

A Qualitative Study Of Challenges Faced By Pakistani Women Leaders

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: It is a qualitative study that examines the challenges and obstacles faced by Pakistani women leaders. The second purpose of this study is to understand the best practices that they opt while facing these barriers.

Research Design and Methods: Semi-structured interview techniques were used to collect the data from a sample of seven women leaders who were working as a leader for more than 10 years during February 2019 to August 2019. Interview schedule was designed to explore the challenges and obstacle that they faced while working as a women leader.

Results: Thematic analysis generate three themes including gender-specific biasness, personality biasness, work-family conflict, and manipulation during their job as a women leader. Furthermore, the emotion focused as well as problem focused strategies were observed as the practices used by the women leaders to endure these barriers.

Discussion and Implications: Themes suggested that the challenges faced by Pakistani women leaders are unique and culturally specific that endorse a need to develop an indigenous scale to assess the women leadership styles.

Keywords: Women leaders, Challenges, Obstacles, Strategies

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Leadership believed to be one of the most important research arena that has uncovered numerous secrets associated with it. Consistently, a belief developed that leadership is a versatile developmental process and with consistent progression in the zone of research it has rarely differ with already derived literature. These incorporate whether leaders are made or born? How have followers effect the effective leaders? Can charismatic leaders change the scenario by developing and destroying cultures and how leaders will be impacted through technology on the performance of others (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009).

Literature shows a broad discussion around leadership and best styles a leader can opt to motivate its followers and make a successful organization. Research has proven that among numerous factors that influence a leadership style, gender is the important and top most. It has proven to affect the whole leadership process as women are believed to be more transformational than men are (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Bass and Riggio, 2006), on the other hand, there are some researches that deny the impact of gender over leadership styles (Oshagbemi, 2008). However, the recent studies have linked the leadership styles with personality traits, situations, and contexts (Brandt & Lahio, 2013), thus challenging the old assumptions of leadership styles and gender by giving a wide field to new researchers. So when we look inside a corporate sector, we see a high representation of women at low and middle levels, with few at the top (Churchard, 2013). It does not indicate that women are incapable of leading rather highlight several other factors that made this happen. So based upon these indications, it was decided to explore the leadership styles opted by women leaders in Pakistan. As within the corporate sector, the leadership styles are continuously evolving and challenged due to the endless evolution of female roles (Holbeche, 2010). Nevertheless, while exploring the leadership styles of women leaders, it was observed that women leaders undergo through several barriers and challenges during their career. Therefore, it was vital to list down the challenges that let the women to reach and remain at the top of chain.

Women are believed to be communal which makes them kind, generous, caretaking and thus making them lack in those traits that seem to be required for success in leadership roles (Fletcher, 2004; Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989; Schein, 2001). Asian women are often stereotyped as being reserved, passive, and unenthusiastic, and are particularly likely to be seen as sentimental that seemingly disqualify such women to be a successful leader (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). The misunderstanding between these feminine traits and the traits that are believed to be necessary to be a leader places women leaders in a double bind, and exposes them to a double standard. Women leaders are thought to be overly calm or too aggressive, and what is seen as self-confident, assertiveness or entrepreneurial in a man leader is often appears to be rude or arrogant in a woman leader (Heilman & Stamm, 2007). African American women are believed to be aggressive and confrontational and thus are exposed to this stereotypical behavior (Bell & Nkomo, 2001).

It has been noted, women who achieve higher management position in distinctly male arenas are seen as proficient but are less well-liked as compared to equally successful men (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004). Simply being a successful woman leader in a male

sphere can be attributed as a violation of gender role norms (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). In the same way, when women perform traditionally male stereotypes gender roles are attributed as conforming to feminine stereotypes, such women are tend to be liked but not respected (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Women in leadership positions are judged too soft, over emotional, and unassertive to make good decisions in conflicting situations and are regarded as sufficiently authoritative (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

