

Bridging the Gender Gap in Academia: Creating Women Leaders through Mentorship Programmes in Pakistan's Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

In Pakistan, gender-based gaps prevail in leadership roles including vice-chancellors, deans, head of departments - particularly within public sector universities. As a step towards bridging this gap, a one-year multi-activity pilot study was undertaken, delivering an innovative programme aimed at empowering women leaders through capacity building and mentoring. As a first step, a Training Needs Assessment (TNA) survey was conducted to ascertain the needs of mid-career women leaders from eighteen women-only universities of Pakistan. Thereafter, a capacity building and mentoring programmes were designed for a sample of women leaders from the women only universities, by utilizing the findings of the survey, taking insights from Women Leadership Programme by the National Academy of Higher Education, and consulting the existing literature. An intensive 5-day residential training programme was conducted by covering areas such as self-identification as a leader, time management, understanding laws, policies and regulations including procurement of goods and services, and the significance of mentoring. Finally, informed by the workshop evaluation and assessment and feedback from participants, a series of four small-group online mentoring sessions were organized for the participants. Moreover, a dissemination workshop was also organized with a view to share findings of the project and receive feedback from participants regarding impact of the capacity-building and mentoring activities. The present article is based upon reflections and lessons learned from this 18-month project. Synthesizing insights from the TNA, capacity building programme, and mentoring sessions, it puts forth recommendations for female leaders, higher education institutions, and policy makers. It underscores the imperative for developing professional networking by experienced and aspiring women leaders, as well as the need for developing a network of mentors at HEIs. The findings recommend that higher education

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policy makers require institutions to organize regular capacity building and formal mentoring programs to empower aspiring women leaders with requisite skills to navigate their roles effectively.

Key Words: Women Leadership, Mentoring, Coaching, Gender Gap, Pakistan

Introduction

In Pakistan, gender-based gaps prevail in leadership roles including vice-chancellors, deans, and head of departments - particularly within public sector universities. As a step towards bridging this gap, a one-year multi-activity pilot study was undertaken, delivering an innovative programme aimed at empowering women leaders through capacity building and mentoring. As a first step, a Training Needs Assessment (TNA) survey was conducted to ascertain the needs of mid-career women leaders from eighteen women-only universities of Pakistan (May to July 2023). Thereafter, drawing upon findings of the survey, building upon the Women's Leadership Programme (WLP) of the National Academy of Higher Education (NAHE)² and literature review, a capacity building and mentoring programme for women leaders in women universities of Pakistan was developed. An intensive 5-day residential training programme was conducted for a selected sample of female participants from these universities, covering areas such as self-identification as a leader, time management, understanding laws, policies and regulations including procurement of goods and services, and the significance of mentoring (August 2023). Informed by the workshop evaluation and assessment and feedback from participants, a series of four small-group online mentoring sessions were organized for the participants (October to December 2023). Finally, a dissemination workshop was held on 30 April 2024 with a view to share findings of the project and receive feedback from participants regarding impact of the capacity-building and mentoring activities.

The present article is based upon reflections and lessons learned from this 16-month project. Synthesizing insights from the TNA, capacity building programme, and mentoring sessions, it puts forth recommendations for women in leadership roles, higher education institutions (HEIs), and policy makers. It underscores the imperative for developing professional networking by experienced and mid-career women leaders, as well as the need for developing a network of mentors at HEIs. We recommend that higher education (HE) policy makers encourage institutions to organize regular capacity building and formal mentoring

2 NAHE is the capacity building arm of the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC). The Women Leadership Programme (WLP) was initiated and led by the then Rector NAHE Professor Shaheen Sardar Ali during her tenure and has become a component of the annual calendar of capacity building activities of the organisation.

programs to empower women leaders as well as those seeking to assume these roles, with requisite skills to navigate their roles effectively.

Locating mentoring needs for aspiring women leaders in the higher education sector in Pakistan: A literature review.

Women leadership holds great significance for the socio-economic and political development of countries. Yet women in leadership roles as well as those aspiring to these roles, face many challenges including in academia (Redmond et al. 2017; Goetz and Jenkins, 2016). Globally, while participation of women in academia as faculty, researchers, and administrators is rising, less than one-third hold senior leadership positions in HEIs (Bhatti and Ali, 2020; Cook, 2012, Gallant, 2014). The gender-based gap in leadership roles within public sector universities in Pakistan is substantial (Ali, 2013). Bhatti and Ali (2020) citing the *Economist Intelligence Unit* (2014) point out that only 0.04% women were at the most senior position of the Vice Chancellor in Pakistani Universities. Lashari (2023) has shown a substantial disparity in the distribution of Vice-Chancellors (VCs) based on gender as less than 10% of the 253 universities are led by female VCs thus significantly outnumbered by their male counterparts.

Despite the increasing presence of women in HE, their success in mainstream leadership roles is not assured (Bhatti and Ali 2020). These disparities are systemic reflecting the interplay between micro and macro factors interacting to influence women's perceptions, choices, and preferences regarding leadership in HE (Dahlvig and Longman 2020, Morley and Crossouard 2015). At the global level, various factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in senior academic roles, such as gender bias, structural barriers, and cultural norms within the academic environment (Morley, 2014; Johnson and Mathur-Helm, 2011). These factors characterize women as inappropriate for administrative and managerial roles (Bhatti and Ali, 2020). Likewise, sociocultural norms and practices compel women to perceive themselves as unsuitable for leadership positions, which detrimentally affect their career advancement (Desai, Chugh, and Brief, 2014; Madden, 2011). The main barriers in women's career enhancement are related to work-life imbalance, negative perceptions of subordinates regarding women leaders, lack of social networking, and personal circumstances (Maheshwari and Nayak, 2022). Morley (2013) argues that the structure of the global academy presents a paradox as it adopts innovation yet old male-dominated leadership paradigms control and shape it. Thus, meanings, discourses and practices in academia reflect the ways in which women and men are largely placed differently within the HE sector (e.g., in terms of access) (Marshall, 2007).

