

## **Narratives of Women Leaders in Higher Education in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

This narrative study explored the experiences of eight women leaders. Five from Lahore and three from Karachi at higher education in Pakistan. Purposive sampling technique was used for the current study. The criteria for sampling was at least 12 years of experience in the field of education in any capacity, be in a leadership position of higher education for at least 5 years, either have a doctoral degree or have state conferred recognition/award in her name. The study aimed at answering the essential questions about the barriers faced by these women, opportunities provided to them and their mentorship role for the coming generation. A qualitative research approach was used with in-depth interviews and fact sheet for arriving at the lived experiences of these women in the form of deeply felt narratives. Narrative analyses was used to gather a complete picture of complex human experiences and narrate them in the form of individual stories and a combined thematic analysis. The study concluded that there was no fixed road map for success in educational leadership which can serve as a blueprint. However, there were over-arching themes like a strong parental support, a broadened vision, higher education and helpful mentors, all of these bring out the best in women to garner their leadership skills. The study also found barriers like the socio-economic status, a toxic work environment and gender which can hinder the progress of women in Pakistan. However, such barriers can be altered through fortitude, hard work and determination.

**Keywords:** *Narratives, Higher Education, women Leaders*

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## **Introduction**

The study explores the phenomenon of women leaders in the higher education scenario of Pakistan with special reference to their individual and collective journeys, placing this research strategically at the apex of national and international interest in women leaders and workers contributing towards a positive, progressive and economically sound country. The study limits itself to the Higher education sector which pertains to educational leaders of colleges and universities. The following section gives a brief background of the study, along with the statement of the problem. It further establishes the significance of the study within the larger Pakistani context preceded by objectives of the study and research questions.

Educational leadership refers to the leadership roles within the educational scenario. Just as there is a dearth of women leaders in other sectors of Pakistan, women leaders in education, particularly higher education are considerably low (Odhiambo, 2011). Female leadership is a less explored facet of the higher education which can bring in multifold benefits to the culture and economy of developing countries like Pakistan, who's almost half the population (females) has remained untapped. Only the recent increase globally and nationally, in women associations and human capital have generated enough interest to bring these marginalized groups into mainstream discourse.

Leadership and its implications for woman have been discussed by the western researchers. However, such discourse does not exist in credible quantities for the Pakistani context. Furthermore, an attempt to find out more about the "fair sex's" leadership behaviors, their differences from their male counter parts and/or glass ceilings they might face in their roles as leaders are some of the topics discussed in popular discourse (Bullough, 2008). The current study does not only attempt to fill the research void prevalent in Pakistan where women leaders in education are concerned but also endeavors to explore the phenomenon of leadership from a different angle, that of the multi layered journeys that established women leaders have taken to reach the point of social/state recognition.

## **Objectives of the study**

- To bring to the fore, perspectives and voices of women in the educational leadership scenario of Pakistan.
- To formulate a road map of lived experiences of women in educational leadership for aspiring women leaders.

### Research Questions

- What is the leadership journey of female leaders in the educational sector in Lahore
- What are the opportunities and challenges they encountered along the way in their career?
- How has mentorship worked for them and how they are extending mentorship to the aspiring women leaders?

### Literature Reviews

#### Narrative inquiry into the study of women's experiences

Schwartz (1997) gives a brief history of “deans of women”, a category in the early 1870s developed in the western society as a way of female leader representation for the newly enrolled female students in higher education institutes, which it is argued was a secondary post usually under the tutelage of the male counter parts.

Ruthellen Josselson(1996) in his book *Ethics and Process in the Narrative Study of Live* defines Narrative Study as 'The most significant truths about human beings are to be found in the stories of their lives' She included the work of four doctoral students and the experiences they have faced while doing narrative study. One of them encountered ethical and legal tangles while interviewing the mothers who have abused their children.

Leadership and its implications have been discussed by a number of researchers both in East and in West. In a study of women in the field of academic medicine, Carnes, Morrissey, and Geller (2008) observed an interconnectedness between women leaders in academic medicine and improvement in women’s health issues. “Research on women’s issues was in the forefront, which it may not have otherwise been, save having women in positions of leadership” (p. 1454).

Mary L. Pflanz(2011) in her study, *Exploring the Journeys of Female Community Leaders*, used the qualitative research study . The narrative inquiry consisted of open-ended interviews which were conducted to record the responses and phenomenological methods was used for analysis. The approach used was one of constructivism and purposeful sampling was used.

Another qualitative phenomenological study was conducted by Nicolya Grigsby-Williams(2018)with open-ended interviews and focus groups to collect data regarding how women leaders view their leadership and success. Responses were obtained from 20 women entrepreneurs between the ages of 25 and 44. Data was analyzed by coding transcriptions for common themes.

P Moreno, GN McLean(2016) conducted qualitative (phenomenological) study focused on gaining a deep understanding of the experiences of women leaders in Mexico, a predominantly male-dominated culture. This study used hermeneutic phenomenology to understand the lived experiences of women leaders in Mexico. “The human instrument builds upon his or her tacit knowledge, and uses methods that are appropriate to humanly implemented inquiry: interviews, observations, document analysis, unobtrusive clues, and the like” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 187). Many studies (Kaplin & Lee, 1995; Smallwood, 2001; Wilson, 2004) have concluded that women suffer from gender discrimination in higher education in the form of hiring policies, pay inequalities and pregnancy discrimination among other things (as cited in Woosnam, 2009). Borcelle (1985) reasserts the fact that the rate of success for men and women to the top management positions is not the same.

This lack of equity for the sexes is a result of gender roles ascribed to the sexes among other things where women are supposed to be at home while men are required to act the role of breadwinners for their families. Rajadhyaksha points out that the prevalent gender role associations run rampant in the society and possess strong roots which continue to “affect the level and quality of social support that a working woman receives in developing countries like India” (as cited in Naqvi, 2016, pp. 279-309). Same can be said about its neighboring developing country, Pakistan which shares many social and cultural constructs with India.

