

Is there room for women? Male managers' experiences of gendered collaborative leadership in organizational life

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Shabnam Aijaz Shaikh

Department of Management and Leadership,

School of Business and Economics, Jyväskylä University, Jyväskylä, Finland

Anna-Maija Lämsä

School of Business and Economics, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland and

Kaunas University of Technology, Kaunas, Lithuania, and

Suvi Heikkinen

Department of Management and Leadership,

School of Business and Economics, Jyväskylä University, Jyväskylä, Finland

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Abstract

Purpose – This study critiques the existing leadership literature for oversimplifying organizational leadership by predominantly focusing on Western contexts. To address this limitation, we explore collaborative leadership within Pakistani organizational life – particularly in the higher education sector – through the under-researched perspective of male managers who have the authority to determine whether women, a historically marginalized group in Pakistan, are included in leadership collaboration. The research question guiding this study is: What decision-making strategies do male managers in Pakistani higher education institutions consider appropriate for addressing the dilemma related to women's participation in collaborative leadership?

Design/methodology/approach – Nineteen interviews were conducted with managers from two higher education institutions. The empirical data, capturing detailed real-life experiences, were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

Findings – The findings reveal a range of decision-making strategies employed by male managers, spanning from resistance to conditional acceptance. These strategies are categorized as patriarchal, withdrawal, and mentoring. Top-level male managers, in particular, emerge as key influencers in shaping the extent to which women are able to collaborate with men in leadership roles.

Research limitations/implications – This study focuses solely on higher education organizations within the Pakistani sociocultural context. Further research is needed to explore the topic in other settings.

Originality/value – Moving beyond traditional research on women's leadership and comparative gender analyses, this study offers in-depth insights into the interplay of gender, culture, and leadership, providing a context-sensitive lens on this dynamic.

Keywords Collaborative leadership, Leadership, Qualitative research, Gender, Male manager, Decision-making, Culture, Higher education, Pakistan

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Organizational leadership is embedded within the broader societal context in which it operates (Guthy and Jackson, 2011). In this study, we take up this idea by examining collaborative

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leadership (CL) within Pakistani organizational life—particularly in the higher education sector. In this context, entrenched patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles often hinder women’s advancement to leadership positions and their possibility to collaborate with men (Nadeem and Sully de Luque, 2020). These norms not only raise ethical concerns related to equity and justice (Bano and Nadeem, 2024; Nadeem and Sully de Luque, 2020) but also undermine leadership efficacy, which is critical for addressing the complex global challenges faced by higher education institutions (HEIs) (Khalid *et al.*, 2017). Nevertheless, CL may provide an alternative approach to promoting women’s advancement into leadership roles and enhancing their opportunities to collaborate with men in leadership within Pakistani HEIs (Shaikh *et al.*, 2023). This leadership model emphasizes collaboration and the involvement of diverse individuals in decision-making, potentially fostering an organizational culture of inclusivity and gender equality. Consequently, it may be suited to overcoming the barriers of patriarchal structures (Raelin, 2006; Rosa and Clavero, 2022).

Advancing CL in Pakistani HEIs requires contributions from all genders. However, engaging men in influential decision-making positions—a key aspect of this study—to support women’s roles in CL remains a significant challenge. The societal context, dominated by top-down leadership hierarchies and traditional patriarchal norms, reinforces the “think manager, think male” mindset (Karimullah *et al.*, 2023; Khan *et al.*, 2020). Meanwhile, increasing pressures, such as internationalization and sustainable development initiatives, compel HEIs to engage in global collaborations, where gender equality is essential for achieving international recognition and advancing social sustainability, as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Khalid *et al.*, 2017; United Nations, 2015). Although the principal sources of Islam affirm gender equality and endorse women’s participation in economic and public life, including leadership roles within organizations when desired by women, their interpretation in Islamic societies such as Pakistan has been shaped by deeply rooted patriarchal traditions (Barqawi *et al.*, 2025; Omair, 2009; Syed, 2008; Syed and Van Buren, 2014). Several feminist scholars, particularly those engaging with feminist Islamic perspectives, have highlighted the need for gender reform within Muslim societies and their organizations, while also problematizing dominant Western feminist assumptions and emphasizing the contextual, contested, and interpretive nature of gender relations in non-secular settings (e.g. Althalathini *et al.*, 2022; Bardan, 2001; Barqawi *et al.*, 2025; Islam *et al.*, 2023; Karimullah and Aliyah, 2023; Karimullah *et al.*, 2023; Salem, 2013; Seedat, 2013; Syed, 2008; Syed and Van Buren, 2014). From this perspective, framing gender reform in this study as the advancement of women’s representation in CL within Pakistani HEIs can be understood as a necessary pursuit.

