

Striving beyond limits: women academics and the glass ceiling in Turbat, Balochistan

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Abstract

Gender discrimination against women is a global phenomenon, though its extent varies across countries and even within different regions of the same country. In Turbat, Balochistan, women experience gender-based segregation, and many face restrictions in pursuing higher education. This research explores the challenges and invisible barriers women in Turbat face in accessing higher education and attaining administrative positions in higher educational institutions. This study used a qualitative approach, conducting in-depth interviews with 30 women academics from the University of Turbat and Government Girls College, Turbat. The data were thematically analyzed, and the findings reveal that women face multiple challenges and structural barriers, highlighting the existence of a glass ceiling within the higher educational institutions of Turbat.

Keywords: Glass Ceiling, Experiences of Women, Barriers and Challenges, Higher Education Institutions, Turbat.

Introduction

Higher education is considered a pillar of country development not only in terms of its economic development but also social development as well (Batool, Sajid, & Shaheen, 2013; Shaukat & Pell, 2015). A key aspect of this contribution is women's access to higher education, while women's engagement in teaching, research and academic leadership is recognised as part of achieving SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable education (Ferguson & Roofe, 2020).

Around the world, women's rate of higher education has increased significantly, with women's enrolment in higher education almost tripling between 1995 and 2018, but this increase has not been reflected in their representation at the highest levels of academic

leadership. As of 2018, women make up just 43% of tertiary-education faculty globally and about one-fifth of top universities have female leadership, while senior academic and decision-making roles are still largely male-dominated (Hurtado, 2021). Similar trends are found in other parts of South Asia: In Pakistan, women make up 22% of the labour force, compared to 67.8% of men, and female representation is even lower in senior administrative positions in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Patchamuthu & Grown, 2017; Khokhar, 2018); in India, women make up 50% of the university workforce, but have seen only 16% increase in representation in faculty roles since 2006 (Correa, Glas, & Opara, 2024; UNESCO, 2020; Jauhar & Lau, 2018).

This underrepresentation is influenced by interlocking structural and cultural barriers such as patriarchal lines of authority, limited mobility, financial constraints, and the gender stereotype of women being unsuited to leadership (Sahin, 2014; Bindu, 2022; Schuh, Bark, Van Quaquebeke, Hossiep, Frieg, & Van Dick, 2014). It is often expected of women in leadership positions to maintain nurturing, deferential behaviours, and women who do not do so are negatively sanctioned for not playing within the gender roles they are expected to play (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). In the context of Balochistan, previous studies highlighted a significant burden of teaching workload, lack of publication assistance, and a climate that does not encourage women's leadership aspirations as some of the major hindrances to institutional progress (Ullah, Changezi, Baloch, & Batool, 2018; Ghaffar, Rauf, & Khaskheli, 2024).

The image of a “glass ceiling” helps to illustrate the invisible barriers that may stand in the way of women who are qualified for promotion to the next level in their careers, simply because they are women (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001; Maume, 2004). According to Cotter et al (2001), a glass ceiling occurs when a gender gap (a) cannot be attributed to other job-relevant characteristics; (b) is more pronounced at a higher level of the hierarchy than at lower levels; (c) is an expression of unequal chances to move up the hierarchy rather than simply representation; and (d) is increasingly evident along the course of a career. It was initially created for the corporate sector, but has since been adapted to academia in various countries around the world, such as Iran, where gender-based stereotypes in occupations are a key determinant (Ramezani et al., 2021), and Turkey, where promotion systems are formally transparent but less so in practice (Bulbul, 2021).

Although the number of such studies is increasing worldwide, there is little empirical research on the glass ceiling in Pakistani higher education, and very little in the more remote and conservative districts of Balochistan. The context of Turbat, District Kech, is one in which there is a high status of male authority in society, limited mobility for women, and conservative views on coeducation and the institutional requirements of academic careers. The empirical study to date has not examined these dynamics in the context of the career paths of women academics in this context. To answer these questions,

the present study focuses on answering the following questions: What are the invisible barriers women academics in Turbat face to pursue higher education and academic advancement? and How do invisible barriers combine to create a glass ceiling within the higher education institutions studied? The study provides context specific evidence in responses to these questions, the answers to which are largely lacking from the body of scholarship on the glass ceiling, which is largely of the center-periphery variety.

