

## WHAT SUSTAINS WOMEN IN A MAN'S WORLD? WHILE HOLDING SENIOR POSITIONS

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### Abstract

This research has explored to add to the global literature to the understanding of the factors influencing women's career progression in higher education management through in depth, semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion. The analysis of the qualitative data provided a unique and comprehensive view of the multifaceted dimensions of distinctive factors supporting women's career progression in senior management positions. With reference to the supportive factors experienced by the participants at organizational level, in connection to work-family interface and women's career progression, the participants – both junior and seniors – informed about the help and support they had received when they got appointed or when they had promoted to their senior roles. It was expected that knowledge based on participant's perceptions of support and the approaches they exercised for facilitating the work-family interface, hopefully, will bring their insights to the wider community. Such awareness would support the management of women's human resources and their careers while addressing the work-family conflict and might emerge as a strong strategy for women themselves for countering the issue of work-family issues, which is widely considered to be the main hurdle to their career paths.

**Keywords:** Women, Leadership positions, Higher learning Institutions, Supportive Factors

### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognized that very few women succeed in top management positions (Catalyst, 2012) despite having increased their enrollment in higher education (Nidiffer, 2010; Morley, 2013). The number of women in senior leadership positions is not compatible with the number of women students and comparatively falls short in the very highest positions (Madsen, 2012; Adler and Izraeli, 1988; Wirth, 2001; Davidson and Burke, 2012). Similarly to other countries, in Pakistan women hold very few senior management positions (Shah & Shah, 2012; Mirza and Jabeen, 2011). Comparatively, women's share of professional jobs has increased but they are concentrated mainly in traditional occupations, such as education and health (Jabeen and Iqbal, 2010). Women have made less progress in legal, political, economic, administrative and decision making positions (Ibid). Due to the Government of Pakistan's commitment and comparatively better allocation of budgets in the education sector, women now hold some management positions in higher education. Women have been moving steadily into occupations, professions, and managerial jobs previously reserved for men (Jabeen, 2000). However they hold a comparatively higher percentage of management positions in 'women only' institutions (Shah & Shah, 2012). Women are best represented in women's schools and colleges. In mixed universities, women deans and professors are a minority group and women vice-chancellors and presidents are a rarity (UNESCO, 2010). Overall, women are largely underrepresented in senior management positions (Ibid). Internationally, the literature suggests that there are a number of complex factors obstructing women's advancement in

leadership and management including gendered attitudes (Vinkenburg and Van, 2005); gender discrimination (Bendl and Schmidt, 2010; Blackmore, 1999); the exclusion of women from male developmental networks (Tharenou, 2005); and the exclusion of women from career development opportunities (Morley, 2006). Moorosi (2010) also found evidence of discrimination among women at the level of planning, access into management and once they held such positions. Jones et al. (2006) and Blau and Kahn (2007) found that women are paid less than men, while a number of studies refer to the glass ceiling (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Barreto et al., 2009; ILO, 2004; Altman et al., 2005). In Asian contexts like India and Pakistan, while avenues for work are now increasingly open for women, they still have to fight against gender bias to gain acceptance as equals (Mirza and Jabeen, 2011). However, at the same time the literature suggest that in Asian context, there are favorable factors which promote women's career progression at their best. To explore such element in the Pakistani context this study has been conducted and result are presented accordingly.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This research has explored the favorable factors supporting women's career progression in higher education management through in depth, semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion conducted with 48 women working in junior, and senior level management positions in the public sector universities of Pakistan. The specific research question was: What factors support women's advancement to senior management positions, specifically at the organizational level where they work in.

