Women constructing leadership identities in academia: Intersection of gender and culture

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This paper is drawn from a PhD dissertation on women's experiences of academic leadership in higher education in Pakistan. It aims to document women's voices from higher education about the discursive construction of their leadership identities within the dominant masculine academic culture. The data presented here is derived from ten in-depth interviews carried out with women leaders from co-educational universities located in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan during the year 2019. The empirical data reveals that women are expected to exercise masculine attributes for representing themselves as successful leaders. However, they feel comfortable acting in their feminine roles by being flexible and accommodating. Women do not consider their gender as an obstacle in constructing leadership identities, yet the masculine academic culture does not accept them in their feminine style. Resultantly, women encounter numerous challenges in constructing their leadership identities. This paper argues that leadership identities of women are discursively produced and reproduced in universities to legitimise masculine discourses. In light of the findings, it is suggested that universities need to develop gender-sensitive policies to encourage and celebrate women's leadership in academia.

Introduction

Globally, academic institutions have increased focus on diversity, inclusion, and equity in leadership and management. However, statistics show that women are still invisible at the most senior leadership positions in higher education (Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Shaikh, 2014). Previous scholarship indicates that this invisibility of women in executive positions is caused by the prevalent masculine discourses, disparities, and suppression (Nguyen, 2012; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Gender roles are infused by cultural scripts to construct and restrain the identities of women, who transgress pertinent masculine discourses by joining particularly male-dominated occupations (Jaros, 2012; Lindsey, 2015; O'Connor, 2014). Multiple identities are associated with women in different stages of their lifecycle that are aligned with their social roles in personal as well as professional domains (Alvesson, Karen & Robyn, 2008).

The identities of women leaders confront intense scrutiny as their colleagues and followers develop specific perceptions of them that might not always be true, but influence women's meanings that they attach with themselves. Studies affirm that organisations describe successful leaders as those possessing argentic traits, for instance self-assertion, competitiveness, and independence. These qualities are more strongly associated with men in societies; thereby favour men in senior leadership roles (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Wynen, op de Beeck & Reubens, 2015). Consequently, the hegemonic masculine standards in universities forge women's identities in otherness and alienate women academics in the competition (Morley, 2010). Women leaders in Asia

experience additional constraints as they need to balance between personal and professional identities while maintaining the social standards of a 'good woman'. They are expected to behave professionally such as pursuing professional attire and late office sittings, besides keeping a distance from their followers. Moreover, society doesn't recognise their efforts and often remains judgmental about their skills and abilities (Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Oplatka, 2006).

Several studies have been carried out around the world about the role of women leaders in higher education; yet, little is known about their perceived leadership and gender identities, particularly in the context of Pakistan. The majority of the leading researchers in Pakistan have documented the problems of women managers and entrepreneurs (Manzoor, 2015; Rehman & Azam Roomi, 2012) with only limited investigations being conducted about women leaders in academia, and these too mostly documented the narratives of college and school principals (Shah & Shah, 2012; Taj, 2016). Surprisingly, there is a scarcity of scholarship related to women academics' conceptions of themselves as leaders in higher education (Shaikh, 2014; Zaman, Qureshi & Bhatti, 2011). Therefore, this paper aims at bridging this gap in the literature by unfolding women's self-perceptions about their leadership identities and examining the effects of established masculine norms in constructing and reconstructing women's leadership identities in higher education in Pakistan. By doing this, we aim to contribute to an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of women performing executive roles in co-educational universities that are located in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan, to unfold their subjective realities in academic leadership.

Research questions

This study is guided by three core research questions:

1. How do women leaders perceive themselves as leaders?
2. What leadership attributes do women possess that distinguish them from their male counterparts?
3. How do women construct and maintain their self-identities within the dominant leadership discourses in academia?