In order to fully comprehend the research at hand, this section reviews some of the previous researches regarding the issue of challenges faced by women in leadership positions within the educational domain globally and in Pakistan. It also reviews opportunities or factors that help women reach leadership positions in education.

It is imperative for a cross analysis to cite barriers/challenges faced by women in accessing leadership positions in an organization be it an educational institute or any other organization. A barrier is defined as “something that keeps apart or makes progress difficult” (Merriam-Webster, n.d). Chiwniak further elaborates by alluding it to both individuals or groups in an organization (1997). A challenge is defined as “a test of one’s abilities or resources in a demanding but stimulating undertaking” (Merriam-Webster, n.d) but for the purpose of the research both will be used interchangeably. The following list of nine barriers have been cited extensively in studies concerning women in leadership roles namely; glass ceiling, glass cliff, gender stereotypes, lack of professional networks, lack of effective mentors, family responsibilities, institutional

policies and culture, male dominated academic arena and queen bee syndrome (AlDoubi, 2014; Counts, 2012).

The discussion proves that not only is there a lack of female educational leaders in Pakistan but also highlights the need of bringing in the female presence. Moreover, in placing this absence of the female voice within the global context, it draws out the contrasts with the western society. The critical consensus not only elucidates various factors that come into play but also highlights the dearth of scholarship within the Pakistani scenario.

### **Methodology**

There are only two paradigms of inquiry open to a researcher that of deduction or induction. Deductive reasoning goes from specific to general in other words a theory or hypothesis is tested whereas the inductive inquiry involves going from general to specific, often “constructing generalizations, relationships and even theories” (Gray, 2014). The inductive approach leans naturally towards a qualitative assessment of the research event. The current study follows the inductive paradigm as it attempts to explore the meanings and establish patterns in the lived experiences of the participants as Gray (2014, p.173) states about inductive approach that “through the process of gathering data, it attempts to establish patterns, consistencies and meanings”.

The second important concept is that of epistemology. Epistemology is quite literally “the theory of knowledge” (Creswell, 1994). Crotty (as cited in Gray, 2014). The epistemological stance for the current research is Constructivism. The current study is interpretive in the sense that it locates the experiences of the selected women within the social and historical perspective and takes into account the temporal space as well.

The study uses two tools for data gathering namely the in-depth interview and a fact sheet for document analysis,

### **Narrative Analysis**

Polkinghorne, states that narrative inquiry is often categorized as having two kinds based on analysis technique, “narrative analysis” and “analysis of narratives” (as cited in Creswell, 2007; as cited in Counts, 2012). Narrative analysis involves viewing individual stories and retelling them in the researchers own words using imminent themes, while analysis of narrative means to fit the data found across all interviews into a coherent narrative, in other words a thematic analysis of all the stories put together. Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2002), cite transcribing an interview as part of the analytical process. Riessman (2008) advises to write the entire

interview on paper including “selected features” like laughing, crying or long pauses etc, and Agar recommends several readings of the text “to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts”(as cited in Creswell, 200, p.213) for the coding process. The coding process is accomplished by color coding the text into different sections and then assigning codes to each section. Later, the codes are gathered under broader themes and redundant information is discarded. It is advised to come up with 5-7 categories of themes (Creswell, 2007).

### **Sample Technique**

There are certain suggestions in literature regarding the recommended sample size of a narrative study. Creswell (2007) cites Huber & Whelan that narrative inquiry uses “one or two individuals unless a larger pool of participants is used to develop a collective story”. The current study capitalizes on this view and selects 8 participants as sample like a Saudi study of the same nature conducted by AlDoubi (2014). Purposive sampling was used for the current study as it was used for “narrow a range of variation and focus on similarities” (Palinkas et al, 2013)

### **Results and Findings**

The findings are also presented using the two methods of Clandinin & Connelly’s (Creswell, 2007) three-dimensional space for the ‘narrative analysis’ and thematic analysis (Creswell, 2007) for ‘analysis of narratives’ both of which are explained in the methodology section.

### **Representation of Findings**

Findings are represented in two ways, graphic display of the imminent journey elements of each participant individually, catering to narrative analysis and tabular display of common themes and supporting responses for analysis of narrative. To represent individual journeys arrow graphic is used with journey elements marked along a trajectory as employed by Counts (2012). The themes will be further discussed in the ‘analysis’ chapter to trace a leadership path for aspiring leaders.