In a study by Bonawitz and Andel (2009), it was found that females in management level leadership believed the invisible barriers they confront were a lack of mentors, socially and culturally constructed gender role inequalities, and a slower path towards career. Studies on women's leadership have also founded that female leaders often experience unequal distribution of employment opportunities across gender and role conflict as well as a biggest barrier of patriarchal attitudes towards females (Aiston & Jung, 2015). These factors are deeply rooted in culture which have developed a glass ceiling (Harris, Ravenswood, & Myers, 2013) for females who desire to achieve executive leadership positions. According to Northouse (2013), women when attain leadership positions are usually perceived firstly through a gender lens and afterwards through societal gender based stereotypes, that is why they experience pressure. Gender stereotyping which is the consensual attitude about personality traits that describe men and women (Harris, Ravenswood, & Myers, 2013), leads towards developing barriers for women's career progress (Aiston & Jung, 2015). Diehl (2014) stated that not only men but also women often hold negative gender stereotypes about other women, which may influence the recruitment of a woman to leading position. Faiz, Bano and Asif (2016) explored across gender difference in leadership in Pakistan and developed a conceptual model of Three M's of gender and leadership in Pakistani context, which they found as barrier to women leadership in Pakistan. The Three M's model portrays the three M's of leadership in Pakistan. Masculinization identify to the traits and attributes that are associated to male gender; matriarchal is the society led by female head and mental block signifies lack of ability to think beyond a certain point. Patriarchal structure is the social system in which fundamental power is held by men like males in Pakistan are considered as leader of the family. The model demonstrates the three M's which act as a barrier in Pakistani context for women leaders. Leadership is viewed a manly job in Pakistan and Pakistani society does not acknowledge when less powerful gender lead the dominant males. Pakistani society has a mental block to acknowledge women as a leader. Likewise in Pakistani family system, the male members of the family often by fathers make major decisions. In Pakistan, men are at leading and powerful position. This male centric structure of the society reduces chances for women to become successful leaders (Faiz, Bano & Asif, 2016). The study by Faiz, Bano, and Asif (2016) served as a base for the current study as it explore the challenges faced by women leaders during their course of leadership along with the strategies they used to overcome these barriers. This study focuses on the current research question.

RQ1: What are the challenges and obstacles women leaders face during their journey to be a leader?

RQ2: What strategies do women use to overcome these challenges and obstacles?

Method

The study was carried out qualitatively during February 2019 to August 2019. A sample of seven women leaders was approached using snowball sampling technique. All of the women leaders were having more than 10 years of administrative and leadership experience. One of them was CSP officer and working as an Assistant Commissioner for the last 12 years; three of them were project manager with an experience of 12, 15 and 15 years respectively; one was government official working as Section Officer for the last 14 years; and one was entrepreneur who was having a leadership experience of around 16 years, and the last one was a bank manager with an experience of 13 years. All of the women leaders were contacted individually at their work place as shown in Table 1.

Semi-structured interview schedule was designed with an in-depth focus on challenges and obstacles faced by thy women leaders. All the primary data gathered in the field in the form of audio recording and field notes, and was transcribed. The six stage process of thematic analysis by Clarke and Braun (2013) was used followed by data familiarization and reduction. The data was coded using inductive codes.

Results

The interviews were obtained from seven women leaders and resulted in different themes as shown in table 2.

Challenges face by Women Leader

After analyzing the data three major themes were emerged including gender-specific biasness, stereotypes, manipulation, and family-based issues.

Gender-specific biasness. The women faced a common set of challenges. Not surprisingly, being judged by males was one of these. Most of them reported that being a woman leader, others, most of the time, take them for granted and not a leader. As narrated by a participant:

“I realized that as a woman leader, most of your male counterparts do not take you serious and they think in terms of paying you less, that she is a female. And sometime they think that a female leader might have no rules and regulations” (Woman X)

Similarly, another woman said:

“Men are the harder guys they are the hurdle because they don't take you serious they feel like you are half of anything. If you are a witness, you are half, if you are intelligent you are half and you are very easily manipulated. So you can get manipulated by anyone very easily because they are going to say something sensitive to your family or something to your own profile” (Woman Z).

Some of the participants reported that being a women leader is sometimes challenging because of female subordinates as sometime they do not take orders seriously as narrated by one of them:

“Most of the women live continuously in a state of comparison with you, despite of the fact that they make things easy for you; they make things complicated. They might have some sort of complex or jealousy but yes I found it strange that how a women can be hurdle for other women” (Woman X)

Another participant reported that:

“Some women are very strange they keep pulling your legs and show that you are doing nothing. They might have no permission from their families to move ahead and project their incompetency over you” (Woman A)

Some women leaders reported unacceptance of women leaders by male’s subordinates. Some of the males’ subordinates believe that how a female can be their boss. As one of them reported:

“There are some male counterparts who will not say that you are wrong but they will keep on criticizing task indirectly and will provide you with lame excuses. They actually test your patience and might be your knowledge.” (Woman C)

Stereotypes. Five out of seven participants have mentioned that having personal characteristics like family background, age, personal outlook, and being single are the major hurdles that women leaders face in socio-cultural background of Pakistan.

