

Underrepresentation of Women in Top Management Roles: A Phenomenological Study of Public Sector Educational Institutions of Pakistan

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores the underrepresentation of women as a lived experience through the Interpretive Phenomenological Approach in Public Sector Educational Institutions of the Wah Region. 6 male and six female high school managers were purposively selected. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed to generate themes using Smith's Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. The findings of the study strongly indicate the existence of gross underrepresentation of women in top management positions. The study concluded that this underrepresentation is due to the male-dominated organizational culture that hinders women's progress toward professional grooming and career advancement. This study is significant as it highlights the dichotomy in public sector educational organizations, which claim to be female-dominating in terms of presence, but equal representation is given only at the lower management level. As the hierarchy ladder goes up, the Glass Ceiling Effect or underrepresentation prevails.

Keywords: Glass Ceiling, Interpretive Phenomenology, Underrepresentation, Inequality, Career Advancement, Professional Grooming



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Introduction

Unnatural underrepresentation or Glass Ceiling of women in top management posts is a widely recognized and established phenomenon across the world (Brower et al., 2019; Longman, 2018). Several studies suggested that Pakistan as a society is significantly gender-biased (World Economic Forum, 2018) as it ranks very low in South Asian countries on the gender-disparity index. Several Pakistani studies suggested the obvious prevalence of underrepresentation of women in top management positions both in public and private sector multi-disciplinary organizations (Amin et al., 2020; Salahuddin et al., 2022). Usually, in Pakistan education sector is considered a largely female-dominating profession and this notion is often supported by statistical findings showing more presence of women as teachers compared to men (Ayub et al., 2019), but ironically, the higher stratum of management is perceptively more entrusted to men compared to women (Farooq et al., 2020). Women are often assigned subsidiary roles and positions in an organizational setup compared to men, mainly because the patriarchal mindset underestimates their professional capabilities (Samo et al., 2019). This can hinder their professional development and progress due to a stereotypical perception that women face challenges in sustaining senior management positions (Masood et al., 2021). The phenomenon of the Glass Ceiling or underrepresentation of women in top management positions has been explored in several studies in the corporate sector and multidisciplinary organizations. These studies have come up with conclusions that strongly suggest that it exists in our society (Waqar et al., 2019). The focus of such studies was on highlighting gender biases, stereotypes, gender discrimination and barriers that women face while advancing in their careers (Anjum et al., 2019).

If the existing literature is closely studied, it is obvious that the majority of research on the underrepresentation of women in top management positions in Pakistan has been conducted in the corporate sector. Very few studies highlight this phenomenon in educational setup as it is considered a female-dominated profession. Furthermore, most of these studies are descriptive, and they do not present an in-depth analysis or highlight the view of individuals who observed it as a lived experience. This provides considerable ground to explore this phenomenon further and determine the standpoint of educational managers who may have experienced it in a context that is comparatively considered female-dominated.

The study was conducted using an interpretive phenomenological research design to present an in-depth analysis of the issue of underrepresentation of women in top management positions, highlighting the experiences of those who have experienced it.

Usually, the phenomenological research design highlights a phenomenon and focuses on the perception and account of the individuals who have experienced it (Cohen et al., [2002](#)) so that the meaning of experience can be understood the way an individual felt it. Hence, the phenomenological research design and the semi-structured interview method as the instrument were appropriate for this study. The main beneficiaries of the study include the policymakers and educational administrators who may consider the implications and reform their organizational setup to make it more encouraging and balanced for females to prosper in top management posts.

Review of Literature

The term Glass Ceiling or underrepresentation of women in top positions is associated with Marilyn Loden, who used it in a speech in 1978 while addressing the disparities and challenges that women face (Millath et al., [2017](#)). The metaphor of the glass ceiling refers to the "Federal Glass Ceiling Commission" (1995), which proposed actions that have larger implications for hindering the advancement of women towards higher managerial positions (Wirth, [2001](#)). This commission was widely criticized for its propositions. A great deal of literature is found on the Glass Ceiling Commission, but a majority of the research is conducted in the United States. Hence, they can be culturally biased. Another study also confirms the presence of this phenomenon in the European context, which reinforces the idea that top management positions are often represented by men. There is a significant difference between the salaries of men and women, where women are paid less even if their positions and roles are equal to those of men (Arulampalam et al., [2007](#)).

