



Check for updates

Gendered Governmentality and Women's Decision-Making Power in Higher Education: A Qualitative Inquiry into Challenges and Opportunities

Nazia Mushtaq¹ Dr. Muhammad Shabbir Chaudhary²

Article Information [YY-MM-DD]

Received	2026-05-16	Revised	2026-06-15	Accepted	2026-07-11
----------	------------	---------	------------	----------	------------

Citation (APA):

Mushtaq, N & Chaudhary, M, S (2026). Gendered governmentality and women's decision-making power in higher education: A Qualitative inquiry into challenges and opportunities. *Social Sciences Spectrum*, 5(3), 80-94.
<https://doi.org/10.71085/sss.05.03.565>

Abstract

While there now exists a body of quantitative data regarding gendered governmentality in Pakistan's higher education institutions, the life-world realities behind these numbers are under-theorized. Using open-ended data gathered through a survey of 385 women academics at public-sector women colleges in the Multan Division of South Punjab, this study explores the obstacles and possibilities for women in making decisions amid multiple forms of governance –liberal, neoliberal, and authoritarian. Through a three-stage thematic analysis process consisting of data familiarization and coding, axial coding, and interpretative coding based on governmentality studies within a Foucauldian framework, six major themes have been identified: (1) gender discrimination and institutional bias; (2) work-life balance and cultural barriers; (3) leadership and professional development restrictions; (4) impediments to research, publication, and funding; (5) insufficient institutional support and policy implementation; and (6) mentoring, familial support, and individual empowerment as enablers. Results indicate that formal policy measures exist alongside informal exclusions which normalize male dominance by way of nuanced regulations, a feature of gendered governmentality. At the same time, stories of participants shed light on the agency exercised by women to negotiate such barriers. This article will provide a context-sensitive understanding of women's leadership within the patriarchal, bureaucracy-centric education sector. It will also offer relevant suggestions for policy improvement in HEIs in South Punjab and similar environments.

Keywords: Gendered Governmentality, Women in Higher Education, Decision-making Power, Qualitative Thematic Analysis, Pakistan, South Punjab, Foucault.

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Government Graduate College for Women & PhD Scholar, Department of Sociology, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Bosan Road Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.

² Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.

Corresponding Author: Nazia Mushtaq, **Correspondence through:** nazia.sociologist@gmail.com



Content from this work may be used under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgment of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.

1. Introduction

Institutions of Higher Education (HEIs) in Pakistan have posed a central dilemma for women in leadership roles. While on the face of it, women serve as principal, vice principal, head of departments, and senior academics in public sector women colleges established specifically to promote female education, in reality, exercising their decision-making powers is fraught with bureaucracy, culture, and patriarchy that hinder the exercise of their authority in HEIs. This dilemma is even more relevant in the context of the Multan division of Southern Punjab province, which is known for its conservatism.

The existing literature related to women's position in the higher education system of Pakistan has mostly focused on access or enrolment data of women, or on the number of women in leadership development pipelines (Fazal et al., 2025; Batool & Qureshi, 2019). The qualitative research about the experiences of female faculty in terms of resisting and interpreting the governance frameworks of their professional life is quite limited, especially in the socio-institutional framework of South Punjab. This paper aims to fill this gap through a qualitative study.

This quantitative research (which has been published already) showed using PLS-Structural Equation Modelling that the decision-making power is a significant predictor of performance ($\beta=0.707$, $p < 0.001$) for 385 female faculty members at the Multan Division, and that the performance mediates the link between decision-making power and all three forms of governmentality authoritarian, liberal, and neoliberal. In turn, this paper builds upon the structural outcomes obtained in the aforementioned quantitative paper by investigating the qualitative dimensions of challenge and agency in participants' voices.

