

## **Enablers to Women Career Advancement in Academics at Management Positions in Pakistani Universities**

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### **Abstract**

Despite a significant gap in the number of female students in higher educational institutions, a corresponding growth in the representation of women in senior management positions within Pakistani universities has not been observed. This study was shaped to investigate the enablers influencing the professional development of women academics at the management level in Pakistan. Using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and a probing strategy, responses to these inquiries were sought from 10 purposively selected female and male senior management position holders across public sector universities in Islamabad. Thematic analysis, employing an inductive approach, was used, and member checks were applied to ensure the reliability of the drawn themes. Each theme was thoroughly explored, and those emerging from a smaller subset of women were categorized separately as unique themes. The study reveals that while there is a growing number of female students in higher education institutions, a subsequent increase in the representation of women in senior management roles has not been observed. Family support, motivation, equal opportunities, government initiatives, supportive organizational culture, and training emerge as critical enablers for women's career advancement. Recommendations address the identified gaps, including implementing targeted support programs, promoting inclusive organizational cultures, and advocating for government support and policies to advance gender equality in academia. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by women academics in Pakistan and provide insights into potential strategies for promoting gender equality and supporting women's career progression in senior management positions within universities.

**Keywords:** Career advancement, higher education institution, management position, enablers

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## INTRODUCTION

Global statistics reveal a substantial rise in women's enrolment in higher education institutions, surpassing the growth rate of men since 1970 (Ravindran, 2020; UNESCO, 2010). However, this remarkable increase in female enrolment has not translated into proportional representation in university management roles. Management positions predominantly continue to be occupied by male counterparts (Morley, 2006). The underrepresentation of women at elevated academic echelons remains a persistent concern for female academicians (Avin et al., 2015; Howe-Walsh et al., 2014; Taylor-Abdulai et al., 2014; Machado-Taylor & Ozkanli, 2013; Zeng, 2011; Montez et al., 2003).

Researchers have identified various barriers impeding the career advancement of women in academia. These obstacles include limited access to advanced education and financial resources, insufficient support from management for engagement in work/life programs, occupational gender segregation, absence of role models, and pervasive attitudinal biases (Laursen & Austin, 2020; Hannum et al., 2015; Bombuwela & De Alwis, 2013; Vinkenburg et al., 2011). A quantitative study by Batool et al. (2013) aimed to assess the status of women's representation in Higher Education (HE) management in Pakistan. The findings underscored structural barriers faced by women, including a lack of mentoring and interacting opportunities, gender inequality, and biases in the selection and promotion processes, all of which hinder their career progression. The challenges women face in advancing their careers persist as a recurring theme in studies conducted globally, encompassing both northern and southern regions, including research from Pakistan (Patel et al., 2020; Bagilhole & White, 2011; Rab, 2010; Shah, 2001). Considering the distinctive role of women in Pakistan, this study delves into the enablers inducing the career development of women academics and their role in navigating their professional paths.

Empirically, prior studies investigated and concluded that the enablers to women's career advancement in higher educational institutions, mainly in developing countries (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022). Thus, one primary research gap lies in the lack of comprehensive studies examining the intersectionality of gender with other factors such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, and regional disparities (Codioli & Cook, 2019; Pfister & Radtke, 2009). Understanding how these intersecting identities impact women's academic experiences is crucial for developing targeted interventions to address barriers to their career advancement. Moreover, Rosca et al. (2020) mentioned a scarcity of research focusing on women's experiences in private-sector universities and other higher education sectors beyond the public sector. Given the growing presence of private universities

in Pakistan, understanding women's unique challenges in these institutions is essential for promoting gender equality across the academic sector (Nazar et al., 2017). Barriers for women in Pakistan include deeply entrenched societal norms and cultural expectations that prioritize traditional gender roles and limit women's access to education and employment opportunities. Ma et al. (2022) also advocated that institutional biases, discriminatory policies, and lack of supportive infrastructure further hinder women's career advancement in academia. Addressing these barriers requires concerted efforts from the researchers. Thus, the present study aims to offer a more profound understanding of the trajectory of career progression for women academics by examining the factors that encourage them to reach coveted positions. The study focuses on identifying those enablers which can be helpful for women in their career advancement. Therefore, building on the current research gaps, this research addresses the following question.

