

**NAVIGATING WORK ALIENATION, BURN  
OUT AND WELL BEING: LIVED  
EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN EDUCATIONAL  
LEADERS OF PAKISTAN**

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NAVIGATING WORK ALIENATION, BURN OUT AND WELL BEING:  
LIVED EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN EDUCATIONAL LEADERS OF  
PAKISTAN

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges confronting women in school leadership and management roles in Pakistan, focusing on burnout, work alienation, and limited institutional support. Despite growing representation, women leaders remain excluded from governance and decision-making, face restricted autonomy, and encounter socio-cultural barriers that constrain authentic leadership expression. This study addresses the critical gap on leadership and organizational behavior and often overlooks the gendered and intersectional realities of women leaders in Pakistan's education sector. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, the research engaged sixteen women leaders with 10-15 years of professional experience through purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed work alienation through restricted decision-making and cultural constraints, while burnout was marked by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished accomplishment. To strengthen credibility and refine emerging themes, a validation panel discussion was held with three senior women leaders with 15-20 years of experience. Findings show women leaders contend with extended working hours, balancing professional and personal responsibilities, gender bias, and limited access to professional development. These factors contributed to exhaustion, lack of recognition, and compromised well-being. Participants proposed practical strategies including leadership support mechanisms such as sessions with school counselors, providing health insurance, well-being sessions, and gender-responsive policies. By situating these insights within the broader discourse on leadership and organizational behavior, the study advances understanding of gender equity and workplace well-being in education. It calls for systemic reforms and policies that foster resilience, inclusivity, and sustainable leadership, offering implications for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners committed to strengthening women's roles in school leadership in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Educational leaders, leadership & management, work alienation, burnout, well-being, gender equity, Pakistan

## **APPROVAL**

This is to certify that this thesis conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in quality and scope, for the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science.

The student has been supervised by: **Professor Dr Juhary Ali**

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This thesis was submitted to Asia e University and is accepted as fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



**Professor Dr Siow Heng Loke**

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Chairperson, Examination Committee

(8 July 2025)

## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Science (Management) is my own work and that all contributions from any other persons or sources are properly and duly cited. I further declare that the material has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. In making this declaration, I understand and acknowledge any breaches in this declaration constitute academic misconduct, which may result in my expulsion from the programme and/or exclusion from the award of the degree.

**Name: Farheen Hasan**

**Signature of Student:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Farheen', written over a horizontal line.

**Date: 8 July 2025**



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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATION**

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
OB	Organizational Behavior
QWL	Quality of Work Life
RO	Research Objective

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 Background of Study

Gender-based disparities persist globally across economic, political, educational, and health domains, posing systemic challenges that are deeply embedded in institutional structures. Even when women participate in the workforce, they frequently remain marginalized within leadership hierarchies due to organizational barriers, cultural biases, and policy gaps that hinder upward mobility (Kakabadse et al., 2023).

Within this global context, Pakistan illustrates the persistence of gender inequality through entrenched institutional pathways. According to the WEF Global Gender Gap Report 2025, Pakistan ranks last among 148 countries, with its overall gender parity score declining from 57 percent to 56.7 percent. Despite modest progress in educational attainment, rising from 83.6 percent to 85.1 percent. Pakistan has closed only 2.3 percentage points of the gender gap since 2006. The most significant regressions were observed in the domains of economic participation and opportunity, where income disparity and wage inequality widened (WEF, 2025).

In the workforce, women represent only 22.8 percent of labor force participation and remain underrepresented in leadership positions across educational, corporate, and governmental sectors (Aslam & Zaidi, 2024). Within higher education, women constitute nearly half of university students but occupy only around nine percent of vice chancellor positions in public institutions, a clear indication of vertical segregation whereby frontline involvement does not translate into decision-making power (Shaukat & Tariq, 2023).

Although female literacy increased modestly from 46.5 percent to 48.5 percent between 2024 and 2025, and women constitute over 70 percent of primary school teachers, these operational gains have not translated into institutional leadership representation (Ahmed & Khan, 2024; WEF, 2025). Structural impediments such as bureaucratic hierarchies, limited professional growth opportunities, and entrenched gender norms constrain women's leadership potential. Transformational leadership, which emphasizes vision, empowerment, and inclusivity, requires organizational autonomy and supportive cultures, while distributed leadership that fosters shared governance remains underutilized due to resource constraints and institutional resistance (Khan & Jabeen, 2023). Recent empirical findings indicate that female school leaders can act as effective agents of change, but their capacity is curtailed by policy gaps, inadequate institutional support for work–life balance, and persistent gender stereotypes among colleagues (Mahmood et al., 2024). Cultural expectations exacerbate these managerial constraints, as women are often expected to manage dual responsibilities of professional and domestic labor. While teaching is considered family-friendly, its administrative and emotional demands contribute to stress, burnout, and work alienation (Bodalina & Meastry, 2022; Malik & Fatima, 2025).