Existing studies on leadership in the context of Pakistani HEIs largely reflect the behavioural paradigm of leadership research (Yukl, 2010)—such as transformational, authentic, and servant leadership behaviours—typically investigated through quantitative designs. These studies can be situated within what is often referred to as the mainstream paradigm of leadership research, which has largely concentrated on identifying the characteristics of effective leaders and the types of behaviours associated with effectiveness (Collinson, 2011). Within this paradigm, leadership studies in Pakistani HEIs have similarly concentrated on linking leaders’ behavioural styles to organizational outcomes such as employee performance, faculty engagement, intrapreneurship, innovation, and quality assurance (e.g. Abbas *et al.*, 2022; Anam *et al.*, 2025; Farrukh *et al.*, 2019; Khan *et al.*, 2020). This emphasis, however, tends to reproduce a narrow, effectiveness-oriented perspective, leaving less attention to the socio-cultural questions of equity, power, and gendered dynamics that also shape leadership. Furthermore, survey-based designs tend to leave little room for critical, interpretive, and context-sensitive understanding that could illuminate the complexities of leadership in non-Western contexts. In this sense, existing research risks reinforcing universalized and decontextualized ideals of leadership while marginalizing the nuanced realities of these contexts.

Some studies have acknowledged the collective and participatory aspects of leadership in Pakistani HEIs, but typically only as a dimension of other leader behaviours, such as transformational, visionary, and leader–member relationship approaches (e.g. [Asif et al., 2021](#); [Sharif et al., 2025](#); [Zulfqar et al., 2016](#)). These studies usually rely on leadership measures derived from Western models, with little localization to the Pakistani context. When gender is considered in leadership research on Pakistani HEIs, the focus is typically on women’s perspectives and barriers in their career (e.g. [Ali and Rasheed, 2021](#); [Bhatti and Ali, 2020](#); [Malik and Courtney, 2011](#); [Shah et al., 2020](#)). To our knowledge, no study to date has focused on male managers’ experiences of leadership collaboration with women in Pakistani HEIs. Nevertheless, the widespread dominance of men in positions of power in Pakistan ([Syed, 2008](#); [Syed and Van Buren, 2014](#); [World Economic Forum, 2025](#)) suggests that male managers are key gatekeepers who can either advance or resist women’s representation in CL within Pakistani HEIs. Overlooking this gatekeeping role risks obscuring the ways in which entrenched traditions and barriers to gender-inclusive CL are maintained or challenged.

The starting point of this study is that male managers in Pakistani HEIs may face a social dilemma: navigating their decision-making amid growing calls for gender-inclusive CL and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. This empirical study addresses the dilemma by examining male managers’ lived experiences, with the aim of identifying the decision-making strategies they consider appropriate when confronted with it. This research makes the following contributions: First, the study aims to enrich the critical literature on organizational leadership ([Collinson, 2011](#)) by providing cultural insights into CL from a gender perspective. It highlights the nuanced and culturally complex nature of CL, which has often been oversimplified in previous leadership research primarily focused on Western, particularly Anglo-Saxon, societies ([Collinson, 2011](#); [Jones, 2005](#); [Guthey and Jackson, 2011](#); [Zhang et al., 2012](#)), by localizing CL in the context of Pakistani HEIs. In line with [Collinson \(2011\)](#), [Grint \(2005\)](#) and [Zhang et al. \(2012\)](#), we view leadership as an ongoing interpretation of meaning produced by those engaged in leadership processes in a specific context. Studies such as this can therefore broaden the understanding of leadership phenomena and advance the development of more context-specific leadership theory. Additionally, research on leadership and gender has traditionally focused either on women’s perspectives or on comparative analyses of women’s and men’s leadership behaviours, often overlooking men’s experiences and roles in shaping this discourse ([Lämsä et al., 2025](#)). However, advancing women’s roles and opportunities in CL requires research from men’s perspectives, together with their active engagement. This study provides valuable insights from the underexplored perspective of male managers, identifying three distinct decision-making strategies they employ to navigate the social dilemma in question: (1) the patriarchal strategy, (2) the withdrawal strategy and (3) the mentoring strategy.

