

Women Academicians' Career Progression in Higher Education of Azad Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract: Women academicians' career progression in higher education has attracted the attention of research across the globe. Although, some significant strides have been made, however women academicians still face barriers to progress in the academia. This study is aimed to know the systematic barriers that slow down women academicians' academic careers in higher education of AJK. We employed quantitative research design and used cross-sectional research method in this study. We selected a sample of 28 women academicians by means of table of random numbers. We collected data by using a questionnaire from one of the public sector universities of AJK while using simple random sampling technique. The findings of the study showed that women academicians face many barriers that significantly affect their career progression. These include barriers in representation, decision-making, recruitment, and research and development. We conclude that women academicians' slower progress is owing to the male dominated structure of higher education. Based on the findings, we suggest adopting and reinforcing gender-sensitive measures to revisit the hierarchal structure of higher education to ensure equal representation of women in higher education careers.

Key Words: Women, Academicians, Higher Education, Representation, Research

Introduction

Women academicians' career progression in higher education has attracted the attention of researchers across the globe. Although, some significant achievements have been made, however they still face many challenges to progress like men in academia (Kinahan et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2020). They also identified many challenges that vividly affect the career progression of women academicians. For example, a wide range of overt to covert forms of challenges, i.e. discriminations and biasness that create hurdles in providing equitable academic environment to the progression of women academicians' academic careers. We conducted this study with women academicians in higher education [universities] of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) to know the barriers they face in their career progression.

Research shows that patriarchal structure of institutions is one of contributing factors to the women's slow career growth in general and higher education in particular (Filandri & Pasqua, 2021). The power structures led by men further create higher education workplace more challenging for women. This gender biased approach marginalizes women academicians in higher education careers. Bourabain (2021) asserted that despite required qualification and research publications, women academicians are not found on the senior academic and power positions. He further stated that women academicians are also missing on the tenured positions. Similarly, Blithe and Elliott (2020) highlighted another

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important area of women academicians' promotion. They said that men academicians receive promotions swiftly than women while having similar criteria of promotions. This shows that higher education has biased criteria to recruit the academicians while promotion criteria and pay gaps continuously perpetuated gender inequalities that further add miseries to the women career aspirants by preventing them to make choices and rise in the academic ladder (Abdullah & Kauser, [2023](#); Casad et al., [2021](#)).

The gender expectations to women are further reflected in patriarchal higher education across societies (Barkhuizen et al., [2022](#)). Van Veelen and Derks ([2022](#)) also added that sociocultural expectations of any society restrict active participation of women in public and private spheres including higher education. They further stated that women are expected to create balance between their career and domestic life of keeping home, rearing children, and social life. It is evident by the slang of 'second shift' where besides academic career, women have their second shift to take care of their domestic chores. While in academia, along with their family responsibilities, they are expected to produce research and compete the men academicians by meeting all the standards. It further makes higher education career a challenge to women academicians (Bird & Rhoton, [2021](#)). Fox Tree and Vaid ([2022](#)) argued that women academicians are disproportioned in allocation of academic and non-academic tasks. They are discriminated in mentoring and networking services that restraint them to grow equally to men. Such imbalances show that women are burdened and face pressures from different associated corridors while men merely focus their academic profiles.

Gender disparities remained a persistent issue in the higher education workplace (Bhopal, [2020](#)). He further maintained that higher education culture is still traditionally operated by men working since long and they never allow women to replace them. Thus, a variety of challenges are experienced by women in such culture, i.e. women academicians experience issues of social integration, mentoring, and professional networks. Similarly, they are disproportioned in senior academic and power position. Absence of women from academic positions is indicative of the women's low aspirations towards the career development (Aiston & Fo, [2021](#)). Moreover, power dynamics and academic hierarchies are major agents of creating barriers for women academicians' professional development while limiting their opportunities for the advancements (Abdullah et al., [2015](#); Heilman et al., [2024](#)).

The intersectionality of gender produces various types of discriminations including race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status which shaped the women academicians' experiences in higher education (Tabassum & Nayak, [2021](#)). They also stated that women from indigenous societies often experience barriers based on the race and culture that further limit their access to resources while institutional support is rarely available to the women. Taparia and Lenka ([2022](#)) asserted that women academicians experience multitude of biases that further create hostile workplace and, hence, exclusion.