Literature review

Leadership scholarship in the past few decades has focused on the investigation of the distinctive leadership styles and characteristics of men and women. The leadership styles of men are understood as assertive and autocratic, whereas women demonstrate flexible and accommodating administrative styles. Studies also show that masculine attributes, for instance, commitment, determination, assertiveness, and resilience, are acknowledged in leadership; however, women leaders are stereotypically defined as emotional, indecisive, and submissive (Eagly & Chin, 2007; Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011). For example, Eagly and Chin (2010) noted that society encourages a male-centric leadership approach, thus expecting women to practise traditional leadership styles.

Consequently, these hegemonic masculine standards in universities forge women's identities in otherness and alienate women academics in competition (Wynen et al., 2015). Women leaders in Asia experience additional constraints as they need to balance between their personal and professional identities, while maintaining societal norms about a good woman. They are expected to behave professionally, for instance, pursuing professional attire and late office sittings besides keeping a distance from their followers. Moreover, society does not recognise their efforts and remains judgmental about their skills and abilities (Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Oplatka, 2006).

This indicates that leadership styles of men and women are stereotypically presented in society, thereby encouraging men in leadership roles (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006; Northouse, 2015; Wynen et al., 2015). Women consider similar leadership attributes among both men and women; yet, men significantly view themselves as more successful in the administrative roles and perceive women as the worst bosses as compared to men (Pfaff et al., 2013). However, research presents evidence that women leaders who exhibit feminine traits and characteristics, for instance, accommodation, sacrifice and respect, are equally successful as leaders. Nisar (2011) stated that successful leaders in well-established Pakistani universities are equipped with skills such as dedication, commitment, motivation, decisiveness, and comprehensive knowledge about the policies. It shows that feminine characteristics such as accommodation, sacrifice, and respect are the least important for leaders to navigate success in academia.

Many studies have emphasised the significance of regular, appropriate, and real-world focused leadership training in the successful management of organisational activities and overcoming leadership crises. Historically, many training programs have been instigated; however, they were not equally beneficial for both men and women and most of these programs even adversely affected women by inadvertently strengthening traditional gender roles (Dover, Manwani & Munn, 2018; Williams, Kilanski & Muller, 2014). Unfortunately, there are few examples of effective leadership training and workshops for women in the academy; yet, they brought effective outcomes (Knipfer, Shaughnessy, Hentschel & Schmid, 2017; Peus, Braun & Knipfer, 2015; White, 2012).

This situation is more alarming in Pakistan, where most of the women are not trained for academic leadership roles. Moreover, they have developed self-doubt about their leadership capabilities due to the traditional socialisation patterns and dominant masculine leadership discourses (Bana & Khaki, 2015; Warwick & Reimers, 1995). The Government of Pakistan has initiated a few training projects for the professional development of teachers, headteachers, and educational administrators at institutional and district levels, using collaboration with some international organisations. However, these are insufficient to address the needs of women in academic leadership (Bana & Khaki, 2015).

Besides training, mentoring and networking act as valuable social capital for women leaders. These help women to improve administrative skills, gain tenure, and advance leadership careers (Grine, 2014; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). However, Ballenger (2010) noted that most networks and mentors are male-centred and are unable to address the

problems of women. Moreover, there is a lack of successful women leaders, who can serve as mentors for other women (Ely et al., 2011).

Other studies indicate that women experience the risk of under-citation due to the lack of social capital. Consequently, they are under-represented in contemporary educational and research-intensive environments (Bagilhole & White 2011; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). The pipeline effect is also endorsed here; if larger numbers of women complete their first degree and continue for doctoral and postdoctoral degrees, then larger numbers will join their academic career earlier and be able to achieve tenure. Thus, their visibility as senior administrators will continue to improve (White, 2012).