Similar to the United States and Europe, the situation is not different in Pakistan in terms of gender disparity and discrimination. Pakistan has been ranked at the bottom of the Global Gender Gap Index since 2012. Research suggests that such an inequitable state of women in Pakistan can be attributed to the patriarchal system that has deep roots in all strata of Pakistani society (Shaukat & Pell, [2015](#)). The advancement of women to higher positions is hindered by cultural and social constraints that women often face in Pakistan. The stereotypical face of women that has been portrayed is of an individual who is weak, submissive, dependent and incompetent. Due to such an image, their advancement to the top ranks has been made difficult despite being academically accomplished (Salik & Zhiyong, [2014](#)). Those who have higher ambitions face numerous hurdles including a lack of support and guidance, sexual harassment, discrimination and institutional politics (Waqar et al., [2019](#)).

Several theories have addressed the phenomenon of underrepresentation of women, including the expectation theory, the social identity theory, the glass ceiling effect and the glass cliff effect. The Social Identity Theory suggests that the social behaviour of individuals is often determined by the social group they associate with. Since women do not fit into masculine groups, they are deemed as a threat to male dominance. This is why they are intentionally subjugated and kept under control (Budworth & Mann, [2010](#)). The Expectation Theory explains that individuals are expected to behave according to the group or gender they are typically placed in. It has been believed that women are less competent than men, and due to this typical thinking, higher rank positions are often given to men as it has been theorized that they will perform better in such positions compared to women.



The evidence explored through various pieces of research concluded that the phenomenon of the underrepresentation of women in top management positions widely exists internationally and across Pakistan. Several researchers concluded that females are subject to underrepresentation, which has numerous causes and consequences. The stereotypical concept of leadership position has often been seen as masculine. The management styles have also been branded as masculine management and feminine management because of the general attributes associated with males and females (Embry et al., [2008](#)). Several studies have confirmed that this phenomenon exists in the organizational setup in both public and private sectors. However, a few gaps have been identified. Studies in female-dominated professions such as education are scarce in this context. There is a need to explore the phenomena deeply and see whether similar treatment of women is present in organizations where there are more women.

Objectives and Research Question of the Study

The main objective of the study is to comprehend the reality of the underrepresentation of women in top management prevailing in public sector educational institutions. In this regard, the following research question is formulated to seek the reality of the phenomenon:

- i. How are women represented in higher management posts in Public Sector secondary educational institutions?

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The research focused on the underrepresentation of women in top management, using the Glass Ceiling Effect as the theoretical framework. The term derives from the 1995 Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, which highlighted the biases women face in achieving managerial roles, regardless of being competent. While there is considerable literature on this topic, most research on this subject has been conducted in the United States and may, therefore, be culturally bound. Similar findings indicate that men dominate top management positions in Europe, and there is a significant salary gap where women earn substantially less than men.

Contextualization

The study was contextualized to the participants belonging to public sector institutions in the Wah Cantt Region located in the northern Punjab of Pakistan. This particular contextualization is done because Pakistan, irrespective of any geographical boundaries, is subject to gender inequality (World Economic Forum, [2018](#)). Hence, this region was selected conveniently. The second reason for this contextualization is that two types of public sector institutions are established in the Wah region. The first type is under the command of the Federal Government, and the second type is under the command of the provincial government. Both systems have different higher management hierarchies and chain of command. This will imply diverse output from the participants regarding the phenomenon. Such a setting provides a better context for the exploration of gender-based stereotyping as a lived experience that may have affected workplace and career advancements.

Methodology

The study was conducted using a qualitative research paradigm, and a phenomenology design was selected. This design is appropriate as it invites us to explore the phenomenon as the lived experience of those who have encountered it. Within the phenomenological research design, Interpretative Phenomenology was used as it provides the opportunity for the researcher to focus on the under-review phenomenon through the detection and clarification of ambiguous meanings deeply rooted in the words of participants' accounts (Roberts, [2000](#)). This approach allows an investigator to study human perception regarding the context and subjective experience of the participant. This is how the deeper insight of the phenomenon, as well as human nature, can be gained (Willig, [2013](#)). Smith's Interpretive Phenomenology specifically addresses the main concepts from three theoretical areas, including phenomenology,



hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2021); hence, this approach was used for the data analysis. It step-wise focuses on the separate cases and then looks for common or dissimilar experiences in comparison.

Participants

The sampling techniques used in this study were purposive, convenient and criterion-based. The educational leaders were purposively selected from the Wah region conveniently. A criterion was defined for the selection of these participants that included a minimum of 3 years of administrative experience at a public sector school level. 6 male and 6 female principals were selected, making the sample of 12 participants. This size is ample to reach the saturation point (Fugard & Potts, 2015). All the participants were senior principals of high school who had been hired through an independent recruitment system prescribed under the Civil Servant Act 1973.

