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Barriers to Career Advancement Opportunities for Female Faculty: A Study of Public and Private Universities in Pakistan

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Abstract

The present research study was conducted to explore the barriers and issues of inequality experienced by female faculty members at their workplace and how they dealt with them. The study employed purposive and referral sampling techniques to conduct in-depth-interviews with 20 female faculty members working at public and private universities of Karachi, Pakistan. A total of 12 open ended questions were asked from individual participants, both in person and on call. Each interview was 40 to 60 minutes long. The data were analysed through thematic analyses by identifying the initial codes, categorizing and analysing the themes, and finalizing the results. The findings of the study show lack of family support, traditional culture, and gender stereotype as the major barriers in females' career advancement. The study ends with recommendations to plug in these barriers by creating equal opportunities for working women.

Keywords: career advancement, gender inequality, gendered stereotype, opportunity barriers

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, gender inequality has become a key feminist issue. Females face biasness while pursuing their careers (Ritz, et al., 2014). The depiction of gender bias in textbooks started from second women's movement in the 1960s (Blumberg, 2008). Durrani (2008) vehemently states that gender inequality and discrimination can easily be seen and observed in the national curriculum of Pakistan and other developing countries. Through national identities, males are shown in superior roles such as leaders, military officers, politicians, and economists; whereas, female roles are confined as care takers and nurturers. This projects a thinking pattern that promotes gender discrimination and creates differences in the society, at work place, and human mind set. Moreover, according to Saher et al., (2014), women are still considered unworthy to hold managerial and leading posts at higher educational institutions. With reference to the gender quality index, Pakistan stands at 135 out of 136 countries. In such scenario, it is significantly important to conduct research study on this particular issue to address the challenges faced by females while pursuing their career. The purpose of the present phenomenological research study was to explore the issues of gender inequality for females working at private and public universities of Karachi, Pakistan and how they dealt with them at their work place. The study aimed to explore the issue by answering the following research questions:

1. How do female university faculty perceive the issues of inequality as barrier to their career advancement opportunities?
2. How do the female university faculty deal with issues of gender inequality at work place?

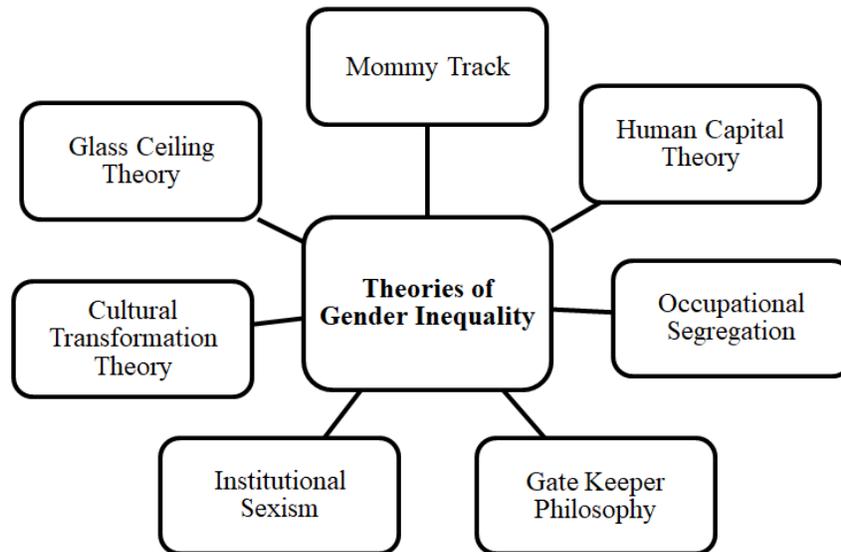
LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a brief historical overview of the challenges, barriers, and inequalities that female faculty members have to face at their workplace. Female teachers are still under represented at a very low level with low wages, low mobility, and low positions in organizational hierarchy. These factors were prevalent even in early 1980s where the term glass ceiling was used to refer to artificial barriers faced by females in academia (Oakley, 2000). Connell (2005) argues that organizations have masculine culture that creates gender stereotype roles for females and males occupy better jobs, allowances, wages, facilities, and more opportunities for success

than females. The present research study uses the following theories to address the issues of gender inequality faced by female faculty at their work place.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework



Mommy Track

According to Miller (2011), this theory explains that gender inequality still exists despite advancement in the movement of women's empowerment. Females take less work due to family and household responsibilities. It is considered that the prime responsibility of a woman is caring and nurturing children (Miller, 2011). Laurin, et al. (2013) describe this theory as social maturity that hinders female competencies, skills, and abilities. Different scholars have tried to address this issue. For instance, Nguyen (2013) raises awareness and encourages equality, Craig and Mullan (2011) suggest that division of responsibilities, power, and household work can reduce inequality.

