extremism in Pakistani society also has implications for masculinity and may be a cause of diminished opportunities for women in academia.

Equality of opportunity (EO) is not a formal framework in Pakistan. EO is given to Pakistani citizens as part of the national (legal) constitution. However, the constitution of Pakistan rejects gender discrimination. “Previous research shows that a legal framework for EEO exists at a basic minimum level in Pakistan” (Ali, 2010; pp.37-38). However, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) is reforming Pakistani universities and the quality of education but there is no EO policy documented in black and white.

The concept of belonging and otherness has been suggested as a valuable notion for understanding gendered inequalities in employment (Ozbilgin and Woodward, 2004). It is a dual concept: the concepts of belonging and otherness are embedded in the complexities of postmodern and post-structural disciplines. ‘Belonging’ refers to being a part of a group and ‘otherness’ means feelings or experiences of being excluded (Ozbilgin and Woodward, 2004:p.677) in the workplace. The present study employs “othering”, which might be an outcome of hegemonic masculinity, to understand the inequalities faced by women and their exclusion from senior positions in academia.

Finally, the aim of this paper is to explore the career progression dynamics of women in academia in the Pakistan, at three contextual levels, i.e. macro, meso and micro levels. Hegemonic masculinity is the theoretical lens adopted in the study, as it helps to explain the dynamic nature of inequalities causes othering that women experience in academic career.

**Methods**

Qualitative inquiry through semi-structured interviews, a reflective diary and field notes were used in the current research. The Twenty semi structured interviews were conducted with women academics in Pakistan. Few of the interviews were given in Urdu (Pakistan’s national language), which were then translated into English by researcher. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The use of semi-structured interviews enabled a degree of consistency between interviews while allowing for interviewees to discuss topics which were not covered by the interview schedule. These interviews schedule was organized around themes; different questions were asked from participants around themes. This permitted a greater flexibility in the ordering of questions (Sang *et al*., 2011) and interview discussion. Themes which are derived from literature had covered three level factors such as macro, meso and micro.

All the interviews were taken face to face. Field notes are taken and a diary was used to note the researcher's personal reflections about the field experiences. The study focused on women academics from business and Economics schools and participants were identified using ‘snowball’ sampling. Snowball sampling helps to access to the women academics faster.

**Findings**

The following section outlines the preliminary findings from the fieldwork. Where appropriate anonymised quotes from respondents are used to illustrate the emerging themes. After visiting several universities and different female academics in Pakistan, the gendered nature of otherness was apparent. Women’s career progression is socially and subjectively constructed on micro, meso and macro level factors which are following.

**Micro-level influences: Women's perception about their career**

According to Syed and Ozbilgin (2009, p.2443) micro level issues are related to individual aspirations, identity and agency. In relation to micro level factors, several of the women academics explained that they became academics because of the nature of work and flexible working patterns. Academic career had given autonomy, learning opportunities and opportunities to share their knowledge with others. Current labour market competition and unemployment were associated with women's awareness of the benefit of a PhD for career progression as such; many were keen to undertake further study.

Participant I: *Yeah: I am motivated to progress that is why I am doing my PhD and want to* *go ahea*d.

Women in Pakistan occupy different academic but less senior positions. Some of women academics could not avail the opportunities due to get a higher doctoral qualification because of their in-laws, family responsibilities and partner decisions.

Participant A*: I got scholarship for PhD in one of UK University to pursue my higher education. Then, I got visa but I did not go there due to my marriage. Last year I returned the scholarship as my domestic circumstances did not allow me to go abroad.*

This quote indicates how micro level influences can interact with broader societal (macro) influences to limit women academics' career opportunities. At university level, ambiguous procedures to pursue higher qualification and unavailability of appropriate supervision are also contributed on women lack of qualifications required for promotion. Some women reported that senior male academics abused their positions by demanding women undertake extra work or engaging in verbal abuse, teasing and aggressive behaviours.

Participant H: *Unless female colleague comply with the male boss… they can not progress in their career. They* [men] *create hurdles in approval of MPhil thesis or PhD thesis. There are so many cases reported that women can not do easily their M.Phil or* PhD.

Those women do not willing to accept the existing hegemonic scenario usually face grievances in shape of show-cause letters from head of school, lost of documents in higher education enrolment process and exclusion from promotion process.