Research Instruments

A semi-structured interview comprising five statements was designed. The participants were allowed to narrate their views about the phenomenon and the way they experienced it. The research question is, "How are women represented in higher management posts in public sector secondary educational institutions? This was addressed by asking the following questions from the participant: 1) What is the representation of men in top management positions in your educational setup compared to women? 2) What is the representation of women in top management positions in your educational setup compared to men? 3) Do you think women are underrepresented in top management positions in your educational institutions?

Data Collection and Analysis

Interview protocols were set, and the participants were visited in their offices for the interview. The participants were ensured that their identity would be kept confidential. In this regard, the interview was recorded only after obtaining the due permission. Meanwhile, the researcher made notes on the interview. The recorded interviews were transcribed and sent back to the participants to endorse them. For the sake of data analysis, the six procedural steps of Smith's IPA were carried out. The step one included transcribing, reading and re-reading a case. Step two comprised making initial notes on a case. The emergent themes were identified during the third step. Connections across the emergent themes were identified during the fourth step. The next step included moving to the next case and repeating the first four steps with each case. Finally, patterns were searched across the cases.

Findings

This study explored the unnatural underrepresentation of women in top management positions in public sector educational institutions. The themes that emerged across the study are listed below:

Glass Ceiling Effect

The participants irrespective of their gender, consistently agreed that their organizational setup has an underrepresentation of women in top management positions while sharing their experiences. This marked the traces of the prevalence of the Glass Ceiling Effect. Table 1 presents the evidence of the glass ceiling effect from the participants' verbatims.

The M2 participant acknowledged that there are very few females seen in the top management posts at the directorate level. He also acknowledged that there is not a single woman seen "at our regional office". Another male participant, M3 also agreed to it and stated that women in our society are "deprived of equality" as the society is male-dominated. Similarly, M4 and M6 also agreed to the lack of representation of women in top management places.

The female participants also acknowledged that they are underrepresented in top management positions. F1 stated that if the top management positions in the directorate are observed, "males are predominantly appointed."



Similarly, F2 also agreed with this statement by saying, "It is very clear, very open and clearly vivid that females are not equal representation at top management positions". F3 also agreed to both F1 and F2 and explained the reasons for the underrepresentation of women in top management posts. She stated that these posts usually have to sustain political and social pressures; hence, women are reluctant to take such posts even if they are offered. F4 explained that the majority of the lower management staff in her organization is female, but "If I look at head office and regional offices, unequal representation exists, and everywhere it is male-dominated." Furthermore, the administrative staff that is deputed in such offices is all male. F5, on two occasions, expressed the presence of this theme. Firstly, she stated that at the institutional level, females dominate the management level, but if the higher authority is observed, "directorates are fully occupied by males." The rest of the female participants also agreed and strongly advocated the lack of representation of women in top positions.

Table 1*Emergent theme of Glass Ceiling Effect and Excerpt of Verbatim*

Research Question	Emergent Theme	Evidence	Participant
How are women represented in top management roles in public sector secondary education schools?	Glass Ceiling Effect	I see fewer females in our directorate Fewer women are seen at our regional office	M2
		Our society is male-dominated, so women are deprived of equality even in the workplace.	M3
		Men are given more opportunities in top management positions	M4
		Yes! We can observe an increasing women ratio day by day	M6
		If I look at my department's top management positions, males are predominantly appointed.	F1
		It is very clear, very open and clearly vivid that females are not equal representation in top management positions.	F2
		No! Women are never equally represented as men in top positions	F3
		If I look at head office and regional offices, unequal representation exists, and everywhere, it is male-dominated.	F4
		Higher levels in directorates are fully occupied by males	F5
		In my opinion, females are underrepresented in top leadership positions, and it is quite obvious in all offices at the country level.	F6

All the participants, regardless of their gender, acknowledged that women are underrepresented in top management positions. Hence, the research question has been addressed. The participants also acknowledged that the organizational system prefers more males in such positions for several reasons.



The Glass Cliff Effect

The second theme that emerged from the participants' verbatims was the Glass Cliff Effect, which refers to the appointment of women to risky positions in which anyone who is appointed can face challenges irrespective of their gender. Women, though, overcame the glass ceiling effect, but their appointment to such challenging positions can negatively contribute to the stereotypes associated with their gender and may label them weak or incompetent leaders. This theme has not been that obvious from the verbatims of all the participants, as only two females mentioned it, but it is worth sharing. Table 2 lists the evidence from the verbatim of the participants on the class cliff effect.