Theoretical framework

This study advocates the postmodern theoretical underpinnings of Michael Foucault and two famous feminist scholars, Dorothy Smith and Rewyn Connell. Foucault (2000) postulated that power structures are systematically produced and reproduced by organisations with the use of knowledge. Knowledge induces a sort of pressure and disseminates the widespread discourses in society to safeguard the relationships of power. Although Foucault has ignored gender aspects in his explanation of knowledge and power; many feminist scholars have filled this gap by incorporating his assumptions in understanding gender-based power relations in organisations. O'Connor (2014) mentioned that traditionally, institutions are built upon the dominant masculine discourses and the academic organisation is no exception. Higher educational institutions are highly influenced by the hegemonic masculine discourses that serve as a major impediment for women aspiring to senior leadership positions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Harding, Ford & Gough, 2010). According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 832), the "hegemonic masculinity" is a traditional norm that legitimises men's domination and restricts women's abilities to attain and maintain leadership roles.

Further, Dorothy Smith's notion of the standpoint and ruling class ideology guided this study in the reflexive understanding of women's leadership identities in university structures. Smith argued that the ruling class ideology is found in all organisations that are largely influenced by the 'male subtext'; therefore, women are "excluded from the practices of power within textually mediated relationships of the ruling" (Smith, 1987, p.4). Smith's assumptions help understand the discursive construction of the ruling class ideology in leadership that excludes the standpoint of women, who possess diverse social identities. Moreover, it is incorporated for a thoughtful and reflexive understanding of the masculine discourses present in academic administration and management that are being formulated by the hegemonic men.

Research method

This paper is drawn from a doctoral dissertation that documented the experiences of women performing leadership roles in the universities located in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. This study adopted an interpretive and constructivist approach (Creswell, 2003) to get an extensive insight into the lived experiences of women about

their leadership styles, and to explore the discursive construction of leadership identities of women in academia. In this paper, we define an academic leader as a person, utilising his or her skills, resources, and energies in the best academic and administrative interests of the institution, whilst balancing family, social, and professional life.

Research design

Data was drawn by using a qualitative research design which is best suited to unveil in-depth information about study participants from an emic perspective (Creswell, 2014). The sample for the larger PhD study was twenty-three women leaders; however, in this article, the narratives of ten participants have been included considering their relevance for the research questions. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling method. The selection criteria were based upon the specific characteristics of the participants including (a) women holding a doctoral degree (b) designated as professors i.e. assistant professor, associate professor, and full professor, (c) had service experience of at least one year as an executive officer and (d) were serving as dean, director or head of department. Surprisingly, there were no women vice-chancellors in the target population. The participants work in a dynamic institutional culture that helped us to identify the dominant leadership discourses that tend to influence women's unique leadership identities in academia.

Data collection

An in-depth interview method was utilised to obtain data from prospective participants. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to guide and facilitate the interview process as proposed by Morris (2015). The interview guide was constructed in a way to answer the major research questions and a pilot study was conducted to check the validity and reliability of the interview guide and obtain further directions for the study.

Face-to-face, on campus interviews were conducted by the first researcher with durations between sixty to eighty minutes for each participant. The interviews began with some preliminary questions inquiring about background information, followed by some basic questions to reflect their personal and leadership identities. For example, the participants were asked about their leadership style and traits, the opportunities they had as academic leaders, and the organisational norms about women leadership. This was further probed by more in-depth questions to unfold their multiple identities, the influence of masculine discourses, and their strategies to balance multiple personal and professional identities. For instance, they were asked to unfold gender-based power relations, their influence on their leadership identities, and women's engagement in decision-making processes. They were also asked how their standpoint is taken by the top management and influenced by the larger power structure of the organisations.

Field notes were also taken to document some important information obtained through the non-verbal communication of the participants and personal observations as well as interpretations during interviews that helped to identify codes and themes. All interviews were audio-recorded after taking informed consent from the participant. While twenty-

three interviews were conducted for the larger study; we have documented ten narrative summaries that seem most relevant for answering our research questions for this article.