In South Asia, including Pakistan, micro and macro factors interact to influence women's perceptions, choices, and preferences regarding leadership in HE (Dahlvig and Longman, 2020; Morley and Crossouard, 2015). Factors such as marital responsibilities, class, caste, age, spiritual beliefs, and cultural norms play significant roles in shaping women's profes-

sional growth (Bhatti and Ali, 2020; Manzoor, 2015; Roomi and Parrott, 2008). Women's professional choices are often shaped by family roles, which restrict their ability to make independent decisions (Roomi and Parrott 2008). Studies have found that domestic commitments often constrain women who aspire to senior leadership positions in academia (Farooq et al., 2020; Bhatti and Ali, 2020 & 2021; Fazal et al., 2019). Proving competent both at the workplace and household level impacts women's mental and physical health (Roomi and Parrott, 2008). Among other reasons, the lack of female role models and networking opportunities further contributes to their under-representation in senior roles (Farooq et al., 2020).

The persistence of inequality highlights the challenges faced by women in accessing and ascending to leadership positions within the HE sector in Pakistan. As Farooq et al. (2020) argue there is a need to provide possible strategies to overcome these challenges; to bridge the gender gap in leadership roles; to address the systemic barriers; and to promote gender parity in leadership roles in the HE sector. They argue that lack of female role models and networking opportunities further contributes to under-representation in senior roles. They, therefore, highlight the importance for female professionals to actively cultivate networks, advocate for their interests, and for senior female leaders to mentor young female academics, thereby supporting their career progression.

Globally, it has been found that mentoring plays a vital role in promoting women to leadership positions (Ntshongwana 2024, Rampersad 2024, Khumalo and Ndlovu 2024, van der Weijden et al. 2015, Chesterman 2003). Brabazon and Schulz (2020) argue that mentoring cultivates leadership qualities in women in academia. Mullings and Mukherjee (2018) frame mentoring as a decolonial and feminist endeavor that challenges traditional power dynamics and addresses the intersections of race, gender, and geopolitics. In addition to offering intellectual and social assistance, mentoring provides strategies for navigating situations where the voices of women may have been disregarded (O'Meara and Stromquist 2016). Curran and colleagues (2019) have highlighted the transformative potential of mentoring women in addressing systemic inequalities, supporting career advancement, and promoting a more inclusive and equitable organizational culture.

Mentoring sessions have reportedly led to healthy interactions (Brabazon and Schulz 2020). Relationships thus fostered evolve into peer networks whereby, instead of individuals contending with challenges independently, they collectively advocate for enhanced campus-wide consciousness, policy refinement, transparency, and accountability concerning gender equity outcomes (Monroe et al. 2008). Such actions represent subtle manifestations of progressive, informal collective initiatives. Due to variation in contexts, needs identified and work environment, some authors have highlighted the importance of contextually tailored mentoring programs (see e.g., Manzoor 2015, Dhunpath 2018, Agosto et al. 2016, Chesterman 2003). Cobb-Roberts *et al* (2017) reveal the systemic barriers and biases

that women and people of color often face in HE. Discussing various strategies to effectively mentor female faculty members within the global context, Conway and colleagues (2018) illustrate the unique challenges faced by women in academia, particularly those at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Johannessen et al. (2012) have found that women and minorities continue to be marginalised in accessing mentoring. There is a plethora of literature that suggests that consideration of contextual factors is essential for effective mentoring programs (see e.g., Manzoor 2015, Dhunpath 2018, Agosto et al. 2016, Chesterman 2003, Manongsong and Ghosh 2023, Mabokela and Mlambo 2017, Ponge et al. 2017, Khumalo and Ndlovu 2024, Cobb-Roberts et al. 2017, Goerisch et al. 2019). Thus Cobb-Roberts *et al* (2017) argue that mentorship programs should be explicitly designed to be inclusive and attuned to issues of race and gender, promoting equity, professional development, and personal growth for marginalized groups in academic settings.

Our project was designed to address this need for contextual awareness. In addition, in locating ourselves within this literature on women leadership and mentoring in HE, it is important to clarify the specific context and landscape of our project. Whilst the available literature mainly relates to mixed HEIs our study was conducted exclusively with women-only universities in Pakistan. Women-only universities were established as early as 1998 to provide women with equal opportunities to receive education. Fatima Jinnah Women University (FJWU) (the Pakistan based institutional partner for this project) was the first women-only university set up in 1998, and since then, 17 other women-only universities have been established in different provinces and regions of the country on the same model. It is important to recognise that these universities admit only female students but faculty, administrative and management staff may be either female or male. It is the case however, that there is more opportunity for leadership roles to be assigned to women. Through our pilot project, we sought to test the assumption that the work environment, challenges and constraints confronted by women employees would be different to those highlighted in the literature on mixed HEIs. Our findings proved otherwise as set out in our conclusions.

The other contextually important factor in our study is the role of rurality. The women only universities are located within urban as well as rural settings and lesser developed areas. We were therefore mindful in the design and implementation of our project to explore whether this rurality produced more complex situations and requirements in mentoring and capacity building needs compared to those within urban settings and the larger cities of Pakistan.

The rest of the study is organized as follows: section 2 describes methodology adopted in different phases of the project followed by section 3 which explains results and findings from its various activities. Section 4 provides discussions on findings of the study in a con-

textualized manner. Section 5 concludes with some recommendations to relevant stakeholders.

Methodology

Contextualizing Mentoring as Capacity-building for Leadership Roles in the Higher Education Sector of Pakistan

Conscious of the value and importance of networking and mentorship, Fatima Jinnah Women University (FJWU), Pakistan in collaboration with the University of Warwick, UK initiated a pilot project designed for female faculty members aspiring for leadership roles. The aim was to train and provide exposure to those female faculty members who are currently performing some leadership roles or who are aspiring leaders, in women-only universities across Pakistan. The project was funded by the British Council, UK under the Going Global Partnerships-Gender Equality Fund (Addressing Women's Underrepresentation in Higher and Further Education Leadership). With the aim to address under-representation of women leadership in HE sector, the project had three distinct pillars: (a) needs assessment of emerging women leaders for training through training needs assessment (TNA) analysis, (b) capacity building of mid-career women to be future successful leaders, and (c) closed group mentoring sessions for women leaders to support them to be effective and vibrant leaders in future. In the first phase, we executed various capacity building sessions focusing on enhancing the capacity of participants in five major areas: self-awareness and self-confidence, time management, emotional intelligence, intellectual acumen, legal and financial knowledge. Throughout this capacity building program, resource persons from both the partner countries—Pakistan and the UK—shared their personal knowledge, experiences, and skills with mentees to help them to broaden their personal and professional horizons and to build their confidence levels so that they aspire for and accept leadership roles. The second phase involved group mentoring sessions with participants to create self-realisation and self-awareness for potential leadership qualities. Each group of participants was allocated a mentor to discuss individual concerns, challenges and hurdles confronted by the mentees and which they may have experienced while moving up the ladder of leadership.