## **3. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA**

The analysis based on participants' responses addressed the supportive factors and individual coping strategies which the women adopted to deal with the challenges of managing work-family roles with reference to the way that they affected women's careers in higher education management. The participants experienced the relationship between career advancement and work-life balance in different ways within their specific home and work contexts. The data revealed that as small number of participants had experienced the work-family interface as an issue. Most reported that they did not experience any difficulties with the work-family interface which hindered their careers. The research explored how the participants managed to achieve senior management positions while still managing their family responsibilities. Many of the interviewees indicated that despite their assumed social role within Pakistani culture, a range of different positive factors had had a significant impact on their dual role responsibilities, all of which contributed to their advancement and their ability to combine career and family. Details of which is given as under:

### **3.1 The interface of Work-Family Life and Coping: Supportive Factors and Personal Coping Strategies**

'Inter-role conflict' (Kahn et al., 1964) occurs when role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Generally, it is assumed that due to women's strong commitment to family responsibilities and career obligations, they experience a clash between their work and family domains (Miller, 2006). Noor (2006) argued that dual roles can be particularly challenging for the professional woman manager as she works towards fulfilling the expectations of both roles. High job demands mean that women devote extensive time to work and experience difficulties maintaining their home and caring for children, and aging family members (Roehling and Moen, 2003). Consequently, they often perceived role conflict as an obstacle to their career development (Domenico and Jones, 2006). The participants had encountered diverse challenges in their progression to the upper levels of management as they attempted to fulfill family responsibilities as well as satisfying role expectations in the work domain. The data suggested that the participants were capable of overcoming some of the challenges with the help of family members and the facilities provided by their organizations as per general public policy. To facilitate a positive work-family life their personal and professional abilities also played a significant role. The participants experienced a sense of fulfillment and contentment from having multiple roles. Thus dual role responsibilities did not inhibit participants from ascending to the top of organizations. The data revealed a number of factors that explained the absence of work-family conflict.

#### **3.1.1. An Extended Family Arrangement**

Families emerged as a significant supportive factor for the majority of the participants (62.5%). As they tried to combine career and family roles which meant that they could fulfill roles at home and at work. The cooperation of joint family members was a dominant feature in different ways. For example, in the joint family set up, the traditional role of grandmothers in the provision of care to their grandchildren was repeatedly acknowledged. One of the participants said: "It is a fact that my career responsibilities and my family life

often put pressure on me. Sometimes, they caused great physical and mental stress. Once it became extremely hard for me to combine long work hours with my family responsibilities. My parents-in-law were living in our hometown which was far away from our employment city. They knew our difficulties. Then we mutually decided to live at one place. They moved to our city. We rented a big house. My sisters and brothers-in-law got admission to the colleges. Thus, finally we got a joint family set up. I acknowledge that this system is very helpful in one way or another. Everybody contributes in whatever way possible. At once our life became easy". In response to a query about problems arising from joint family systems, further to her statement above she added: "It might differ from person to person but I feel comfortable in a big family set up. There are no worries about household chores". Other participants also indicated that managing multiple roles alone was not easy and that they required support from their families. She wanted to look after their children with the help of their families. She indicated "In the initial stage of my career, I was very confused. I was not able to cope with domestic responsibilities. I always had a messy morning full of hustle and bustle. I often was late getting to my office. First thing in the morning, along with other responsibilities, was preparing the breakfast for everybody. I had to make everything ready for my young child to drop him off to the university day care. My daily work schedule often conflicted with my home life. Finally, my husband lost his temper and wanted me to quit my job. I was very worried about the situation. It was difficult for me to leave my career. I tried to convince him to find another option. Then we decided to ask my mother-in-law to help us. She was living in her hometown. Although elderly people usually do not feel easy to leave their homes and live in a new place, she kindly accepted our request for the sake of our comfort. We used to leave our child with her. Due to her presence our maid could come in during the day to do domestic tasks. Thus, we both breathed a sigh of relief".

It was acknowledged by the participants that due to the facilitating behavior of family members they were able to manage work and family life simultaneously. If this had not been the case it would have been difficult for them to meet work and family commitments effectively. They would have had to reduce the hours they devoted to work or might have had to sacrifice their career to undertake their family roles.