#### **Narrative Analysis Findings**

Individual trajectories of the participants’ stories

Figure 2: Dr. E's Trajectory

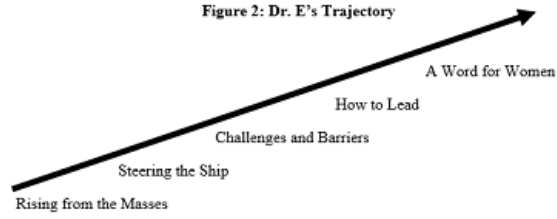


Figure 3: Dr. G's Trajectory

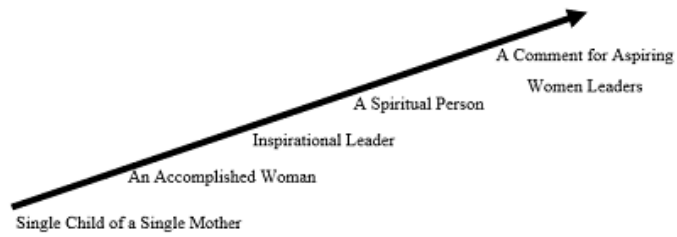
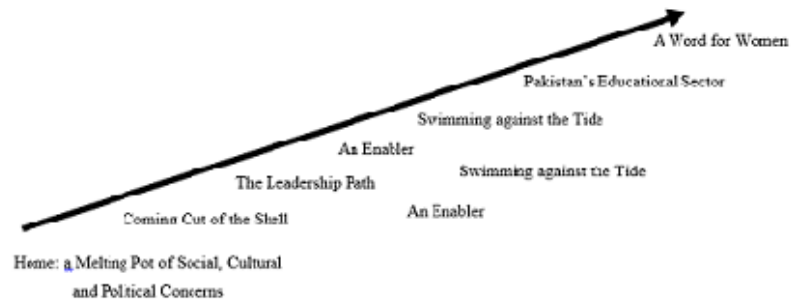
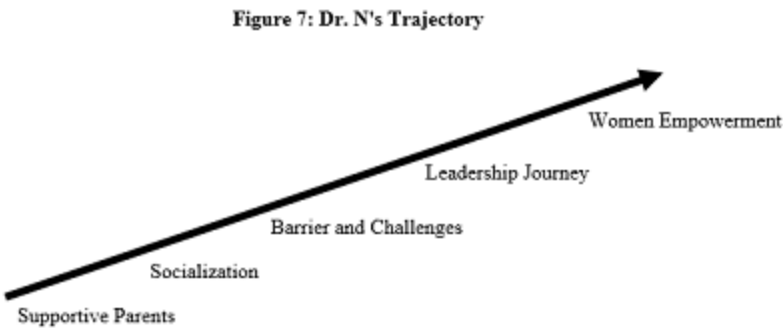
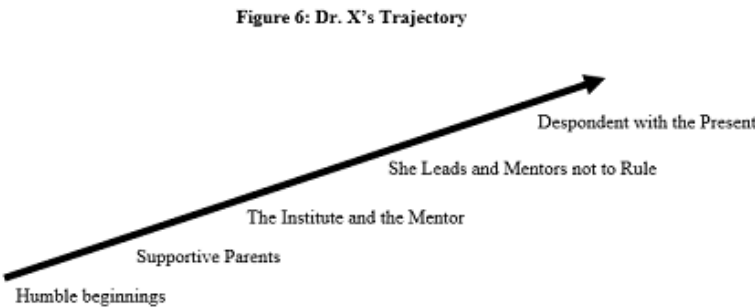
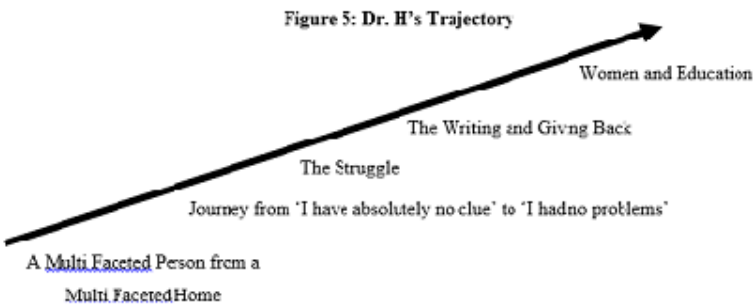
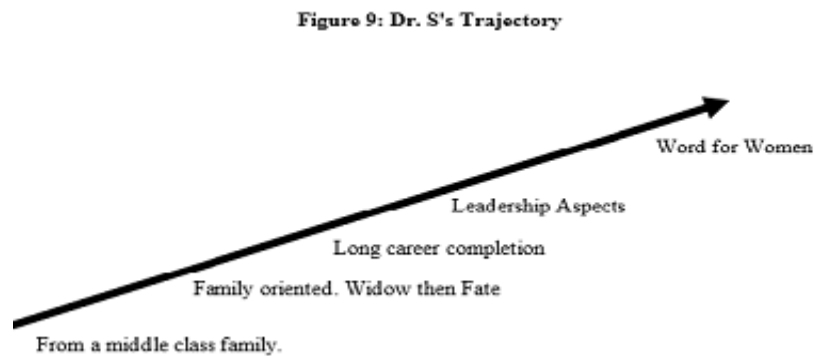
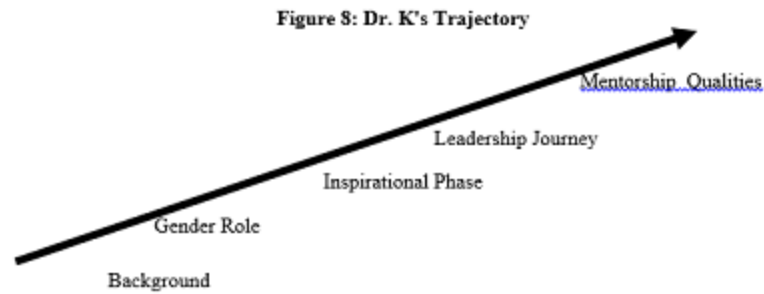


Figure 4: Mrs. T's Trajectory









The journey element brings together their narrative from a personal and social point of view, showing their journey across time. Hence, setting them in a three dimensional space of time, situation and social interaction.

### Analysis of Narratives Findings

Thematic analysis is given with the first three themes of 'Barriers and Challenges', 'Opportunities: Person, Institute, Event' and 'Mentoring and Leadership' catering directly to the research questions while the remaining three themes of 'Getting Multiple Perspectives', 'Women of Strength' and 'Familial Relationships Shape Leaders' are also explained as they emerged out of the participants' discourse.

#### Barriers and Challenges

One of the major concerns of the study was finding the barriers and challenges faced by women in higher educational leadership. The study finds three concerns which can be deemed as barriers/challenges to their

leadership roles. They are gender, socio-economic status and poisonous work environment, discussed separately as sub-themes.

### **Gender**

Although gender does not come across as a major barrier at first glance of the interviews' transcripts it emerges like constant presence within the narratives of all the participants. It appears as a generalized issue for some participants, while others see it very much a part of our social scenario, still there are some with a clear cut stance on the matter. However, the most interesting manifestation of gender barrier is embedded within the story of one of the participants who doesn't acknowledge its presence, yet it can be seen as an overarching reality of her code of life.