Table 2

Emergent theme of Glass Cliff Effect and Excerpt of Verbatim

Research Question	Emergent Theme	Evidence	Participant
How are women represented in top management roles in public sector secondary education schools?	Glass Cliff Effect	Male counterparts in top management positions deliberately create hurdles and put you as a defaulter so that you have to go again and again to their offices.	F3
		Women are given harder times than men.	F4

While talking about discrimination and differentiated treatment, F3 highlighted that women are treated differently if they are in the top management position. Deliberate efforts are made to sabotage their work, and unnecessary delays are created so that they fail. She stated that women are more likely to be exploited by people no matter how minimal the level is; they face it to a certain extent. She further highlighted that unnecessary delays are created in their work, and deliberate hurdles are created to put them "on a defaulter list." Her statement shows that women are faced with more challenges in the top management seats, and most of these challenges are deliberately created to fail them. F4 also agreed with F3 and said, "Women are given harder times as compared to men." She also elaborated on the reason for it and stated that this happens because of the gender gap and lack of interaction between male and female heads of the institution. The theme of the Glass Cliff Effect is worth mentioning as it explains that working in top management posts can be more difficult for women, and any mistake may brand them as incompetent or inefficient managers.

The Glass Elevator Effect

The next emergent theme is the Glass Elevator Effect, which refers to the hidden advantages that men have in a female-dominating profession. These advantages include advancement in career and going high up the ladder faster compared to women. This study, through the responses of the participants, established that education is a female-dominated profession. The presence of the Glass Elevator Effect is interpreted through several responses from the participants. Most of the males acknowledged that they did not feel any hurdle or discrimination, although they acknowledged that their organization had more females. At the same time, they acknowledged that their organization is male-dominated, which makes their working environment comfortable. Table 3 lists the responses of participants that can support the Glass Elevator Effect well.



Table 3*Emergent theme of Glass Elevator Effect and Excerpt of Verbatim*

Research Question	Emergent Theme	Evidence	Participant
How are women represented in top management roles in public sector secondary education schools?	Glass Elevator Effect	Discrimination is obviously there. For example, whenever it comes to nominations for training, my immediate boss (a male) always nominates my male colleagues and ignores females.	F2
		There is no discrimination among male and female employees. Preference is based on skills and competence only.	M1
		Being a male principal, I have observed that Official letters from regional offices contain special instructions that "females not to be nominated to supervise maintenance work of school buildings, management of functions, etc".	M6
		The official culture is not democratic and tilted towards male dominance due to the higher percentage of males in top positions.	M4

F2 stated clearly that men have more advantages and are given preference when it comes to professional development opportunities. In table 3, it has been highlighted that higher administration gives more professional development opportunities to men that can help them in the advancement of their careers. While addressing the matter of career advancement, M1 denied any sort of discrimination being done except for "skills and competence." This hints at the condescending treatment of women, if they are discriminated against, it is because of their lack of skills and competence. M6 also made it clear that males are entrusted with more tasks compared to women, as there is a concept that women do not perform better. Being awarded more tasks and authority also hints towards the Glass Elevator Effect, indicating men have more opportunities for advancing in their careers. M4, while addressing the organizational culture, clearly stated that the culture of their organization is "not democratic." He acknowledged that "due to the dominance of men", the organizational culture is not democratic, which hints towards the better advancement of male managers compared to females.

The pictographic representation of all the emergent themes is given in Figure 1. This figure demonstrates the emergent themes. Whereas Figure 2 elaborates on the conversational responses of both male and female participants.