### **3.1.2. Sense of Moral and Religious Duty to Take Care of Their Parents**

As far as marital status and work-family responsibilities were concerned, the data found little difference between the lives of married (65%) and unmarried (31%) participants. Although unmarried participants reported being free from married life responsibilities, it was not always married women that required extra effort to maintain their homes. Unmarried participants also had commitments to their parents, brothers and sisters in addition to their work. There were also two single mothers who had the sole responsibility of caring and providing for their children while also managing their work roles. The findings did not reveal any differences between unmarried (31%) and divorced participants (4%) in relation to their work-family responsibilities. Unmarried participants were engaged with elderly care responsibilities. However, they felt satisfaction in looking after their parents and did not consider this to be an extra burden on them, so perceived no conflict in their work-family lives. One of the participants said "People assume that since I am unmarried I don't have other commitments and I can manage to work for long hours without any problems. I feel this is just taken for granted. I work the same as married women. I tend to work usually from morning till evening in the office. When I get back home, I give time to my dependant mother and sister. I make sure all of their needs are met. It is quite a busy routine but to me this is all part of my life. I never feel any bother in doing this. I always feel good that I am doing something for them. I am blessed to be able to take care of my mother".

Further to their moral and religious duty to take care of their parents, they always thought of it in that way and did it willingly rather than complaining. They happily provided their dependants with all of the things that they needed: one of the participants explained that "Being the only daughter at home I take full responsibility for taking good care of my parents. Although, I am unmarried I still make a huge commitment to my job and to my parents. The important thing is that I never feel that I am doing something extra for them. I do everything with much love and affection. It is my religious obligation too. Parents are entitled by right to kind and dutiful treatment from children. This is an important duty which Allah emphasizes strongly. It is not at all any difficulty for me. Indeed I feel much pleasure in taking care of my beloved parents. I feel blessed to have this opportunity to serve my parents". , The data showed that spending time with their parents and taking care of them made them contented.

### **3.1.3 Pleasure of Nurturing Children**

The literature suggests that women see the demands of family life and having children adding to work-family conflict and interfering with achieving career success (Colman, 2011). However, the research revealed that

children were thought of as enhancing participants' personal life and minimizing work-family issues. The majority of the participants (88.4%) did not see the demands of family life with children interfering with achieving their career success. Having children was thought to be the best part of their lives. The pleasure of nurturing them was evident from their narratives. They were happy and satisfied in putting in every effort for their upbringing. One of the participants said: "It is always surprising to me that some women forgo children in order to pursue their career. Not having children to pursue a career is quite unappealing to me. I might be wrong but in our society I never came across women who preferred their career over children. Raising children is an exciting part of our lives. I believe we all happily overcome difficulties for our children. Therefore, whatever circumstances we face we never get frustrated. We never see the responsibility of children as in conflict with our careers. I never ever thought that my children would interfere with achieving success in my career. At any cost I wouldn't forgo them for my career". Among 16.6% of the participants who reported working late in the evenings. A few of them considered that their lengthy working hours meant that they could not spend as much time as they wished with their children. They often suffered from guilt at not spending enough time with their children while they were very young. However, most of them said that they had succeeded in managing to spend time with them whenever possible. For example one of the participants reported that either their children stayed with their grandparents or they took children with them to work while attending long official engagements: "We never left our children unattended at home. We tried to give as much time to our children as we could. For example, if I had to attend a university function or I had to attend lengthy official meetings I took my children with me. To keep them busy, I asked them to spend their time in the library. I made appropriate arrangements for their reading and writing activities around the library. I took great satisfaction from doing this".

Those respondents who had no children suggested that in Pakistani society women did not view children as a burden. This was one of the main reasons for the low inter-role conflict among married working women. One of the married participants who had no children and no extended family spoke about her lack of family responsibilities. She felt an increasing desire to have a child and felt unhappy that she did not have domestic responsibilities. "I really think there are so many different responsibilities that a woman has to take care of, alongside her work responsibilities, when she either has children or extended family members to look after. I don't have children. When I am at home, I am busy in the kitchen. I have very limited domestic responsibilities on a routine basis and it is therefore thought that as I have no children I have fewer worries. Truly speaking, I am not happy with the situation. I want to have children. I believe that in our culture, children are not taken as a burden but the blessing of Allah. I never opted to forgo having children to avoid extra responsibilities. If I had children then nothing in the world would be more important to me than taking care of my children."

The work-family responsibilities of participants with children compared to those of participants without children were different. The demands of family and work posed challenges to those with children. However, participants perceived this as normal and accepted it as part of their overall happy lives. They never considered forgoing having children to focus on their high-pressured jobs. They tried to make it as easy as possible to have a career and a family.