Human Capital Theory

There are various variables identified by theorists that hinder women career advancement opportunities. According to Dunn (2012), the term human capital is defined as an individual's talent, knowledge, education, experiences, training, expertise, and qualification as required by organizations. Jogulu and Wood (2011) state that employment demands efficiency and effectiveness by considering their employees' competencies and skills. It is believed that this theory can help generate financial resources, assets, and cash. In terms of working women, Brown (2010) expresses that it is because of petty personal roles that women are unreliable and unwilling to participate in professional learning activities.

Occupational Segregation

Kalantari (2012) asserts that there are certain roles that are associated with male and female gender, which cause differences and discrimination in the way males and females approach their career. For instance, females

have some specific careers like being a teacher, nurse, receptionist, secretary, and beautician, which carry a low pay package and least facilitations and allowances. Klimova and Ross (2012) opine that females are comfortable with low salary package due to less working hours, less commitments, and less involvement in professional learning activities despite their education, competencies, skills, and abilities.

Gate Keeper Philosophy

This philosophy talks about the barriers that prevent women from moving up on the corporate ladder. Cheng and Tavits (2011) argue that in most of the organizations, males occupy leading posts and are considered gatekeepers of organizations.

Institutional Sexism

It has been observed that gender discrimination has been taught since early years of education for career selection. Educational institutions promote gender discrimination through academic content, that is, books, pictures, and stories of national heroes. The content represents males as dominant, powerful, and decision makers. O'Reilly and Borman (1984) describe that institutions reinforce sex-roles in the society through dramas, skits, and theatres by showing boys' role as a leader and girls' role as a mother, whose sole responsibility is to take care of her family and children. This has been taught from generation to generation as a norm.

Cultural Transformational Theory

Females are given less value than males in many organizations. This promotes gender segregation at work place (Hakim, 2006). Anderson (2013) describes that organizational culture is resisted due to some hidden traditional norms of the society. This disparity continues to exist within the diverse growing organizations.

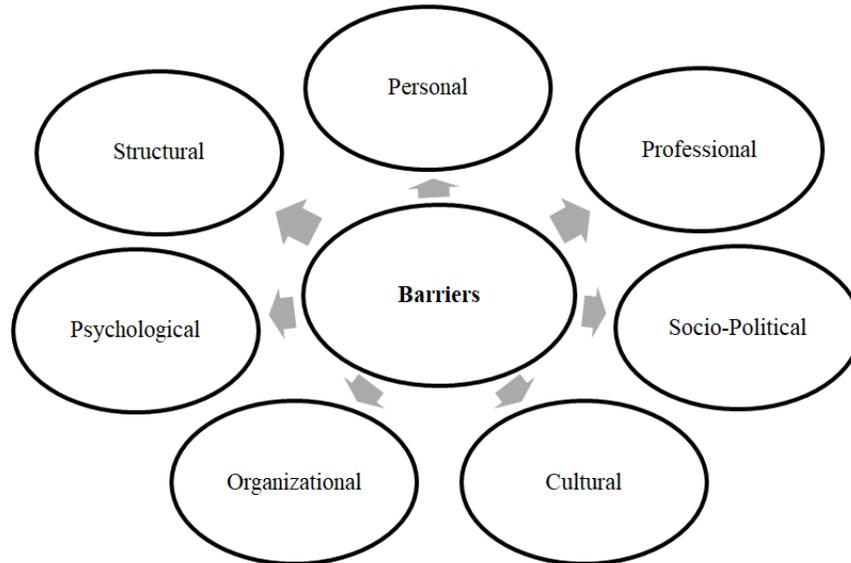
Glass Ceiling

There are several reasons that hinder women's career advancement. One of the main reasons is gender stereotypes. Zamfirache (2010) explains that glass ceilings are invisible hurdles, barriers, issues, and boundaries that stop women from achieving success in their careers. Women devote their lives for their children, family, and household responsibilities and take least interest in their careers. Similarly, Bombuwela and Alwis (2013) consider lack of family support after marriage as one of the main reasons behind women's low participation in their career advancement.