Literature Review

The issue of gender equality in higher education has gained a lot of momentum in recent years, given that there is still a significant amount of evidence showing that universities are not as successful with recruiting, retaining and promoting women academics (UNESCO, 2021). Although women are important role models for future female leaders in education, a significant gap exists between women as students and women as institutional leaders. This is where the numbers fall short for women in the United Kingdom; though they account for 56.6% of the university student population, only 45.3% of the higher education workforce and only 27.5% of leadership and management roles (Hewitt, 2020; Osho, 2018; Oberholzer, 2021). It's a trend that many people have no idea is happening, or they may think it's a coincidence, but it simply is the bias of academic institutions, which prejudices women despite their qualifications (Pardhan, 2018).

This disparity in the leadership of academia is not restricted to any particular area of the world. Gender-equality campaigns and talk have not equally translated into representation in academic leadership in Western Europe, with women having fewer opportunities to showcase their abilities (Safdar & Rudi, 2017; Bindu, 2022). In Iran, gender stereotyping based on occupational segregation has been recognized as the most powerful cause of the glass ceiling in academic medicine (Ramezani et al., 2021), and in Turkey, the lack of transparency in promotion criteria, which are sustained informally, has not been the sole cause of the glass ceiling effect (Bulbul, 2021). These trends are seen in India and China, too, where women having higher education and jobs still face challenges in their careers similar to those found in the West (Yadav & Khanna, 2014). Even in India, though women are more in number than men in many fields such as medicine, both visible and invisible forms of gender discrimination continue to hinder women's progress in the workplace and their economic involvement generally (Varghese & Panigrahi, 2019).

In South Asia, Pakistan has one of the lowest percentages of women working in the labour force, only behind Afghanistan (Khokhar, 2018). Although women's employment in schools has grown over the years, the same trend does not apply to universities, where, despite the presence of a few women in senior positions in administration and teaching, the percentage of women in senior roles in administration and deanship of departments is still low (Correa et al., 2024). Women are further characterized by vertical segregation, in terms of their underrepresentation at higher levels, and horizontal segregation, with underrepresentation in STEM, construction, and technology-related occupations

(UNESCO, 2020; Jauhar & Lau, 2018).

The situation of women academics in Balochistan is different from the national level as women academics have been found to have a separate set of problems such as lesser research output and publication support, heavy and rigid teaching loads and institutional cultures that discourage women's ambitions to become leaders (Ullah et al., 2018; Ghaffar, Rauf, & Khaskheli, 2024). In the literature, however, this is still limited and one study has yet to specifically focus on how these dynamics play out in a higher education setting, where conservative social norms on female mobility and co-education are especially strong, such as those found in the conservative society of Turbat. This study aims to fill this gap by offering the first empirical and qualitative report on the glass ceiling phenomenon as experienced by female academics of Turbat.

Theoretical Framework

The glass ceiling effect (Cotter et al., 2001) is the analytical lens of this study, and two other theories are used to complement it and explain the social production and maintenance of the glass ceiling: social role theory and social exclusion theory.