Data analysis

The data analysis proceeded in six steps, as recommended by Creswell (2014). In the first stage, all recorded data was transported to a laptop and transcribed by the first researcher to avoid any risk of misunderstanding and misinterpretations. As many participants used mixed languages, namely Urdu and English, all transcripts were later translated into English that was also counterchecked by the language expert for more precision. We utilised questions as suggested by Creswell (2014, p. 247), such as "What general ideas are participants saying? What is the tone of the ideas? What is the impression of the overall depth, credibility, and use of the information?" In the third stage, descriptive codes were assigned to the data (Creswell, 2014). According to Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) "a descriptive code assign labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase - most often a noun - the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (p. 74). During the fourth stage, themes were developed during and after formulating data patterns and descriptive codes. In the fifth stage, themes were discussed in detail along with excerpts, and in the last stage data was interpreted further through the lens of Michael Foucault's notion of discourse analysis. An attempt was made to develop an understanding of the socio-cultural discourses of educational leadership and its influence on women's leadership identities.

Validity and reliability

Actions to ensure validity included member checking, peer debriefing, clear description of the researcher's positioning, and clear and rich description of participant's narratives (Creswell, 2014).

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval for this study was granted by the relevant research boards at the International Islamic University Islamabad, where the larger PhD study was conducted. Moreover, while conducting this study ethical guidelines as suggested by the Belmont Report (as cited in Childress & Beauchamp, 2001) were applied to safeguard the interests of the participants as well as the stakeholders. For this purpose, the names of the participants and the universities have been kept anonymous. Moreover, a written informed consent was obtained from each participant, and the confidentiality of personal details and information was strictly adhered to.

Findings

Five themes are extracted from the data attained in this study that unfold the identity construction of women leaders in co-educational university structures. These are understanding leadership from the experiences of women, leadership style of women, women leaders as researchers, leadership workshops and training, and mentoring and networking.

Understanding leadership from the experiences of women

To understand, how women construct their leadership identities, it was important to note how they understand leadership. The majority of women in this study comprehended leadership in terms of responsibility and commitment, as illustrated by the following excerpts.

> For me, leadership is not a gratifying role; rather, I feel that it is a great responsibility because as a leader, I have to take the lead by constant hard work and becoming a role model for others. (Nayab, Chairperson, Associate Professor)

> I believe that leadership demands working as a team where each member has distinctive abilities, and a leader has to identify and utilise multiple skills and resources to achieve defined goals. (Naheed, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

The narratives of these participants clearly illustrate the significance of consistent hard work for a leader. They maintained that women have to manage their roles more vigilantly to avoid any unhealthy criticism because women leaders are stereotypically defined as less committed and motivated. Unlike male colleagues, Nayab was not enjoying her leadership status due to the higher expectations associated with the administrative positions. She often donated extra time to her office work to accomplish various activities and felt it necessary to become a mentor for her fellows. Similarly, Naheed believed that leadership required individuals to utilise numerous abilities to deal with their followers, because they have distinctive socio-cultural and psychological backgrounds. Therefore, as a leader, she corresponded with her team with competence and developed an ability to identify the strengths and weaknesses of her subordinates. Another Chairperson understood leadership as having bilateral dimensions. She explicated that:

> In my opinion, leadership has two aspects; first, leading one's life in one's way, and second, start helping others in determining and achieving their specific life goals. (Khadija, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

The conversation with Khadija reveals that leaders should identify their skills and resources to get them prepared for leading others. It helps them to decide their own life goals and develops the confidence to lead from the front. Khadija believed that this realisation of personal abilities allows others to get inspiration from them. Good leaders are always prepared to mentor others; consequently, people also start recognising them as successful leaders.

These excerpts clearly illustrate the importance of consistent hard work and determination for women to become successful leaders. The participants believed that they needed to manage their roles more vigilantly to avoid any unhealthy criticism, because women leaders are stereotypically characterised as less committed and motivated. It is found that women often require putting extra time and effort into accomplishing their office work. The reviewed literature also reveals that women leaders are perceived as less confident, emotionally unstable, passive, weak, and incompetent. These stereotypical beliefs systematically favour men in leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely et al., 2011; Singh,

et al., 2012; Wynen et al., 2015). These prejudicial attitudes are stronger in Pakistani society, due to the prevailing patriarchal structure that is distinctly different from Western attitudes.