“My personal Outlook is also one of the issues, as you are so young, how can you do a business at such an age, actually it is a challenge and you have to tell them that you know how to run a business” (Women Z)

Another reported:

“I am a workaholic, and I love to work, and most of the time I use to listen that, you know she does not have a family, she does not have a husband, so she has enough time for work; And she maybe is not a homemaker” (Woman B)

Another reported:

“Most of the times, other asked me why I am not getting married. I looked perfectly alright, then they say there might be some other issues, that is why she is single” (woman Y)

A few of them also mentioned that females who are working with them at workplace or those who are housewives, are a major challenge for them, as narrated by one of them:

“The thing is those females who are actually living as a housewife and they are at home they would try their level best to say these mean things to you that you would not feel comfortable working out and you would going home back and feeling like it is not normal” (woman B)

Similarly, another participant reported:

“Females who are actually on high post they are so insecure that they would not exactly give you a way to the top posts” (woman X)

Manipulation. A common challenge that many participants faced was the manipulation done by their subordinates. Mostly subordinates resist in taking orders from women leaders. As reported by two participants:

“Sometimes your clients manipulate you while thinking that she is a female, she will know nothing and we can keep the contracts our way” (woman D)

“Most of the time your subordinates have a mindset that being a woman leader has nothing to do with rule and order. As they can have any favor anytime and when you say ‘no’, then they find it quite odd, in a way that you are not understanding them” (woman A).

Generally, leadership position has always been associated with male gender (Eagly, 2007) and the participants have perceived it. As said by one,

“Employees generally accept male leaders quite easily but when they are dealing with a female leader then initially they do not accept them and when once they accept a female boss, they try to use her for their own benefit” (woman B)

Family based issues. Although it is commonly believed that female leaders have to face a lot family issues too but the interviews from Pakistani women leaders reported that their family has always been supportive.

“My family has always supported me, so if I am leading a big business today, it’s just because of family” (woman x)

“My husband has always been very supportive. He lives in another city and I am living somewhere else because of my job, but he is indeed very understanding” (woman y)

Although the findings indicate a support of family with all the female leaders but some of them reported that having a family life sometime serves as a hurdle for woman leaders’ working as government officials.

“I was once appointed as a project manager in-spite of my colleague who was more capable and fit for that job, and the only reason was that she was having a family and two years old daughter. And our top officials believe it will be difficult for her to manage” (woman X)

“Sometimes family is supportive but your superiors are not. They do not give you opportunity to grow because they think females will not manage properly. Whereas if a woman leader has managed to reach here, she will definitely managed to move ahead.” (Woman A).

Strategies to Resolve Challenges. A shared strategy for overcoming challenges faced by women leaders **was** focusing on the problems. This allowed the women to demonstrate their personal skills to handle the situation.

“I just believe in one thing that if you have steadfastness and sustainability, then nothing can stop you from your goal” (woman 6)

“I use to give my subordinates examples of other people just to get the work done, or sometimes I ask someone senior to me to guide my subordinates who are aged than me so that I do not become the bossy leader ” (woman 6, years)

But most of the participants were in favor of tackling the issue by managing their emotions like just not working on the problem and giving it time as mentioned by a participant:

“I ignore the issue most of the time, unless and until it become that crucial that I have to address it” (Woman 1, year)

“I keep myself cool and calm, so that things do not become a problem for me at work” (Woman 5, year)

A few leaders reported that ignoring is an art that a leader must have while leading the followers as reported by participants:

“Ignoring the comments of your subordinates is an art that every leader should have” (Woman 3).

Another participant stated:

“I ignore their (subordinates) actions a number of times, and stay calm” (woman 5).

Similarly, another leader reported:

“I have heard many negative comments about me at my work place, but over the time I have learned this art of remain calm and let the things get settle on their own” (woman 7).