The analytical perspective is that of governmentality developed by Foucault (1991, 2007), elaborated by feminist theorists who underscore that the technologies of governing are not gender neutral but rather serve to reproduce gender hierarchies through discourse, surveillance, requirements for performance, and regulation of the self (Oksala, 2013; Bacchi & Eveline, 2010). Three types of governmentality have been found especially relevant to HEIs in relation to women: (i) liberal governmentality, which, while acknowledging the agency of women via the discourses of rights, subjects it to proceduralism; (ii) neoliberal governmentality, which governs through performance-based measures and entrepreneurship of the self; and (iii) authoritarian governmentality, which involves centralized hierarchical control constraining autonomy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gendered Governmentality in Higher Education

The idea of governmentality by Foucault denotes the system of institutions, methods of analysis, procedures, and tactics through which power is used to control individuals and population groups (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 2010). Significantly, Foucault posits that modern governance does not rely on coercion but rather creates knowledge and subjectivities that compel individuals to self-govern. The notion of governmentality has been elaborated further by feminists who argue that governmentality is inherently gendered since it has always involved creation of subjectivities and norms that conform to patriarchal ideology, thereby limiting the ability of women to govern effectively despite being accorded equal status (Oksala, 2013; Connell, 2009).

Governance through governmentality in the field of higher education is achieved by way of policy frameworks, performance appraisal frameworks, academic hierarchy, and cultural governance (Ball, 2012). These have been further exacerbated with the introduction of neoliberal reforms that value quantification of results, rankings, and efficiency, all of which negatively impact the heavy

burden of care work borne by women (Morley, 2013; Burke, 2020). Academic research conducted in the Global South, such as that carried out in Pakistan, demonstrates that liberal policy interventions, like anti-discrimination policies and gender sensitisation training workshops, often co-exist with the existence of an authoritarian administrative culture where male informal networks continue to wield control (Shah & Shah, 2012; Batool & Qureshi, 2019). The current literature places these developments within the context of the cultural idioms of exchange whereby Saher and Ali (2025) prove that women academics in Pakistan need to navigate their way around the informal reciprocity of Vartan Bhanji in order to become part of male-dominated professional networks, just like what Mansoor and Saher (2024) found out.

2.2 Women's Leadership and Decision-Making in Pakistan

Since the creation of the HEC in 2002, the higher education system of Pakistan has seen considerable reform through liberalism and neo-liberalism (HEC, 2022). The introduction of gender parity targets, anti-harassment policies, and scholarship programmes for women has ensured that more females enrol in institutions of higher learning. Nonetheless, the structures of inequality are still intact as women are under-represented in terms of occupying academic/administrative leadership positions, and where they occupy leadership positions, their real authority is limited because of centralized governance arrangements (Rashid & Asif, 2025; Malik, 2021). This situation is not exclusive to Pakistan: according to O'Connor (2020), the continuous imbalance in senior-level higher education positions in various national contexts is indicative of masculine organizational practices rather than lack of women in the pipeline.

These aspects manifest in Multan Division of South Punjab: The conservative culture, patriarchal social hierarchy is superimposed on the highly centralized bureaucracy in the Punjab Higher Education Department. Women colleges in this division are controlled at different layers of governance like the affiliating universities, Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education, and the provincial Department itself, thereby reducing institutional autonomy and, in turn, the discretion of women principals and department heads (Tasleem & Hatim, 2024; Kumar & Limbachiya, 2023).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

In this paper, three interrelated theories are brought together to inform its analysis. Firstly, there is the interpretation of Foucault's theory of governmentality in order to understand the way in which the rationalities of liberal, neoliberal, and authoritarian forms of governance influence the behavior of women in making decisions (Foucault, 2007; Lemke, 2001). Secondly, Naila Kabeer's (1999) tripartite framework of empowerment through resources, agency, and accomplishments is employed to analyze the context within which women have the capacity to convert formal power into actual power. Thirdly, Bourdieu's theory of structure and agency is applied in order to analyze the ways in which women reproduce the constraints within the structure of society.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The current paper presents a qualitative component of a mixed-methods research design where the quantitative phase, which has been reported elsewhere, used PLS-SEM to validate a structural model comprising decision-making power, work performance, and three governmentality dimensions. The qualitative component was conducted in parallel and is concerned with the same phenomenon under study by means of open-ended questions integrated into the survey tool. Such

a research design is recommended in cases where one wishes to interpret statistical results through participant stories (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