1. What are the enablers in women's career advancement at managerial positions in higher education institutions?

The main objective of this study is to identify and analyse the factors that enable women to advance in managerial positions within higher education institutions, focusing on understanding the strategies, support systems, and organizational policies that contribute to their career progression.

The researcher organized this paper as follows: Second, a review of the past studies on the enablers in women's career development, mainly in developing countries; Second, the research method was outlined. Third, the researcher stated in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Discussion on the results, practical implications, limitations, and future research directions was elaborated in the last sections of this study.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

European countries prioritize gender equality more than any other region globally. Still, the reality reveals a notable underrepresentation of women in university senior academic positions. Similar challenges of women's underrepresentation persist in various countries worldwide, including Canada, New Zealand, Africa, Australia, and Asia, as documented in the Stanford Report (2014) and also in the work of (Wilson & Thomson, 2021; Wilson et al., 2008). Specifically, within higher education, women have consistently faced underrepresentation in critical positions such as dean, director, and other senior positions (Gallant, 2014). This trend extends globally across various higher education systems. Despite constituting 45% of the workforce in the United States, women occupy less than one-third of management roles in higher educational institutions, as highlighted by data from the Bureau of Labour Statistics (Wroblewski, 2019).

Furthermore, in England, there is a notable lack of women's participation across all levels of university management, particularly evident with approximately 13% representation at the whole professor level (Doherty & Manfredi, 2010). Hong Kong similarly sees women holding fewer than 15% of senior academic positions, with only four out of 34 women serving as pro-vice-chancellors and no woman holding the position of vice-chancellor (Cheung, 2013; Morley, 2014). In Japan, Shirahase (2013) reports that women constitute 20.6% of the academic workforce, with only 9.7% holding professorial positions in the 86 national universities and just two women holding the position of vice-chancellor. Mainland China, on the other hand, shows a comparatively higher representation, with 25.8% of women holding various academic positions (Banker, 2023; Forestier, 2012).

South Asian nations also face the issue of women's under-representation in senior positions in higher education institutions. In India, statistics indicate that female academics constitute less than 40% of university faculty, with a noticeable scarcity of Muslim women in academic roles (Morley & Crossouard, 2015). Despite higher female student participation in higher education, women in India often find themselves absent from top-level positions in educational management, potentially influenced by social and cultural factors (Khokhar, 2018; Chanana, 2011). Bangladesh faces a similar challenge, with a survey revealing that the inclusion of female academicians in universities was less than 5% from 2010 to 2012 (Morley & Crossouard, 2015). In Nepal, Grove (2013) sheds light on the under-representation of women in higher education management levels, attributing this to societal values that limit their decision-making capacities due to their multiple roles as wives, mothers, and family caretakers.

In Pakistan, women comprise 49.2% of the population and have obtained 52% of professional positions across various fields (Afzal, et al., 2021; Catalyst, 2014). However, despite this, women predominantly find themselves in lower-ranking roles. A significant disparity exists between the number of male and female employees at a major public sector university in Pakistan, particularly noticeable across various hierarchical levels. Women are predominantly employed as lecturers in the country's universities, representing the initial rank in university teaching grades (Subbaye & Vithal, 2017). Social and cultural constraints, gender bias, and lack of family support, lack of supportive facilities such as childcare, transportation, and workplace accommodations limit the occupational choices available to Pakistani women. Unfortunately, predetermined views regarding women's primary roles as homemakers contribute to the perception of women as inferior in the workplace (Dankwa, 2018).

Women in Pakistan are increasingly enrolling in higher education institutions for academic pursuits and subsequent employment. Despite their long-standing presence in university academia, women are often underrepresented in senior positions in these institutions. Ghaus (2013) investigated women managers' challenges in Pakistani higher education, highlighting social (family-related) and organizational barriers, particularly prevalent in private sector universities. Previous studies on gender inequality in Pakistani higher education have also highlighted issues such as sexual harassment faced by women (Jamil, 2020; Durrani et al., 2010).