### **3.1.4. Institutional Facilities Management**

In accord with public policy, generally, the most senior university officers are entitled to have access to full-time help from servants. These servants are paid for by their organizations and provide services to senior officers free of charge. Their assigned work ranges from housekeeping to laundry and ironing. To facilitate travel most senior officers are provided with chauffeur driven cars. In order to provide these services to senior officials and facilitate them in meeting their work-home responsibilities servants and drivers are usually housed at the homes of senior employees. Some of the participants (31.2 %) working in senior management positions reported that they were entitled to have such provision. Therefore, in terms of combining an administrative career with a family, the benefits of senior level positions presented a very different scenario. For them combining a management career with a family was not an issue. However, a few of them acknowledged that the smooth daily routine regarding household tasks was possible only due to such help at home. One of the participants said: "I admit I just could not do without servants. I have a couple living in my servant quarters provided by the university. A male servant provides me with technical assistance and a great deal of support in other different tasks. The lady manages my home, looking after my young children and meeting other work responsibilities. Almost all domestic chores are managed by this couple. I don't have to do that at all. Thus I feel everything is under control".

Regarding the provision of chauffeur driven cars the senior participants stated that they had no travel worries. They had been provided with comfortable cars to facilitate their travelling for official purposes. This

provision was an important contributor towards the facilitation of official activities. One of the senior participants articulated: "My role involves long working hours and a great amount of travel within and between cities. I commute daily quite a long way. My official car is like an office for me. Whatever official files need to be seen, I read them while travelling. I am never bored by having to travel a lot. Rather, after having quite a tough routine, I always feel relaxed sitting in the back seat of my official car. This is the best time to think and to plan further".

The senior and junior participants who were not entitled to have chauffeur driven cars were facilitated by other means of transportation provided by the university. This made their lives easier. One of the participants said: "I have no worries. I have a set pattern of work and family life. I am living on campus in a university housing building. The university staff van runs between campuses and leaves every half an hour, till late in the evening. So commuting to any university campus is very easy. I have planned my home and work schedules according to this. I've never had a problem in reaching the office on time. Either I am at home or at the office. Mostly I work with peace of mind. Even, when I have to go shopping, I have found the university transportation like no other. For me the transport facility removes all worries. It saves a lot of time which you can easily devote to your other responsibilities".

Although university childcare centres were reported to not be very reliable, they still continued to be a major source of support for the working women. The availability of childcare facilitates at the universities had helped some junior participants who wanted their children to attend these centres. This helped them balance work and home: "Though I am not satisfied with the care provided by the day care centre staff, as sometimes they treat the children harshly, still I prefer to use this opportunity. Although, I have a maid in our house and we allow her to work in our presence particularly at the weekends, we don't want to leave her in our home alone with our child. This is not secure. Taking account of this, the daycare facility is very valuable and contributes to the childcare responsibilities."

The data revealed that the participants appreciated the organizational facilities that they had utilized in managing their career and family responsibilities. Although the status of participants working in junior and senior management positions differed in terms of what was provided by the university, the majority of the participants managed their housekeeping, childcare, and all other areas of running a home using some of the provided services.

### **3.4. Impact of Participants' Own Aptitudes and Abilities**

The participants credited several factors for maintaining a relatively stress free environment both at work and home. Demanding work-family roles and the desire for a peaceful working and living environment led them to utilize their personal abilities. More than fifty percent (58.3 %) of participants developed their professional and personal roles in such a way to help them to achieve their careers with relatively few difficulties. The interviews revealed that the following abilities had a significant impact on their work life.