This intensive pilot study was undertaken in three phases commencing from January 2023 to April 2024.

Study Setting

As indicated above, this study was conducted exclusively with women-only universities in Pakistan. As stated above, there are 17 women universities in Pakistan. However, only 14 showed their interest in becoming part of this leadership programme. Hence, the study was conducted on the women leaders from these universities.

Phase 1. Training Needs Assessment (TNA)

A comprehensive Training Needs Assessment (TNA) survey form was developed for identifying training needs and understanding gaps in the under-representation of women leaders in HEIs.³ The objective was to obtain first-hand data from respondents regarding the skills and competencies required to create women leaders in HEIs for bridging the gender gap in senior positions. In other words, the aim was to assess self-awareness and self-realization for potential leadership qualities.

All 18 women-only universities in Pakistan were invited to participate in the online TNA. Each university was requested to nominate one focal person for coordinating with the research team to execute the project effectively. Altogether, 117 mid-career female faculty members performing some leadership roles from 14 universities participated in the survey.

The survey was developed through a consultative process and desk review. It comprised of 51 qualitative and quantitative questions under five sections i.e., (i) Socio-demographic Profile, (ii) Professional Profile, (iii) Organizational Support, (iv) Self-Assessment, Needs Assessment, Leadership Skills, and (v) Mentoring. The instrument was pilot tested to assess its practicality and accuracy with thirty young female faculty members of the Principal Investigator's university who were not included in the final survey. After incorporating minor changes in the instrument, the cross-sectional self-administered survey was shared via Google Form with all participating universities to request them to fill-out at least 10 questionnaires ensuring a diverse sample. (List of participating universities is provided in Annex A)

Phase 2. Capacity Building Workshop

Drawing on the TNA results and NAHE's Women Leadership Program developed through a national and extensive consultative process, a set of modules were developed for a women leadership training workshop. The specific contribution of the present project was to introduce and design a module on mentoring of emerging women leaders. These modules encompassed a wide range of topics relevant to women leadership roles within the HE sector in Pakistan.

All women-only universities were invited to nominate two faculty members presently performing some administrative duties, to attend the residential capacity building workshop. A total of 27 nominations were received from 14 universities. A five-day capacity building workshop was organized from August 15 to 19, 2023, which comprised 3-4 interactive sessions each day using various pedagogical techniques including brain-storming activities, group work, and writing reflection diaries.

3 The survey instrument can be made available upon request

Phase 3. Mentoring

All 27 participants of the workshop were invited for a series of four online group-mentoring sessions. Each of the five groups had 5-6 participants and an assigned mentor. Each group-mentoring session spanned over 1-2 hours. Throughout these sessions, topics were tailored to address the specific needs and interests of participants and therefore varied in content. Topics discussed in the sessions included workload distribution, trust concerns, time and stress management, strategic planning, gender stereotyping, promotion and recognition, challenges with administrative tasks, self-improvement and coping mechanisms, harassment and misconduct, ethics in leadership, work-life balance, career advancement, conflict resolution, writing research grants, research collaboration and networking.

Dissemination Seminar and catch up with Mentees

A dissemination seminar was organized to share project findings with key stakeholders; policy makers, project participants, HEI faculty and staff. Most importantly, participants/mentees were invited to this workshop to follow up on the project activities and receive feedback on what impact the 16 month-long project had had on their personal and professional lives. The aim was to validate the findings as well as capturing outsiders' perspectives. The seminar also provided a platform to discuss the operational challenges in scaling up of advancing women leadership and their mentoring in the context of their respective HEIs.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval of the survey instrument was given by the FJWU Ethics Committee. The adherence to confidentiality in group mentoring was perceived as a challenge and participants were made aware of the necessity of maintaining confidentiality and its importance to building trust in the process. However, no adverse consequences were reported.

Results

Findings from the Training Needs Assessment (TNA)

Socio-demographic profile

The sample comprised a vibrant and heterogeneous group of mid-career females, juggling work and home obligations, coming from a range of linguistic and cultural origins. In terms of designation, most participants were Lecturers (51.3%), followed by Assistant Professors (36.8 %). A very small proportion was Associate Professors (7.7%) and only one respondent was full Professor (0.09%). Reflecting an interdisciplinary cohort, their fields of expertise varied although most were working in the scientific fields. Age distribution was diverse too, with the largest cohorts falling within the 31-35 and 36-40 age brackets. The sample reflected a wide mix of ethno-linguistic backgrounds within the academic community, with the majority identifying as Punjabi (53.0%), followed by Pukhtoon (27.4%), Sindhi (2.6%),

and Balochi (1.7%). The sample included a mix of mid-career academics; 39.3% respondents with 6–10 years of experience, 35.9% of respondents with 1–5 years of experience, and 14.5 % respondents with 11–15 years of experience. These professionals in their early to mid-career were actively involved in leadership positions. Seventy percent of respondents had previously participated in capacity building training sessions of a similar nature. The distribution of time frames for these training sessions revealed a diverse range. Notably, 34.1% of respondents attended trainings more than 4 years ago highlighting the erratic nature of these events and the need for consistent, periodic capacity building⁴.

3.1.2. Work-Place Environment

Most participants shared a positive perception of their workplace expressing an encouraging picture of their respective HEIs (Table 1). According to the data, the majority of the senior management was reported to be supportive and open to new ideas. As the respondents belonged to women-only universities, the expected responses that women were preferred for leadership roles, did not come as a surprise. However, 33% of respondents believe that women's opinions are not given sufficient importance in decision making. This is a significant number aligning with literature of mixed universities reflecting a deeper issue of male dominated societies.