In addition, Coleman ([2020](#)) found work-life balance of women academicians as one of the critical issues where institutional support is required to address the problems they face. Unfortunately, majority of the universities lack friendly policies on work-life balances that may help to provide flexibility to the academics as well as parents to balance their family and professional lives (Stephens et al., [2020](#)), whereas absence of such policies effect the women academicians' career growth and family responsibilities (Angervall & Beach, [2020](#)). Thus, lack of such policies makes workplace challenging to women academics and they are unable to perform and compete to men and grow exceptionally in their academic careers.

Study Context: Research on women academicians' career progression is limited in Pakistan. Although studies have been conducted on the women's issues in higher education (Ali & Rasheed, [2021](#); Fazal et al., [2019](#); Shah et al., [2020](#)). However, these studies do not cover the overall situation faced by the women academicians in higher education. Similarly, few studies conducted on women academicians in higher education of AJK show that women are discriminated in higher education careers (Abdullah et al., [2024](#); Abdullah & Nisar, [2024](#); Abdullah & Ullah, [2022](#)), while studies on career progression are scarce. Due to lack of literature coupled with our experiences, we conducted this research in one of the universities of AJK. Addressing these barriers requires a multi-faceted approach, including policy reforms, increased support for work-life balance, and initiatives to combat bias and discrimination.

Literature Review

A substantial body of literature has been conducted on women academicians' position in higher education (Aiston & Fo, [2021](#); Angervall & Beach, [2020](#)). Despite some significant strides in academia, women academicians are still facing underrepresentation and proportion issues across developed and developing countries. They further argued that women academicians are disproportioned to men while men occupy the senior academic and power positions. On the other hand, women are mainly found on the lower academic positions. This shows that women academicians are mainly marginalized in academic positions (Barkhuizen et al., [2022](#)). This argument is further supported by Bhopal ([2020](#)) who argued that women academicians in Indian higher education face issues of representation in rising the academic ladder of senior positions including headships and leaderships roles. He also asserted that such disparities are due to the systematic barriers of gender inequalities and biasness while institutional discriminatory policies and lack of networking and supporting work life policies are missing (Bird & Rhoton, [2021](#)). Similarly, women academicians' also face problems in recruitment where men dominated structure influences selection and promotion process (Blithe & Elliott, [2020](#)). While women academicians are discriminated in research and development that leave them with low career aspirations in academia. In addition, Bourabain ([2021](#)) revealed that male dominated academic culture emphasize long working hours expecting high productivity that is not suited for the women academicians, and they are unable to balance their academic and family responsibilities.

Heffernan ([2021](#)) and Lipton ([2020](#)) argued that women academicians' exclusion from decision-making processes in higher education is a critical issue that undermines gender equality and limits the diversity of perspectives in academic leadership. Although women have made significant strides in entering academia, they remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions such as deans, provosts, and university presidents (Allen et al., [2021](#)). This exclusion from key decision-making roles is often the result of institutionalized gender biases, where male-dominated academic structures and networks tend to favor men for leadership positions (Clavero & Galligan, [2021](#)). Women are frequently overlooked for senior roles despite their qualifications, research contributions, and teaching excellence. The absence of women in academic leadership means that decisions regarding institutional policies, hiring practices, funding allocations, and curriculum design may not fully consider the challenges and needs of women or other marginalized groups within the academic community (Berry et al., [2020](#)). Furthermore, De Welde and Stepnick ([2023](#)) contended that the lack of female representation at the decision-making table often perpetuates a cycle of exclusion, as women are less likely to be invited to participate in crucial committees or advisory boards. This exclusion limits opportunities for women to influence the direction of their institutions and shape policies that could promote gender equality and inclusivity (Abbasi et al., [2016](#); Maheshwari & Nayak, [2022](#)).

The influence of masculinity in the higher education system significantly shapes the academic culture, often to the disadvantage of women and other marginalized groups (Van Veelen & Derks, [2022](#)). Traditionally, higher education institutions have been built on patriarchal structures, where leadership roles and authority are largely dominated by men. This masculine framework influences the way academic power dynamics, policies, and expectations are structured, perpetuating an environment where qualities traditionally associated with masculinity—such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and hierarchical thinking—are valued over qualities associated with femininity, such as collaboration, empathy, and relational communication (Taparia & Lenka, [2022](#)). As a result, Lipton ([2020](#)) revealed that male-dominated norms tend to define what is considered "successful" or "authoritative" within academia, marginalizing those who do not fit this mold, including women, individuals, and others who challenge the gendered norms of the institution.