3.2 Participants and Setting

Qualitative data were collected from the same group of 385 women faculty members from women's colleges in the four districts (Multan, Khanewal, Vehari, and Lodhran) of Multan Division in Pakistan. Respondents came from different academic levels: Lecturer (BPS-17, n = 150, 39%), Assistant Professor (BPS-18, n = 160, 41.6%), Associate Professor (BPS-19, n = 60, 15.6%), and Professor (BPS-20, n = 15, 3.9%). They belonged to 37 different government women's colleges. Most of the respondents were married (68.8%), held M.Phil/MS degree (54.5%), and had one to twenty years of work experience (70.2%).

3.3 Data Collection

The two open-ended questions that were added to the structured questionnaire were as follows: (i) 'What are the specific obstacles that you face in making decisions and leading in your organization?' and (ii) 'What are the opportunities or facilitators that helped in your professional growth and making decisions?' These two questions were generated after conducting a literature review and had been approved by two academic scholars of gender studies and education administration. The answers were written either in English or Urdu, and for Urdu answers, translation was done by the researcher as well as the bilingual academic peer.

3.4 Three-Step Thematic Analysis

The analysis was carried out using the three steps approach as illustrated in Table 1 below. This approach was based on the method of Braun and Clarke (2006) but was modified to fit into the theoretical perspective of Foucault. The steps included (1) familiarization with data and initial coding; (2) axial coding; and (3) interpretative refinement. All the above were done in a reflexive manner by the main researcher.

Table 1: Three-Step Qualitative Thematic Analysis Procedure

Step	Process	Analytical Action	Outcome
Step 1: Data Familiarisation & Initial Coding	Read and re-read open-ended responses; generate initial descriptive codes	Line-by-line coding of 385 open-ended responses using NVivo; researcher reflective memos written after each coding pass	Pool of 248 initial codes capturing raw participant language
Step 2: Theme Development (Axial Coding)	Cluster initial codes into candidate themes; refine by collapsing, splitting or renaming categories	Thematic mapping and constant comparison; negative case analysis; peer debriefing with co-author	Six overarching themes with associated sub-themes and representative quotes
Step 3: Defining, Refining & Interpreting Themes	Write detailed thematic narratives; anchor themes to Foucauldian framework; check against raw data	Member checking with 10 participants; triangulation with quantitative PLS-SEM findings; saturation confirmed	Final six-theme structure integrating participant voices with gendered governmentality theory

Step 1: Data Familiarisation and Initial Coding

The complete responses from all 385 participants were read thoroughly during three different sessions in order to gain a general impression of the dataset. A line-by-line coding approach was then applied with the use of NVivo software. Every piece of meaning was coded by a descriptive code that stayed true to the participant's words. In keeping with the recommended qualitative research practice regarding memo writing (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008), researchers made notes after each coding session as well as their interpretations of the data. This resulted in a set of 248 codes.

Step 2: Axial Theme Development

The initial codes were subjected to comparison and were organized into tentative themes through the thematic map. Those codes related to the same phenomenon were grouped together, while those overlapping with each other were combined together; while those not fitting into any of the clusters were kept as individual categories or disregarded. There was a negative case analysis undertaken wherein the responses seemed to challenge the emerging themes were analyzed so as to question and fortify the boundary of the theme.

Step 3: Defining, Refining, and Interpreting Themes

Theme names, definitions, and rich interpretive quotations followed. The themes were then subjected to interpretation through the lens of the Foucauldian governmentality paradigm, analyzing how participant experience is consistent with the various forms of governmentality

(liberal, neoliberal, and authoritarian). Triangulation was achieved using the results of the quantitative PLS-SEM analysis in the accompanying paper, whereby themes were checked against structural consistencies revealed in the study. Member-checking was done using a purposeful sample of ten participants, who validated the interpretations of the themes through their own experiences.