TABLE 1. UNIVERSITY/WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT	LOW/WORST/ NEVER	MODERATE	HIGH/EXCELLENT / ALWAYS	TOTAL
University working environment (worst-Excellent)	9 (7.7%)	36 (30.8%)	72 (61.5%)	117
New ideas supported by senior management (Never-Always)	10 (8.5%)	34 (29.1%)	73 (62.4%)	117
Females are preferred for leadership positions/roles (Never- Always)	9 (7.7%)	21 (17.9%)	87 (74.4%)	117
Importance is given to the opinion of females in policy decisions/ meetings (Least Important -Most Important)	7 (6.0%)	32 (27.4%)	78 (66.7%)	117

Note: On a 10-point likert scale, scores ranging from 1 to 4 are classified as low/worst/never, scores ranging from 5 to 7 are classified as moderate rating of the category, scores ranging from 8 to 10 are classified as high/excellent /always rating.

4 See Table B1 in Appendix B.

Awareness/Knowledge about Policies

For assessing the awareness and knowledge levels related to adopting different policies by various universities, respondents were requested to identify the policies adopted by their respective universities. The focus was on three specific policies: (i) Policy on Harassment in the Workplace (ii) Policy on Plagiarism, and (iii) Policy on Persons with Disabilities. Data demonstrated that among 117 respondents, 102 indicated the presence of a policy on plagiarism in their universities, 75 referenced the policy on workplace harassment, and 54 reported the existence of a policy concerning persons with disabilities⁵. It is essential to acknowledge that individuals within the same university may have identified the status of these policies in their institution based on their own knowledge and may not reflect the institutional reality/factual position of the HEIs.

Self-Assessment on Competencies in Administrative, Professional, and Financial Skills

The respondents self-assessed themselves to be highly competent in written communication tasks, such as formal letter-writing, lower competency in memo and report writing, whereas, majority of the respondents reported only a moderate proficiency in procurement and financial management skills. More than one third of the respondents reported a low proficiency in this area. Low confidence in these areas, critical to leadership roles, was also consistently reported during workshop and mentoring sessions and the need for capacity-building was also emphasized. Respondents stated this as one of the factors inhibiting their aspiration for leadership roles (Table 2).

TABLE 2. ADMINISTRATIVE, PROFESSIONAL, AND FINANCIAL SKILLS

ADMINISTRATIVE	LOW	MODERATELY	HIGHLY
Writing official letters (internal and external)	3 (2.6%)	36 (30.8%)	78 (66.7%)
Writing Memos	15 (12.8%)	46 (39.3%)	56 (47.9%)
Reading and Developing Budgets	16 (13.7%)	61 (52.1%)	40 (34.2%)
Report Writing	6 (5.1%)	36 (30.8%)	75 (64.1%)
PROCUREMENT			
Procurement Rules	32 (27.4%)	55(47.0%)	30 (25.6%)
Procurement Planning	35 (29.9%)	57 (48.7%)	25 (21.4%)
Procurement Lifecycle Management	41 (35.0%)	53 (45.3%)	23 (19.7%)
FINANCIAL			
Budgeting	28 (23.9%)	54 (46.2%)	35 (29.9%)
Auditing	40 (34.2%)	49 (41.9%)	28 (23.9%)
ADMINISTRATIVE SKILLS			

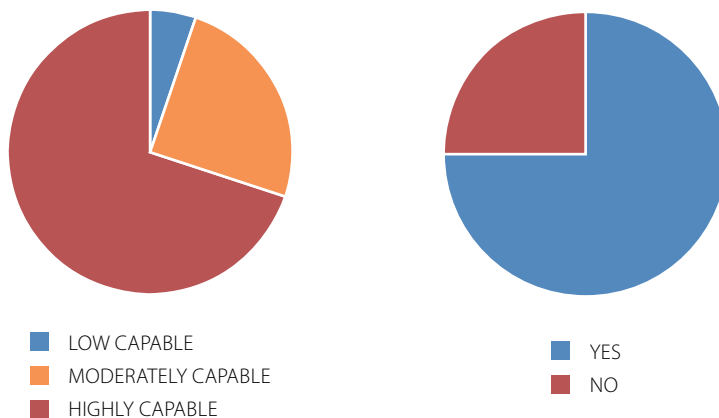
5 (see Table B2 in Appendix B)

Problem Analysis	6 (5.1%)	42 (35.9%)	69(59.0%)
Stakeholders Analysis	10 (8.5%)	55 (47.0%)	52 (44.4%)
Scenarios and Alternatives	8 (6.8%)	50 (42.7%)	59 (50.4%)
Planning Formulation	8 (6.8%)	47 (40.2%)	62 (53.0%)
Policy Implementation	7 (6.0%)	47 (40.2%)	63 (53.8%)
Policy Evaluation	9 (7.7%)	53 (45.3%)	55 (47.0%)
Decision Making	5 (4.3%)	43 (36.8%)	69 (59.0%)
Conflict Resolution	5 (4.3%)	44 (37.6%)	68 (58.1%)
Work-Life Balance	9 (7.7%)	48 (41.0%)	60 (51.3%)
Time Management	4 (3.4%)	45 (38.5%)	68 (58.1%)
Self-improvement and Management	3 (2.6%)	42 (35.9%)	72 (61.5%)
Stress Management/Resilience	6 (5.1%)	48 (41.0%)	63 (53.8%)

Note: On 10-point likert scale, Scores ranging from 1 to 4 are classified as low competency, scores ranging from 5 to 7 are classified as moderate competency, scores ranging from 8 to 10 are classified as high competency.

Leadership, Mentoring, and Career Advancement

The respondents were asked to conduct a self-assessment as team leaders, using a scale



ranging from least to highly capable. Most respondents, 69.2%, rated themselves as highly capable team leaders. (Figure 1). Notably, out of the total sample, 74 % of respondents reported performing some leadership roles.

Figure 1. Self-Assessment as Team Leader.

Attributes for effective women leaders and professional development as prioritized by respondents are shown in Table 3. The respondents reported professional/official networking as the most important skill followed by communication skills and peer to peer collaborations.