Discrimination against women in the recruitment process for higher education positions is a persistent issue that limits gender equality in academia (Siekkinen et al., [2020](#); Stephens et al., [2020](#)). Despite progress toward gender equity, women often face significant barriers in securing academic roles, particularly in senior or tenured positions. One of the most notable forms of discrimination is implicit bias, where hiring committees unknowingly favour male candidates over equally qualified female applicants (Maheshwari & Nayak, [2022](#)). This bias can manifest in various ways, such as favouring traditionally male-dominated research areas or overlooking women's contributions in academic settings. Furthermore, Heffernan ([2021](#)) found that women are frequently subjected to higher scrutiny during the hiring process, with their qualifications and achievements often questioned or downplayed in comparison to those of male candidates.

Women also face challenges related to the perception of their commitment to academia, particularly when balancing professional and personal responsibilities (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022; MUHAMMED et al., 2015). Women of childbearing age, for instance, may be unfairly presumed to be less dedicated or to have potential career interruptions due to caregiving duties. This type of stereotype can hinder their chances of securing positions, particularly in highly competitive fields. In some cases, hiring practices that prioritize long hours, high productivity, and an unwavering commitment to research can inadvertently disadvantage women, who may face societal expectations to take on caregiving roles at home (Heilman et al., 2024; Kinahan et al., 2020).

Women's deficiency in research within higher education is a significant barrier to achieving gender equity in academia (Allen et al., 2021). Despite women constituting a substantial portion of the academic workforce, they remain underrepresented in research output, particularly in prestigious publications and research funding. Several factors contribute to this disparity (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). First, gender bias often affects the evaluation of research, with studies showing that women's work is sometimes undervalued or overlooked, especially in male-dominated fields (Abdullah et al., 2024; Shah et al., 2020). This bias extends to peer review processes, where women researchers may face harsher scrutiny or have their contributions dismissed, even if they produce groundbreaking work.

Methodology

In this research, we employed quantitative research design in the positivistic research traditions to know the women academicians' career progression in higher education of AJK. We used cross-sectional research method to measure the difference of variables. We aimed to know the systematic barriers that slow down women academicians' academic career in higher education of AJK. For this study, we selected one of the universities of AJK and derived a sample of 28 women academicians by using table of random numbers. This technique is useful where everyone in the sampling frame has equal chance to be included in the sample. We opted this technique to avoid the biasness to select a representative sample to ensure the generalization of the findings. We designed a questionnaire and collected data from the women academicians by means of simple random sampling. We selected few variables from the collected data, i.e. women representation, decision-making, masculinity, recruitment, and research. We divided women academicians into two groups while analysed responses of each group independently to assess whether both groups have significant differences or not. Thus, to measure, we employed Independent Sample T-test to compare the means. Before conducting the t-test, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was performed to check if the assumption of equal variances between the groups was met. If the assumption was violated (i.e., unequal variances), the Welch's t-test was used as an alternative, which adjusts for the unequal variance between the groups. The data were analysed using statistical software to compute the t-values, degrees of freedom (df), and p-values. The significance level was set at 0.05, meaning any p-value below 0.05 was considered statistically significant. The mean difference, standard error, and confidence intervals were also calculated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the magnitude and precision of the differences between the groups. This methodology allowed for a rigorous and reliable analysis of the research questions, ensuring valid results that contribute to the understanding of the variables under study.

Key Findings

Key findings are crucial to summarize the important results and insights gained from the research. These findings provide evidence to answer the research questions. Moreover, these offer new perspectives on whether to support or challenge the existing body of knowledge.

Table 1

Frequency Distribution of Qualifications, Income, Designation, and District

Variables	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Qualification	MPhil	16	57.1
	PhD	10	35.7
	MA	2	07.1

Variables	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Income	80,000- 90,000	1	03.6
	90,001-10,001	1	03.6
	10,0002-120,002	5	17.9
	Above 120,003	21	75.0
Designation	Lecturer	15	53.6
	Assistant Professor	12	42.9
	Professor	1	03.6
District	Muzaffarabad	25	89.3
	Kotli	1	03.6
	Poonch	1	03.6
	Any other	1	03.6