3.5 Trustworthiness

For trustworthiness, I used Lincoln & Guba's (1985) four-criteria approach, applied as per the pragmatic guidelines suggested by Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules (2017) regarding the demonstration of rigour at all phases of a thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was achieved via prolonged involvement with the data (three complete readings before coding), peer review by my supervisor at each phase of analysis, negative case analysis for testing the candidate themes with disconfirming answers and member validation from a purposeful subset of ten participants who agreed that the themes were consistent with their experiences. Transferability will be ensured with the provision of thick descriptions regarding the research setting, the sample drawn from four districts, and the demographic details of participants, enabling readers to determine whether the results apply to other South Asian Higher Education Institutes. The dependability criteria have been met with the audit trail of the journey of 248 codes into six themes along with dated reflective memos at each stage of analysis (Birks et al., 2008). Reflexivity notes where the positionality of the researcher as an educated woman in the South Punjab Higher Education Institute (HEI) was revealed were used to strengthen confirmability, as well as the triangulation of the qualitative themes with the results of the parallel PLS-SEM. These methods can be considered as meeting a number of the "big tent" indicators of qualitative research quality identified by Tracy (2010) – rich rigor, sincerity, and credibility.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Approval for ethics was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Department of Sociology of Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. All respondents signed the consent form. It was an entirely voluntary study, and participants had the right to leave the study at any point without facing any repercussions. Participant confidentiality was ensured through using code numbers (R1, R2... R385) in place of their personal identifiers.

4. Findings: Six Thematic Domains

An analysis of the open-ended answers provided by the participants was found to reveal six dominant themes. These themes have been presented below along with a narrative, verbatim quotes, and interpretation with respect to governmentality.

Theme 1: Gender Discrimination and Institutional Bias

The most common problem raised at each level and in each district was discrimination based on gender particularly in terms of access to leadership positions, committee work, and decision-making in the institution. It became clear that equal credentials and experiences did not mean equal chances when competing against males.

Theme 1: Gender Discrimination and Institutional Bias

Symbolic Representation	<i>"I am listed on every committee, but when the actual discussion happens, my suggestions are noted and then quietly set aside. My presence is decorative." (R47, Assistant Professor, Multan)</i>
Male Network Exclusion	<i>"The real decisions are made in informal meetings—over tea, after official hours, among the senior male staff. We are never invited. By the time we enter the meeting room, everything has already been decided." (R112, Lecturer, Khanewal)</i>
Opaque Promotion Processes	<i>"I have a PhD and more publications than two of my male colleagues who were promoted before me. No official reason was given. Everyone understood. No one said anything." (R203, Associate Professor, Vehari)</i>

From an interpretive perspective, such instances serve as examples of the microphysics of power as described by Foucault in that exclusion does not occur via a prohibitive policy but via common administrative processes such as informal discussions, evaluation criteria, and symbolic inclusion devoid of real authority to maintain male governance while maintaining a commitment to formal equality. This is the working of authoritarian governmentality carried out via gendered informality and parallels the discussion by Saher & Ali (2025) on decision-making that occurs via informal means in Pakistani organizations.

Theme 2: Work–Life Balance and Cultural Constraints

The second group of responses referred to the convergence of personal responsibilities and professional commitments. The “double burden” of participants was that of being required to perform difficult domestic duties (housekeeping, parenting, elderly care) alongside heavy academic workload and administrative requirements.

Theme 2: Work–Life Balance and Cultural Constraints

Double Burden	<i>"I teach from morning to afternoon, attend administrative meetings, then go home to cook, care for children, and prepare for the next day. There is no time for research. No time even for thinking." (R18, Lecturer, Lodhran)</i>
Mobility Restrictions	<i>"When a national conference was held in Lahore, my family did not approve of overnight travel. My male colleague attended and made contacts that later helped him in promotion. I stayed home." (R79, Assistant Professor, Multan)</i>
Gendered Professional Norms	<i>"If a man stays late to finish college work, he is dedicated. If I stay late, people question my character. So I leave on time, but the work does not stop." (R156, Associate Professor, Khanewal)</i>

Through such stories, it becomes evident how neoliberal governmentality, which is concerned with the need for perpetual availability, productivity, and investment in oneself, is connected with patriarchal culture, where mobility and visibility in the workplace are constrained for women. In this way, there appears to be a “double bind” (Fraser, 2019), in which women must satisfy both requirements despite their lack of compatibility.