Conceptual Framework

The present study employs the following conceptual framework that provides an insight into how gender inequality exists at workplace, what are the barriers that women experience at workplace, and how they deal with them.

Figure 2
Conceptual Framework



Barriers to Career Advancement Opportunities

Professional Barriers

The majority of schools, colleges, and universities have top leading posts occupied by males. Glass ceiling is the major professional barrier that prevents women from taking leading and managerial positions at workplace. According to Helgesen (1990), boys are more encouraged to play sports and through play they do not only learn to be aggressive, but it helps them develop leadership and critiquing skills. These skills are more beneficial for males to lead at workplace. Some of the earliest studies on the leadership styles of males and females also show that while women exhibit democratic leadership style, men act in autocratic and direct style (Jogulu & Wood, 2006).

Structural Barriers

Structural barriers can be seen in recruitment and selection process by preferring male instead of females or leadership positions. Women face inequalities in terms of salary, allowances, incentives, bonuses, and promotions as compared to men who receive all by performing the same tasks. Women are treated unequally, which affect their performance and morale. This barrier acts as a glass ceiling in women's career.

Organizational Barriers

Women face cultural bias at workplace due to gender stereotype roles that are prevalent in the society. Females are less supported both by other females and males at the workplace. Females are rarely accepted as leaders because the organizational staff prefers strong, authoritative, and traditional leadership style.

Socio-Political Barriers

Workplace politics involves biasness in hiring and promoting females at workplace. Due to informal friendships, relationships, and mutual understanding, males receive more favours, connections, and resources.

Psychological Barriers

According to Eagly et al., (2007), women are considered to be more communal, interpersonally sensitive, soft spoken, friendly, and sympathetic. These characteristics are deemed inappropriate for any leading and managerial post. On the contrary, male traits are more individualistic, ambitious, authoritative, and dominant for successful management. Research indicates that these stereotypes impede women's career.

Cultural Barriers

Research has shown that women are expected to perform more domestic work than men (Neale & Ozkanli, 2010). As a result of family pressure, women prefer part time jobs which affect their earnings, working hours, and overall career progress. Asians are more bound to family responsibilities. The traditional cultural values confine women to play the role of housekeeper or home caretakers and prevent them from socializing and demonstrating their professional skills.

Personal Barriers

Many females sacrifice their careers due to family responsibilities, personal beliefs, and attitudes (Acker, 2010). According to Bombuwela and De-Alwis (2013), there are two main factors that cause challenges for women to pursue their careers. Firstly, due to family and secondly, intentional discrimination exerted by men as they do not want to share their power with women. These factors hinder the overall chances of women's career progress.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the present research study was to explore the barriers and issues of gender inequality that female experience at work place. Since a qualitative research allows researchers to explore issues in-depth when collecting the data, the present study finds it appropriate to use qualitative approach to explore inequality issues faced by female faculty working at universities. A purposive and referral sampling techniques were used to identify and select individuals who had experienced barriers and issues of gender inequality. To carry out lengthy in-depth interviews, 20 participants allowed the researcher to obtain detailed reality through interviews.

The primary data were collected through individual in-depth interviews from 20 female participants working at public and private universities of Karachi. Each interview was conducted for about 40-60 minutes. The interview used a protocol comprising 12 structured open-ended questions along with some additional probe questions to analyse the data and understand the participants' views. After conducting the interviews, the data were analysed through thematic analyses as it helps provide rich and detailed data. The interview transcripts were read multiple times to generate initial codes, organize, and review the themes and produce the report.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

The findings of the current research study show that barriers and gender inequality exist in many organizations as a traditional norm.

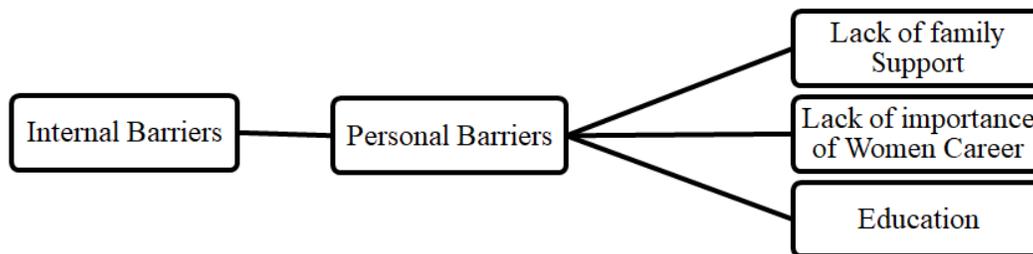
Barriers in Career Advancement Opportunities

According to the findings of this study, there are two types of barriers that hinder women's career advancement: (a) internal barriers; and (b) external barriers.