Table 1 shows the distribution of demographic variables. According to the table qualification of the women academics was found as 57 percent women faculty members hold M.Phil. degree including the lecturers and assistant professors. Women academicians hold doctorate were 36 percent while 7 percent were possessing master's degree education. As far as income is concerned, only two women academicians consisting of 7 percent of total proportion were found earning from 80000 to 100001 while 18 percent were found earning from 100002 to 120002. A major ratio of 75 percent women academicians earned reasonable income of more than 120003 per month. The designations of the women were also sorted out categorically which construe that 54 percent were found occupying the position of lecturer while 43 percent were assistant professors and only one professorate woman academician pertaining 3.6 percent was thus found in a defined unit of population. Seeking the residence of the academicians according to their concerned district, 89 percent women academicians were found from district Muzaffarabad and 3.6 percent each were found from Kotli, Poonch and Bagh. It is augmented that women academicians enumerated so far have good record of the qualification and most of them are either M.Phil. or possessing the Doctorate degrees. Therefore, women do possess the highest qualification and the rate is increasing. For the income generation activity, most of the women earn a reasonable amount according to the designation they possess in the hierarchy. Most of the women academicians belonged to Muzaffarabad. It is pertinent that women have highest qualification increasingly along the earning status and placed in the well-defined hierarchy.

Hypothesis Testing

We conceptualized the study and developed the following hypothesis.

There is significant difference of representation, decision-making, masculinity, recruitment and research between men and women in higher education careers.

Table 2

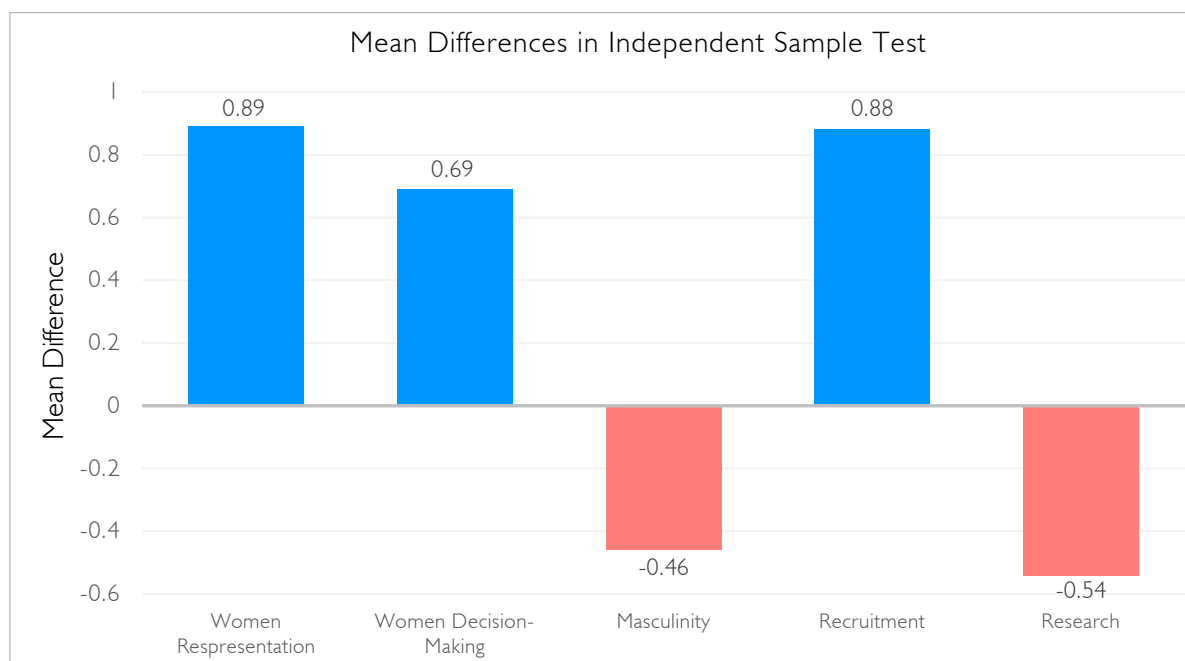
Independent Samples Test of Women Representation, Decision-Making, Masculinity, Recruitment, and Research

Variables		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Women representation	Equal variances assumed	.820	.374	3.965	26	.001	.89231	.22503	.42975	1.35486
	Equal variances not assumed			4.063	25.117	.000	.89231	.21961	.44012	1.34449
Women Decision Making	Equal variances assumed	1.928	.177	2.736	26	.011	.68718	.25120	.17084	1.20352
	Equal variances not assumed			2.653	19.986	.015	.68718	.25901	.14686	1.22749