Theme 3: Limited Leadership and Professional Growth Opportunities

Members from all four units spoke about systematic lack of access to leadership development, training, research, and administrative positions. This phenomenon stood out clearly when the women who were at junior and mid-level ranks said that the selection process for these positions is non-formal and discretionary, favoring male faculty members.

Theme 3: Limited Leadership and Professional Growth Opportunities

Leadership Pipeline Exclusion

"The principal always selects her deputies from among the senior male teachers, even in a women's college. She says it is because they have "more experience." But they have more experience because they have always been selected." (R221, Assistant Professor, Vehari)

Training Access Gap

"Three workshops on educational leadership were held this year. All three times, the same two male teachers from our department were nominated. I asked once and was told the quota was "already filled." (R304, Lecturer, Lodhran)

Circular Disqualification

"To be appointed head of department, you need administrative experience. To get administrative experience, you need to be appointed. For women, this circle never opens." (R38, Associate Professor, Multan)

The theory of the reproduction of social structure through institutional activity is vividly exemplified here as the criteria of access to the development of leadership skills are described as being purely meritocratic but in reality reproduce the existing distribution of capitals networks of connections, visibility, administration experience which favors men. Women are not discriminated against in terms of policies but rather in terms of institutional activity on a daily basis.

Theme 4: Barriers in Research, Publishing, and Funding

Researchers who have research duties found themselves facing some unique structural and interpersonal barriers that affected their research productivity, publication history, and access to outside funds, all of which have implications for promotion.

Theme 4: Barriers in Research, Publishing, and Funding

Funding Network Exclusion	<i>"Research grants are announced, and I apply. I have seen projects awarded to groups that were formed before the announcement, all male. The paperwork is equal-opportunity; the reality is not." (R167, Associate Professor, Multan)</i>
Publication Bias Perception	<i>"A journal reviewer told my supervisor that my work "lacked practical experience in the field." My male colleague's paper—on the same dataset—was accepted first round. We wrote it together." (R89, Assistant Professor, Khanewal)</i>
Time Poverty and Research Output	<i>"Research requires uninterrupted time. I have a teaching load of 18 hours per week, administrative duties, and a family. My male colleague has 14 hours and no domestic obligations. Our publication records are compared as if our conditions were the same." (R241, Associate Professor, Vehari)</i>

These cases demonstrate the workings of neoliberal governmentality in action: performance is judged according to measurable output (articles written, money earned from grants, presentations at conferences), but the circumstances under which such outputs can be achieved are systematically uneven. The woman in this instance has internalized the need to achieve, but the structural context in terms of heavy teaching obligations, domestic chores, and lack of access to research networks makes achievement highly unequal.

Theme 5: Inadequate Institutional Support and Policy Implementation

What stood out was the disparity between the policies available and the way institutions acted on the ground. It was noted that there were gender policies in place maternity leave, harassment committees, flexible working hours but that these policies were not well-observed or used.

Theme 5: Inadequate Institutional Support and Policy Implementation

Policy-Practice Gap	<i>"There is a written policy for maternity leave. When I returned after three months, my name had been removed from the departmental committee I had served on for two years. No one explained why." (R332, Assistant Professor, Multan)</i>
Anti-Harassment Committee Inaccessibility	<i>"The anti-harassment committee exists. But the chair is a male senior professor, and complaints go through the principal's office. Most women do not report because they fear the consequences for their careers more than the harassment itself." (R144, Lecturer, Vehari)</i>
Flexibility With Hidden Costs	<i>"Flexible hours were introduced. But if you use them, you are marked as "not committed." Full-time visible presence in the</i>

institution is how dedication is judged. Flexibility is a trap."
(R56, Associate Professor, Lodhran)

Liberal governmentality operates through the deployment of rights-based and inclusive policy frameworks; however, what the research findings reveal is that these policies can serve as “technologies of the self,” according to Rose (1999), in the sense that these policies will sustain the status quo power structures through ensuring that resistance is very expensive for the individual.