Figure 2.
TABLE 3. ATTRIBUTES FOR EFFECTIVE WOMEN LEADERSHIP

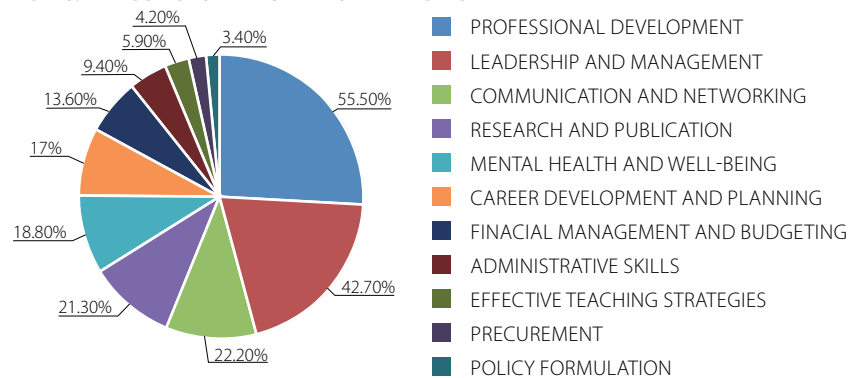


Figure 2a. Importance of Mentoring

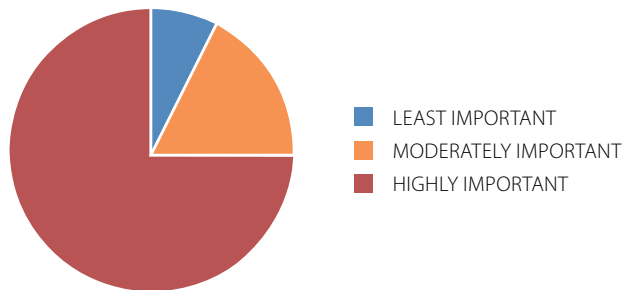


Figure 2b. Type of mentoring Received.

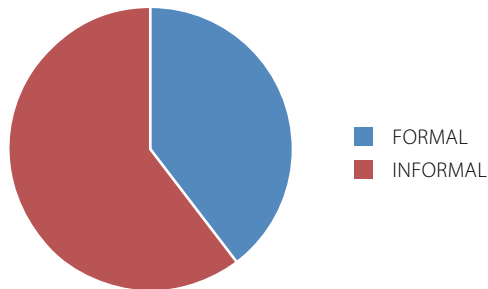
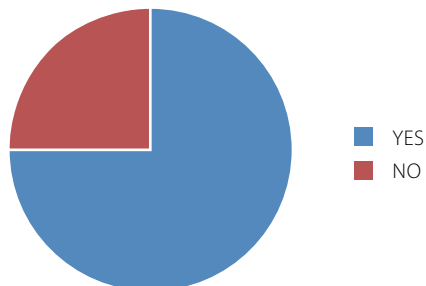


Figure 2c. Role of Mentor in Career Progress.



AREA OF WOMEN LEADERSHIP	LEAST	MODERATELY	HIGHLY
Communication Skills	9 (7.7%)	22 (18.8%)	86 (73.5%)
Knowledge and skills acquisition	7 (6.0%)	29 (24.8%)	81 (69.2%)
Professional/ official networking	5 (4.3%)	24 (20.5%)	88 (75.2%)
Sharing Experiences	7 (6.0%)	26 (22.2%)	84 (71.8%)
Peer to peer collaboration	6 (5.1%)	25 (21.4%)	86 (73.5%)
Learning about practical actions and best practices (through conferences, shadowing programs etc.)	6 (5.1%)	27 (23.1%)	84 (71.8%)
Learning about practical actions and best practices (through 2 conversations i.e. reaching out to colleagues)	4 (3.4%)	33 (28.2%)	80 (68.4%)
Policy implementation	6 (5.1%)	33 (28.2%)	78 (66.7%)
Practical policy integration and coherence	3 (2.6%)	35 (29.9%)	79 (67.5%)

Note: On 10-point likert scale, Scores ranging from 1 to 4 are classified as least important, scores ranging from 5 to 7 are classified as moderately important, scores ranging from 8 to 10 are classified as highly important.

Perceptions on Mentoring

In this part of the survey, the extent to which participants valued mentorship was explored. Data revealed that the vast majority of participants (75%) agreed that mentorship is beneficial in the journey of their professional growth. Notably, the same number (75%) had had some form of informal mentorship and considered it to be highly important for their personal and professional growth.

Respondents were asked to share their opinions on areas upon which they would like to be mentored. Most identified professional development as the most prominent area for mentoring, followed by leadership and management. Communication and networking, research and publication, and mental health and well-being, financial management and budgeting, administrative skills, effective teaching strategies, procurement, and policy formulation and implementation were also identified as areas for mentoring (Figure 2). .

Capacity Building Workshop

Following on from the TNA survey, and informed by its results, participants from women-only universities were invited for a five-day workshop at FJWU in Rawalpindi. As mentioned above, twenty-seven participants from 14 universities attended the workshop reflecting inclusivity, diversity, and the representation of various geographical, cultural and linguistic ethnicities from across Pakistan. Participants comprised Associate Professors, Assistant Professors, and Lecturers, representing various fields, notably Biology and Medical Sciences, Social Sciences, and Physical Sciences. Geographically, the majority of participants hailed from Punjab, with notable representation from KPK, Sindh, and AJK. The only province with a women-only university remaining unrepresented was Baluchistan. Age distribution was centered around 31-35 age group, while marital status indicated a roughly equal split between single and married individuals. Ethnolinguistic identity primarily consisted of Punjabi, followed by Pukhtoon and other identities. Length of service varied, with the majority having served between 6 to 10 years⁶. Each session of the workshop was dedicated to a specific topic pertinent to leadership and professional development within the HE sector. Topics covered ranged from women in leadership roles and strategies for effective leadership in academic administration to incorporating digital technology in teaching and learning from COVID-19 experiences. Moreover, sessions focused on other important leadership aspects such as successful research practices, grant writing, understanding laws and policies, procurement procedures, financial management, leadership and mentoring skills, workplace ethics, diversity and inclusion, and conflict management. The diverse expertise of the resource persons reflected the comprehensive nature of the workshop's agenda, aimed at equipping participants with a broad spectrum of knowledge and skills relevant to leadership and professionalism in the HE sector. The workshop spanned over five days (Box-1).