According to Eagly's (1987) social role theory, gender stereotypes are a product of the traditional division of labour between men and women in society. Socialisation programs men to be primary breadwinners in assertive and public roles, and women to be homemakers, who are expected to perform at home and care for others. These socially created roles unobtrusively create barriers in institutional systems that hinder women's progress without taking into account their personal abilities. In its application to this study, social role theory can help to identify the reasons why women academics in Turbat are not encouraged to pursue careers in the traditionally "male" sphere of administrative work: this is because the socialisation they have received in their families and communities, and which they have internalised, makes this path less appealing to them. Another interesting and more structural approach is the social exclusion theory (Jehoel-Gijsbers & Vrooman, 2007), which considers social exclusion as a multi-dimensional process involving material insecurity, lack of access to social rights, lack of participation, and lack of acceptance in existing culture. Applied here, this theory sheds light on the way that the social and cultural norms found in Turbat limit access to the material and social resources—mobility, family support, financial independence—women need to obtain to pursue their higher education and institutional advancement and exacerbates the social role theory-identified barriers. The two theoretical perspectives discussed above will be used in this case to analyze the specific cases of gendered restrictions and the overall scenario of structural exclusions described below.

Methods

Research Design

The qualitative research design was used in this study because it was appropriate for the lived experiences and career challenges of women academics in higher education, which are contextually nuanced in nature and therefore hard to quantify.

Study Setting and Population

The study was carried out in the District Kech, Turbat, Balochistan. The target population consisted of female faculty members of the University of Turbat and Government Girls Degree College, Turbat, whose lived experiences of higher education and institutional advancement was the focus of inquiry.

Sampling

The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which was used to select participants who could speak directly to the study focus. At least one year of teaching service and current residence and employment in Turbat were required. The final sample consisted of 30 participants (20 from the University of Turbat and 10 from Government Girls Degree College, Turbat). Recruitment continued until no new themes arose from subsequent interviews; in this purposive sample, thematic saturation was reached.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by a pre-developed interview guide incorporating open-ended and probing questions. Twenty-three interviews were conducted face-to-face at the participants' institutions, and seven were conducted by telephone with participants unavailable in person during the data-collection period. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. Institutional permission and participant scheduling were confirmed prior to data collection, and all interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework: familiarisation with the transcribed data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final narrative report (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Codes were generated inductively from the transcripts and iteratively grouped and merged into the eight themes presented in the Findings section.

Trustworthiness

Rigour was discussed following the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985) for trustworthiness in qualitative research. This was enhanced by the extended time spent with participants during interviews and the peer debriefing between the three authors during coding to build credibility. Dependability and confirmability were aided by the thorough audit trail of the coding process, starting from codes to themes. Although transferability is not discussed directly, the paper is richly described and includes contextual participant accounts throughout the paper to enable readers to evaluate the applicability of the findings in a similar setting.

Ethical Considerations

Research procedures followed standard qualitative research guidelines with human research participants such as voluntary participation, informed consent, and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. Before the interview, all participants were given an overview of the study, and they were informed of the opportunity to participate and consented to be audio-recorded verbally and/or in writing. In this paper, participants are not identified by any information, but by codes (P1–P30) which are anonymous.

Findings and Discussion

This section first presents the socio-demographic profile of participants, followed by the eight themes derived from thematic analysis.

Socio-demographic Characteristics

Table 1. *Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents*

Socio-demographic Characteristics	<i>F</i>	%
Education		
BS	2	7
Masters	8	27
MS	3	10
M.Phil.	15	50
PhD	2	7
Field/subject		
Education	4	13
English	6	20
Sociology	2	7
History	1	3
Urdu	2	7
Balochi	2	7
Management science	2	7
Computer science	1	3
Economics	3	10

Socio-demographic Characteristics	<i>F</i>	%
Chemistry	2	10
Bio-tech	1	3
Physics	1	3
Zoology	1	3
Botany	1	3
Position at Uni/College as an Employee		
Lecturer	28	93
Assistant professor	1	3
HOD (Acting)	1	3
Nature of Employment		
Contract	7	23
Visiting	4	13
Permanent	7	63
Marital status		
Single	13	43
Married	17	57
Family Type		
Nuclear	10	33
Joint	20	67
Age		
20-25	3	10
26-30	12	40
31-35	9	30
36-40	6	20
Years of Services		
1-5	20	67
6-10	6	20
11-15	3	10
16-20	1	3
Monthly Income:		
Up to 25000	2	7
25001-50000	6	20
50001-75000	9	30
75001-100000	12	40
above 100000	1	3

Findings

Theme 1: Reasons for joining Academia as a Profession

Many female faculty members join academia because women in many families are restricted to the medical field or education. Because of these limited options, females do not opt for other professions. Women also consider teaching to be more comfortable and suitable.

