

A Qualitative Study of Pakistani Working Women's Advancement towards Upper Level Managerial Positions

Muhammad Tahir¹

Abstract

Women's presence at top managerial positions is less than men across the world and Pakistan is also no exception. Pakistan is a conservative and male dominated society where working women face a lot of obstacles while making advancement in their careers. However, due to the increase in literacy rate and greater efforts from government, civil societies, and media, working women and women at managerial positions are becoming more acceptable by the society. Keeping in view this changing scenario, the objective of the current study is to understand the working women's experiences, barriers, and related issues while making advancement towards managerial level positions. The study is qualitative in nature and used phenomenology as a main mode of inquiry. Sample of the study was drawn from banking, education, and telecom sector in Pakistan. Data was collected from thirty female managers working at various levels among the three mentioned sectors. Key findings of the study are that Pakistani female managers face familial, organizational, and cultural barriers. The study also identified that there is greater acceptance of female managers as compared to the past. Moreover, Pakistani female managers also possess some unique leadership characteristics which are not very common among male managers.

Keywords: *Female Managers, Attitude, Stereotyping, Diversity, Pakistan*

1. Introduction

Pakistan, a South Asian country with population of approximately 180 million, comprises of 51% females out of its total population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Conditions in Pakistan are not very suitable for female as due to cultural and religious influence, women are often subject to discrimination, violence, and other

¹ Assistant Professor, School of Management and Social Sciences, Iqra National University, Peshawar. Email: tahirkhanzaee@gmail.com

strict rules and regulations. This situation is also evident in reports by some well-known international agencies, for example a report by Thomas Reuters Foundation (2011) rated Pakistan among the top five worst countries in the world to be a woman in. Similarly, a Global Gender Gap Report showed that Pakistan scored low on all developmental indexes including female's educational attainments, availability of health facilities, political empowerment, economic participation, and opportunities for women (Hausman, Tyson & Zahidi, 2012). Traditionally, in Pakistan, women assume the role of care taker for family and mostly stay at home. However, this situation is changing as in Pakistan, more women are assuming the dual role of care taker for family as well as worker in various fields or as an entrepreneur. The statistics from Pakistan Bureau of Statistics report support this proposition as it shows that females labour force participation rate in Pakistan was about 21% in year 2007-2008 which increased to 24% by 2013 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2014). The change can be credited to improvement in education and general openness in society. It can be argued that conditions for working females in Pakistan is coming to a cross road where at one side there is support and improvement, and on the other side, there are barriers in career progression such as inequality in pay, discrimination in recruitment, and bullying at workplace (Saeed, 2004). Little research has been conducted on the topic of female managers in Pakistan; therefore, the key motivation of this study is to enhance our understanding of female manager's problems and experiences in the context of Pakistan.

2. Literature Review

Research on the theme of female managers and leaders has increased during the last two decades. From the literature, it can be established that there is shortfall of women at senior managerial level positions; and women mostly occupy middle-level positions in organization, thus, facing horizontal as well as vertical occupational segregation (Lynnes & Schraders, 2006; Catalyst, 2005; Powell & Graves, 2003). The low representation of females is mostly due to the barriers such as 'career' and 'perceptual' faced by female workers (Swanson & Woitke, 1997). Attitudinal and structural barriers are confirmed by several studies such as Catalyst (2005) pointed that despite occupying almost half of different management positions, women only constitute about 2% of Fortune 500 CEO positions. Common factors such as

additional responsibilities on females for looking after the family, lack of role models, and negative attitude towards female managers are creating hidden barriers for female to progress to the top level positions (Catalyst, 2005; Brown, 1979).

Several studies conducted at international level concluded that there is a negative or less favourable attitude towards female managers by workers. Example includes an attitudinal study based in America conducted by Sutton and Moore in 1965 and repeated in 1985, found that attitude towards female executives has only slightly improved over the course of 20 years. Similarly, an attitudinal study conducted in Chinese context focused on sales workforce and found that male respondents showed more negative attitude towards female sales managers compared to the female respondents (Liu, Comer, & Dubinsky, 2001). In Middle Eastern countries, a study conducted by Abdalla (1996) found that there is some improvement in the region towards accepting females at managerial role; however, there is still reluctance from Arab men to give greater autonomy to the females. In Pakistan, a study conducted by Guney, Gohar, Akinci, Kilic, & Mutlu (1996) compared the attitude towards female executives between Pakistan and Turkey. The study found that there is more positive attitude towards female executives in Pakistan as compared to Turkey. A recent study is conducted by Batool & Tahir (2016) on attitude towards female managers in Pakistan. The findings of the study indicate that there are certain barriers faced by female managers; however, now there is greater acceptance towards female managers in Pakistan. Overall, most of the findings of aforementioned and similar studies acknowledged that females face attitudinal and structural barriers in making progress and attitude towards female managers is often negative and considerably different based on gender.