Theme 6: Mentorship, Family Support, and Individual Agency as Enabling Factors

Unlike the other themes that came before, this one is different from them because it deals with what enabled the development of the ability to make decisions in the participants. These are mainly relational and informal variables such as mentoring, family encouragement of profession, and personal agency.

Theme 6: Mentorship, Family Support, and Individual Agency

Transformative Mentorship

"My supervisor—a woman professor—introduced me to every committee she sat on for two years. She told them I was capable before I believed it myself. That visibility changed my career."
(R19, Assistant Professor, Multan)

Family as Professional Enabler

"My husband drives me to early morning meetings and takes the children to school. Because of this I can attend what my colleagues cannot. His support is invisible in every analysis of my 'success.'" (R271, Associate Professor, Khanewal)

Strategic Agency

"I learned to frame my proposals in terms of what the college needs for its accreditation. I do not say 'I want to go to this conference'—I say 'this will help the college's HEC ranking.' It works, mostly." (R185, Assistant Professor, Vehari)

The narratives on empowerment can be categorized according to Kabeer's (1999) empowerment model which has three variables: resources (mentors and family support), agency (strategic narrative and networking in profession), and accomplishments (professional achievements and institutional recognition). It is very important to observe here that the empowerment strategies adopted by the participants have an informal character and they have been employed by individuals. This means that there is a structural deficiency since the official institution is not providing the enabling environment which the women have referred to.

5. Discussion

5.1 Gendered Governmentality in Practice

In totality, the six themes reveal the fact that gendered governmentality in Multan Division's women colleges can be understood in terms of three intertwined levels. Authoritarian governmentality (Themes 1 and 3) refers to a situation where women leaders exist alongside centralized, hierarchical exclusion from meaningful decision making; power is delegated symbolically but is withdrawn de facto through backroom politics, non-transparent selection, and

naturalized male hegemony. In neoliberal governmentality (Themes 2 and 4), increased performance measures and accountability obligations increase the stress on women teachers while not taking into account their disadvantaged conditions of production; thus gender inequality is viewed as a problem of differential outputs rather than an outcome of discrimination. In liberal governmentality (Theme 5), policy measures are formally adopted but not implemented adequately, thus creating a 'gap' between policy on paper and policy in action, which Foucault (1991) may refer to as the most sophisticated form of control because it precludes any contestation on grounds that the issue is settled already.

The results of this study take the structural model presented in the complementary quantitative study in a significant direction. The PLS-SEM results indicate that decision-making power leads to better performance, and better performance moves governance systems from being authoritarian to becoming liberal and neoliberal. The findings from the qualitative part of the study reveal the dark side of these associations; how women are prevented from having the decision-making power necessary to increase performance, and what informal consequences they face for using their formal right to make decisions. The combination of the two findings creates a vicious cycle of limited capacity: women who do not have decision-making power are not able to increase their performance to justify their authority.

5.2 Agency Within Constraint

Theme 6 challenges any simplistic structure-focused explanation. The participants are not objects of governance; rather, they employ 'technologies of the self' (strategic self-presentation, networking, learning of institutional language) as per Foucault (1988), as well as leveraging their relational assets (mentors, family support system) to some extent to offset deficiencies in structure. This result echoes the findings of Kabeer (1999), who contends that agency can be exercised even in resource-constrained settings, but she rightly warns against the inadequacy of individual agency without structural transformation of resources.

The fact that enabling factors are concentrated in the domain of informal social relations (mentoring, familial support) rather than institutions also holds an important implication: the present system burdens individual women's informal social networks with the responsibility of handling structural inequalities. This is a typical feature of the neoliberal governmentality model where the responsibility of managing structural inequalities is transferred to individuals while simultaneously retaining the semblance of equal opportunities (Brown, 2015).