Internal Barriers in Career Advancement Opportunities

Figure 3

Internal Barriers and Issues of Gender Inequality at Workplace Faced by Females



Lack of Family Support

It is an entrenched Pakistani traditional and societal norm that when girls reach puberty their parents start planning for their marriage. Participant A expressed:

“There are some common practices in our society and our family religiously follows that girls should get married at the age of 18, otherwise they will not get good proposals. So, there is no need to study.”

Participant C stated:

“It has been enforced since my childhood ... a girl's responsibility is to take care of family, parents, siblings, and husband.”

Participant D said:

“Girls are born to perform the role of motherhood, ... and perform all household responsibilities.”

Participant F replied:

“My family is least supportive when it comes to organizational commitment. My father instructed me not to stay long, not to involve ..., reach home before Maghrib, and not to show any extra efficiency.”

Most of them had more or less experienced the same situation. The family plays a vital role in the upbringing of their children regardless of their gender, but traditionally we are living in a stereotyped culture where male are decision makers and female are subordinates.

Lack of Importance of Women Career

It has been observed that women get least importance when it comes to their careers due to their predefined roles of motherhood, and household responsibilities. These responsibilities make them hesitant to take initiative or show interest in professional learning activities due to working hours and travelling. Participant C stated:

“Whenever I talk about my career, my brother questions ... because in the end I have to take care of my husband, family, children and other household responsibilities. So, degrees and certificates have no value.”

Participant E aggressively said:

“Career? What does it mean? Are girls even allowed to think about it? Girls don’t have any career choice ... depended on male’s decision. They continuously remind them that you are a ‘GIRL’ and that you are not allowed to think and talk about career.”

Education

Education is the key to success. It makes one understand the meaning of life and value his/her beliefs and attitudes. Acquiring knowledge, skills, and abilities bring positive change in one’s life. However, it is found to be one of the major challenges for women to excel in their careers. Following are some of the views of participants regarding their educational struggle.

Participant A said:

“If a girl is more educated than a boy, it will create insecurity for her.”

Participant C stated:

“Highly educated girls won’t get good marriage proposals because people consider them ‘aliens’ who do not want to stay at home ... perform household responsibilities.”

Participant D shared:

“I was not allowed to get education until I got a good marriage proposal.”

Participant F expressed:

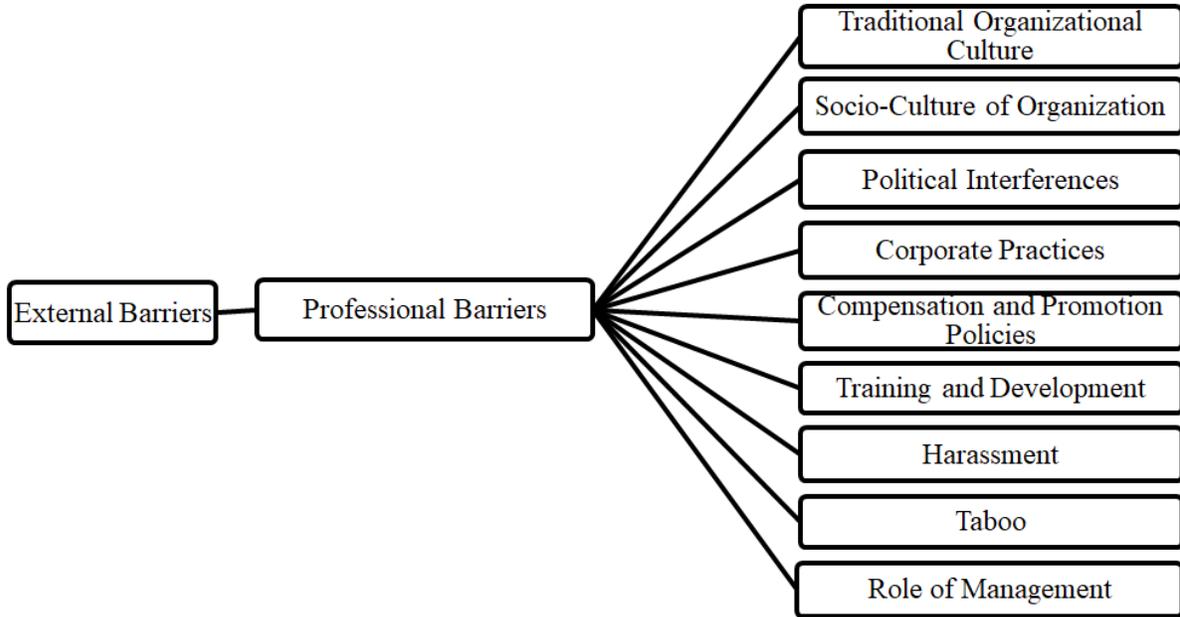
“My grandma always said that intermediate and graduation is enough for girls. There is no need to spend more money ... will get married. Instead of spending on education ... practice domestic work”