BOX-1: CONTENTS COVERED IN THE WORKSHOP	
Day 1	Historical context, relevance, and issues faced by women in leadership roles through ‘storying ourselves’ Exploring barriers to women’s visibility in leadership positions Group exercises included reflecting on personal reasons for leadership roles and brainstorming solutions
Day 2	Understanding academic professionals’ diverse roles in teaching, research, and administration within the HE sector, with the goal of developing strategies for effective time management in academic leadership. Enabling participants to identify their most important/urgent tasks, time stealers and different strategies were shared to manage their tasks Successful teaching approaches, using digital technologies and lessons learnt from the COVID-19 experience Challenges of remote instruction and the complexities of online education Navigating the academic publications and grant writing landscapes Effective strategies for publishing in reputable journals Understanding the submission process, selecting appropriate journals, and crafting compelling manuscripts that meet the standards of academic rigor and relevance Illuminating key strategies for developing competitive grant proposals; identifying funding opportunities, aligning research objectives with the priorities of funding agencies, clearly articulating the significance and potential impact of the proposed research, and assembling strong interdisciplinary teams when necessary Understanding the evaluation criteria used by funding agencies and leveraging resources and networks to enhance the proposal’s competitiveness.
Day 3	Legal frameworks, laws, and regulations that apply to leadership preparation e.g. The Higher Education Commission Ordinance 2022, recruiting and promotion rules, modernization regulations etc. Effective and transparent procurement methods in academic contexts; best practices for procurement management, accountability and sustainability Financial principles, financial regulations and financial management methods.
Day 4	Improving leadership abilities through mentorship Maintaining ethical standards in HEIs Leadership and mentoring skills; importance of mentorship in emerging leaders; understanding mentoring and coaching in HE Workplace ethics, professionalism, equity, diversity, and inclusion
Day 5	Problem-solving approaches Networking tactics Roundtable discussion led by specialists in the field on mentorship for female executives. Participants engaged in open discussion, shared their experiences, and sought advice from experienced mentors

The workshop provided an opportunity to interact with a diverse group of emerging women leaders from women only universities in Pakistan. It enabled participants to learn from the expertise, knowledge, and experiences of resource persons, discuss their problems and concerns, and deliberate on various aspects of the leadership journey. The group activities, individual participation and sharing experiences allowed the participants and organizers to learn about individual personalities, building team work, and appreciating inclusivity, while respecting difference.

Fig 3. Summary of Workshop based Reflection Diaries.



The workshop equipped participants with the knowledge, skills, and support networks required to embark on their respective leadership journeys with confidence and resilience. At the end of each day, discussions on diary writing and reflections were a salient activity. Participants were encouraged to write a daily diary, capturing their insights and experiences throughout the workshop. This encouraged participants to consider the necessary leadership attributes for developing academics, examine their own leadership skills and limitations, and picture themselves as future leaders in the academic community. Through self-reflection and introspection, participants were encouraged to improve their time management skills, improve their teaching and research practices, and develop their leadership potential in the HE sector in their own respective contexts. The summary of workshop-based reflections is presented in Figure 3: Summary of topics captured in Reflection Diaries.

The main theme emerging from the reflective diaries was “Effective Women Leadership is not a myth but a reality”. Through deliberations and sharing experiences, participants discussed strategies to overcome challenges in their local context and how best to navigate their respective academic landscapes to become effective leaders. Their aspirations to take on leadership roles were enhanced as they realized that they were not alone and faced similar challenges in endeavoring to break the proverbial glass ceiling. Discussion with their colleagues and facilitators led them to recognize their potential to become effective leaders, building professional networks, and overcoming hesitation in dealing with administration and financial matters. They identified poor women representation in leadership meetings with women's voice largely missing/ignored/unaccounted for. This finding is particularly puzzling in women-only universities where the women predominantly hold leadership roles and thus requires further research.

Evaluation of the Workshop and Operational Challenges

The quality of the workshop was assessed through electronic surveys distributed after each session. The workshop was well-received, with participants consistently expressing satisfaction with the content, relevance of practical examples and activities, and time allocated for questions and discussion. The survey revealed that the workshop effectively engaged participants and addressed their needs and expectations.

A number of challenges had to be confronted during all phases of the project. During the TNA phase, multiple follow ups were required using the designated focal point persons for collecting responses for the TNA despite being nominated by the respective universities' leadership. Acquiring nominations for the workshop too was a challenge. During the workshop which, according to the participants, provided immense opportunities for personal and professional development to participants, the organizing team faced several challenges in organizing and conducting the workshop effectively. Late joining of partici-

Figure 4. Topics from Mentoring Sessions.



pants at the workshop sessions, and continuous use of mobile phones by some during the sessions were other challenges for the facilitators.

Mentoring Sessions

Following the five-day residential workshop in August 2023, the final activity under this pilot project was to organize participants into groups for four online mentoring sessions. The 27 attendees of the workshop were divided into 5 groups. The mentoring sessions were led by members of the project team who had become acquainted with the participants since inception of the project. An online pre-mentoring meeting of mentors was held to agree on broad guidelines and code of practice. (Warwick University mentoring code of practice and best practices were shared)⁷.

While each mentoring session evolved in its own way with the flow of issues raised by mentees, a number of similarities were present. For instance, trust concerns, time management, ability to say 'No' to avoid overloading, strategic planning, forming alliances, career aspirations, conflict management and resolutions, collaborations and networking, work-life balance and the burdensome nature of administrative work. Participants voiced concerns about striking a balance between their commitments to teaching, research, and administrative work. They also generally agreed that declining more work from superiors is frequently viewed as a non-professional attitude.

7 <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/lmd/coachingmentoring>

Mentees were enabled to reflect on their experiences but were also provided with suggestions and options for effectively managing their roles and responsibilities in their professional settings. The importance of sharing what works among peers and networks was emphasized. During the mentoring sessions, we observed the proactive role of mentees in helping each other to address professional challenges by sharing their own experiences. Mentees were also encouraged to make to-do-lists to have clear priorities for effective management of time and tasks.

Mentees were appreciative of the safe and confidential space created in the online mentoring sessions. They stressed the need to have a formal mentorship program in HEIs to address the many challenges and to receive expert guidance and support. Figure 4 shows main topics discussed in group mentoring sessions.

Mentees also provided their insights regarding the benefits of mentorship. A common thread running through the comments was the enormous influence mentorship has had on their personal and professional development. Many mentees reported a rise in self-confidence, which they attributed to the support provided by their mentors. Furthermore, mentorship was recognized for its role in skill development, with mentees reporting considerable gains in leadership, communication and interpersonal skills as a result of their mentorship experiences. Mentees highlighted mentors' role in identifying their strengths, rectifying deficiencies, facilitating career progress, and extending emotional support.