**Meso-level influences: Universities working environment and process**

Turning to meso-level (organisational) factors, many interviewees said that universities' management and administrative practices are also gendered and women perceive themselves excluded in current system in different ways. Universities’ hegemonic work culture and structure created exclusion pattern for women and some men also. Women academics are not in senior positions, and feel they are perceived as an ‘out-group’ in universities. The sense of otherness is results from a lack of collegiate working environment, lack of leadership support, lack of recognition of their work, an excessive burden of teaching courses, unclear and undefined EO polices, resistance to their availing themselves of networking opportunities, lack of mentoring for their career and the need to juggle work/life balance.

One of the women pointed out that her university ideology with is derived on religious terms influences EO policies. Pakistani Government Rhetoric on EO means very little in academia. One of academic from a university which works purely according to Islamic teachings and practices said:

Participant K: *The ideology of Islamic university practices, there are some stereotypes and progression is not done according to Equality. Positions for men and women academics for promotions are announced separately. University offer more recruitment and promotion opportunities to men compare to women academics.*

As men occupy the senior positions both academic and managerial level, they express their power and authority, even involving unethical practices such as blackmailing (loss of important official documents, termination of teaching contracts, not allowing to go for conferences/ trainings) because they know no one will listen to the marginalised voices of women “as otherness”.

Participant J: “*not exactly in the present scenario in this university or in this institution is fully supportive towards women. There are so many factors that I realize that there is still discrimination towards women. Most of the time women are blackmailed and their progress are affected due to male dominated factors. In this male dominated environment even men are not willing to work under the women dean or chair*man.”

So, even when women progress they face constraints from their male subordinates in relation to their feminine authority. Men predominantly occupy strong managerial positions to recruitment and promotion committees. Several academics also complained that the bureaucratic structure of universities contributes to their otherness and creates belongingness for men. It makes the promotion process opaque and allows procrastination in decision-making helps to maintain status quo.

Participant F: It *is very obvious when there is long hierarchy involve then things cannot be very transparent. There are many people involved and they do not show tell true information to the top management they create problem* for us.

Women participants felt they are treated differently by academic administration differently then male colleagues. Lack of role model and women administrators’ women face hurdles in instant access to worthy information. Women cannot challenge those procedures because male control over procedures under look by male administers.

One of female academic said that some of their male colleagues also suffer like her; because those male colleagues are not as powerful as mangers working on key administrative positions. It tells how presences of hegemonic masculinity in academia “othering” women and some men from career advancement.

***Networking***

Networking is important for the career advancement of both men and women (Emmerik *et al*., 2006), but appeared to be more difficult for women in academia. In Pakistan, women academics’ were compelled implicit way to be excluded from the networking opportunities. Male academic are advantaged by the men’s network. Pakistani culture allows limited interacted between male and female, which also seems to be in practice inside organization.

Participant B: It *is very much important but again….. I do not do it. Networking only happens when cultural support is there. The cultural support is not good here. I am talking about organizational cultural support. Interaction with other male colleagues can ruin my reputation and can disturb my family life as well.*

Even the male students dominate women through his masculinity and try to exclude her from interaction with male colleagues. This helps maintain traditional customs or norms that separate men from women.

*Participants M: We can not interact or do informal networking with male academic... there will be conspiracy and scandal against me. They (students) will even write it on a paper and paste on wall or my door... boys will write that she is sitting with person X...”*

Student’s involvement in gender discrimination showing the strength of customs and masculine beliefs at macro level as this not challenged at meso level.

**Macro level influences: Social –cultural norms**

Lastly, broad level macro factors play key role in women academics career and career related decisions. Several females expressed normative pressures from society in name of customs and culture is contributing constraints in their career progression.

***Work life imbalance***

Work life imbalance was experienced by both women with and without children. In Pakistani society only married women are allowed to have children. Women as achieved their work life balance by compromising or entirely compromising on one aspect on other. But she can not carry same kind of work life ethics after her marriage.

Participant T: *I too much focus on my work only. This is something my family is complaining against it. I am single and I think I need to focus on this aspect of my life as well… I think it is depressing*.

However, motherhood resulted in career penalties for some respondents:

Participant S: *This balance become possible by compromising on one side of notion either work or domestic life. At the beginning of my career, I gave priority to my family. My husband gave children and whole house responsibility to me. I gave importance & priority to my children and family.*

In Pakistani society domestic work is pre-dominantly associated with women. It is one of strong expectation is associated with women to be ‘good’ mother wife, sister and daughter. A 'good' woman is defined by man and obedience and willing to make sacrifices for family. Male family members are generally exempt from those expectations. Female said their male academic colleagues do not have the same issues with work life balance because their wives back at home perform the child care responsibilities.