Second, this study draws on the logic of appropriateness theory, which posits that individuals’ decision-making is influenced by their perception of what is considered appropriate by decision-makers in specific dilemma situations ([March, 1994](#); [Weber et al., 2004](#)). Instead of adopting the dominant theoretical frameworks used in decision-making in social dilemmas, such as rational choice or expected utility models—which tend to overlook the sociocultural characteristics of the context—the theoretical lens of the logic of appropriateness can significantly contribute to the literature on decision-making in a specific context ([Weber et al., 2004](#)). The adopted framework, particularly in CL, provides an approach to show how gendered expectations of the study context shape and are shaped by decisions in a social dilemma. The information gained from this study can also be useful to leadership in the studied HEIs and possibly other HEIs in Pakistan to make them more gender inclusive and to address gender equality demands in their leadership development efforts.

Finally, this research contributes to the existing body of work on gender, culture, and the complexities of CL by enriching our understanding with detailed, real-life experiential data. Over the past 2 decades, qualitative research—with its emphasis on context-sensitive analysis—has become increasingly important for capturing complex, unresolved, hidden, and

nanced phenomena in organization, management and leadership studies (Jedličková *et al.*, 2022). While the dominance of quantitative methods in the field has been acknowledged (Mehmood *et al.*, 2018), Butterfield and colleagues (2005) argue that qualitative studies can offer novel and deeper insights into gender tensions—dimensions that are often difficult to capture through quantitative measures alone. Responding to Yaghi's (2018) call for methodological diversification, this study seeks to understand individuals' lived experiences by uncovering the underlying meaning structures embedded in real-life events (Aspers, 2009; Mortari *et al.*, 2023).

This paper is organised as follows: It begins with the description of CL and the gendered context of the study, followed by a discussion of the adopted logic of appropriateness theoretical lens. Next, it details our qualitative research design, including the data collection and analysis processes. Subsequently, after the empirical findings, we discuss the findings and draw conclusions and implications.

Collaborative leadership and the sociocultural context of the study

CL is recognized as a modern approach that can foster organizational success (Maalouf, 2019). Raelin (2006) defined CL as processes within organizations where collaboration arises from organizational needs, leading individuals to initiate and share leadership responsibilities. CL includes power sharing and is an egalitarian and inclusive leadership approach (Lawrence, 2017). Lawrence suggested that integrating a critical gender perspective within CL research is needed because it can reveal gendered dynamics, dismantling patriarchal structures that traditionally benefit men over women (and other marginalized groups) in organizational leadership. CL aims to promote inclusive decision-making, knowledge sharing, innovation, collective goal-setting and mutual respect (Hsieh and Liou, 2018; Kezar, 2014). However, Shaikh *et al.* (2023) found that while some CL practices exist in Pakistani HEIs, they often exclude women, with collaboration primarily occurring among men.

Pakistan's patriarchal society marginalizes women, leading to their underrepresentation in leadership roles, and this disparity is largely influenced by sociocultural norms, traditional interpretation of religious texts and unconscious biases (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019; Karimullah *et al.*, 2023; Shah, 2010; Syed, 2008; Syed and Van Buren, 2014; Waqar *et al.*, 2021). Pakistan's low ranking in the Global Gender Gap Report by the Economic World Forum (2025) highlights this disparity. Despite growing awareness of the necessity for gender-inclusive collaboration in leadership, implementation in Pakistani HEIs tends to be hindered by conservative expectations that confine women to subordinate or domestic roles, deeming them unsuitable for leadership in organizational life (Khalid *et al.*, 2017). These perceptions often lead women to see themselves as weak or inadequate, further limiting career progression (Choudhry *et al.*, 2019).

Malik and Courtney (2011) examined the intersection of higher education and women's empowerment in the Pakistani educational context. Their study revealed a paradox: despite women's increasing success in education, patriarchal norms, such as *izzat* (honour), hinder the translation of these achievements into leadership roles, restricting women's participation in leadership. *Izzat*, a deeply ingrained cultural norm in Pakistan, emphasizes the protection and preservation of family and community honour, typically linked to women's behaviour and conformity to traditional gender roles. A woman's actions, including her career choices, are frequently scrutinized, as they are seen as a direct reflection of her family's standing in society. These societal expectations create significant barriers for women aspiring to leadership roles.

Nadeem and Sully de Luque (2020) analysed leadership in Pakistan using the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research (GLOBE) framework. Their findings indicate that Pakistan scores high on power distance, in-group collectivism and assertiveness but low on gender egalitarianism. These cultural traits suggest a hierarchical leadership style with clear authority distinctions and intense loyalty to in-groups, such as family or close associates. This environment creates significant barriers for women, making it

harder for them to exhibit expected leadership traits, such as assertiveness and competitiveness. Women often face deep-rooted biases and criticism, as culturally preferred leadership styles in academia remain male-dominated (Morley and Crossouard, 2016; Rosa and Clavero, 2022).