A study highlighted that family support and training in home and institutional training can increase women's representation in higher education (Thomas, 2021). However, numerous research findings consistently report the unwelcoming attitude of higher authorities in the form of a non-supportive workplace culture towards women academics within university settings, which undermines the space for women academics in management roles (Cidlinská, 2019; Vinkenburg et al., 2011). Women in academia confront organizational and cultural barriers as they progress in their careers (Forster, 2001). Institutional male power and biased recruitment and selection policies as significant obstacles to women's academic career advancement (Hill et al., 2016). Additionally, women in academia often bear higher workloads than their male counterparts. However, these duties receive inadequate recognition in the promotion process based on research and publication outputs, as observed by (Laux, 2018).

Since this study is concerned with identifying the enablers of women's career advancement in academia and, by extension, the relevance and appropriateness of views that tend to perpetuate the challenges, it lends itself to a critical examination through the lens of Gender Equity Theory. This theory serves as a crucial framework for understanding the dynamics of women's career advancement in academia, particularly in the context of Pakistani universities. It posits that equitable access to opportunities and resources is essential for both genders to thrive professionally (Hill et al., 2016). Despite increasing female enrolment in higher education, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior management roles. This disparity can be attributed to systemic barriers such as cultural norms, gender biases, and institutional practices that favour male counterparts (Forster, 2001). Gender Equity Theory emphasizes the importance of creating supportive organizational cultures, implementing inclusive policies, and fostering family support to enable women to overcome these challenges (Cidlinská, 2019). By focusing on equal opportunities and addressing the unique barriers faced by women in academia, this theory provides valuable insights into the enablers that can facilitate women career progression.

Ultimately contributing to a more balanced representation of management positions within educational institutions (Vinkenburg et al., 2011).

## METHODOLOGY

This research focused on examining the subjective experiences of respondents during their employment. The study adopted a qualitative, inductive, and interpretive research approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the professional journeys of women academics. A purposive selection process was employed for data collection, involving ten males and females from public sector universities in Pakistan. Among them, higher management positions such as dean, director, and registrar were part of the interviews as research participants. These academics had accumulated 14 to 27 years of overall work experience and resided with their spouses and children, enjoying a comparatively higher socioeconomic status than other professionals in Pakistan. While these participants were affiliated with public sector universities, they hailed from the same region, representing Punjab, a specific area of Pakistan. In this manner, the selected samples aimed to provide a representative insight into the experiences of female academicians from throughout the province of Punjab.

To gather data, in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews were employed, as outlined by (Ruslin et al., 2022; Creswell, 2010). This choice was primarily based on the effectiveness of such interviews in delving into respondents' varied insights and opinions, particularly when addressing multifaceted and occasionally sensitive issues (Gavrić & Braje, 2024; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). The interviewing style adopted was that of an informant, encouraging participants to recollect any significant aspect vividly related to the subject under investigation. Subsequently, these surface features were thoroughly examined through a process of elaboration.

Table 1 Research participants: Designation and length of experience

Participants	Pseudonym	Overall work experience	Current position Work experience	Current position	Gender
<b>WCA-P1</b>	DSA	26 years	5 years	Dean	Female
<b>WCA-P2</b>	DNS	23 years	6 years	Director	Female
<b>WCA-P3</b>	DNR	14 years	10 years	Director	Male
<b>WCA-P4</b>	MBY	25 years	8 years	Additional Registrar	Female
<b>WCA-P5</b>	DHK	18 years	17 years	Additional Registrar	Male

<b>WCA-P6</b>	MS	30 years	13 years	Assistant Registrar	Female
<b>WCA-P7</b>	DNR	20 years	4 years	Deputy Registrar	Female
<b>WCA-P8</b>	DBN	20 years	11 years	Director	Male
<b>WCA-P9</b>	AS	13 years	5 years	Registrar	Male
<b>WCA-P10</b>	DAbS	27 years	7 years	Dean	Male

In line with the researcher's use of probing, an interview protocol was formulated based on the research question (Shah et al., 2020; Cooper & McIntyre, 1996). The primary focus was to investigate the enablers for women in academia to hold management positions. These inquiries were designed to uncover problems, challenges, and critical moments that restrict academics. These questions constituted the foundational framework for the research methodology employed in the study.