Dr. E and Dr. G oppose the notion of gender having a stake in the leadership position of women. They both promote a non-gendered approach to career development. For Dr. E in a leadership position "gender takes a back seat" while Dr. G says "it is not the case" talking about women having gender issues in educational leadership. They both acknowledge that "for some women it can be an issue" as explained by Dr. E.

Mrs. T talks about growing up in a gender neutral home and working in a gender neutral environment. However, she distinctly concedes that gender parity is rampant in our society and "you only have to switch on the television" to see that. She cites personal anecdotes where she saw a fierce under representation of women in HEC (Higher Education Commission). She talks about its existence in a "covert" form in our society. Being a social worker as well she clearly states about gender issues that "though one has not suffered it directly, one has certainly stood up for those who have".

Gender became an issue for one of the participants, Dr. H who "suffered for it". She states that in work life being a woman "helped but it was a disadvantage when it came to my husband". She brings in the patriarchal discourse when she says, "It was because he was a man he thought that he could impose his will on me which I could not accept". Mrs. T echoes her sentiments in closing her interview "for 80% of the male population in the country accepting that women are their equal is a big challenge". This line of thinking supports Cikara and Fiske's (2009) concept of paternalism as discussed in chapter 2, because of which a successful and respected leader Dr. H had to choose between work and family and she had to get semi-separated. Dr. N had to suffer gender biasness as according to her if she would have been a boy she would go for her PhD without any second thought. Dr. K although did not seem to be affected by gender discrimination but at the end of her interview she mentioned clearly that

our society do not still have confidence in women empowerment. When she said that higher position in education field still not offered to women (e.g. Vice Chancellor or Chancellor post), it confirmed her statement. Dr. S however, nor faced any such issues and neither she mentioned any gender barriers.

A case in point for the “covert” gender discourse prevalent in Pakistan is Dr. G’s narration of her mother’s advice when she was entering a co-education university, “you have to have a barbed wire around you. Don’t jump out of that and don’t let anybody jump inside and you will be safe” stands against her assertion that gender isn’t an issue. So, it is evident that even though Dr. G opposes a significant presence of gender issue in society, she herself narrates a necessary precaution against the opposite sex. Bringing into focus Mrs. T’s words regarding gender bias, “We don’t realize it because we are told since childhood not to talk about it. It has become internalized”. The scenario calls for “speaking up” (Mrs. T) as “women usually don’t stand up for their rights” (Dr. X). Patriarchy is tangible in the narratives of these women, in some more than the others.

### **Socio-economic Status**

Socio-economic status is a concern that emerges out of analyzing the narratives of the five participants. It is observed that women whose families had higher socio-economic status and varied stimuli since childhood did not focus upon education as a means of attaining leadership. As in the case of Mrs. T whose house was a melting pot of culture and politics and Dr. H whose dynamic father exposed his daughters to outdoor/indoor sports, culture in the form of music and “literati” of Pakistan. However, even this high status can be problematic at times as Mrs. T says, “During the Zia regime I was barred from certain privileges as my father was out of favor of the government” she further explains about having a famous father, “many people loved me because of that or hated me because of that”.

On the other hand, women like Dr. G, Dr. K, Dr. S and Dr. E explicitly state the importance of higher education as a means for leadership position. This is not to say that a doctoral degree is not important for leadership roles in education or that the participants who didn’t talk about it don’t feel it is an important feature. It is a matter of perspective where the middle class or upper middle class women deem a doctoral degree a big recommendation for a bright future. Dr. E says, “she must get her higher degree” and Dr. G says, “if you are on merit then no one can beat you”. Same as Dr. K says, ‘At higher level you cannot have leadership wither doctorate degree. PhD is the priority but in private sector, there is

no hard and fast rule. Experience is not an issue. Set your goals and work hard.' Likewise, Dr. S stats, 'Woman is a born educator. Women leadership can be incorporated easily. Education no doubt plays an important role. Experience also counts for getting leadership position.'

Dr. X closes the argument by providing the kind of structure a woman from the middle class needs to be successful in her career. She explicitly states about aspiring women leaders that "Obviously by the time you know that she begins to aspire, she would have obtained a fairly strengthened socio economic status" and "those who have connections will always reach somewhere". Dr. H further clarified in her chit chat after the interview that a higher socio-economic status "certainly makes things easier". This finding is in sync with Schipani's assertion (as cited in Al Doubi, 2014) regarding the importance of networking mentioned in the review of literature. Same as Dr. N stats, ' As I was a girl, I had the opportunity and inclination to spend time at my grand parents' house. Since my grandfather was I well-known figure in Pakistan and internationally, I had the opportunity of tagging along with him to all the parties and meetings that he used to have over here. And I think I learnt a lot because of that.'

Hence, clarifying the fact that for women who have a middle class background; education, being at the top of the class and having connections is more important than women who are born into a family of high significance but sometimes this high significance can also backfire if you are in the public eye.

### **Toxic Work Environment**

*Endless Possibilities Executive Coaching* defines toxic work environments as "Toxic workplaces are generally characterized by a culture of dysfunctional interpersonal dynamics. These dynamics can play out in a number of ways: inequity, unaddressed conflict, harassment, or even just general lack of communication" (2016). Although there are no overt references to a poisonous work place by the participants, there are instances which point clearly to the occurrence of such circumstances in the work place.

Four out of the eight respondents allude to a negative workplace and these three also mentioned within their discourse, their ways to handle these events. The remaining four participants have not mentioned any such restriction as Dr. E says that her appointment "was a welcome sort of thing by everyone", Dr. H feels, "women get a lot of respect in our culture...I never felt discriminated against" and Dr. S stats, 'It took ten years to get

permanent in the workplace as our seniors were not ready to give their position to us.'