Discussion

The major objective of this study was to determine the challenges and barriers faced by Pakistani women leaders throughout their careers and the strategies they used to resolve those issues. The women leaders who were interviewed believed having a natural tendency to lead others because of their caring and nurturance attitude. The narratives indicated that all of them were passionate about their careers and workaholics. Study indicated barriers of gender-specific biasness, stereotypes, manipulation, and family-based issues faced by Pakistani women leaders.

Gender specific biasness has always been a common obstacle that is faced by women all over the world (Bonawitz & Andel, 2009). They not only bear gender inequalities in their career path but also a slower path towards the top position. Facing a patriarchal attitude is also common

(Aiston & Jung, 2015) and was found in the narratives of women leaders. Although several studies in the past has reported glass ceiling effect (Aiston & Jung, 2015; Pirouznia, 2011; Shah, 2010) in the careers of many women leaders but this was not observed in the narratives of Pakistani women leaders. Pakistani women leaders face a biasness because of their gender even from females and it has also been found in the past studies (Harris, Ravenswood, & Myers, 2013).

Secondly, an obstacle of stereotypes was reported by Pakistani women as being leaders. The narratives indicate that being single, having less age, and working till late hours sometimes generate pressure on them. Northouse (2013) has also reported same barrier faced by women leaders. Women leaders who usually managed older men and women face criticism and prejudice most often. Despite of the fact that women are considered respectable in Pakistan, people are still not accustomed to view a women leading them. So whenever, people encountered in such a situation they start acting strangely. Similarly having a specific personality traits exert a pressure on women and thus make it difficult for them to progress (Harris, Ravenswood, & Myers, 2013). Stereotypical attitude faced by Pakistani women leaders is not only shown by men but also by women as stated by Diehl and colleagues (2014) who reported negative stereotypes about women leaders, which has a negative effect on recruitment of women leaders.

It is commonly believed that women are more emotional and nurtured as compared to men. So when they become a leader, their role is believed to be highly affected by their sentiments and this results in their manipulation. Many subordinates and clients when dealing with women leaders holding such views do not provide the platform for maintain a strong position as reported by Faiz, Bano, and Asif (2017). Not a single man has ever reported any sort of manipulation by subordinates because they are considered assertive, rational, logical, decisive, and opportunistic (Park, 1996). On the other hand, women are considered warm, cooperative, expressive, gentle, tactful, submissive and empathetic that becomes a major reason of their manipulation by others.

Lastly, the family based issues serves as one of the obstacles for women leaders. Taking care of family and doing household chores has always been considered a major responsibility of woman (Eagly & Carli, 2007). So when a woman opt a career it is considered her duty to manage the family and work herself. The narratives state that women leaders are managing their family and work quite efficiently and have family support with them. But the top management and others always consider it an excuse to not promote her and give her leadership responsibility as they believe that it will be difficult for women to manage.

Conclusion and Implication

The indigenous barriers that have been found in the present study are the ones that needed to be addressed in detail so that we can have more women leaders around us thus contributing to the prosperity and success of country. The current study has a strong implication in corporate sector where a comfortable and unbiased attitude is much needed. Moreover, the study addresses a unique set of barriers and the strategies to resolve these issues that show there is a need to develop an indigenous scale for women leadership style.

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Table 1 Description of interview participants. (N=7)

Participants	Age in years	Position as leader	Experience in years	Location
1	45	Assistant Commissioner	12	Lahore
2	40	Media Project Head	12	Lahore
3	42	Project Manager	15	Lahore
4	39	Section Officer	14	Lahore
5	35	Entrepreneur	16	Lahore
6	37	NGO Project Head	15	Lahore
7	36	Bank Manager	13	Lahore

Table 2 Major themes and sub-themes emerged from interviews. (N=7)

Sr No	Major Theme	Sub-Themes	Sub-Categories
1	Challenges faced being a woman leader	Gender-specific biasness	Male counterparts' non-serious attitude Leg pulling from Female subordinates Little/no support Insecurity from male and female colleagues Only males are leaders
		Stereotypes	Personal characteristics (age, marital status, looks) How a woman can be a leader?
		Manipulation	Subordinates take for granted Women leaders are considered easy to handle
		Family-work conflict	Having a family appears to be a barrier for promotion Glass-ceiling effect because of having children
2	Strategies	Problem-focused	Using personal skills Situation-based solutions
		Emotion-focused	Ignoring Staying Calm