Labor market trends further reinforce these barriers. Although women's representation in managerial positions rose from 19 percent to 20.5 percent between 2023 and 2025, gains remain concentrated in selected sectors. Women in rural areas, who comprise about 31 percent of working women, face compounded inequities compared to their urban counterparts (Habib, 2022). Additionally, women earn approximately 34 percent less than men, placing Pakistan second to last globally in women's leadership representation (OICCI, 2024).

Despite these systemic challenges, recent studies emphasize that inclusive leadership training, mentorship, and institutional support systems can mitigate gender disparities and enhance organizational effectiveness (Nguyen et al., 2025). However, there remains a notable research gap regarding stress, burnout, and work alienation among female school administrators, underscoring the need for studies that frame these issues not as individual weaknesses but as organizational design failures.

This study therefore situates gender inequities in Pakistani educational leadership as both managerial and social challenges requiring systemic organizational reform. It argues that interventions such as flexible work policies, mentorship, leadership development programs, and distributed leadership practices are necessary to enable women's sustained participation in educational leadership. In doing so, it aligns leadership theory with empirical evidence and the lived experiences of women educators to articulate a management-centric agenda for gender equity that enhances both institutional performance and social equity.

Despite these alarming statistics, incremental progress is being made; female literacy rates have risen modestly from 46.5% to 48.5% over the past year, and parity in educational attainment at the primary level has increased to 85.1%. Over 70% of primary school teachers in Pakistan are now women, signaling a significant social transformation. However, their preponderance at the classroom level has not meaningfully translated into increased representation in institutional decision-making or policy leadership. Recent initiatives, such as the Schools Connect Programme in Punjab has demonstrated that targeted professional development and networked communities of practice can empower school leaders especially women to champion inclusion, equity, and effective organizational change. Nonetheless, bureaucratic

inertia, limited professional growth opportunities, and entrenched gender norms continue to restrict the actualization of leadership potential among women educators.

Management and leadership theories provide a critical lens for contextualizing these challenges. Transformational leadership which is centered on vision, empowerment, and inclusivity is often stymied by structures that restrict autonomy and decision-making for women. Distributed leadership models, which emphasize collaborative governance, remain underutilized due to resource constraints and resistance to change within organizational cultures. Studies from 2024 and 2025 consistently confirm that while head teachers and principals (many of whom are women) can act as agents of change, their impact is circumscribed by policy gaps, lack of institutional support for work-life balance, and ongoing stereotyping by male colleagues.

Cultural expectations place a dual burden on professional women, who must balance work, family responsibilities, and often unpaid domestic labor. The notion that teaching roles are “family-friendly” is contradicted by evidence of long hours, administrative overload, and emotional labor, factors leading to burnout, stress, and work alienation. According to the 2025 GPE KIX project, head teachers integrating inclusive practices reported significant gains in school climate and student outcomes—but such successes were the exception, requiring persistent advocacy, community engagement, and capacity building.

Working women might be greatly impacted by social pressure in a nation like Pakistan, where women are frequently expected to help with agricultural labor, particularly in rural regions, or undertake unpaid labor at home. Since teaching roles are thought to have fewer hours and be less taxing, this cultural expectation frequently

causes many women to favor jobs in the education sector, even when this view is false. The truth is that teaching can be extremely demanding and demands a large amount of intellectual and emotional involvement, even though it is sometimes perceived as a more flexible job. When attempting to preserve a work-life balance, women, whether in the business sector or in education, often compromise their well-being. Their relationships with their families as well as their performance at work may suffer because of this fight, which can cause burnout and stress. Stereotyping of female leaders is a persistent issue, and male leaders frequently undervalue women (Bodalina & Meastray, 2022). More women are entering the workforce in developing countries like Pakistan because of the quick changes in the economy and society. Nonetheless, studies on women in leadership roles show that they must contend with high social expectations about their family obligations, which frequently results in feelings of overwork (Young & Mcleod, 2001). Future-shaping in schools depends on effective leadership, and the welfare of leaders has a direct impact on educational quality. The effects of burnout and work alienation on those tasked with raising the next generation go well beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Because it addresses the core of nurturing the nurturers, making sure that these female leaders are fulfilled, empowered, and able to deliver the greatest educational experiences, this issue is essential.