It is important, not to observe the nature of these work place problems which are not elaborated by the participants, but to realize the way these women have handled such situations. Each of the three respondents have their own unique way of dealing with negative vibes. Dr. G uses her immense spirituality as a means to let go such incidents. She says:

Of course there are professional rivals, there are animosities you cannot deny this. But I think that I have never hurt anyone and if someone tries to hurt me then I don't mind. I don't bother. I think that if you work with honesty then Allah is with you.

Mrs. T uses "sense of humor" not only as a tool to bring people together but also as a way to get over tough realities of life on day to day basis saying, "in the Pakistani context when things are always so terrible. I think if you can't develop a sense of humor then you'll never have hope".

Dr. X's experiences with a 'political' work environment has had an adverse effect on her and made her despondent with the future of her institute. She says "College is not the same anymore".

Dr. N believes, 'You are a different person when you are at work. You have to manage and balance home work with life work.'

Dr. K experiences, 'I never found difficulty managing the institution.'

Hence, negativity is faced by most of women leaders but it's not that they face it rather how they move on after facing it. The way they deal with workplace skirmishes is a point to remember with enough trust in God and enough hope to go on.

### **Opportunities: Person, Institute, Event.**

This theme is about the opportunities the participants got that further shaped their careers. It is observed that the opportunities came either in the form of supportive people, in the form of the active ambiance of institutes that they were a part of or in the form of events/incidents that happened to put them more squarely in the path of leadership. Although person, institute and event are inseparable in most cases, they are identified separately depending on the emphasis placed by the respondents.

People, as influence is discussed further in the 'mentoring' theme as it shows a continuous mentor-mentee cycle, a full circle of being helped and then supporting others. Events and institutes are discussed here.

Significant events can be seen to shape a journey, called by Creswell (2007) moments of "epiphany". Such moments are evident in the case of Dr. H who had leadership potential but was put in a demanding position

and excelled. About a conference where she accompanied her senior colleague/President of Philosophical Conference she says:

So he said to me, '*Yahan beti baitho aur General Musa ka address likh do*' (sit here daughter and write General Musa's address). So I said, 'Aa I beg your pardon'. He said, 'Well, you see the governor has asked if somebody will write something about philosophy and about the congress'. So I said, 'I don't know, I have absolutely no clue' So in some ways he forced me into a situation.

Mrs. T also talks about this moment of epiphany. She relates that she was a very shy child who "would hide in the bathroom" if someone came to meet the family and laughs saying, "I know it's hard to imagine now".

She says:

When I was in my final year in school, I took part in a declamation contest and that was my first experience of public speaking and I came first in the Punjab in that. And that altered my perception of myself that I could actually face the public which I never thought I could.

She cites another example of starting dramatic performances in college; both of these incidents fostered her confidence.

In addition to incidents, institutes can also act as sites for epiphany, in other words pivotal moments in life where perspective becomes clear. Dr. X presents her institute L-College as such a place where she "got my [her] bearings right".

Dr. N says, 'As I was a girl, I had the opportunity and inclination to spend time at my grand parents' house. Since my grandfather was a well known figure in Pakistan and internationally, I had the opportunity of tagging along with him to all the parties and meetings that he used to have over here. And I think I learnt a lot because of that. '

Dr. K indicates, ' Teachers were role model for me.

When I was in Hamdard university there I found some of the teachers who really inspired me a lot and I decided to go for higher division.'

Dr. S believes, ' It was my fate which brought me to this position, not any personality.'

Hence, three of the eight participants narrate such moments of epiphany that changed in some ways the direction of their journeys. This is not to say that the other participants did not go through such moments; it merely states that their transitions may have been smoother.

### **Mentoring and Leadership**

An important theme regarding mentoring and leadership emerges from the collected data which shows the participants' journeys both as mentees and as mentors of the up-coming generation and points to the continuous nature of mentoring. Leadership capabilities pertaining to training younger individuals is also dealt with in this theme where it is argued that these women like any leader of substance have followers, people who remain with them because of loyalty. However, it is not the last step, as the data

Dr. N says, 'I always wanted to do something what Quaid i Azam did. I always used to say that I am going to become a lawyer.'

explains that getting constant loyal people is not enough and these women actively form new leaders who go on and take up their own roles in the society to mentor someone else along the way. The sub-themes are: as mentors and mentees and inspiring followers, generating leaders.

### **As Mentors and Mentees**

Mentoring others and being mentored themselves emerges as another important theme. The experiences of the participants show that mentor-mentee relationships are about giving back to the community by developing younger individuals whether formally as a mentor or informally as a supporting role model.

The participants talked about certain people who were sources of inspiration for them along the journey and also some who directly put them in the way of opportunities because they believed these women could do what it takes to succeed. This finding is in direct opposition to the findings of Malik (2011) discussed in the review of literature section, which asserts that most women suffer from a lack of role models in leadership positions in Pakistan.

For many of them the inspiration came from childhood or adulthood teacher/principals. When asked if anyone inspired you to be who you are Dr. H answered:

I think our Principal at Queen Mary's, Mrs. Clayton, who was a British lady, is the one who is responsible for the fact that I used to say when I grow up I'm going to be Principal of Queen Mary College. So right from that time I wanted it.

Mrs. T cites the Principal of her college as "a great influence" as "he came from a very radical background of how to teach art and design...I knew I wanted to be a teacher". Dr. E "was in awe" of her institute's Principal and Dr. G calls the founder of her organization as an "ideal".

However, Dr. S stats, 'I was inspired by no one, it was my fate which brought me to this position.'

So, all the participants felt inspired by people in the education sector and as a result grew up to be a part of the educational scenario of Pakistan. For some of the women mentors actually stepped in and changed the direction of their journeys. Dr. X explains that the principal of her institute not only sent her name for a post graduate diploma but also pushed her for a doctoral scholarship that she got from a U.K University. She uses the words, "I was not willing to go at all". Dr. H relates a significant event from her early career when her senior professor not only chose her as his secretary which contributed to increasing her exposure manifold, but also encouraged her to use her talents and realize her leadership potential.