Leadership style of women

In this study, it is found that most women practise cooperative, flexible, and team-based styles of leadership. The majority of the participants intended to have a decentralised authority that facilitated them in maintaining a productive work environment and achieving effective outcomes. As Khadija and Sana expressed:

> I believe in a non-directive style of leadership. I frequently arrange meetings with my faculty and administrative team to discuss the professional objectives and keep facilitating them in achieving the desired outcomes. (Khadija, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

> I enable my team to effectively do their work by providing them a nice congenial atmosphere, where they can perform well. (Sana, Director, Associate Professor)

These are clear examples of the flexible and accommodating leadership approach of women. They aimed at facilitating their subordinates in achieving their work objectives successfully. The non-directive administrative style of Khadija and Sana benefited them in analysing not only their strengths and weaknesses but also facilitated them in dealing with people having distinctive backgrounds. Moreover, they endorsed a friendly atmosphere, where everyone was able to share personal as well as professional plans. However, participants also expressed that institutional culture encouraged assertiveness and firmness in academic leadership. For instance, Warda, who practiced a flexible leadership style, said that:

> I believe that administration is a challenging activity where at times we need to be assertive as well as polite. However, I feel that I am more accommodating due to which some colleagues, particularly men, don't behave professionally. (Warda, Chairperson, Associate Professor)

Likewise, another participant narrated:

> Sometimes, I become facilitating – that brings personal satisfaction – and get firm at some other moments, specifically when things get out of balance. (Naila, Dean, Professor)

The narratives of the participants manifest the effects of the dominant discourse of assertiveness prevalent in academic administration. Women experience obstacles while working with their male counterparts, who often interfere in the smooth transmission of organisational activities, due to their non-directive leadership styles. The results reveal that women were intended to change their style of leadership in compliance to the specific demand of the situations. However, they aimed primarily at facilitating everyone in accomplishing their assigned work. For instance, Naila was well aware of this ruling class ideology and learned to deal with it with her increased experience and exposure. She was

strictly following the organisational policies and never compromised on the quality of work; therefore, she learned to be assertive along with being accommodating, to manage her work more effectively.

Hence, it is clear that women's leadership perceptions are evident in their leadership style in practice, as they mostly demonstrate accommodating, flexible, and team-based leadership styles that are inconsistent with the dominant masculine discourses endorsing assertiveness. These findings resonate with previous research conducted by McMahon (2011), Northouse (2015) and Reynolds (2013). In this study, it was also found that women experience obstacles in dealing with their male colleagues, who interfere in the smooth transmission of organisational activities, due to their non-directive leadership style. Results reveal that women tend to transform their administrative style according to the demands of the situations. However, their objective is to facilitate every member in the successful accomplishment of the tasks assigned. The leadership styles of women leaders are associated with their feminine attributes and qualities. The following excerpts evidence this well.

> I perceive myself as confident, competent, and resilient. Besides, I wish to maintain a healthy work environment by collaborating with my faculty. (Warda, Chairperson, Associate Professor)

> I am friendly, accommodating as well and tolerant; that facilitates in keeping me aside from disputes and resolving conflicts successfully. (Sara, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

The above narratives reveal that women leaders are committed and confident, besides being accommodating and flexible. However, it is found that the cooperative nature of women is not encouraged in leadership culture, because it is not associated with the hegemonic masculine discourse. Another significant discourse of tolerance is also unveiled by the participants that are mostly concomitant with women and not appreciated among leaders in academia. Nevertheless, for women like Sara, this ability helps manage many critical and conflicting situations. However, at times they faced the consequence of these qualities. Hence they learned to keep a separation between feelings and work with their increased experience and exposure.

The subjective realities of women uncover the distinctive leadership attributes of women in academia, for instance, patience, cooperation, emotional intelligence, and flexibility. Women are enthusiastic to get recognised for their feminine leadership traits, rather than evaluating them on prevailing masculine standards in leadership. Despite increased changes in academia, women leaders are still pressurised to conform with hegemonic norms that produce greater challenges for women leaders in academia.