As one of the respondents highlighted: “Females themselves choose to come towards academia, because it is more comfortable and suitable for them.”

This shows that females choose their careers based on how they can manage their time. Regarding the limited options for females, a respondent shared her experiences: “I joined academia because my family does not allow me to go into other fields. I have done my MSc in economics. Several opportunities are available in banking; the State Bank of Pakistan announced the post, but as a female, I was not permitted to apply”.

The data highlights that the teaching profession is chosen because families allow it in the name of family values, showing limited opportunities for females. Only a few interviewees saw their passion in the teaching field.

Theme 2: Invisible Barriers

Females face certain challenges and hurdles that keep them behind in almost every aspect of work life. Invisible barriers in the daily lives of females are a major hindrance to acquiring higher education and gaining positions in higher educational institutions; among other invisible barriers, a few are discussed here.

2.1. Time Management Issues (Balancing Public and Private Life)

While trying to enroll and participate in higher education, many females struggle to manage their time between private and public life. It becomes tougher for married women since they have to take care of their homes and kids.

As one of the respondents shared how she tries to manage public and private spheres of life: “...Being a female, I have to do all the domestic work, in the morning after completing the domestic work, then I get ready for college..... Being a mother, it is more difficult to take care of the baby, home, and institutional work [doing MPhil]. The duty is not limited to working hours; when you come back home, you have to check assignments, prepare lectures, check papers, and for the arrangement of programs and activities, you have to give extra time and effort...”.

Keeping up with home and work life can be tiresome for women, especially those continuing higher studies along with a job and the responsibilities of extended families. Managing work and family life equally can be challenging for women, as giving more time to one sphere can negatively affect the other. One of the respondents mentioned that:”... Challenges are many, like time. In an administrative position, more time is required, and females are afraid that they cannot manage the time...”.

Many times, females do not want to take on a decision-making position because they fear they cannot manage time between both spheres of life, which makes them lag in acquiring higher positions.

2.2. Transportation Issues

In Turbat, women rarely drive themselves, and traveling alone on public transport to distant areas is socially discouraged. Although vehicles are available at home, women typically do not own them and depend on male family members for mobility. Women face transportation challenges because most men in the family are occupied with work. This dependency creates an invisible barrier that is rarely discussed in conversations about gendered challenges. In this regard, a respondent said: "Transportation is a huge issue. There is no local transportation, no conveniences, and vehiclesI cannot travel alone; even if there were meetings in other cities, I have to go with a male from home because of cultural issues."

Another faculty member who did her M.Phil. at the University of Turbat was from a far-flung area (Nasirabad) of Turbat and also faced difficulties managing transportation, so she had to pay extra and struggled to get her degree on time.

Although the University of Turbat provides transportation for female students, it is insufficient for all students, according to teachers. Although female self-driving is emerging, driving in Turbat can still be time-consuming for women.

2.3. Sexual Harassment and Unconscious Bias

Sexual harassment and unconscious bias are two of the major concerns regarding females' higher education, indicating that such issues are not observed as much as they are observed in larger cities. But some responses show that, though these cases are not in alarming numbers, they are still alarming. When asked about the sexual harassment cases, a college faculty member said:

".... A student came to the principal to ask for transportation, even though her home was near; when asked why they needed transportation, she clarified that a man in the street chased them and sexually assaulted them; because of this, many students left the school..."

While waiting for university transportation on the main road, many students face harassment, because of which many students get mentally disturbed and prefer to quit studying. Unconscious bias, an invisible barrier, prevails in many male-dominated societies. A commonly observed issue is that little effort goes into facilities for females, such as daycare centers, and they receive little attention. A respondent said: "There is one thing that males are dominant in; the thing is mentality. We cannot remove it from society. The males indirectly tell you that you cannot do it; give it to a male; he can better do it."