Various theories such as role congruity theory, organizational constraint theory, theory of numbers, and gate keeper theory explains the low presence of women at top level of organizations' hierarchy and the barriers faced by female workers. For example, according to role congruity theory, leadership itself is a masculine phenomenon and hence it does not fit very well with caring and soft stereotypical role of female (Madeline, 2001; Heilman, 2001; Schein, 1975). Similarly, according to organizational constraint theory, women face numerous

constraints within the organization which shapes women's behaviour, motivation, and self-efficacy; which in return results in lesser degree of progression towards the higher level positions in organization (Cecilia & Shanti, 1999; Blackmore, 1998). Limited support and networking for women, low line management experience, very few role models, long working hours, and inflexible work schedule are typical organizational constraints which impede women's progression to the managerial level (Crampton & Mishra, 1999). Another name given to such barriers is 'glass ceiling', a term which was first introduced by US Department of Labour in 1980s. Glass ceiling formally refers to the artificial barriers faced by female managers which restrict qualified females from making progress towards higher managerial levels (US Department of Labour, 1991). A third related theory is the theory of number which focuses on the numerical minority of women in groups dominated by males (Kanter, 1977). The theory hypothesizes that women face discrimination due to their low presence in management positions and, thus, their effectiveness as a leader is tempered due to the assessment made by the male members (Bowen, Swim, & Jacobs, 2000).

Finally, gatekeeper theory focuses on the hiring process which is predominated by males and results in less number of female entering in the organization (Tallerico, 2000). The theory further states that males involved in hiring and selection process make decisions under the influence of factors such as gender stereotyping and similarity attraction dynamics which results in bias towards selecting females. The theories discussed above are just few of many theories which explain the low representation of women at the top managerial positions and barriers faced by female managers while pursuing their careers and making progress. Based on such theories, it can be concluded that women faces a lot of barriers and attitudinal bias while making progress in their careers. Since, there are only few studies conducted on this topic; therefore, this study is intended to fill the literature gap. The objective of this paper is set to explore the experiences of Pakistani females as managers and also establishing the structural barriers and attitudinal and behavioural biases faced by them.

3. Methodology

The following section provides details about the research design, interview contents, population and sampling issues, and data collection procedure.

3.1. Research Design:

Research design refers to the plan and structure of the investigation conducted to achieve evidence for answering the research question posed (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993). Before selecting a research design, a researcher normally adopts certain worldview to carry on research. Such worldview or philosophy is called a paradigm and its subtypes mostly range from positivism, post-positivism to constructivism. Selection of a particular paradigm enable researcher to make certain assumptions and adopt certain research design and methodology. This study is based on constructivism philosophy which states that reality is socially constructed and should be understood by in-depth analysis with the help of interaction with participants. Having decided about the paradigm, the authors are also aware that by very nature of the study, there is inclination towards advocacy and feminist perspective. Consistent with the constructivism paradigm, the study utilized qualitative methodology and adopted the phenomenology method (Creswell, 1998). Phenomenology has focused on understanding the essence of experiences about particular phenomena. For interviews, a tentative set of questions were developed which set the tone for the interview process. Additional questions were also asked as required during the interview process. Broadly, the following questions were included in interview.

- In your opinion, what are the barriers faced by the Pakistani female managers and women workers pursuing managerial careers?
- How is your experience of becoming a manager?
- Did you find any differences in people's behaviour and attitude mainly because of your gender?
- Do you think that Pakistani women can be successful managers?
- In your opinion, do Pakistani women possess similar or any unique leadership and management styles?
- Do you have any suggestions for Pakistani female managers, female workers, and their organizations?

3.2. Population and Sampling Procedure

The population of this study is all female managers in Pakistan who are working at some managerial or executive capacity; however, the actual number of population is not very clear. The sample was taken from banking, education, and telecom sector of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Due to the nature of the study, non-probability purposive sampling was used. The demographic profile of the respondents is given in the table below.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Interview Respondents

	Interview Respondents (n=30)	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)
GENDER		
Male	0	0
Female	30	100
AGE GROUP		
25 Years and less	01	3.33
26 to 40 Years	17	56.66
41 Years and above	12	40
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL		
14 Years	12	40
16 Years and Above	18	60
ORGANIZATIONAL OWNERSHIP		
Public	10	33.3
Private	16	53.3
Semi-Public	4	13.3
ORGANIZATION'S NATIONALITY		
Pakistani	20	66.6
Foreign	10	33.3
INDUSTRY		
Banking	10	33.3
Education	10	33.3
Telecom	10	33.3

All respondents were females and all of the respondents had Bachelor degree or above. Seventeen respondents fall in to the age group of 26 to 40 years and twelve respondents were in the age group of 41 and above. Ten respondents belonged to the public sector, sixteen to the private sector, and four to the semi-public organization. Twenty respondents belonged to the Pakistani organizations, while, ten belonged to the foreign ownership.