Figure 1

Emergent themes from participants' responses

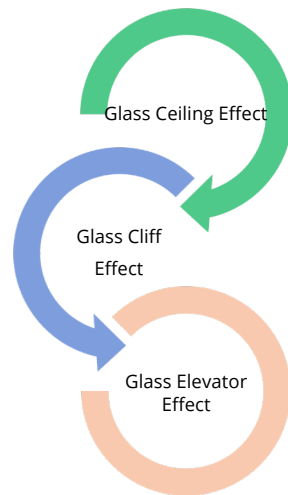
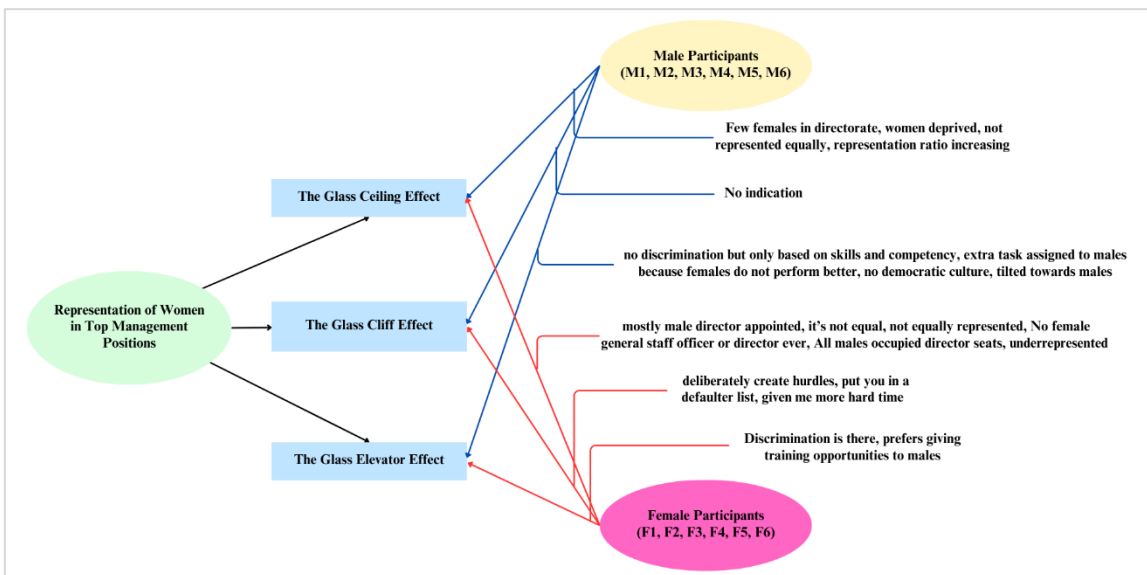


Figure 2

Conversational Responses Against Emergent Themes



Discussion

The findings of the study reveal that women are underrepresented in top management positions within public-sector educational institutions. All participants expressed that women in their organizations hold significantly fewer top management roles, leading to the conclusion that the Glass Ceiling Effect is present, resulting in this underrepresentation of women. Another research found similar results and concluded that gender has a great impact on the selection of top individuals at top management posts, and gender stereotypes play a vital role in affecting the career advancements of women. The cause of the underrepresentation of women can be attributed to the male-oriented organizational culture (Tahira et al., 2021). Another study also concludes that top management positions are mostly entrusted to males due to discrimination and male domination in general (Farooq et al., 2020).

The second major theme that emerged from the participants' verbatims was the glass cliff effect. It is a comparatively less obvious theme and has been mentioned by only two female participants, but it is of equal importance because it hints at the challenges that women face in the position of top managers. Findings show that



women are presented with more difficult situations where deliberate hindrances are created to fail them as educational managers. Their failure is not associated with factors like skills and lack of professionalism, but it is attributed to the personality traits that are stereotypically associated with them. These findings are in line with the study of Glass and Cook (2016), who concluded that women are often subject to more difficulties than men. The findings also suggested that the Glass Elevator Effect is present in the educational setup of the participants, where men have a preference over women in terms of career advancements in a female-dominated profession. The presence of the Glass Elevator Effect cannot be overruled as the participants have hinted towards its presence in their discussion while acknowledging the availability of better opportunities for men in career advancement, training and allocation of tasks. The findings of the study are not in line with the study of Hussain, Naz, Khan, Daraz, and Khan (2015), who hinted towards the absence of the Glass Elevator Effect, although they acknowledge that Pakistan is a dominating society where men always have an edge over women in terms of career advancement. However, the findings align with another study which concluded that males benefit from the Glass Elevator Effect in female-dominating professions for career advancements (Casini, [2016](#)).

Conclusion and Implications

The study concludes that women are the victims of underrepresentation or the Glass Ceiling Effect in public sector educational institutions, similar to other professions. The study also concludes that the prevalence of Glass Cliffs and Glass Elevator is scarce, but it exists in the research setting. It has been driven from the findings that the main reason for this underrepresentation of women in the educational setup is the discriminatory attitude of policymakers who are in male dominance in the hierarchical ladder of the organization.

This study is of significance as policymakers can derive inspiration to review the organizational environment to make it gender-balanced for educational leaders. The higher administration may benefit from the potential of female educational leaders by giving them due representation in top management posts.



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