The interviews, encompassing conduct, analysis, and reporting, adhered to established ethical guidelines in the social sciences, emphasizing subjects' rights to anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent (Bjarsholm et al., 2018; Bryman, 2016). Participants were granted consent by being familiarized with the research questions before the interviews. To safeguard the anonymity of the interviewees, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Before the interviews, the researcher reassured each interviewee about the information's confidentiality and anonymity, fostering an environment conducive to open and uninhibited expression.

Drawing from this, a probing strategy was employed to clarify specific responses. Participants were prompted to exemplify and explain specific points, with occasional probes used to maintain focus on the research question (Buma & Nyamupangedengu, 2020; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1992). These probing inquiries sought to elicit detailed and explicit views from participants, fostering a deeper understanding of their perspectives. Examples of probing questions included requests for specific examples, reasons behind dislikes, and detailed descriptions of events. Each interview spanned 35 to 45 minutes, and to ensure data validity and reliability, interviews were recorded using tape recordings.

#### **DATA ANALYSIS**

Thematic analysis, guided by the deductive approach, outlined and scrutinized the interview data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Following Clarke and Braun's (2017) six-phase guide for thematic analysis, the researchers acknowledged that these phases are not strictly linear, allowing for iterative movement between them. The preliminary data underwent transcription, and the researcher engaged in the repeated reading of each

woman's narrative. During this process, brief notes, comments, and questions arising from the reading were marked on the transcribed data.

Each data segment relevant to or containing noteworthy information about the research questions was coded. An open coding system was developed, with codes refined as the researchers progressed through the data. Themes were organized after multiple readings of the transcripts, considering the coherence, truthfulness, and consistency of themes. Comparisons across interviews were made to identify similarities and differences, merging similar themes under one heading (e.g., family support and supposed understanding incorporated into one theme). Distinct themes, such as supportive culture and government initiatives, were identified separately.

Central themes were identified, with various subthemes organized under these main categories: women's experiences regarding enablers in their academic career development. Member checking (respondent validation) by Creswell (2010) was applied to validate the credibility of the results. Literal transcriptions of randomly selected responses from five participants were sent back to them for verification of correctness and resonance with their accounts. Participants were informed about member check verification after the interview, and upon receiving the transcripts, they willingly reviewed and verified the data. One participant even contributed additional details during the verification process. While this verification process spanned several months due to participants' busy schedules, it actively involved contributors in confirming and endorsing the results, justifying potential researcher bias.

## FINDINGS

The study participants articulated some concerns related to career advancement. Academics shared common concerns about some themes, which were grouped as subthemes under the main themes of enablers. Enablers were those influences that smoothed the academic journey of women's careers.

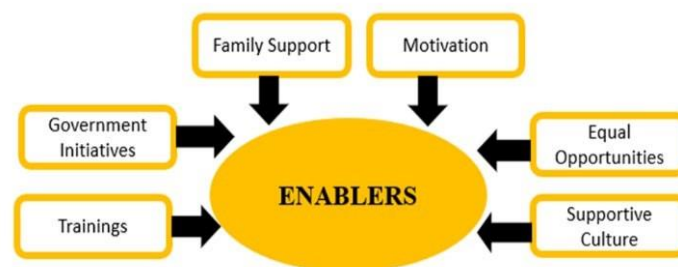


Figure 1 Enablers in Women's Career Advancement



## 5.1 Enablers

Reflecting on their academic journeys, female academicians recognized numerous aspects that played a positive role in advancing their careers. These considerations encompassed family support, motivation, training, supportive culture, government initiatives, and equal opportunities associated with the management positions.