Women leaders as researchers

This study investigated women's identities as researchers and how it influenced their leadership identities. Academic excellence is fundamental for survival in competitive academic environments. Participants elucidated that academic leadership demands

effective managerial skills along with research and academic excellence. However, universities put greater emphasis on the research productivity of academic administrators. As Naila narrated:

> In my opinion, a leader should be equipped with multiple skills including education, research, and administrative abilities. I have observed many academic administrators, who are great researchers but are not successful leaders. (Naila, Dean, Professor)

Academic competence is highly acknowledged in higher educational leadership because it facilitates understanding issues and developing opinions in academia. However, participants reported that administrative and managerial skills are equally important in academic leadership that is usually not learned by improved education and research. The participants also mentioned that research competency, which is not directly associated with administration, is one of the dominant factors in choosing a leader in universities. Therefore, they have to focus on their research besides developing administrative skills. The following narratives of the participants elaborated the challenges in strengthening their research identities:

> My research activities are negatively influenced because of my administrative responsibilities. However, I am supervising PhD scholars that benefit me too. (Naheed, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

> My research publications are continuing to decline due to my administrative roles, while my university emphasises research publications for promotions. I try to manage time for research at home – that is also difficult due to the overwhelming household commitments. (Sara, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

The conversations with women highlight that the gender identities prioritise their role in the family, and when it is added up with their leadership identities, they find it even more challenging to manage quality time for research productivity. Therefore, they focus mostly on group research work and publications. Moreover, it is evident in this study that many universities do not consider managerial experience during the promotion of the faculty. This discourages women from taking leadership roles.

The detailed discussions with the interviewees reveal that women are apprehensive to engage themselves in academic and research activities that are decreased due to their administrative roles. They are very saturated due to their multiple and contrasting identities as leaders, researchers, teachers, mothers, wives, etc. Other researchers also have highlighted the effects of research publications on women's professional growth (Bilimoria, Joy & Liang, 2008; Fox, 2010; Leahey, 2006). In this study, the participants incorporated some approaches to improve their research publications, including managing extra time for research productivity at home, utilising the university library for getting quality time, focusing on group research with students and colleagues, and developing effective research networks.

Leadership workshops and training

Leadership development programs are pivotal in enhancing administrative and managerial skills and the potential of women academics; as may be expected, all participants emphasised the necessity of leadership training in universities. However, participants reported a lack of formal training and workshops for academic administrators in their institutes. It is evident in the following excerpts:

> I feel that training is significant for the development of academic administrators but unfortunately, it is usually missing in higher educational institutes. (Sana, Director, Associate Professor)

> Faculty development programs are a regular part of this university; however, we never received or heard of the workshops or training of the academic leaders. (Sara, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

It is clear from the narratives of the participants that leadership training is missing in academia, and is believed to be essential for the identity construction of women academics. As mentioned in the previous theme, universities place more emphasis on the academic excellence of their leaders, which does not necessarily enhance their leadership skills. In the absence of such opportunities, many women have learned their new and complex leadership roles through on-job experience and exposure. Naheed narrated her similar thoughts in these words:

> Training is beneficial for keeping us equipped with the new rules and tendencies in leadership. I have attended few workshops that facilitated in keeping myself aligned with the contemporary practices in administration as well as organising work more effectively. (Naheed, Chairperson, Assistant Professor)

Naheed had attended some effective leadership workshops that facilitated her in successful management activities. It provided her opportunities to develop networks with effective academic managers that helped her in getting multiple solutions to problems.