Overall, feedback on the mentoring sessions was positive and participants found this formal mentoring useful in advancing women leadership in HEIs. A number of challenges too, were identified and discussed for future and on-going formal mentoring programmes. An indicator of success of the online mentoring sessions and indeed the entire pilot project was that all participants formed WhatsApp groups as well as WhatsApp groups by mentoring cohort. We were informed that these groups are actively engaged in reaching out to each other, networking among themselves, raising questions and looking for responses, sharing information and so on. They were also getting in touch with each other regarding their career progression, conference announcements and opportunities. Warwick University contributors provided letters of support for fellowship applications initiated by our mentees, some of whom made it to the interview stage.

A number of challenges too, were identified and discussed for future and on-going formal mentoring programmes. The most important issue, especially, in a close-knit society like Pakistan is related to ensuring trust and confidentiality. Mentors emphasized the integral nature of the relationship between trust and confidentiality in mentoring. It can only take place and succeed in safe spaces and that the development of contextually appropriate protocols and codes of conduct for mentors and mentees will be critical to the implementation of a formal process.

Reflections and concluding remarks

The present article results from a pilot project conducted over 16 months which offered coaching and mentoring to emerging women leaders in women-only universities in Pakistan. This pilot project addressed the gender-based gaps in leadership roles identified in the global literature and evident within public universities in Pakistan (Ali 2013, Bhatti and Ali 2020, 2021, Lashari 2023). Thus, despite the increasing presence of women in higher education, their success in mainstream leadership roles is still not assured (Bhatti and Ali 2020). Following the literature, the project recognised that there is always an interplay between micro and macro factors which interact to influence women's perceptions, choices, and preferences regarding leadership in higher education (Dahlvig and Longman 2020, Morley and Crossouard 2015). We set out to explore therefore how to address systemic barriers and promote gender parity in leadership roles specifically in the higher education sector?

This was a pilot project designed to address issues which had been identified in Pakistani public HEIs but with a specific focus on the context of women only universities. We were interested in exploring whether the challenges faced by women in these contexts were different from those in mixed sex settings. We were also mindful that these universities were located in rural and less well-resourced areas as well as in some urban centres. The design of the project in four phases enabled us to use the findings from each stage to develop the next. The findings from phase 1 (the training needs assessment) in particular revealed the pervasiveness of the structural issues that confront women in their aspirations to be leaders. Even in women only universities, women face barriers not only for acquiring leadership roles, but they also experience obstacles in raising their voices in official forums due to various socio-cultural and organizational factors. For instance, stereotypical behaviour towards women, organizational bias, lack of effective networking, unequal opportunities for capacity building, and lack of mentors hinder women in effectively playing leadership roles. Additionally, women may still also struggle with self-doubt and imposter syndrome which makes it difficult for women to advance in the leadership roles and to be heard. Thus, our findings from the phase 1 survey, feedback from the phase 2 leadership workshop and the phase 3 mentoring sessions align almost completely with research and literature relating to mixed HEIs.

Phase 2 (the 5-day capacity building workshop) drew on phase 1 findings and also on the literature discussed earlier which highlights the importance of developing networks among female professionals through which they can share experiences and advocate for their interests. The evaluation built into this workshop informed the need for and the development of the group mentoring element of the project (phase 3). Again, this phase built on the literature which points to the way in which mentoring can, if designed with sufficient contextual awareness, support female academics in their career progression. The

mentoring program was tailored to address the specific challenges that women in HEIs face in Pakistan. We focused on women undertaking leadership responsibilities in various women only universities to cultivate the “soft-skills” required to perform significantly and smoothly their tasks. Based upon feedback from participants, and subsequent interaction with them, it may be stated that the mentoring program had a positive impact on the participants’ personal and professional development. Many mentees noted increased self-confidence due to mentoring support, and acknowledged the role of mentors in enhancing leadership, communication, and interpersonal skills. Although it is too early to claim definitively the positive outcome of our collaborative and inclusive mentoring practices, we believe that regular mentoring will not only promote women’s professional growth but also contribute to transforming academic cultures to be more supportive and equitable as suggested by Chesterman (2003) and Marina (2019).

We also addressed the importance of contextual awareness in issues when choosing mentors. As mentioned earlier, all mentees were females who had received various training opportunities, faced similar challenges in becoming leaders, served in various leadership positions, and shared the same culture. This worked as an accessible bridge between mentors and mentees to share their lived experiences pertaining to their personal and professional lives. Believing that mentoring is a process, the resource persons from both the partner countries—Pakistan and the UK—shared their personal knowledge, experiences, and skills with mentees. Mentors provided insights regarding successful navigation regarding various leadership styles. Similarly, through mentoring sessions, each mentor carefully listened, addressed and suggested a range of workable solutions to the issues and concerns raised by mentees.

Contributing to creating a critical mass of women leaders in higher education, this pilot study will have a positive impact to minimize the leadership gender-gap in HEIs of Pakistan. This will occur as soon as these trained women leaders will not only apply the knowledge and skill set acquired in their professional matters but also cascade this learning and skills in their respective institutions. One of the outcomes that the project intended to achieve in the longer term is creating self-realization and recognition of potential of women leaders both at personal and organizational levels. This would facilitate in minimizing the gender gap in senior positions in higher education settings. Despite the project’s success, it is pertinent to mention that it was extremely challenging to fully inculcate the importance of and commitment to such opportunities among all participants. Simultaneously, it can be said that some persistent constraints may hinder the full realization of women’s potential at individual, organizational, and at the policy making level.

Emerging women leaders in HEIs in Pakistan face a number of challenges in navigating their respective, cultural contexts to bring about change. In a highly competitive, educational environment this requires a skillset beyond classical education, training and

research. With the aim of overcoming the gender gap in higher education institutions' leadership positions, our pilot mentoring project has demonstrated how a mentoring program can be embedded within the higher education system to facilitate and ease the transition of mid-level women leaders to senior leadership roles.

As a contribution towards bridging the gender gap, the current pilot study is focused on mentoring mid-career women serving in women-only universities of Pakistan. A notable contribution of this pilot was the creation and effective utilization of digital platforms to facilitate the ongoing engagement and knowledge-sharing among participants and mentors. Thus, we are claiming that our pilot initiative does recognise and challenge the way in which the global academy is structured (Morley (2013) and that the findings are applicable to emerging women leaders in all HEIs of Pakistan.