3.3. Data Analysis

Qualitative data collected through interviews were analysed by using a framework given by Miles & Huberman (1994). The framework is compatible with phenomenology method and suggests that qualitative data analysis should include three steps namely data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusion. The interview data collected were revisited several times and key themes were drawn which were used for drawing conclusions.

4. Analysis

Qualitative data obtained by interview process generated three themes. Details of these themes are as under.

Theme 1: Barriers Faced by Pakistani Female Managers

First theme, which emerged from the data is that females face barriers which are familial, cultural, and organizational in nature. Familial barriers include caring for family and no permission of work after marriage. A lot of Pakistani families still follow the norm that men will be involved in economic activity, while women's job will be to stay at home and look after the family. Similarly, many Pakistani men do not like that their wives go out of the house and work somewhere. Cultural barriers include gender segregation (*Purdah*) which creates problems for example women cannot travel alone or stay late at work. The *purdah* system also excludes women from attending certain events such as training programs, seminars, and so on. Organizational barriers mostly stems from gender stereotypes held by male managers. Similarly, organizations also hesitate to invest in female career development as females often have short careers due to marriage and relocation issues. Overall, these barriers reduce women's chances and willingness to accept managerial positions which, subsequently, results in less number of women to make it to the higher level. Overall, many respondents hold the opinion that barriers exist for females; however, they also acknowledge that such barriers for females in Pakistan are gradually decreasing. Some of the common responses are as under.

"You know very well about our culture (Pakistani). Women face problems everywhere, including family, public places, classrooms, and offices etc. Women have

to be strong enough to resist such problems and type of behaviour to show their full potential”

“I know many talented female colleagues who had exceptionally good education track. They started work but got married after some time and then this was either an end or a big break in their careers”

“Even when a female worker qualifies for managerial role, their organization hesitates to handover managerial role to them. This is because of less confidence placed on the females and their commitment to the organizations”

“Purdah was a big problem ten years ago, but now the concept of purdah is decreasing. Now a lot of women are observing purdah and still successfully achieving managerial careers”

Theme 2: Acceptance of Female Managers

Second theme, which emerged from the data is that now there is greater acceptance for female managers in Pakistan. According to the respondents, employees see female managers as manager rather than a female and employee’s behaviour and attitude is reasonably good towards the female managers. Furthermore, there was greater resistance towards female managers few years ago but as the time is passing; the acceptance towards female managers and female workers is increasing. There is also indication that subordinates perceive female managers as more intelligent, hardworking, and superior over male managers. Moreover, organizations also reap the benefits of having a female manager because it helps in creating a better working environment. Female managers are also considered superior in selling ideas to organizational members as well as handling difficult customers. There is some resistance coming from top management or same level male managers who find it difficult to accept women as a manager. Some of the common responses are as under:

“Our society has relatively opened up now. Females can be found everywhere including the top managerial positions”

“I have been working as a manager for several years but did not find any problem at all. When people see female as a manager, they give her more respect”

“Once a woman becomes manager, there are certainly no issues from the employees or external customers. However, top managers or other similar rank employees do show some negative attitude towards female managers”

“Male managers perceive female managers as problematic. This is sometimes a source of conflict and tension in organizations”

Theme 3: Unique Characteristics of Female Managers

The third theme, which emerged from the data is that Pakistani female managers have some unique characteristics which are found less common among male managers. According to the respondents, Pakistani female managers are more adaptable, learning oriented, and consensus driven. Moreover, their way of handling teams and resolving conflicts is also very efficient. However, a negative side of Pakistani female managers is that they are more involved in organizational politics and rivalries which can prove negative for organizations. Some of the common responses are as under.