### 5.1.1 Family Support

It includes encouragement and assistance from parents, siblings, husbands, and in-laws and is a fundamental enabler in women's career advancement. Emotional backing shared responsibilities, and a conducive home environment provided by family members contribute to a woman's ability to navigate challenges confidently and pursue professional goals, fostering a supportive foundation for her career development. WCA-P2 added her view:

“Supportive family environment encourages women to chase their career goals.”

DNS

Another research participant, WCA-P1, said that

“In-laws are never much supportive of girl career.” DSA

One of the female research participants gave her views:

“Yes, spouse understanding is included. If he's supportive, it is good. Otherwise, he's also the main cause in depressing and stopping the female.” DNS

The male registrar stated that:

“Due to less family support, that is why females cannot grow well in their career.” AS

These statements collectively emphasize the significant impact of a supportive family environment, particularly the role of in-laws and a spouse, on women's pursuit of career goals. The first statement suggests that in-laws may not typically support a girl's career ambitions. The second statement underscores the crucial role of a supportive spouse in positively influencing a woman's career trajectory, indicating that a lack of understanding from the spouse can lead to feelings of depression and hinder female progress. The final statement reinforces the idea that insufficient family support, including from in-laws and spouses, can impede the growth and success of women in their careers. Together, these perspectives highlight the importance of familial encouragement and understanding as critical factors in facilitating women's professional development.

### 5.1.2 Motivation

As a career advancement enabler for women, it involves internal or self-motivation driven by personal aspirations and goals. External motivation comes from exterior sources, such as recognition and encouragement from peers or mentors. Additionally, moral support, provided by family, friends, or colleagues, is critical in supporting a woman's determination and confidence as she routes her professional journey. These combined motivational components contribute significantly to women's success in advancing their careers.

Female assistant registrar as research participant WCA-P6 states her views as:

“There is no training and no encouragement for us. There is no encouragement, no appraisals, no motivation.”

MS

Research participant WCA-P10, in the position of dean, shared his views:

“There should be motivation in the form of incentives for them.”

DAbS

One female director (WCA-P1) of a higher education institution gave her views regarding motivation:

“If she has self-confidence, we can motivate and effort for her, and she would win it.”

DSA

These statements together convey a sense of dissatisfaction and a desire for more support and encouragement within a professional context. The first statement indicates the absence of training, encouragement, appraisals, and motivation, suggesting a lack of recognition and developmental opportunities. The second statement proposes the need for motivation in the form of incentives, highlighting the belief that tangible rewards could serve as effective motivators for individuals. The third statement emphasizes the importance of self-confidence in an individual, suggesting that with internal confidence, external efforts to motivate and support can lead to success. These statements highlight the significance of encouragement, recognition, and motivation in fostering a positive and conducive work environment as an enabler for women.

### 5.1.3 Equal Opportunities

As an enabler for women's career advancement, it entails equitable access to education and job opportunities. It signifies eliminating gender discrimination, ensuring women have the same educational and professional

prospects as their male counterparts. By raising an environment where women have equal access to education and employment, this enabler supports women's career growth and enables them to pursue and achieve their professional aspirations.

Research participant WCA-P10 stated that:

“There should be equal opportunities for education and job, supportive culture for females.”

DAbS

WCA-P3 shared her view:

“We need to give equal opportunities in education, in jobs, in promotions to males and females without any discrimination.”

DNR

Female research participant WCA-P2, as a director, said that:

“There should be equal opportunity for males and females in the management setup. We have very few opportunities for females in management setup than males. If they want their professional growth, good opportunities.”

DNS

These statements advocate for equal opportunities for both males and females in education, jobs, and professional growth, emphasizing the importance of a supportive culture for women. The first statement highlights the need for equal opportunities in education and the workplace, highlighting the importance of creating an inclusive and supportive environment for females. The second statement further reinforces the need for equal opportunities in education, jobs, and promotions without discrimination. The third statement focuses explicitly on the scarcity of opportunities for females in management roles compared to males, suggesting that for professional growth, women require more and better opportunities in management positions. These statements emphasize the importance of fostering equality and a supportive culture in organizations to ensure equal access and advancement for both genders.