Madsen and colleagues' study (2020) underscores men's crucial role in advancing gender equity within male-dominated contexts, emphasizing that active support from male allies leads to greater inclusion and career advancement for women in leadership. This finding suggests that by providing leadership development opportunities and publicly recognizing women's contributions, men not only support individual growth but also foster a broader cultural shift towards inclusivity, in which women's empowerment is both encouraged and valued. Smith (2023) shifted the focus to the systemic barriers that prevent men, especially senior leaders in top management, from actively engaging in gender equity initiatives, underscoring the need to frame gender equality as a leadership issue rather than solely as a women's issue.

Despite significant sociocultural challenges, some empirical evidence highlights women's inclination towards leadership roles in Pakistan. This trend not only highlights the resilience and determination of women but also signals a positive shift in academic and professional landscapes, where women's leadership is being increasingly recognized. For example, Bano and Nadeem (2024) explored how factors such as egalitarian family values, male sponsorship and leadership experiences contribute to developing positive leadership identities among women, despite operating within a low gender-egalitarian culture. Similarly, Shah *et al.* (2020) argued that despite gender discrimination and institutional hierarchical politics, women in academia remain committed to their professional growth, viewing their roles as both personally fulfilling and socially impactful. Ali and Rasheed (2021) further highlighted women's resilience in leadership, driven by intrinsic motivation, family support and academic excellence. These findings indicate that women in Pakistan may overcome some barriers and redefine leadership, potentially progressing towards attaining leadership roles.

In summary, building on the previous analysis, gender disparities in leadership roles within Pakistan's gender-segregated HEIs are a critical concern (Khan *et al.*, 2020). Despite entrenched patriarchal values and norms, women's participation in leadership is increasingly recognized as essential for advancing gender equality and contributing to the success of Pakistani HEIs (Islam *et al.*, 2023).

Theoretical lens: the logic of appropriateness theory

This study employs March's (1994) logic of appropriateness framework, which posits that actions are appropriate when aligned with the rules and expectations of a given context (Schulz, 2014). Decision-making in social dilemmas is thus shaped by societal norms, role-based expectations and gender dynamics (Amstutz *et al.*, 2021; Chappell and Mackay, 2017). Social dilemmas arise when individual interests conflict with collective norms. For instance, a male manager may support gender inclusivity in leadership but must navigate patriarchal expectations in the Pakistani context that devalue women's leadership (Bano and Nadeem, 2024; Shaikh *et al.*, 2023).

The rationale for selecting March's (1994) logic of appropriateness lies in its ability to explain complex social phenomena more effectively than conventional utility-based models, which focus primarily on rational evaluations of consequences and alternatives (March and Olsen, 2009; Weber *et al.*, 2004). Chappell and Waylen (2013) highlight the framework's strength in illuminating how situations, rules and identities influence organizational behaviour, particularly regarding gender dynamics and context-driven decision-making. The framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

Weber *et al.* (2004) defined the first element of the framework as recognizing, interpreting, and classifying the situation at hand. Decision-makers, such as male managers in this study's context, seek to make sense of and assess the dilemma they face by drawing on their perceptions, knowledge, learned behaviours, and organizational as well as societal values and

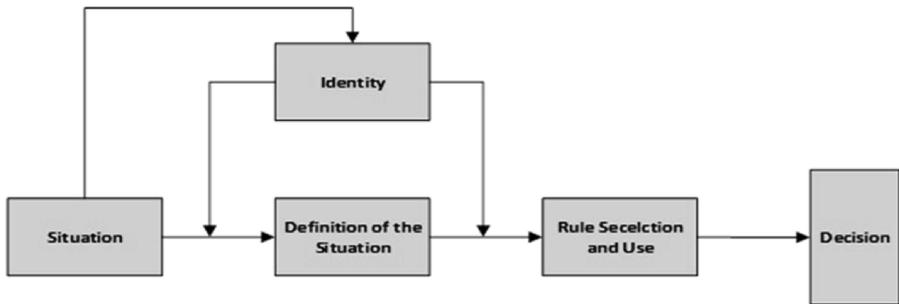


Figure 1. A representation of the logic of appropriateness framework (Source: [Weber et al., 2004](#), 284)

norms ([Messick, 1999](#); [March and Olsen, 2009](#)). This step is crucial because it frames the dilemma and influences subsequent decisions by aligning them with the perceived expectations or rules that govern similar situations ([March, 1994](#)).