#### **3.4.1 Embracing Diverse Strategies to Respond Inter-Role Conflict**

One of the strategies exercised by the participants to overcome work-family role conflict was their own attitudes towards work and life. Some of them indicated that they had never felt any pressure fulfilling the requirements of both domains. They adopted a range of strategies for minimizing the possibility of conflict. For example, one of the senior participants articulated how she managed her home: "While at home I remain focused on family matters, a role I greatly enjoy. I perform the traditional homemaker role and help family members with all matters. I enjoy cooking which I mostly do at the weekends. I enjoy inviting friends to dinner. It is a fact that if you have passion for whatever you do at home or at work, it really makes a difference to your enjoyment of life. I think this makes you a better parent and a successful professional"

A few of the participants applied their assertive skills to manage work and family matters. For example, some participants realized that they were not giving proper time to their families. Following this, they took some time away from work to share activities with their children. They refused to attend meetings late in the evenings, tried to return home early and avoided staying very late. This strategy did not affect their work obligations. One of the participants said: "I did not refuse to attend meetings in the day. I am very particular about managing things accurately and professionally but I try to avoid official meetings late in the evening. I have pointed out explicitly to everyone that we can avoid having meetings scheduled in the evenings. The important thing is the recognition of the problem, which can then lead to finding a solution.

Some of the participants admitted that their busy work schedule made it difficult for them to spend enough time with their families but they were able to justify this through pointing out the advantages of their work: "It has not always been pleasant. Enjoying career and family is quite difficult. Many times my husband is in a

difficult mood even relating to minor issues because of the hectic routine of my official tasks. He often complains that we do not have enough leisure time. I explain to him that my work obligations are unavoidable if I am to get such a handsome salary and in return I am obligated to work hard. He is convinced. It means a lot to me that at least he understands my job requirements”.

The findings suggested that the participants tried to organize their schedules and plans carefully to be practical. The ability to work in an organized manner made it easier for the participants to accommodate work and family requirements. This was an effective strategy for reducing work pressure: “I focus on urgent and important tasks rather than those that are not important. I always make a list of what I must get through in a day or week. For example, I used to write two separate to-do lists, what I would like to get through in the office and in my home and focus on completing those on that day. I always try not to leave tasks incomplete”.

Some of the participants indicated that while it was difficult to manage dual responsibilities simultaneously, they succeeded by making a fair distribution of time between both roles: “It does not mean that I am not facing work-family challenges. Like many working women today, I am facing the same problem of work life balance. At one time a smooth life seemed difficult to maintain. I had difficulties in managing things. Then I forced myself to be organized and set my priorities and goals both in work and family roles. I distributed appropriate time for each role and now it is rare that I cannot do something because of my family or work responsibilities”.

Adaptability was identified as the most important strategy among the participants to attain a satisfactory work-life balance: “There is no need to blame home responsibilities for women’s lack of career promotion. I think it is a simple matter of management and understanding. I engage in my workplace with full commitment and dedication. But even if it is needed, I have had never compromised and taken time off for my family. It is important to understand the situation.

Despite the dual role pressures that participants confronted the majority of them tried not to develop conflict with family members. When it came to arranging work-family lives, they sacrificed their own comfort for the sake of family members and avoided the possibility of conflict: “The only thing which created difficulties is that I sacrificed my personal concerns but did not compromise my family’s needs. My own personal interests are not that important to me. This is the main reason that I don’t have any conflict in my family and personal life. I believe all working women make many small sacrifices for their family and avoid potential clashes between work and family”.

Most of the participants succeeded in managing their families simultaneously with their career. This was associated with their positive attitudes and realistic thinking: “I understand it when people talk about work-family balance. People have to find their own solutions. It is your inner feelings that matter, what you feel about it. Sometimes people do nothing but still they are not happy in their lives. For some a busy schedule makes them happy. I am the second kind of person. I prefer to keep busy. I am much happier when I am working. More than two holidays makes me bored. I go to the office and do the best I can there and then I come home and do the best I can at home. I keep my life on this rotation. I feel good about it. People need to feel like that. Actually, this is a real balance between work-and home”.

The research suggested that balancing the work and family domains was not an easy task for the participants to manage but they had adopted a range of strategies drawing on their personal qualities in order to achieve a satisfactory balance.

### **3.4.2. Effective Delegation at Workplace**

A further strategy adopted by 58 percent of the participants was delegation of responsibility to others. One of the participants stated that she was never afraid to delegate to her colleagues and subordinates and acknowledged their role in offering her cooperation which enabled her to manage her work responsibilities: “Being in a responsible position at work I want to have every task completed perfectly. However, I am against holding power for myself. I think this is unjust to others as well ourselves. I personally like to get others to contribute and share responsibilities. I understand that when you involve others in getting things done, this not only makes them feel good and empowers them and gives them confidence but you also lessen your workload. So I delegate at work. Consequently, I share my responsibilities and minimize the amount of work.”