#### **5.1.4 Government initiatives**

It involves established rules, policies, and structural frameworks to promote gender equality and support women in higher education institutions. These initiatives aim to eliminate difficulties and foster an inclusive environment, ensuring women have equal education and workforce opportunities. By implementing supportive measures, governments create conditions that encourage women to progress and flourish in their careers. WCA-P10, a male research participant serving in the capacity of a dean, expressed that:

“The revolutionary step in this regard means that the government needs to allocate more budget for the females than the males. We need revolutionary steps at the country level in this regard. In HEC funding, there should be the condition that 30% of the budget will be used for female career advancement and their development.”  
DAbS

WCA-P8, a male research participant in the role of a director, conveyed that:  
“Some more initiatives are necessary, such as some allowances allocations and some more salary/money for their kids and children's marriages. There should be a pick-and-drop service for them. These steps will increase female participation in jobs.  
DBN

Moreover, one female deputy registrar WCA-P7 stated that:  
“The government should give her facilitations in terms of financial benefits, and then some kind of time and age flexibility and security for her kids. There can be such services where she can take benefits and some schemes where her child and professional life may be protected. The government has certainly taken some initiatives, but there are only a few. For example, service and day-care and then a few credit schemes in the bank, but there is a need to enhance more of things. More things need to be introduced at a national level as well.” DNR

These statements collectively promote revolutionary steps and increased government initiatives to support and encourage women in various aspects of their lives. The first statement proposes a revolutionary approach at the national level, urging the government to allocate a higher budget for females and institute conditions in Higher Education Commission (HEC) funding to ensure a significant portion is dedicated to female career advancement and development. The second statement describes additional initiatives, such as allowances, financial support for children's marriages, and transportation services, with the belief that these measures will enhance female participation in the workforce. The third statement emphasizes the need for comprehensive government facilitation, including financial benefits, time and age flexibility, and children's security. While acknowledging existing initiatives, it suggests introducing national schemes to protect the balance between women's professional and personal lives. Together, these statements emphasize the importance of government support and initiatives to create an environment conducive to women's full development and encouragement.

### 5.1.5 Supportive culture

It involves raising organizational and societal environments that encourage gender equality. Organizational support includes workplace policies, mentorship programs, and a commitment to diversity. Societal support promotes cultural shifts that value and facilitate women's professional growth. Together, these elements create a conducive atmosphere, enabling women to advance in their careers.

WCA-P8 gave her views:

“She needs family support as well as organizational support. However, we are still not ethically so strong that we could promote the culture of working from home if a female worker cannot reach the office every day on time. If it

happens, there should be organizational support for a female.”

DBN

Female research participant WCA-P2 claims that:

“There is a stigma that women cannot do the work. The same attitude is found in her family when they criticize her stand equal to men. In this way, our country is not very supportive in this context.”

DNS

These statements highlight the crucial need for family and organizational support for women in the workplace. The first statement suggests that while family support is essential, the organizational culture still lacks the ethical strength to fully embrace and promote flexible work arrangements, such as working from home, which could benefit female employees facing daily commuting challenges. The statement emphasizes the importance of organizational support to accommodate the needs of female workers. The second statement points out the existence of a societal stigma that questions women's capability to perform certain tasks at par with men. This stigma is noted not only in the workplace but also extends to the woman's family, where her efforts are criticized for not aligning with traditional gender norms. The statement implies that the overall societal attitude in the country does not provide sufficient support for women challenging these stereotypes and struggling for equality in the professional sphere. Together, these statements highlight the significance of organizational and societal support in addressing the challenges women face in the workplace.

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### 5.1.6 Training

It encompasses both home-based and institutional training. Home training involves early education and upbringing, instilling skills, values, and confidence. Institutional training includes formal education, workshops, and professional development programs that equip women with the necessary knowledge and skills to excel in their careers. Together, these training components contribute to encouraging women to succeed in their professional journeys. One research participant, WCA-P6, said:

“We need training and awareness at our homes.”