5.3 Comparison with Existing Literature

The results corroborate and build on an existing literature about women's leadership in a patriarchal environment within HEIs. In her review of the literature on higher education governance, Morley (2013) points to the paradoxical inclusion and marginalization of women in higher education institutions as a crucial characteristic of modern university governance; this study illustrates this paradox in the specific institutional form of public sector women's colleges operating under centralized provincial bureaucracy. Ramohai (2019) identifies exclusion through informal practices that limit women working in senior management roles at South African universities despite policies that aim to support women's advancement; in Pakistan, the extreme centralized bureaucracy of the Multan Division heightens the phenomenon of limited authority noted by other researchers. The institutional approach to analyzing academia in Pakistan by Soomro, Khaskhely, and Baloch (2023) arrives at a similar conclusion from a different angle, claiming that gender differences in academic career development persist not because of any

conscious prejudice but due to seemingly gender-neutral practices implemented in institutions; the results of the current study add ethnographic perspective to this claim through the voices of the participants themselves.

6. Policy Recommendations

The findings yield six concrete, evidence-based recommendations for HEI administrators and policymakers in Multan Division and comparable contexts.

- Institutionalise Transparent Promotion and Appointment Criteria. Promotion and committee appointment decisions must be governed by documented, publicly available criteria evaluated by gender-balanced review panels. Informal, discretionary selection processes are the primary mechanism through which gender discrimination is reproduced within formally equal-opportunity frameworks.
- Invest in Women-Targeted Leadership Development Pipelines. Mentorship programs, leadership schools, and administrative placements especially for women academics must be instituted at divisional level. Participation in these programs ought to be regulated through rotation systems rather than nomination processes.
- Enforce, Monitor, and Evaluate Gender Policies. Anti-harassment cells should have independent, balanced gender panels; complaint mechanisms should shield the complainant from any institutional punishment. Maternity, paternity, and flexible work policies need to be actively monitored for their implementation, with regular reporting to Punjab Higher Education Department.
- Reform Workload Allocation to Achieve Structural Equity. Teaching loads and administrative duties must be formally audited by gender. Research time—formally allocated and protected—should be proportionately available to all faculty regardless of gender. Performance evaluation systems must be adjusted to account for documented differences in workload composition.
- Decentralise Administrative Authority to College Level. A degree of financial, curricular, and staffing authority should be delegated to college principals, reducing dependence on provincial directive and enabling women leaders to exercise the substantive authority their formal roles suggest.
- Establish Divisional-Level Gender Equity Offices. A dedicated Gender Equity Office within the Multan Division higher education administration should be mandated to audit institutional practices, investigate complaints, and oversee the implementation of the above recommendations, with annual public reporting.

7. Conclusion

Qualitative data collected during the current study on women academics at women's colleges of public sector in Multan division, south Punjab, Pakistan have been analyzed in this paper through a three-stage thematic analysis using Foucauldian governmentality theory. The results of the thematic analysis suggest that there are six thematic areas which capture the experience of restricted decision-making authority and possibilities for its transformation.

It is evident from the findings that gendered governmentality does not occur because of exclusion but because of intersection of authoritarian bureaucracy, performance under neoliberalism, and failure to deliver liberal policies. Women in authoritative roles are restricted from exercising their decision-making authority because of the informal relations, selectivity in implementation of policies, and cultural practices which demand both performance at home and work. There must be

structural changes in policy, institutional culture, and administrative structure before women can exercise their decision-making authority.