It is clear from the above excerpts that workshops and training are believed to have a significant role in the identity construction of women academic administrators. All women illustrated the need for leadership development programs because they believed them to be very effective in emboldening them, to first acknowledge their potential, and then assert their leadership skills in academia, while narrowing the existing gender leadership developmental gap. Leadership scholarship unfolds the need for formal training and workshops for women leaders to foster their career goals (Bilimoria et al., 2008; White, 2012). In this study, many women tried to reduce the leadership training gap by engaging themselves more with professional networks and learning from their mentors, as discussed in detail in the next theme below.

Mentoring and networking

In the absence of fundamental leadership socialisation and leadership training, mentoring and networks played a significant role in developing the leadership identities of women in

this study. Many participants shared its influence on their professional growth. As a participant reported:

> I have limited formal networks due to the limited time and cultural constraints; however, I am engaged with numerous informal networks and mentors that help me in getting updated knowledge and professional advice. Moreover, they keep me motivated to identify my latent abilities. (Naveeda, Chairperson, Associate Professor)

Another participant shared her experiences of mentoring and networking in this way:

> My mentors help me in becoming confident and extending professional relationships. They also keep me well informed about new opportunities. Moreover, they encourage me to identify my skills and capabilities that are necessary for managing critical and challenging roles. (Sobia, Dean, Professor)

The above excerpts manifest the importance of mentors and networks for women administrators in the universities. Women, who were formerly marginalised due to the hegemonic leadership norms, were later strongly motivated by their mentors and networks. They have learnt to identify their latent abilities and utilise them effectively in their personal and professional lives. Moreover, they became aware of the new opportunities that facilitate them in defining their career paths. Similarly, Sobia shared the role of her mentors in developing confidence, courage, and competitiveness that are highly acknowledged leadership attributes. These findings resonate with previous studies that highlight the significance of networking and mentoring in women's career progression (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fitzsimmons, Callan & Paulsen, 2014; Peus et al., 2015; Sanchez & Lehnert, 2019).

As women are socialised to conform to the traditionally feminine norms in Pakistani society, most of them are perceived as less confident, dependent, and emotional. These stereotypes often develop self-doubt among them about their leadership identities and they become scared of being unsuccessful or criticised. It is evident in this study that women who were formerly marginalised due to hegemonic leadership norms, are now strongly motivated by their mentors and networks. They have learned to identify their latent abilities and utilise them effectively in their personal and professional lives. Moreover, they become aware of the new opportunities that facilitated them in defining their career paths.

Discussion

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how women in Pakistani academia construct their identity as leaders. It argues that leadership identities of women are discursively produced and reproduced in universities to legitimise masculine ideologies, and that women need to balance their multiple identities to survive in a male-dominated leadership environment. The discussion that emerged from this study is in line with previous research conducted on this issue, around the world. Nevertheless, this paper brings some new and unique findings in the socio-cultural context of Pakistani society,

where there is a lack of research on the multiple identities of women serving as leaders in higher educational institutes.

Pakistani women possess multiple identities as leaders, faculty and researchers, as well as daughters, wives, and mothers. The interplay and tensions are evident between these contradictory identities because these are highly influenced by deep-rooted masculine discourses (Ali, Kulik & Metz, 2011). The results of this study indicate that women are intending to get recognition for their unique feminine identities, while conforming with the religious and cultural subtext. Therefore, they need to struggle hard for building a strong and positive perception of women leaders and proving their credibility that is distinctive from the dominant patriarchal norms. These findings resonate with prior studies which have indicated that women's construction of self is affected by the prevailing discourses (Eagly & Chin, 2010; Northouse, 2015).