The same strategy was adopted by another participant who spoke about her management techniques for completing different activities and daily tasks efficiently: “A significant habit I have learnt over time is to delegate responsibilities to my colleagues and subordinates according to their abilities. Some are brilliant,

very hardworking, and well organized. I try to make the best use of them. Along these lines I divide my workload and pass it onto others. Rarely, do I stay late in my office to finish daily tasks.”

The research found a connection between work-life facilitation and participants’ professional and personal attributes which enabled them to organize their work and family responsibilities efficiently and professionally.

### **3.4.3. Sense of Career Fulfillment Adding to Work-Family Life Facilitation**

The data showed that feelings of success and achievement were derived from engaging in multiple domains of work and family life and that this was gratifying for most of the participants (58%). They reflected upon their career and family lives within the Pakistani system and indicated that working in senior management positions especially in higher education management had boosted their self-esteem. They believed that they were able to manage the balance between holding senior positions with family roles. The following examples showed that the importance of senior roles contributed to and allowed participants to be fulfilled in both their work and personal domains: “Although I haven’t any time for myself what I have achieved so far gives me a complete sense of self satisfaction. This is the reward of my job. I start working in the early hours of the morning and finish late. I enjoy each and every moment while sitting in my executive office. I love every minute of it. This gives me a sense of pride that I have achieved with continued effort. I feel I have an addiction to work. I never like holidays.

One of the participants indicated that feelings of achievement and related excitement kept her working in her professional life despite the challenges of balancing the work-family interface: “I am holding a very important position with many responsibilities. I understand that I have very prestigious status. I actually feel satisfaction with my career progression. I feel happy to think that I am making an important contribution to my university. These feelings keep me going in my work and family circles. I never feel exhausted rather I enjoy working. I feel very lucky to have the opportunity to get this important position”.

The research found that participants felt valued for what they were contributing to their organizations. The success of their career life contributed to their sense of personal fulfillment. The evidence suggested that they were gratified with their high status which had a positive impact on their willingness to perform dual responsibilities.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The data indicated that there was not a single participant who claimed that work-family issues were completely absent from their lives. Dual commitments to a career and a family were reported to be complex to manage. Some family issues as well as individual circumstances created particular difficulties for the participants in combining work and family life. However, the data presented in this study indicated that participants did not perceive these difficulties as insurmountable. Work-family interface challenges were considered as part of their dual roles and could not be avoided but several helpful aspects were indicated and participants reported adopting different approaches and practices to overcome the challenges. The type of family was reported as an important facilitative factor in supporting work-life domains. The participants frequently acknowledged the positive impact of joint family systems and recognized that such extended families provided considerable support in the facilitation of career and family roles. The family structure, whether there were children or not, was found to be important. Although having children was reported to increase family demands and create a potential imbalance in work-life domains, the participants considered children as an integral part of their family life and as one of the blessings of God. This was a source of strength in reducing difficulties in their children’s upbringing. Some participants devoted themselves to their career because they had no children, however, this was not a deliberate decision taken to advance their career. While unmarried participants experienced fewer difficulties than those who were married, they frequently had elderly care commitments and younger brothers and sisters to look after. The care of parents was reported as a source of contentment for them. The data suggested that they thought themselves blessed for doing something for their family members. This belief meant that combining work and family roles was not an issue for them. The participants attributed their ability to facilitate a positive work-life balance to different factors which were interlinked. Work-life conflict was quite low in the case of senior participants who had considerable support provided by their universities. For those, not entitled to such extensive benefits due to their comparatively junior positions, there were still opportunities to leave their children in university day care centres. The data suggested that managing career and family challenges required a particular approach to life, family and work. Participants adopted particular strategies to help them maintain an appropriate balance including delegating work. Their achievements gave them satisfaction and they had high self-esteem and a sense of empowerment. Their enjoyment of their work and the excitement they derived from it enabled them to manage the demands of work and family.

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