In our culture, there are hurdles for the females to get education. While some believe that if their husbands allow, they can pursue education after getting married or continue privately or after their children have grown up. These beliefs and mind-sets pose a serious threat to women’s career progress.

External Barriers in Career Advancement Opportunities

Figure 4

External Barriers and Issues of Gender Inequality at workplace faced by Females



Traditional Organizational Culture

Organizational culture believes in male dominant environment, while females are least considered to be part of any challenging work. Almost all participants described their organizational culture as stereotyped and traditional in nature.

Participant F expressed:

“Organizations are all about men’s world. There is so much talk about women empowerment ..., but the fact behind this debate is that inequalities still exist and ... men are everywhere, whether he is a boss ... or your colleague. You are expected to follow their instructions ... and job tasks.”

Based on participants’ comments, it is found that males hold power and consider females their subordinates at workplace.

Socio- Culture of Organization

When asked about the barriers, hurdles, issues and challenges encountered by women, factors like male dominance, superiority, and nepotism emerged, which were found to be affecting women’s salaries, vacations, trainings, allowances, promotions, and overall work performance. Participant C said”

“If you are working under male supervision, you have to obey him, whether he is right or wrong and if you are asked for any favour, you have to give in, otherwise ... will be replaced soon.”

Participant B informed:

“There is no place for women at managerial positions, despite having good qualification and competencies. Getting leading posts is like a dream ... but possible if you have good terms with your ‘BOSS’.”

Participant D revealed:

“The biggest barrier for women is women. Women are a barrier for one another because ... to grow personally and professionally, to get opportunities, or appreciation from male heads due to insecurity and jealousy.”

Political Interferences

Whether it is government, semi-government, private or partially private organizations, political interference can be observed in hiring, selecting, and promoting people in the organizations. The norms of the society reinforce the attitudes and the roles of gender, which remind us that men are the heads and women should confine themselves to household responsibilities and play the role of motherhood or a care taker.

Participant A revealed:

“There is a misconception about females ... spread rumours faster than media ... are wrong. Male are the best in such activities. They spread rumours, they backbite, they leg pull, they are the best politicians. All ... gatekeepers are connected strongly to degrade and humiliate females.”

Participant B lamented:

“Educational institutions are influenced by political power. Decisions are made ... not on the basis of progress, ...promotions are based on political interference.”

Corporate Practices

Corporate practices and policies are the major barrier in women’s career advancement. Females are excluded from all leading posts or if by chance one gets the opportunity to lead, she is mainly bound to follow the instructions of her head.

Participant B reminded:

“Good look is more preferred than good qualification. Unfortunately, these are the common practices nowadays. To be young ... are the positive points to get a good job and salary package.”

Organizations should develop gender free policies, which will benefit females, their career, and professional learning to help them upgrade their level without considering their gender.

Compensation and Promotion Policies

It was found that there is less recognition of female's efforts, abilities, and skills. Females neither receive good salaries nor get facilities from the organizations. Almost all participants opined that females could be promoted if they were beautiful, attractive, and well-liked by their managers and subordinates, and political contacts also counted.

Participant F complained:

“I work more than my male counterparts, but still my salary is low, salary increment is a dream, there are fewer opportunities, insufficient facilities and allowances, and promotion is like a dream for me.”

For promotion and compensation, women are expected to be smart, fashion savvy, and most importantly, they must not wear a hijab. The participants acknowledged that hijab is another barrier for women to grow in any organization.

Training and Development

During the interview, most of the participants indicated that there are no such training and professional development courses, and learning activities conducted by the organizations. Male workers are more encouraged to be part of training and learning activities whereas female a is least considered because of time constraint and household responsibilities.

Participant A explained:

“There should be equal opportunities of training and learning development sessions for both male and female. It will not only improve them personally and professionally, but will help the organization grow as well.”