Identity is the second key determinant in the logic of appropriateness framework, encompassing the personal and social construction of self that guides decision-making ([March, 1994](#)). [Weber et al. \(2004\)](#) described identity as a lens through which individuals evaluate the appropriateness of actions based on socially defined roles and personal traits, shaping their behaviour, expectations and choices. Identity evolves through the performance of multiple roles informed by prior experiences, norms and beliefs, developing into a nuanced self-concept shaped by obligations, restrictions and aspirations.

The third key component of March's logic of appropriateness framework focuses on the rules governing behaviour in specific contexts. Decision-making involves interpreting and making sense of societal and organizational norms, anticipating others' expectations and considering reactions. This process highlights social and cultural norms, especially regarding gender roles in organizations ([Amstutz et al., 2021](#)). In Muslim societies like Pakistan, religious practices reinforce gender-specific rules, such as modest dress, to uphold traditional values and gender segregation ([Barqawi et al., 2025](#); [Omair, 2009](#); [Seedat, 2013](#); [Syed, 2008](#); [Syed and Van Buren, 2014](#)). Deviating from these norms can result in social disapproval or sanctions ([Shaikh et al., 2023](#)). This normative component tends to shape decisions through social interactions and organizational dynamics rather than self-interest ([Rønning et al., 2013](#)).

To sum up, this study applies March's logic of appropriateness theory ([March, 1994](#)). The theory emphasizes that individuals'—particularly male managers'—interpretation of situations in this study tends to be shaped by traditional socio-cultural norms and conservative interpretations of Islam, which are closely interwoven ([Syed, 2008](#); [Syed and Van Buren, 2014](#)). At the same time, the theory recognizes that individuals—and the ways in which they construct their leadership identity in a given situation—are not wholly determined by these institutionalized norms and rules; they can challenge and resist them. Consequently, the decisions that male managers in this study consider appropriate when confronting a gender dilemma may either conform to and uphold the traditional conventions of male-dominated patriarchal leadership in Pakistani HEIs and the associated patriarchal identity, or reflect openness to change and efforts to reformulate these conventions toward a more modern, localized CL model and a more gender-inclusive identity. While the original works on the logic of appropriateness theory do not explicitly address gender, following the suggestions of [Amstutz et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Chappell and Mackay \(2017\)](#), the theory is extended here to recognize that individuals' decision-making is a gendered phenomenon. Furthermore, complementing this perspective, insights from [Acker's \(1990\)](#) theory of gendered organizations are integrated, allowing male managers' decision-making in relation to CL to be understood as gendered in nature. [Chappell and Mackay \(2017\)](#), for example, emphasize

that the rules and norms guiding decision-making reflect stereotypes about men's and women's roles, abilities, and opportunities typically privilege men and masculinity over women and femininity.

Research questions

Informed by the adopted theoretical lens, the central research question of this empirical study is as follows:

What decision-making strategies do male managers in Pakistani higher education institutions consider appropriate for addressing the dilemma related to women's participation in collaborative leadership?

To address the main question, the following sub-questions are posed:

- (1) How do male managers interpret situations involving women's participation in collaborative leadership?
- (2) How do male managers construct their leadership identities in these situations?
- (3) What rules do male managers consider appropriate to guide their decisions?

Research paradigm and methods

Our study adopts a critical interpretivist leadership research paradigm, which views social reality as constructed and understood through the meanings actors—such as the male managers in this study—assign to their experiences (Crotty, 1998; Grint, 2005). Furthermore, we take a critical stance by highlighting the significance of gender as a key aspect of CL and leadership more broadly (Collinson, 2011; Fletcher, 2004). Consistent with Syed (2008), it is assumed that understanding gender and CL requires attention to contextuality, recognizing that Islamic societies are not monolithic; consequently, CL and gender dynamics may take diverse forms across different Islamic contexts. Within this paradigm, qualitative methods are particularly suitable for capturing lived experiences and meaning-making in the study context. Accordingly, an empirical phenomenological design (Aspers, 2009; Mortari *et al.*, 2023), which focuses on analyzing and interpreting experiences from the perspective of those who have lived them, was chosen to investigate male managers' situated interpretations of CL.