“Females in our society are trained to be more democratic and adaptable”

“Upon marriage, females have to leave their parents’ house and move to their husband’s house and thus adjust with their in-laws. Therefore, they develop some very positive skills which are also reflected in their management style”

“We (females) possess positive aspects such as maintaining harmonious relationships with groups, listening to others, and creating flexibility which make us successful managers”

“There is a perception that females are more involved in playing political games and this is quite true”

“Politics is a part of our (Women’s) life. Politics is involved in our domestic life and certainly it is used in organizational life as well”

4.1. Discussion

The objective of the study was to explore the experiences of Pakistani females as managers and enquire about barriers and biases faced by them. Interviews were conducted with thirty female managers working in three key sectors of Pakistani economy. Overall, the findings indicate that females face barriers while making progress in their career as managers. Such barriers are also reported in other international studies (Brown, 1979; Liu, Comer, & Dubinsky, 2001; Abdalla, 1996; Guney et al., 1996). In Pakistani context, a study of women in higher educational institutes found that women in management encounter familial and organizational

barriers (Ghaus & Raja, 2013). Our findings also indicate that once females become managers then they don't face much attitudinal or behavioural problems from workers or customers. These findings can be explained by the concept of power distance and individualism/collectivism dimensions of Hofstede (1980). According to Hofstede, Pakistani culture is mostly high power distance and collectivist in nature. In such type of culture, people are loyal to their group as well as leader and do not develop negative attitude or feelings regardless of the leader's gender (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000).

Our results also acknowledge that now there is greater acceptance towards female managers. These results are also similar to the findings of other studies which found that now there is greater acceptance towards female managers in Pakistan (Guney et al., 1996; Batool & Tahir, 2016). These positive results can be associated with a lot of efforts from government, civil societies, media, and other International organizations which are making efforts for females in Pakistani society for very long time. Such steps include Pakistani constitution (1973) which gives equal rights to women and also instructs the government's subsidiary organizations to make special provisions for the protection of women and children. Women's political and economic empowerment remained on agenda of previous several governments, which resulted in separate ministry for Women Development at Federal level, creation of all women banks and police stations, and setting quota for females in government jobs. Several bills and laws have been passed related to female equality, female rights, and avoidance of discrimination and harassment towards female workers. As a result of such legislations, number of women in federal and provincial parliaments has also increased. Currently, women can be seen as actively involved in Pakistani politics for example Maryam Nawaz, who is the daughter of a famous politician and current Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, is considered a role model for younger females in Pakistan. Contrary to common Western misperception, Islam is also quite soft towards females. In Islam, women are given rights to choose partner and get share in deceased husband's and father's property. Furthermore, women are also encouraged to get education in Islam. The emergence of media such as Pakistani news channels and social media including Facebook and Twitter is also a possible source of reduction in negative perception towards female managers and workers. Our findings

also indicate that Pakistani female managers have some unique management and leadership characteristics. Such unique characteristics can be associated with female upbringing in Pakistan. This finding also indicates that females in Pakistan are not making male managers as their role model. This question remains unexplored for future researchers as whether Pakistani female managers are showing unique characteristics as a result of their upbringing or by following some female ideals or a combination of both factors. Overall, it can be concluded that women in Pakistan are certainly gaining acceptance in organizational world.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study and in the light of literature, it can be concluded that female workers in Pakistan face familial, cultural, and organizational barriers which reduces their chances and ability to reach to the top level managerial level positions. Moreover, despite such barriers, Pakistani women are making progress and are now working at managerial positions, which were previously considered only for males. There is also improvement in Pakistani society in terms of acceptance towards female workers and managers. These results are also an indicator of a broader change in Pakistani society.

5.1. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the current study, following recommendations are put forward.

- Organization should create a favourable environment and better management policies for females so that females can easily progress in their managerial careers and organization can also take benefits of the diversity.
- Female managers should also provide counselling and role modelling to their junior female colleagues so that they can make progress in their careers.
- Human Resource function and personnel should focus on creating better policies and practices for females. Examples can be flexible working timings as well as greater attention in recruitment and selection process.
- Government should also play its role by making new as well as enforcing existing laws to make working environment safer and supportive for females.

- Media can play a positive role by running awareness campaign and educating the society about gender issues.
- Civil societies and non-government organizations should also be involved in lobbying as well as developing awareness programs for the masses.

5.2. Limitations

Limitations of the study include scope of the study, sampling, and methodology adopted which makes the generalization of the findings difficult. The study is limited in scope since it only focused on females for data collection and did not get data from other sources such as subordinates to get a better picture of reality. The study draw non-random sample from three main industries and mainly relied on qualitative data collected through interviews. Generally, the qualitative data analysis is heavily influenced by a researcher's personal values and perception. which are difficult to detach from analysis. Therefore, in current study, small and non-random sampling along with interpretation bias remains a limitation of the study. A future researcher can overcome these limitations by adopting a broader scope of the study with larger sample and better data collection and analysis techniques.

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