Harassment

Gender issues are not new in human society. Throughout the history, women have been facing issues of gender discriminations and inequalities and empowerment is a dream come true. Women are treated differently at all levels. Some of them are even harassed by their own family members, colleagues, friends, and peers. They are harassed verbally, physically, and psychologically that affect their abilities, hinder their skills and competencies, and restrict them from thinking out of the box.

Verbal Harassment

Participant A expressed her experience:

“People don't have sense how to talk with and about women. Their language is not appropriate while talking to women.”

Participant C remarked:

“My dean would call me by different names like ‘my child’, ‘my baby’, ‘sweetie’ or ‘my girl’, which is really irritating and unbearable for me. Some male are habitual of passing comments on women’s dressing style, features, body gestures etc.”

Physical Harassment

Some women have also complained about physical harassment at work place. They experience touching, hitting, and tapping on shoulders at workplace on daily basis and reacting to this is associated with being conservative.

Participant A warned:

“Harassment exists and is a common practice in many organizations. It is associated with liberalism and modernism. For me, it seems like we are trapped amongst the rogues.”

Participant C added:

“Handshakes and hugs have nowadays become a practice and a way of appreciation in the organizations. If you do not follow, you are assumed to be over reacting. I have worked in many organizations, but ... how to make my boss happy.”

It has been observed from the participants’ responses that working women are not allowed to raise their voice to discuss any issues. They are expected to be fearful and silent because what society thinks of you matters a lot instead of your own beliefs.

Non-verbal Harassment

Every day and everywhere, women face visual harassment whether they wear hijab or modern gear and whether they are young girls, teens, or adults. Every woman is harassed by a man once in her lifetime. It is important to note that a woman cannot complain about visual harassment unless it is physical.

Participant B remarked:

“Whether there is an interview or event, meeting or conference, people look at you in an inappropriate way that shakes your confidence.”

Ethic education should be provided to everyone. Women should be respected not as a gender but as a human being.

Taboo

There are some issues that are still unaddressed because females do not open up for the sake of their family and their own dignity in the society.

Role of Management

Participant B explained:

“There are codes of conduct and policies on harassment, but on paper only. No one can take action because none of us report, otherwise we will be fired or harassed or pressurized to leave the job.”

Participant F shared:

“You cannot complain. You can only compromise or adjust or hide yourself. Because the people you complain have the same mind-set.”

Discussion

Despite the overall improvement in the movement of women’s empowerment and inequality, yet it exists in societies, organizations, institutions, and homes, which create barriers for women to pursue their careers. Through the analysis and findings of this research study, it has been confirmed that females experience challenges in terms of family support, education, gendered biasness, and harassment, which affect their participation in professional learning activities and commitments (Acker, 2010). Their predefined roles towards their home commitments hinder their capabilities, competencies, and skills despite having good qualification and potential to lead and manage. It was also found that some females want to remain at a lower hierarchical level in order to look after their families. This is indicated in a study conducted by Bosse & Taylor (2012). The study also signposts that encouraging women to get education has benefits not only for the families and communities, but also for the whole society as it will bring innovation and increase the proportion of women in public and private universities by making them more representative. Education has the potential to transform values, attitudes, and outcomes for girls and young women employment. There is a need for social change or transformation to support gender equality, provide equal opportunities both as a natural form of social evolution, and a necessary element for the social development of the society. As indicated from the study findings, women should be empowered at all stages of their lives, which matches with a study conducted by Ellemers (2018). Yet, within academic institutions, power hierarchies emerge that favour men and the masculine, while undermining women and the feminine (Roberto et al., 2020). This nepotism should be shunned so that females are encouraged to make their opinions, fight for their rights, and control their own lives by taking individual decisions.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

As far as the recommendations are concerned, the following are proposed:

- Family should understand the value of women’s education, career, and professional development.
- Appropriate counselling and mentoring should be provided to them for their career selection, career growth, and professional development.
- All educational institutions should provide equal opportunities to both male and female in order to create equality. Institutions should revise their hiring policies and encourage women to apply at all hierarchical level.
- They should be assessed and encouraged with positive feedback in order to create a productive learning environment.

- Typical mind-sets should be challenged by providing or promoting women to top academic positions.
- Women should be respected not as a gender but as an individual.
- Code of conduct should be revised and awareness programs developed to promote respectable and friendly environment.
- Organizations should make anti-harassment committee to reduce and eliminate the issues of harassments.

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