On the other hand, the narratives provided by the respondents on the subject matter of strategic agency, mentoring, and family support indicate that women are not only objects of governance but also active and resourceful agents in negotiating the institutional environment. It is imperative for an adequate study of women's leadership in such an environment to consider both aspects simultaneously. The structural constraints are indeed there and very much systematic; as is the resilience shown by women faculty in navigating and challenging and even transforming their structural constraints where necessary. The future research on the topic should be extended via FGDs conducted among stratified participants and tracking participants who have availed themselves of the leadership development program over a period of time, and also comparing and contrasting different divisions and provinces.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

References

- Bacchi, C., & Eveline, J. (2010). *Mainstreaming politics: Gendering practices and feminist theory. University of Adelaide Press.*
- Ball, S. J. (2012). *Foucault, power, and education. Routledge.*
- Batool, Z., & Qureshi, R. (2019). Women in higher education leadership in Pakistan: Opportunities and challenges. *Asian Women*, 35(3), 33–55.
- Birks, M., Chapman, Y., & Francis, K. (2008). Memoing in qualitative research. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 13(1), 68–75.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice. Stanford University Press.*
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution. Zone Books.*
- Burke, P. J. (2020). Gender, neoliberalism, and corporatized higher education. In *The Wiley handbook of gender equity in higher education* (pp. 69–90). *Wiley.*
- Connell, R. (2009). *Gender: In world perspective (2nd ed.). Polity Press.*
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. Sage.*
- Dean, M. (2010). *Governmentality: Power and rule in modern society (2nd ed.). SAGE.*
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). *Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders. Harvard Business School Press.*
- Fazal, S., Nazir, F., Khan, M. I., & Khan, S. I. (2025). Gender equity in higher education in Pakistan: Bridging dreams and realities. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 1–19.
- Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 16–49). *Tavistock.*
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 87–104). *University of Chicago Press.*
- Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, territory, population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78. Palgrave Macmillan.*
- Fraser, N. (2019). *The old is dying and the new cannot be born: From progressive neoliberalism to Trump and beyond. Verso.*
- Higher Education Commission (HEC). (2022). *Gender and higher education policy framework. Government of Pakistan.*
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464.
- Kumar, D., & Limbachiya, H. (2023). Role of administrative department in education with reference to schools and universities. *Revista Review Index Journal of Multidisciplinary*, 3(3), 18–22.

- Lapeira, M., & Samara, G. (2025). She is the boss: Determinants of legitimacy of women as family business leaders. *Journal of Strategy and Management*, 18(2), 468–493.
- Lemke, T. (2001). “The birth of bio-politics”: Michel Foucault’s lecture at the Collège de France on neo-liberal governmentality. *Economy and Society*, 30(2), 190–207.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. SAGE.
- Malik, S. (2021). Gender dynamics in higher education: A case study of South Punjab. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*, 18(1), 45–63.
- Mansoor, A., & Saher, N. (2024). Women repressed? We think not! The intimacy between erotic capital and career ascent in Pakistani academia. *Journal of Leadership in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2024.2431978>
- Morley, L. (2013). The rules of the game: Women and the leaderist turn in higher education. *Gender and Education*, 25(1), 116–131.
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16, 1–13.
- O’Connor, P. (2020). Gender imbalance in senior positions in higher education: What is the problem? *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 42(5), 476–490.
- Oksala, J. (2013). Feminism and neoliberal governmentality. *Foucault Studies*, 16, 32–53.
- Ramohai, J. (2019). Women in senior management positions at South African universities: Their movement in, out and across universities. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 34(3), 217–232.
- Rashid, A. G., & Asif, Z. (2025). Gender inequality in the public sphere as perceived by Muslim female graduate students at a Pakistani higher education institution. *Journal of Islamic Marketing*, 16(2), 668–688.
- Rose, N. (1999). Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought. *Cambridge University Press*.
- Saher, N., & Ali, R. (2025). Erotic capital and gendered Vartan Bhanji in Pakistani higher education: navigating patriarchal landscapes for career advancement. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2025.2492124>
- Shore, C., & Wright, S. (2011). Governing by numbers: Audit culture, rankings, and the new world order. *Social Anthropology*, 19(4), 485–502.
- Soomro, T. R., Khaskhely, M. A., & Baloch, R. A. (2023). The gender gap in Pakistani academia: Institutional perspectives and women’s experiences. *Journal of Higher Education Research*, 15(1), 45–62.
- Tasleem, S., & Hatim, A. (2024). Patriarchal structures and women leadership in Southern Punjab. *Pakistan Journal of Sociology*, 12(1), 77–94.
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851.