It is interesting to note that most of the women received the required mentorship support from other women. The only exceptions are Mrs. T who was inspired by a male principal and Dr. H who was mentored by her male senior colleague although she was also inspired by her childhood female principal for coming into the educational sector.

When it comes to mentoring, Mrs. T and Dr. H talk about supporting both male and female students. Dr. H says, "I don't distinguish between girl students and boy students because I feel not everybody has the same talent...I just encourage whatever their talent is". Mrs. T talks exhaustively about helping women in the social domain. Referring to the social work organization she was a part of she says, "We were present when there was discrimination against girls". She also believes in supporting women in day to day life:

I'm always mentoring women of all kinds whether it's my *jamadarni* (maid), having to deal with an abusive husband or it's someone in a woman's shelter or it's a woman journalist who comes to me to talk to me about something. I do it as a matter of course because I feel that not to do it is really betraying what I believe in.

However, when she mentions experiences in the professional capacity she takes names of both male and female students whom she mentored and who have "become household names" in Pakistan.

The remaining three participants, Dr. X, Dr. E and Dr. G refer to women when they talk about helping younger colleagues or students, part of the reason could be because Dr. X and Dr. E both belong to women's colleges and hence didn't get a chance to interact on a daily basis with male's students/colleagues in search of support. Dr. G has always worked in co-education schools and universities throughout her career yet mentions other women while commenting on helping aspirants.



Hence, women investing in women is a common theme that carries across their journeys both as mentees and mentors. Another point of interest is that the women like Mrs. T and Dr. H, who received a positive support system in their careers from males in the field, made it a point to say that they mentor both males and females as mentioned before. However, the women who had women as positive role models in their careers talk only about supporting other women throughout their narratives, although it is safe to assume that they have supported male colleagues and subordinates as well because education is a heterogeneous field and male and females interact on a regular basis.

### **Inspiring Followers, Generating Leaders**

This sub-theme talks not just about the leadership trait of inspiring followers that these women have but of preparing future leaders. A characteristic of the participants was their dynamic, humble personalities which inspired people to keep in touch or keep working with them. Dr. G says, “the people who work with me love to work with me”. She gives examples of people who have stayed with her for 16 years and counting. Mrs. T says, “the important thing is not to win every time, every battle, but to make sure that as you are moving forward in your purpose you are also making friends” and “I can look at a whole legion of them whom I have taught and who eventually became my friends”.

So, not only are these women leaders influencing people they are making friends as they go along their paths. Dr. X remarks how her students have gone and acquired their own leadership roles as “principals, curriculum developers, text-book writers, school managers and coordinators” and says, “these students come back and they say we remember that this what you said, and that’s what you said, and you know we sort of made that effort”. Dr. E also talks about “locating women” for preparing the “next line of leaders”.

This is what distinguishes a true leader from a person who is merely in a leadership position. A true leader doesn’t just have worshippers in the form of followers, but also has the parental role of preparing future leaders for the betterment of the community (Luongo, 2007). These women are proving to be true leaders as they are not just generating followers, although they have followers as well but they are constantly creating future leaders.

### Getting Multiple Perspectives

Getting multiple perspectives or a “broadened vision” as Dr. H declares, emerged as a major theme prevalent in the lives of all the women leaders interviewed. The form of that broadened vision varies from person to person. While home was a stimulus rich environment for some, the higher education institute (where they are now in leadership positions) became the breeding ground for experimentation with multiple activities for others.

At home, the social engagements of the parents proved to be one of the key elements that contributed to their grooming. In the case of Mrs. T, having an important socio-political figure as a father and a writer as a mother provided such rich experiences which are inaccessible to many people. About her early experiences that shaped her personality she says: Yeah, I think it was my parents and also together with them it was the kind of friends that they had, the people who were close to them...whether it was the writers that were my father’s friends...or whether it was artists or even whether it was politicians.

Dr. H also comments on the early exposure to family friends as, “there was a great exposure to artists and literati of Pakistan”. She also comments upon further diversification of views which came as a result of studying abroad on Fulbright Scholarship.

The parents’ active social life is not the only thing that can encourage a broadened vision as in the case of Dr. G, social engagements were not a factor rather she carved a niche for herself early on in life by reading diverse materials extensively to be what Mrs. T calls “being encouraged to actually form your own ideas and then test them through dialogue and discussion”. Dr.G received this exposure through reading “Manto”, “Kashf ul Mehjoob” and “Tafseer (translation and explanation) of the Holy Quran” under the supervision of her grandmother, “to draw the line between right and wrong”. Dr. E also alludes to the significance of reading for aspiring women leaders.

For Dr. X, the exposure came when she entered her college. She states, “Here at L-institute I got my bearings right because you see the L-institute of that time was the institute, the college and somehow there was so much to do there was so much happening...L-institute itself was an experience”. Katharine Phillips (2014), senior vice dean at Columbia Business School comments that “being exposed to diversity can change the way you think” and prove to be a pivotal point for a progressive journey. Thus, the nature of this diverse experience doesn’t matter as much as its presence does, for

some it comes a little easy as an essential part of growing up in an engaging environment while others have to inculcate this experience through reading and still others may become self aware by being in the stimulus rich environment of a certain institute surrounded by inspiring teachers.

### **Women of Strength.**

Another emergent theme was the strength these women have whether in their character like integrity and honesty, which defines for them their leadership capabilities or the strength they have inherent in their gender, that of the biological equality of the brain for the two sexes. For ease of exploration the theme has been divided into sub-themes namely; leading from the front, and brain over brawn as quoted by one of the respondents.

#### **Leading from the Front**

Although these women have different career trajectories it came across that they have more or less similar notions of what it means to be a leader and similar edicts are followed by them to ensure a positive and progressive environment of the institute they are a part of.