It is thought that females are not qualified for certain tasks, like arranging extracurricular activities and programs, without considering their opinion, and they are not given chances to come forward.

Theme 3: Financial Issues

One of the greatest problems faced by females in higher education is financial issues. Many parents cannot afford the expenses of higher education. Scholarships are not provided to all students, and parents may not have enough income to cover semester fees and other educational expenses. As shared by a respondent: "It's a financial issue; females face this more because it is considered that education for females is not important, they have to get married anyway and look after the house so why study..... they'll rather send their boys for education because boys will support them later, and girls will get married and go to another house, so why spend it on the girl and this can be a reason."

Some financially weak families prefer to send boys to school, seeing sons as an asset for the future, while daughters will eventually marry as a cultural norm. Girls' education as necessary and essential gets overlooked. Only a few students get the chance to pursue higher education, and scholarships are financially challenging.

Theme 4: Cultural Barriers and Social Pressure

Cultural values and norms play a huge role in shaping how institutions work in any society and how people respond to social institutions in that society. In certain conservative situations, coeducation is not considered to be for girls. A respondent said: "... there are some families that do not accept the coeducation system; they mind it, like there is a narrative that we do not go in front of our male cousins; how can we go in front of other guys outside of the family." In conservative settings, coeducation is often viewed negatively, where studying alongside boys can become a social issue for girls. Under societal pressure, many families prevent female students from pursuing higher education because of fear of character judgment and being labeled unfairly.

4.1. Early marriage as a cultural barrier

Early marriages compel girls to quit their studies and take responsibility for the home. In some cases, in-laws also do not allow their daughters-in-law to study, while many others do not get permission to work even after completing their graduation. A respondent said: "... I was 16 years old when I got married, when I had done my matriculation, so for me my early marriage was a huge issue. I had the responsibilities of my husband and his family, so I could not attend my classes regularly; I only took papers. I did not know how to manage my home and educational life, so it was a huge challenge."

Supportive in-laws also cannot change much of a woman's fate, as they are the caretakers of their homes and eventually get stuck between family and studies/work life. Thus, they often do not pursue professions, even after completing higher education.

4.2. Gendered Behaviors and Male Supremacy

Females face gender discriminatory behaviors in their everyday lives; both genders are socialized differently, males being the future providers, while females being homemakers, creating restrictions for females to acquire higher education. Many young women internalize feelings of inferiority, shaped by everyday behaviors that normalize male supremacy and sustain inequality. A respondent points out that: "Another problem in male-dominant society is male chauvinism, where the superiority of females is unacceptable to the opposite gender. Considering females to be weaker, it becomes tougher for males to work under an inferior gender. In the context of the culture, the decision-making authority is given to males, whether it is at home or outside the home."

A respondent shared her experience while she was the HOD of the Urdu department at college: "...I only said to a male teacher that submit your results sooner within the due time; *he refused to teach anymore...*"

Masculinity and power sharing are important perspectives with regard to gaining a leadership position at an institution, since men are heads of the family and authoritative figures, as our cultural background suggests. As a result, some men become intolerant of females in leadership positions.

Discussion

The data gathered in this study reveals that female academics go through different invisible barriers which create hurdles for their progress, these barriers include time management and transportation issues, along with sexual harassment and unconscious biasness. Traveling is generally more difficult for women than it is for males. They thus have fewer chances, and when they do travel, they encounter accessibility and transportation-related mobility restrictions (Kurshitashvili, Carvajal, & Tamayo, 2021). Another study shows how females have to give more time to family because of which females cannot give enough time to work. Datta (2018) wrote that the first justification for keeping women at home is that it is usually the woman who should be taking care of the family. While married women spend up to 14 to 42 percent of their non-leisure time caring for children, married men spend only 1 to 20 percent of their non-leisure time doing so (Datta, 2018). Besides, evidence from the literature strongly implies that there is a gender difference in academia and that both men and women have unintentional, slight bias, Workplace unconscious prejudice is a possible reason. Decisions may be affected unintentionally by our background, experiences, stereotypes, and cultural setting Pradhan (2018).