Empowering women educational leaders is not only a matter of equity but also of organizational effectiveness and national development. Countries that invest in inclusive leadership, continuous professional development, and tailored support systems for female leaders see improvements in both educational quality and workplace well-being. For Pakistan, addressing the gender gap in educational leadership demands multifaceted policy reforms, ranging from measurable equity

targets and mentorship programs to flexible workplace policies, networked communities of practice, and enhanced recognition of women's contributions at every level.

In conclusion, the sustained underrepresentation and marginalization of women in educational leadership in Pakistan is a managerial and social challenge requiring systemic reorientation of organizational practices. By aligning leadership theory with contemporary research and real-life narratives, this study seeks to illuminate the pathways, barriers, and enablers that can foster a more inclusive, supportive, and dynamic leadership landscape for women advancing educational excellence and social equity for the generations to come.

## **1.1 Problem Statement**

Despite gradual progress in women's educational participation in Pakistan, women remain critically underrepresented in school leadership and management positions. Structural, cultural, and organizational biases continue to hinder their advancement, resulting in persistent gender gaps that undermine equity, institutional effectiveness, and national development goals. For instance, while the female literacy rate stood at only 53.7% in 2021 compared to 73.5% for men (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022), women who do enter the education sector are still concentrated in teaching rather than management, with less than 10% holding senior leadership roles (I-SAPS, 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

This problem is rooted in three key gaps:

### **1.1.1 Knowledge Gap**

While international research increasingly explores school leadership and burnout, studies focusing specifically on female educational leaders in Pakistan remain limited.

Evidence shows that despite forming the majority of the teaching workforce, women hold less than 10% of senior positions, highlighting the severity of gender disparity in leadership opportunities (I-SAPS, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). However, scholarship addressing their leadership trajectories and occupational well-being remains scarce. For instance, a 2024 study on female teachers in public sector universities of Punjab identified a strong correlation between high burnout and declining professional performance, but highlighted the absence of research on women in school leadership roles (Fatima & Akhtar, 2024). Furthermore, much of the existing scholarship on gender and management in Pakistan has concentrated on corporate sectors (Siddiqui & Raza, 2022), leaving the unique institutional challenges and lived realities of female school leaders underexplored.

### **1.1.2 Practical Gap**

There is a significant absence of institutional frameworks, policies, and support systems designed to facilitate women's advancement to, and retention in, leadership roles within schools. Findings from qualitative research in Karachi and Lahore reveal persistent barriers such as lack of time flexibility, inadequate professional development opportunities, and insufficient mentorship structures (Khan & Shah, 2023). Women leaders frequently report being sidelined by institutional politics, gender bias, and exclusion from professional networks (UNDP Pakistan, 2022). The consequences of these gaps extend beyond limited career progression, as evidence also shows that workload pressures, conflicting obligations, and lack of support are strongly associated with higher levels of burnout and stress among female educators, undermining job performance and institutional effectiveness (Fatima & Akhtar, 2024). Despite women representing over 60% of teaching staff in urban schools (Pakistan

Education Statistics, 2023), their progression to management positions remains disproportionately low. This disjunction between women's teaching participation and their representation in leadership underscores systemic inequities that not only restrict women's career trajectories but also exacerbate burnout, stress, and work alienation ultimately weakening organizational effectiveness.

### **1.1.3 Methodological Gap**

Most existing studies on women's leadership in Pakistan's education sector rely on quantitative surveys or descriptive analyses, which rarely capture the depth and complexity of women's lived experiences. Globally, methodologies such as narrative inquiry and phenomenology are recognized for capturing the diverse realities of women leaders, yet their application in Pakistan remains limited (Ahmed & Rehman, 2024; Khan & Shah, 2023). Very few recent studies employ these approaches to explore how women leaders navigate professional demands and personal well-being. For example, a 2024 qualitative case study in Karachi, involving only 15 participants, explicitly called for further research utilizing lived-experience methodologies to contextualize women's challenges and strategies more effectively (Ahmed & Rehman, 2024). In the absence of such qualitative inquiry, policy frameworks risk being insufficiently grounded in the authentic voices of those most affected by systemic inequities.