In addition to several adjectives that define their inherent characteristics like “humility”, “hard work”, “tolerance”, “honesty” and being “self-critical”, they all talk about “best practices”. Dr. E says, “integrity for me is the number one ingredient of becoming a good administrator because if you are not doing the right things, you cannot preach to other people”. This belief in practicing what you preach is echoed by Dr. G who argues that role modeling is the right way to enhance leadership capabilities because ‘if you want to advise somebody first you have to be acting on those things’.

These women use an “inclusive” approach as Mrs. T elaborates, “I think collective decision making is always my way of working because I feel then that everybody has a stake in what you are doing”. Dr. H makes similar reflections, “I feel that’s real leadership when people make decisions and they think it’s their decisions although you have guided them”. So, it’s very important for any leader to make sure her team is on the same page as them and to be effective conflict resolvers. These findings coincide with Palamu Joronin’s (as cited in Lahti, 2013) findings as mentioned in the literature review section that “women are more communicative” with a horizontal style of leadership. Hence, it’s evident that the respondents have a collaborative approach towards leadership where every individual of the team becomes significant to complete the bigger picture.

Dr. G gives herself the role of a “mediator” in clashes and disagreements while Dr. X talks not just about practical solutions but about self-reflection. She states, “I quickly start thinking in terms of solutions instead of moaning and groaning and I sort of analyze this problem, I’m also analyzing my role in it. Where did I fall short”? This process of self-reflection is what she says makes the difference between being a transformative leader and a merely transactional one.

Dr. N stats about leadership, 'I don't know more than you, I know as much as you...we sit out together and we'll work together. I think it's caring as well a part from sharing.

Dr. K believes and says, 'You have to have clear knowledge about the area you are heading.

You must have some management skill. You need to have those skills which are required. You should know how to build the team.'

In addition to enlisting things that effective leaders need to do, the interviewees also talked about some of the things a leader needs to guard against. Dr X comments, “I think a good leader should guard against politicizing her role” and goes on to say how most of the leaders in educational sector work by “hearsay”. Dr. G also alludes to this when she says that “I don’t let anybody add fuel to the fire” while she is resolving conflicts and she states how she stays away from the “politics” of an organization. She also advises to guard against “rigidity” bringing out the idea of flexibility as one of the significant features of a good leader. Hence, leaders need to be aware of their surroundings and abreast with new developments in the field.

Dr. S says, 'Leader should not be a boss. I believe in teamwork. Prepare and teach others too.'

Every participant unanimously agreed upon merit as a means to get leadership positions and rather than just talking about merit, these women also proved with their examples that merit is a key factor for accessing leadership positions with Dr. G having 29 gold medals under her belt and Dr. H being a Fulbright scholar among other things. An example of their humility is evident by the fact that these women share amongst them several prestigious titles and awards which they do not focus upon because for them, “leaders are nurturers”, (Dr. X) “facilitators”, (Dr. H) and “enablers” (Mrs. T). They derive pleasure from the satisfaction of knowing that they have made a difference rather than any formal award given for that purpose.

Dr. E sums it up stating that “there isn’t a clear cut road map” as far as leadership journey is concerned, there is only education, dedication and a belief in a higher power in case of Dr. G.

### **Brain over Brawn**

Mrs. T calls the current times the “era of the brain” and hence that of women’s success, which is not to say that brain is the commodity of the woman but that intelligence of the mind is what is beginning to matter most in the professional world now more than a pre-conceived notion of a stereotype of what women are meant to do.

Dr. G echoes her thoughts on the matter that “we have the same cranial capacity” and calls for an end to “women beating their drums of misery”. She advises about a proactive approach that of leaving behind the negative notions attached to womanhood and embracing the strengths- the fact that both men and women can excel in any field that they put their minds to.

Hence, three of the five participants bring up and talk against the quota system while the others don’t bring it up in discussion. It would have been interesting to note their take on quota system had it been brought up. Dr. H says, “I don’t believe in quotas, not even for women because I feel that merit is the most important factor and that we need to train women to get that merit”. Mrs. T relates an anecdote where she went for an HEC meeting during her time as Principle of O-College and she relates how she saw that all the forty university representatives were male and when she questioned it, she was told that Fatima Jinnah College is going to be for women and so a woman head will be appointed. That is the kind of quota system that these leaders preach against as Dr. E says, “when you are a professional, I think gender takes a back seat and it should take a back seat...the only thing is that you should be good at what you are doing “.

They all unanimously agree that women bring more to a leadership role than men in an organization, “generally women tend to be better than men in leadership roles because they listen”. Mrs. T explains:

Because they are not hooked into the rat race mostly as I think that they can bring a sense of completeness to the people who work with them...women very often have not had the sense of entitlement that the male child has that the world revolves around him. Therefore, they are able to give everyone a sense of entitlement rather than keep it for themselves. So I think women make much better leaders.

While they advocate women’s leadership advantages for an organization Dr. X and Dr. G., being aware of the other side of the picture point out that “that is not always the case”, and that some women can be “political animals”. This observation corresponds with the afore mentioned research in the review that there is a presence of a certain level of “queen bee syndrome” within the organizational

structures where women tend not to support other women and try to create hurdles in their way (Rossbacher, 2013).

Thus, it's quite evident that a non-biased perspective has emerged which sees women not just as better leaders and identifies their positive characteristics, but also highlights their limitations.

### **Familial Relationships Shape Leaders.**

One of the major themes that emerged was that family dynamics play a vital role not only in providing stimulating environment for developing leadership capabilities, but also play a pivotal role in developing self-confidence and self-assuredness among individuals. Family life of female leaders can be divided into life before marriage and life after marriage, both of which can have a significant influence on the personal and professional lives of women.

The first family exposure of an individual is his/her parents and siblings. The study found that a positive parent-child relationship goes a long way in this regard. Parents issue a great influence on the future capabilities of women leaders whether it is the support of both the parents or any one of them. Mrs. T talks about her parents:

So it was very clear that you know being a female child had absolutely no bearing on the way our parents would trust. We were two sisters, no brother and you know we were brought up to be what we wanted to be. There were never any compulsions to think that there were any constraints where we wanted to go and how we wanted to live our lives.