Variables		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Masculinity	Equal variances assumed	.471	.499	-2.044	26	.000	-.46154	.22578	-.92564	.00257
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.079	25.823	.048	-.46154	.22199	-.91801	-.00507
Recruitment	Equal variances assumed	.621	.321	4.764	24	.000	.87653	.32102	.31982	.65142
	Equal variances not assumed			3.352	20	.012	.56326	.31245	.15312	.32143
Research	Equal variances assumed	.521	.632	2.532	26	.021	-.54261	.12321	-.83212	.12232
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.983	25	.016	-.36921	.32112	-.84353	-.00027

Levene's Test p-value = 0.374, which is greater than 0.05, so we assume equal variances. The t-test result shows a significant difference between the groups ($p = 0.001$), with a mean difference of 0.89231. This value shows that women are underrepresented in higher education. Similar findings are reported by many researchers. Aiston and Fo (2021) and Allen et al. (2021) highlighted that women are underrepresented in academic positions of higher education. they further stated that women are less likely found on the higher academic positions. The 95% confidence interval for this difference is between 0.42975 and 1.35486. Levene's Test p-value = 0.177, so we assume equal variances. The t-test result shows a significant difference ($p = 0.011$) with a mean difference of 0.68718. These values construe that women face exclusion in decision making processes in higher education. It is concluded that men do not include women in decisions making. Angervall and Beach (2020) and Avolio et al., (2020) also revealed that women are not included in decision making process by men on senior academic and power positions. They also stated that men predominantly occupied the higher education further marginalized women in academic hierarchy. The 95% confidence interval for this difference is between 0.17084 and 1.20352. Levene's Test p-value = 0.499, so we assume equal variances.

The t-test result shows a significant negative difference ($p = 0.000$) with a mean difference of -0.46154. Here, we found that higher education structure is masculine where men are dominating the academic structure since long while women disproportioned and located at the lower academic positions. Barkhuizen et al. (2022) spotlighted that higher education structure is under the immense influence of masculinity where men are possessing the higher positions demonstrating their hegemony. Berry et al. (2020) added that men's hegemony further shaped the reality by influencing the behaviour of women academicians. The 95% confidence interval for this difference is between -0.92564 and 0.00257. A negative mean difference indicates that one group has a lower score on masculinity than the other. Levene's Test p-value = 0.321, so we assume equal variances. The t-test result shows a significant difference ($p = 0.000$) with a mean difference of 0.87653. This shows that recruitment is also under the influence of men academicians. This low proportion of women academicians is indicative of men's dominance that further marginalize the women's entry into higher education. Similar assertions are given by Bird and Rhoton (2021) and Casad et al. (2021). They also emphasized that higher education structure is primarily occupied by the men, and they discriminate women in higher education careers. The 95% confidence interval for this difference is between 0.31982 and 0.65142. Levene's Test p-value = 0.632, so we assume equal variances. The t-test result shows a significant negative difference ($p = 0.021$) with a mean difference of -0.54261. This indicates that women academicians are deficient in research. Many researchers Fathima et al., (2020) and Fox Tree and Vaid (2022) argued that women are deficient in research globally. While men academicians due to their long standing in academia discriminate women in research while they have mastered skills of research. The 95% confidence interval for this difference is between -0.83212 and 0.12232. Again, a negative mean difference indicates a lower score for one group in the research variable.

Figure 1*Mean Differences in Independent Sample Test***Conclusion**

We concluded that women academicians face discrimination from their male counterparts within the higher education system. Our findings reveal a complex range of barriers contributing to the slower career progression of women. Women remain underrepresented in higher education, with a noticeable imbalance in academic positions. Furthermore, women are less likely included in decision-making processes, highlighting the pervasive influence of masculinity within the academic structure. Additionally, male academicians play a significant role in shaping recruitment processes, often contributing to the marginalization and alienation of women in academia. The lack of women's presence in research also reflects the dominance of male hegemony over research productivity. In conclusion, women academicians encounter numerous barriers, including challenges in representation, decision-making, recruitment, and research. These barriers are perpetuated by male academicians in senior academic positions, ultimately hindering the career advancement of women in higher education. It is suggested that gender-sensitive policies be adopted and enforced to ensure equal representation in the recruitment, decision-making, and research processes, while addressing the patriarchal structure of higher education in AJK.

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