## **1.2 Research Objectives**

Following are the objectives.

1. To investigate the primary factors contributing to burnout and stress experienced by women in school leadership roles.

2. To explore how female school leaders, establish and maintain well-being and work-life balance amidst professional demands.
3. To identify and analyze the effective strategies women leaders utilize to navigate and overcome institutional, cultural and professional barriers in their leadership journeys.
4. To examine the influence of organizational culture, institutional policies, and societal gender norms on the leadership experiences, and challenges of women educational leaders.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

Following are the research questions.

- i. What are the key factors that contribute to burnout and stress among female school leaders in Pakistan?
- ii. How do female school leaders maintain work-life balance and promote their well-being within the educational sector?
- iii. What strategies do women educational leaders employ to overcome institutional, cultural, and professional barriers in their leadership roles?
- iv. How do organizational culture, institutional policies, and societal gender norms impact the leadership experiences of women in school leadership positions?

These research questions encompass the qualitative method in the study, allowing for a comprehensive investigation of the topic.

### **1.4 Conceptual Framework**

This study focuses on the experiences of women leaders within Pakistan's education sector, particularly those occupying school leadership roles, who navigate the complex interplay of professional responsibilities and personal obligations. While women have

made significant progress in various career fields during the twenty-first century, entrenched social, cultural, and organizational barriers continue to hinder their advancement into leadership positions, especially in male-dominated hierarchies.

The research specifically examines how these women manage work-life conflicts arising from the "double burden" of professional duties and primary responsibility for domestic and caregiving tasks. In doing so, it highlights the challenges of long working hours, inflexible institutional demands, and societal expectations that frequently limit women's career advancement and impact their well-being, including experiences of burnout and work alienation.

Aligned with the study's objectives, this research investigates the following dimensions within the boundaries of the educational leadership context in Pakistan:

- The multifaceted factors contributing to burnout, stress, and work-life imbalance experienced by female school leaders;
- The gendered social and organizational biases, hierarchical constraints, and cultural norms that affect women's professional trajectories in leadership positions;
- The self-perception of women leaders and social perceptions shaped by cultural expectations;
- The role of organizational policies such as flexible work hours, childcare provision, and mentorship programs in either supporting or limiting women's leadership effectiveness and well-being;
- The causes and consequences of career breaks among women leaders, including childbirth, caregiving responsibilities, and societal pressures;

- The strategies women employ to overcome institutional and cultural barriers while maintaining career progression and personal wellness.

The study confines itself to a qualitative exploration of female leaders primarily in the school education sector, drawing on their lived experiences to identify systemic challenges and pragmatic solutions. While it acknowledges broader societal gender gaps, the research concentrates on institutional settings where women lead educational institutions, aiming to provide actionable recommendations for fostering equitable, supportive, and resilient leadership environments.

Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on promoting gender equity in education leadership by offering a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between personal, social, and organizational factors. It endeavors to supply practical, evidence-based insights to help educational institutions, policymakers, and human resource practitioners create workplaces that recognize and nurture women's leadership potential, thereby advancing a more inclusive and diverse educational landscape in Pakistan.

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This research holds vital importance in addressing the challenges faced by female educational leaders in Pakistan, especially within school leadership roles. By examining the intersection of structural, cultural, personal, and professional barriers, the study offers multidimensional insights and practical recommendations that contribute to enhancing gender equity and workplace well-being in educational institutions.

### **1.5.1 Practical Significance**

- Provides actionable insights for Human Resources practitioners and school management to develop supportive organizational cultures that accommodate the unique work-life balance needs of women leaders.
- Highlights the importance of flexible work schedules, childcare services, mentorship, and psychological support tailored for female leaders to reduce burnout and work alienation.
- Offers evidence-based guidance to schools and educational institutions on designing inclusive programs that foster women's leadership potential and resilience, thereby improving female representation in decision-making positions.
- Emphasizes the role of women leaders as role models who positively influence female students and enhance overall school performance through collaborative and innovative leadership styles.

### **1.5.2 Academic Significance**

- Bridges a notable gap in the literature by providing rich qualitative data on the lived experiences of women school leaders in Pakistani context often under-researched in school leadership and organizational behavior studies.
- Contributes to leadership and organizational behavior discourse by exploring how gendered cultural norms and institutional structures shape burnout, alienation, and well-being among female leaders.
- Introduces intersectional analysis that deepens the understanding of socio-cultural and professional challenges faced by women, advancing scholarly conversations around gender equity in educational leadership.