Unconscious bias does not simply affect men (Afzal & Akar, 2020; Pradhan, 2018). Another invisible barrier that was observed by analyzing data was sexual harassment, the cases are not that much in educational institutions, but students have faced such behaviors more in public places, that is discussed by the study of Datta (2018). The UN reminds us

that women's participation in school, the workforce, and public life is negatively impacted by sexual abuse in public settings. women's progression to executive positions could be delayed or prevented by sexual harassment and other forms of gender discrimination (Bell, McLaughlin, & Sequeira, 2002).

Nevertheless, financial instability is one of the major causes to impede the participation of females in higher education, because many times sons are preferred to get enrolled in higher education if a family is financially weak. Cited by Shaukat and Pell (2015) that families did not support girls' education because of their low rates of income. After marriage, girls were expected to look after the family and the house. Boys are therefore given more attention by parents because they will eventually be expected to support the family financially (Maqsood et al, 2012; Shaukat & Pell, 2015).

Yet another barrier for females' participation is culture and social pressure, the data in this paper shows that females face different cultural stereotypes and social pressure as the perception of coeducation is not considered respectable in our society. The previous study shows the remarks made by girls on how their families felt about co-education put to light the fact that Pakistani families had more or less traditional structures, where mixing boys and girls even for educational purposes was frowned upon. This pattern suggests that co-education may be seen as a threat to the status quo, which favored men and handed less influence to women. Early marriage too is a major hindrance in females' education. Denying girls their right to a higher education could be a sign of a society where gender is divided. By providing females additional household tasks, training them to accept these roles without question, placing little value on girls' education, and giving boys preferential treatment when it comes to family resource investments, gender-specific hurdles were demonstrated (Maqsood, Maqsood, & Raza, 2012).

Analyzing all the data, it becomes clear that our society is a male-dominant society, where male supremacy cannot be questioned. A reason for female deprivation can be because of the gendered behaviors that are imposed, so that male dominance should not be questioned. This is obvious in the findings of the study by Maqsood et al. (2012). The values of a male-dominated culture were reflected in these stereotypical gender roles. The study also made clear that girls had to deal with family resentment in order to persuade their parents to let them enroll in university (Maqsood et al., 2012). The data support that a glass ceiling exists in the higher educational institutions of Turbat. The barriers and struggles that are experienced by the academia of these institutions manifest as such.

Conclusion

This study provides enough data to make it clear that females face greater barriers compared to men, due to which they cannot enroll and participate in higher education as well as their male counterparts. Restrictions that include cultural barriers, biased gender

behavior, and early marriages create problems for females to engage in higher studies

Social pressure that coeducation or higher education is not for females, since they have to look after their household, restrains many parents from sending their daughters to coeducation; this also limits their fields to serve in society. With obvious barriers like financial issues and lack of socio-cultural restrictions, females also struggle because of the invisible barriers mentioned above, i.e., transportation and time management issues, sexual harassment, and unconscious bias. It is quite difficult for females in higher education to balance home and work life, which can make it harder for married females to handle along with a large family's responsibilities.

Limitations of the Study

Since this study focused on the female faculty members in higher educational institutions of Turbat, which were only two institutions, the findings of this paper are limited. Moreover, little research has been done on the glass ceiling in these institutions; thus, no literature was found on the glass ceiling in Turbat specifically. A few studies on gender discrimination and the glass ceiling at the provincial level exist, but the literature review within the context of Baloch society remains inadequate. Further, we could not conduct all 30 interviews face-to-face because of summer vacations; 7 respondents were contacted online. This may have limited the data interviewees provided.

Declaration Statements

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