“People need training, and there is a lack of training.” MS

Dean of faculty WCA-P10 stated his views as:

“There is another kind of misconception, so these are misconceptions that indicate that something important is lacking in their vision, so the problem is that they have been trained like this way they are not convinced they are intellectually weak to understand that women are as important and as they gather in at several occasions they are more important.”

DAbS

Female additional registrar WCA-P4 stated that:

“Our training at home needs to educate men and to make them understand that their daughter is not the only one to do the house chores.” MBY

These statements collectively emphasize the importance of training, awareness, and education. The first statement highlights the need for training and awareness within homes, indicating that fostering understanding and awareness should start at the domestic level. The second statement underlines a broader societal need for training, pointing out a general lack of awareness and knowledge. The third statement delves into the idea that misconceptions about the importance and capabilities of women stem from inadequate training and understanding. It suggests that individuals may not be intellectually equipped to recognize the significance of women, indicating a need for comprehensive training to shift these perceptions. The last statement specifically addresses the need for training at home to educate men and change their mindset regarding gender roles. It emphasizes the importance of dispelling misconceptions about women's household responsibilities, highlighting the role of education in fostering a more equitable perspective. Collectively, these statements stress the necessity of

training and awareness initiatives to challenge ingrained misconceptions and promote a more enlightened and equitable view of gender roles at both the individual and societal levels.

**Table:2 Overall Findings**

Theme	Sub Themes	Results
<b>Enablers to women career</b>	Family Support	Research reveals that family support, including encouragement from parents, siblings, spouses, and in-laws, emerges as a central enabler for women's career advancement, fostering a conducive environment for professional growth.
	Motivation	The research highlights motivation, stemming from self-motivation, external encouragement, and moral support, as a key enabler for women's career advancement. This multifaceted motivation is crucial in creating a dynamic and endowing environment for women to succeed professionally.
	Equal Opportunities	The study identifies equal opportunities, encompassing both education and job sectors, as an essential enabler for women's career advancement. Fostering equal access to education and eliminating gender-based disparities in job opportunities is essential for promoting gender equality in professional spheres.
	Government Initiatives	The study highlights that government initiatives, particularly through systemic measures like rules, policies, and structural frameworks, play a pivotal role as enablers for women's career advancement. These initiatives are important for fostering gender equality and providing support for women's professional development.
	Supportive culture	The research features that a supportive culture, involving both organizational and societal norms, is a key enabler for women's career advancement. A culture that encourages gender equality within the organization and challenges societal norms is essential for raising women's professional growth.
	Trainings	The study identifies training, including home-based and institutional programs, as a critical enabler for women's career advancement. These comprehensive training initiatives, spanning homes and institutions, equip women with essential skills and knowledge for their professional journey.

As mentioned above, the table highlights that this research underscores the pivotal role of family support, encompassing encouragement from parents, siblings, spouses, and in-laws, in facilitating women's career advancement and fostering a conducive environment for their professional growth. Motivation, originating from self-motivation, external encouragement, and moral support, emerges as a crucial enabler for women's career advancement, creating a dynamic environment for their success. Equal opportunities in education and job sectors are essential for women's career advancement, promoting gender equality by ensuring equitable access to education and eliminating gender-based disparities in job opportunities. Government initiatives, including rules, policies, and structural frameworks, are vital for women's career advancement, fostering gender equality and supporting professional development. A supportive culture, within both organizations and society, is a crucial enabler for women's career advancement, encouraging gender equality within the organization and challenging societal norms. Training, encompassing home-based and institutional programs, is identified as a critical enabler for women's career advancement, equipping them with essential skills and knowledge for their professional journey.

## **DISCUSSION**

The underrepresentation of women in senior management positions within higher education institutions is a pervasive issue globally, including in Pakistan. Despite significant strides in women's enrolment in universities,

their ascent to leadership roles remains disproportionately low. This discussion delves into the study's findings investigating the enablers influencing the professional development of women academics in management positions within Pakistani universities. It explores potential strategies for promoting gender equality in academia.