***Gender norms and women mobility decisions***

Women’s mobility and decisions related to work are determined by men. Strong joint family system, authority of decisions and cultural practices paralyse women's career inspirations.

*Participant H: Honestly, we do not enjoy the equal status, so I would say in Pakistan gender spectrum there are many thing they are creating hurdles in women way… if there is international work shop or international conference so male member will not give permission to her to go.*

Women academic teaching style, amendments to course and class schedules (e.g. late hours evening classes) need social approval. Female academics have to work harder to perform their duties in best way other wise they would be criticised and discussed by male colleagues.

*Participant B: I do things what I want under many social norms. Actually being a female you have to work twice as hard as a man in order to proof your self.*

**Discussion of findings and conclusion**

The main objective of this paper was to identify Pakistani academic women’s perceptions, subjective experiences and interpretations of potential barriers that influence their career progression. The findings presented in this paper demonstrate that women face gender inequalities at different macro-, meso- and micro-levels. In Pakistan senior academic and managerial positions are hold mostly by men. Pakistani women perceive themselves as powerless, lacking authority and excluded from the male-dominated environment of academia (Munir and Sajid, 2010). The respondents' perceptions regarding their career progression were influenced by macro-level societal factors. The findings are supported by the literature (Munir and Sajid, 2010; Ali *et al*., 2010) which suggests male domination in (Pakistani) society, gender stereotypes, and expectations influence women’s careers. Women career and mobility decisions were strongly associated with culture and approval of family head. In Pakistan the existing societal-cultural norms created by men which favour a particular group of privileged men— current working patterns in academia generated a sense of otherness for women and belongingness (for men) in respect of HE employability.

Women academics have argued their slow progression into senior positions might also be caused by meso-level factors. In universities, the hegemonic working patterns in shape of structures, and culture reinforce the few privileged male employees (academics and mangers). This study’s findings are supported by the evidence that hegemonic practices in the shape of the lack of mentors (Gibson, 2006), opaque organizational practices, universities’ bureaucratic structures, women’s exclusion from formal/informal networking (Doherty and Manfredi, 2010) limited role in management and decision-making, work-life imbalance (Malik *et al*., 2010; Brodolini, 2011). The reasons for the gendered outcomes of academic career progression are perceived to be due to the hegemonic values inherent in the dominant masculine culture in higher education establishments. Absence of defined EO in Pakistan’s higher education may also contribute present gender stereotypes and hegemonic practices. The women respondents’ voices and experiences convey a distinct sense of “othering”.

The intense societal pressure and unequal organizational practices, female academics had attained slight progress in their careers. Women academics acknowledged a lack of higher qualification (such as PhDs) limit access to senior positions. The lack of qualification can be the result of both societal inequalities and the availability of higher qualification (scholarship) opportunities provided by universities. Therefore, micro-level individual constraints cannot be detached from organizational processes and societal factors (Jamali, 2009). These macro meso factors seem to keep consciously women and some men on low academic profile to support the existing hegemony masculinity in academia. Among the twenty participants no women occupied professorial positions and only a few had PhD qualifications. Women face different challenges in their academic career at all contextual levels.

**Conclusion**

This study is a part of broader comparative study between UK and Pakistan. Since, at this point the study is in developmental stage, only, career progression patterns and experiences of women academic in the context of Pakistan are under discussion. I conclude by highlighting that in Pakistan, multi-level factors are embedded together in multifarious ways, often contributing to othering practices in academia. The research employs “othering”, which appears an outcome of hegemonic masculinity, is perilous for women career progression; causes their exclusion from senior positions in academia. Women are treated differently because of their gender and visibility segregated in Business and Economics Schools. Hegemonic masculinity, the theoretical lens of study, was significantly helpful in exploring and understanding those hindrances which unfairly slow down women’s career progression in academia.

The phenomenon of equal opportunity stands for something of a paradox for Pakistani women academics. Women were facing inequalities in working process within universities and unequal rights in broader socio-cultural context as well. The paradox of equal opportunity is more complex and women academics had very naive understanding about it.

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