Dr. X echoes her beliefs, "my parents never stopped encouraging me" and referring to her father she said, "He encouraged me to read, he encouraged me to become what I wished to become". These statements clarify the fact that having male siblings does not matter where supportive parents are concerned as Mrs. T only had one sister while Dr. X had three younger brothers. Being an only child of a single mother Dr. G gives the credit of her success to women in her life. About her mother she says, "She was my mentor, she was my friend, she was my sister. She had filled up all vacuums in my life. She was everything to me". She also credits her grandmother who "had an important role in shaping my personality". Dr. H and Dr. E also acknowledge the role their families played in making them who they are today. This finding coincides with Malik's (2011) findings mentioned in the review of literature that strong parent-child relationships and a gender neutral environment are key elements for developing leadership capabilities in women.

Life after marriage of all these women leaders also impacted their career trajectories. Where Mrs. T and Dr. G point out the fact that they were extremely “lucky” for having “supporting” husbands who as Mrs. T puts it, is the reason “that I think influenced my career and my way of working and painting every day”. Dr. E also comments about her family life:

No, not at all actually because my husband was always supportive and I don’t have a large family...I was inducted as the principal. And my husband had already passed away...I have one child. So, don’t really have any family pressure so to speak.

Her dialogue suggests that having a large family can be a hindrance and places the support of the husband as a significant factor for career development. She further points out the phenomenon of “most women getting busy with children and marriages” as one of the reasons for a lack of women leaders in higher education. Dr. H also echoes her beliefs, these concerns find footing in the literature reviewed earlier where Rhode and Kellerman (2007) assert that 4 out of 10 women drop out of jobs for family responsibilities.

Same as Dr. N says, 'My parent’s family helped me a lot.' and Dr. K mentions, ' My parents and husband were always supportive.'

Dr. H, on the other hand wasn’t as lucky as the rest of the women leaders in her choice of a husband. She states this as being the only difficulty of an otherwise challenging but smooth life. She says, “Well I think that my basic issue was that my husband didn’t want me to work...he didn’t see why I needed to work”. The fact that Dr. X never married combined with Dr. H’s case suggests that while having a supportive husband goes a long way for establishing a flourishing career for a wife, having a non-supportive husband can diminish the odds to the point where Dr. H. had to be semi-separated and Dr. X, never had to face the “double-bind” (Odhiambo, 2011) of working women as she is single.

Dr. S stats, 'I am a widow. Due to family priorities (husband and children) I took ten years to complete my MPhil and PhD. I had a cooperative husband.'

Thus, positive family relationships lay the ground work for developing strong, well-rooted women who go forth and become individuals of integrity and agents for change.

### **Conclusion & Implications**

The purpose of the study was essentially to chart a road map or at least generate a reliable data base for women who aspire for leadership positions within the higher education sector of Pakistan. Hence, the narrative approach to inquiry was selected to delve deeper into the lives of

accomplished women educational leaders and chart their journeys towards leadership positions.

The data gathered, reveals that the human element of women's journeys cannot be charted up as a blue print for success as the eight participants show multiple trajectories. The study found that these women with varying socio-economic backgrounds, from those belonging to the literati of Pakistan to those in the upper middle class and still those with a middle class working background, each of them got their own moments to shine as leaders in the higher education sector. The journey element depicts how the path to leadership for each of these women was individualistic with distinctive barriers, exclusive opportunities and unique support systems yet they all managed to get to the top.

The unique journeys shed light on some themes similar across each narrative and these similarities can be taken as a reliable data source for the aspiring women leaders. The study showed that these women were not blinkered by norms and had a broadened vision of society whether through a conducive childhood, home environment or extensive reading, or meeting inspiring teachers much later in life at the college level. The women also have leadership qualities of humility, cooperation, vision and trust in their colleagues to garner personal loyalties. They believe that investing in positive relationships is the more significant element of leadership than "winning all the time" as commented by Mrs. T, a respondent. Each of the women deem education and merit highly important for attaining leadership positions, they exclaim that leadership is not a game of politics rather a fruit of hard labor though having connections certainly makes it easier.

Among the major themes that the research proposed to study namely barriers/challenges to women's leadership, opportunities to enhance the leadership and paying it forward in the form of mentoring, the barriers emerged as less vehement than expected although very present in the form of gender parity, a lower socio-economic status and toxic workplace environment. The study proves that these barriers can be overcome by immense hard work, getting the relevant degree and learning the art of letting go whether in the form a belief in spirituality of a profound sense of humor. Opportunities for these women, and by extension for any other aspiring woman came in the form of helpful senior teachers or principals of institutes that they worked at, people who recognized the budding capabilities of these women and then put them in situations to reach their potentials. Last but not the least, the study found the theme of mentoring as a cyclic occurrence, where these women received effective mentors when they were struggling to forge a path for themselves, these women



are now playing their role as effective mentors for coming generations. An interesting finding is that the women whose mentors were both males and females explicitly mention mentoring both the genders while the once who were helped by women are explicitly helping women. So, for the society to flourish it is suggested that men mentor women as well because this can prove to be one of the stepping stones for a gender neutral society.

The study opens new avenues for the narrative method of inquiry as there is a dearth of studies conducted using it since it is an emerging method and seminal works propose an unstructured, open to interpretation view towards the method. The findings of the study pave way for further research into leadership of women leaders in the educational sector of Pakistan where the social standing of the women's family is concerned as it has emerged as a major theme which can alter perception.

### **Limitations of the Study**

For member checking as well, final copies were sent to all the participants however, only five responded back with minor corrections (the final drafts after corrections have been used in the study's analysis section).

Participants were busy with pack schedule thus, one of the participants gave interview on telephone.

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