One of the study's key findings is the importance of family support as a critical enabler for women's career advancement in academia. Pakistani women often face societal expectations regarding their roles as wives and mothers, which can impede their professional aspirations (Sarwar & Imran, 2019; Buddhapriya, 2009). However, the study reveals that women who receive support from their families can better navigate the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities. Accordingly, Kim (2020) outlined the manifest in various forms, including encouragement to pursue higher education, assistance with childcare, and understanding the demands of academic careers (Kim, 2020). Overall, universities and policymakers can create a more supportive environment for women academics by acknowledging and addressing the role of family support.

Institutional training also emerges as a significant enabler for women's career advancement in Pakistani universities. These trainings provide women academics with essential skills and knowledge needed to excel in leadership roles. Additionally, they help women build confidence and networks within the academic community, which are crucial for career progression. However, the study highlights the need for targeted and accessible training programs tailored to the unique challenges faced by women in academia. By investing in such initiatives, universities can empower women academics to overcome barriers and thrive in management positions.

Furthermore, organizational culture is pivotal in shaping women's academic experiences. The study identifies the importance of fostering an inclusive and equitable work environment that values diversity and promotes gender equality. This involves challenging gender biases and stereotypes and implementing policies and practices that support women's career development. By fostering a culture of inclusivity and respect, universities can attract and retain talented women academics, ultimately enhancing the diversity and effectiveness of their leadership teams. There are several strategies universities and policymakers can adopt to promote gender equality in academia. Offermann and Foley (2020) pointed out a need for targeted recruitment and retention efforts to increase the representation of women in senior management positions. This may involve implementing affirmative action policies, mentoring programs, and leadership development initiatives designed explicitly for women academics.



Additionally, Lester and Sallee (2023) suggested that universities should prioritize creating family-friendly policies and support systems that enable women to balance their professional and personal responsibilities effectively. Finally, raising awareness and challenging societal norms regarding gender roles and expectations is crucial for creating a more equitable academic environment.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations can be proposed to promote gender equality and support women's career advancement in Pakistani universities. Firstly, institutions should prioritize implementing family support programs to assist women academics in balancing their professional and personal responsibilities. These programs should include initiatives such as childcare services, flexible work arrangements, and parental leave policies to lessen the burden on women managing both academic and family commitments. Secondly, designed institutional training initiatives should be developed to equip women academics with the necessary management and administrative skills to excel in managerial positions. Thirdly, efforts should be made to transform organizational cultures within universities to advance inclusivity, diversity, and gender equality. This could involve implementing gender-sensitive policies, providing bias awareness training, and establishing mentorship programs to support women's career progression. Additionally, government support and policies are important in advancing academic gender equality. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan should prioritize initiatives for supporting women's academics, such as allocating funding for management training programs and enforcing gender equality policies across universities. Furthermore, awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts should be undertaken to challenge societal norms and stereotypes surrounding women's roles in academia and a supportive environment for women academics to succeed.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study sheds light on the enablers influencing the professional development of women academics in management positions within Pakistani universities. Despite the significant growth in women's enrolment in higher education, their representation in senior management roles remains disproportionately low. Through in-depth interviews with senior management position holders from public sector universities in Islamabad, several key enablers were identified, including family support, institutional training, and organizational culture.

The findings underscore the importance of family support as a critical factor in women's career advancement. By receiving encouragement, assistance

with childcare, and understanding from their families, women academics are better equipped to navigate the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities. Additionally, institutional training emerged as essential for providing women with the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to excel in leadership roles. Universities can invest in targeted training programs to empower women academics and foster a more diverse and inclusive leadership pipeline. Furthermore, the study highlights the significance of organizational culture in shaping women's experiences in academia. By promoting gender equality through initiatives such as diversity training and inclusive leadership practices, universities can create environments where women feel valued, supported, and empowered to thrive. Addressing these enablers is crucial for promoting gender equality and creating more inclusive and equitable academic institutions in Pakistan.

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