Based upon various activities and feedback received, the mentoring programme noticeably enhanced participants' leadership and management skills, encouraged them to form networks to share issues of common interest and discuss options of addressing the gender gap in higher education leadership going forward. Nationally, it will contribute to minimize the gender-based gap in leadership roles within public sector universities in Pakistan (Ali 2013, Lashari 2023, Bhatti and Ali 2021).

In agreement with Bayeh (2016), we believe that giving non-discriminatory opportunities to women in various aspects of society will lead to more diverse perspectives, innovative solutions, and sustainable development. Efforts like the present one will help change a culture that acts like a vulture, preying on the most vulnerable and perpetuating a cycle of insidious and pervasive suffering (Ali 2023). This program will positively impact at three levels, i.e., macro, meso, and micro the factors that affect women leadership in academia (Morley and Crossouard 2015) since these elements interactively influence women perception, choices, and preferences to be a leader in higher education settings (Dahlvig and Longman 2020).

However, our study also showed that despite positive feedback and enthusiasm, the usefulness of mentoring varied among participants, and not all participants displayed the same level of commitment. Further research may be required before rolling out the programme to coeducational universities in Pakistan, to ensure mentoring is effective. A lasting change in mind-sets can only be achieved in the longer run, and this paradigm shift would only be possible when such initiatives are institutionalized both at the policy-making and organizational levels. There remains a need to institutionalize the framework for mentorship and fostering women leadership – one that includes toolkits for mentees and mentors, networking of mentors, extending the mentoring program beyond women-only universities, and exploring opportunities for global north-south cooperation for broadening the impact of mentorship programs.

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Annexures A

Annex-A1: List of Participating Universities

- Fatima Jinnah Women's University, Rawalpindi
- Government College Women University, Faisalabad
- Lahore College for Women University, Lahore
- Rawalpindi Women University, Rawalpindi
- The Government College Women University, Sialkot
- Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore
- Women University, Multan
- Government Sadiq College Women University, Bahawalpur
- Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Women University, Peshawar
- Women University, Swabi
- Women's University, Mardan
- Begum Nusrat Bhutto Women University, Sukkur
- Peoples University of Medical & Health Science for Women, Nawabshah
- Women University of Azad Jammu & Kashmir, Bagh

Annexure B

TABLE B1. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF TNA PARTICIPANTS

DEMOGRAPHICS		FREQUENCIES (N)	PERCENTAGE (%)
DESIGNATION			
	Professor	1	0.9
	Associate Professor	9	7.7
	Assistant Professor	43	36.8
	Lecturer	60	51.3
	Others	4	3.4
FIELDS			
	Biology & Medical Sciences	33	28.2
	Physical Sciences	21	17.9
	Social Sciences	33	28.2
	Management sciences	15	12.8
	Arts & Humanities	11	9.4
	Others	4	3.4
PROVINCE			
	Punjab	63	53.8
	KPK	36	30.8

DEMOGRAPHICS		FREQUENCIES (N)	PERCENTAGE (%)
	Sindh	6	5.1
	AJK	12	10.3
AGE			
	25-30	16	13.7
	31-35	38	32.5
	36-40	40	34.2
	41-45	18	15.4
	46-50	5	4.3
ETHNOLINGUISTIC IDENTITY			
	Punjabi	62	53.0
	Sindhi	3	2.6
	Balochi	2	1.7
	Pukhtoon	32	27.4
	Other	18	15.4
LENGTH OF SERVICE			
	1-5	42	35.9
	6-10	46	39.3
	11-15	17	14.5
	16-20	12	10.3
	Total Sample	117	

TABLE B2. AWARENESS/KNOWLEDGE ABOUT DIFFERENT POLICIES ADOPTED BY THE UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY NAME	POLICY ON WORKPLACE HARASSMENT	POLICY ON PLAGIARISM	POLICY ON PERSON WITH DISABILITIES	N
Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Women Uni- versity, Peshawar	8	18	2	19
Begum Nusrat Bhutto Women University, Sukkur	3	3	3	4
The Government College Women Uni- versity, Sialkot	10	8	5	13
Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore	5	7	7	7
Women University, Swabi	4	10	3	12
Women University, Multan	6	9	5	9

UNIVERSITY NAME	POLICY ON WORKPLACE HARASSMENT	POLICY ON PLAGIARISM	POLICY ON PERSON WITH DISABILITIES	N
Women's University, Mardan	4	5	3	6
Government College Women University, Faisalabad	2	3	3	3
Lahore College for Women University, Lahore	3	5	3	5
Rawalpindi Women University	1	2	1	2
Peoples University of Medical & Health Science for Women, Nawabshah	2	2	1	2
Women University of Azad Jammu & Kash- mir, Bagh	7	8	5	12
Government Sadiq College Women Uni- versity, Bahawalpur	9	12	6	12
Fatima Jinnah Women's University, Rawalpindi	11	10	7	11
Total	75	102	54	117

TABLE B3. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

DEMOGRAPHICS		FREQUENCIES (N)	PERCENTAGE (%)
DESIGNATION			
	Associate Professor	5	18.5
	Assistant Professor	9	33.3
	Lecturer	13	48.1
FIELDS			
	Biology & Medical Sciences	11	40.7
	Physical Sciences	4	14.8
	Management sciences	4	14.8
	Social Sciences	7	25.9
	Arts & Humanities	1	3.7
PROVINCE			
	Punjab	15	55.5
	KPK	6	22.2

DEMOGRAPHICS		FREQUENCIES (N)	PERCENTAGE (%)
	Sindh	4	14.8
	AJK	2	7.4
AGE			
	25-30	3	11.1
	31-35	10	37.0
	36-40	8	29.6
	41-45	5	18.5
	46-50	1	3.7
MARITAL STATUS			
	Single/unmarried	12	44.4
	Married	15	55.6
ETHNOLINGUISTIC IDENTITY			
	Punjabi	15	55.6
	Sindhi	3	11.1
	Balochi	0	0
	Pukhtoon	6	22.2
	Other	3	11.1
LENGTH OF SERVICE			
	1-5	9	33.3
	6-10	11	40.7
	11-15	2	7.4
	16-20	5	18.5
	Total Sample	27	