Women's leadership identities are evident in their leadership style in this study because, the majority of women practised cooperative, flexible, and accommodative styles in academic administration. They seem to decentralise their authority, which facilitates maintaining a healthy and productive work environment and achieving effective outcomes that are inconsistent with the dominant masculine discourses endorsing assertiveness. The results reveal that women tend to transform their leadership styles following the requirement of the situations. Yet, they aim at facilitating each team member in accomplishing work effectively. Similar to these findings, the literature also indicates that women practise team-based and transformative leadership styles (Reynolds, 2013; Singh et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, women academics share some unique feminine traits that distinguish their styles of leadership in universities. Interestingly, women in this study were found to be more enthusiastic in incorporating their feminine attributes in their professional lives, instead of advocating the dominant masculine values. An important discourse of tolerance is also unveiled in this study that is mostly concomitant with women and not appreciated in administration. Women take it as their strength in managing numerous critical and conflicting situations, because it facilitates them in the successful management of disputes and disagreements. These findings are inconsistent with the reviewed literature in the socio-cultural context of Pakistani society, which indicates that women college principals utilise feminine as well as masculine attributes in management and administration (Shah & Shah, 2012).

Surprisingly, the results indicate that universities don't have regular training structures for their academic leaders, which was found to be one of the major impediments to women academics in attaining and maintaining leadership status in the universities. The majority of women in Pakistan are traditionally socialised to conform to feminine standards that consequently restrict their success as leaders. Thus all women emphasised the need for formal training. This problem was also identified about two decades ago by Warwick and Reimers (1995), who noticed that the educational leaders in Pakistan are mostly untrained to serve as leaders, don't perceive themselves as leaders, as well as not behaving as leaders.

The findings of this study indicate that this situation is little changed, which is alarming for the growth of academic institutions.

This study finds a significant contribution of networks and mentors in constructing professional identities of women in the absence of leadership socialisation and formal executive training. Women in Pakistan are engaged by informal networking and mentoring because they find it more appropriate in the presence of multiple family and professional responsibilities. Similarly, previous leadership research has elaborated on the significance of mentors and networks in the professional growth of women, though indicating that women get less benefit from such sources as it requires more time and effort (Peus et al., 2015; Sanchez & Lehnert, 2019).

To sum up, this article explored and documented the dominant leadership and masculine discourses that shape women's identities in academia. It also offers an understanding of the outstanding performance of women who confront the hegemonic leadership norms and get success with their unique leadership and feminine identities. This scholarly work brings hope for transformations as evidenced by the career trajectories of these participants.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations to this study. The sample for this study was taken only from coeducational universities in only two cities of Pakistan; hence, the results cannot be generalised to the entire women academic leaders serving in different parts of the country. Besides, some who were approached declined to participate in this study, owing to their overwhelming personal and professional commitments or unwillingness to share their stories due to their cultural constraints; they could have provided some important insights on the issue.

Conclusion and implications

This paper documented how women leaders in Pakistani universities construct their unique identities within the hegemonic socio-cultural environment in the country. The leadership discourse appears to institutionalise the traditional masculine identities in higher educational institutions, that consequently pressurise women to adopt ruling class ideologies to safeguard their interests. Therefore, these women worked hard to maintain a balance between their multiple identities in two entirely contradictory domains: family and work. The majority of the women lacked fundamental leadership socialisation and formal training; however, their mentors and networks played a vital role in balancing their multiple roles and reinforcing their personal beliefs to allow them to succeed in the competitive hegemonic regimes. The recognition of their strengths as well as weaknesses not only entwined within the context and the situations in which they are performed, but also within the hegemonic discourses and culturally shaped narrative conventions.

This study provides future directions for further research, there being a general lack of research on the lived experiences of women leaders in higher educational institutions in Pakistan. Similar studies could be conducted in other parts of Pakistan to gain a deeper as well as a holistic picture of women in leadership. This will construct a comparative

analysis of the influence of various socio-cultural arrangements on women's leadership styles and practices. Moreover, the population of men can provide a fruitful understanding of the distinctive self-perceptions and leadership styles in Pakistani universities. Furthermore, this study identified a lack of training for women leaders; therefore, it is suggested that universities should develop formal mechanisms of leadership training for its existing and forthcoming leaders that can be very effective, especially for women, in simultaneously developing administrative and managerial skills. Importantly, women leaders should be acknowledged and appreciated in their feminine roles instead of stigmatising them with masculine characteristics. For this purpose, universities' policies need to be sensitive to women's unique positions and their needs within society.

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