Drawing on 19 face-to-face interviews with male managers from two HEIs in Pakistan, this study analyses and interprets their experiences in detail. The HEIs were chosen to represent both the public and private sectors, as both types operate in Pakistan (Komatsu, 2009). Selected HEIs are located in Sindh Province, where we had an opportunity to produce data, as one of the authors in our research group has spent most of her life in the region. The interviews were conducted in English, the professional language used at the HEIs studied. However, during the data-gathering phase, the author occasionally used Sindhi, the participants' mother tongue, to facilitate communication. The participants' quotes and conversations were then translated into English for analysis. During this process, we were aware of the challenges in accurately translating the original meaning of their words (Xian, 2008). The first author, who handled the translation, worked as "an intercultural communicator" (Xian, 2008, p. 240)—carefully understanding and conveying the social and cultural context behind the original quotes while making sure the stories keep aligned as true as possible to their original form. She also discussed these translations with her co-authors and took detailed notes, which became part of the research process. This helped her reflect more deeply on participants' accounts.

The sample was recruited using purposeful sampling, a method in which participants are selected based on specific criteria relevant to the study (Patton, 2015). In this case, the criteria required that interviewees be male managers with decision-making authority within HEIs. The participants' professional experiences ranged from 5 to 45 years and thus held a broad viewpoint on the topic. A summary of the research participants' data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information of the research participants

Participant code	Highest education earned	Age range	Current position	Work experience (academic)	University sector
MP1	Ph.D.	50–59 years	Top Manager	15–20 years	Public
MP2	Ph.D.	50–59 years	Top Manger	20–25 years	Public
MP3	M.Phil.	50–59 years	Top Manager	20–25 years	Public
MP4	Ph.D.	50–59 years	Top manager	20–25 years	Public
MP5	M.Phil.	30–39 years	Middle Manager	5–10 years	Public
MP6	Ph.D.	50–59 years	Top manager	15–20 years	Public
MP7	Ph.D.	50–59 years	Top Manager	15–20 years	Public
MP8	Ph.D.	50–59 years	Top Manager	20–25 years	Public
MP9	M.Phil.	30–39 years	Middle Manager	5–10 years	Public
MP10	Ph.D.	50–59 years	Top Manager	15–20 years	Public
MP11	M.Phil.	30–39 years	Middle Manager	5–10 years	Public
MP12	Ph.D.	65–75 years	Top Manager	35–45 years	Private
MP13	Ph.D.	40–49 years	Top Manager	15–20 years	Private
MP14	Ph.D.	50–59 years	Top Manager	25–35 years	Private
MP15	Ph.D.	65–75 years	Top Manager	35–45 years	Private
MP16	Ph.D.	70–79 years	Top Manager	35–45 years	Private
MP17	M.Eng.	30–39 years	Middle Manager	5–10 years	Private
MP18	Ph.D.	30–39 years	Middle Manager	10–15 years	Private
MP19	M.Phil.	30–39 years	Middle Manager	10–15 years	Private

Source(s): Authors' own work

Anonymity was guaranteed to the participants; therefore, the names of both the institutions and the participants were kept confidential. The empirical section identifies the participants using codes ranging from male participant 1 (MP1) to male participant 19 (MP19). Before the interviews, we sent them a consent letter and a research protocol to ensure that they were fully informed about the study and its purpose. Consistent with the adopted empirical phenomenological approach (Aspers, 2009; Mortari *et al.*, 2023), the interviews were conducted as in-depth discussions, lasting between 60 and 90 min. All interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent and then transcribed verbatim. To design the interview protocol for the participants and conduct the research process, we followed the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The interview guide (see Appendix 1) was pre-tested following the approach outlined by Yeong *et al.* (2018) to ensure its relevance to the local context. Four participants from the target organizations participated in the pre-test, resulting in minor adjustments for clarity.

The critical incident technique, originally developed by Flanagan (1954), was a key method employed during the interviews. This technique involved asking the interviewees to describe and discuss real-life events they had experienced related to the research topic (Bott and Tourish, 2016; Hiekkataipale and Lämsä, 2017). According to Bott and Tourish (2016), the critical incident technique is particularly valuable in qualitative studies because it can uncover significant, culturally embedded and novel insights. The described events could be positive or negative, providing a deep and multifaceted understanding of the respondents' experiences (Hiekkataipale and Lämsä, 2017).

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse and interpret the data. In the analysis process, we used NVivo 12 Plus to support the process. We began by reading the data multiple times to immerse ourselves fully in it. Next, as suggested by Mortari *et al.* (2023), we made a list of and coded the critical incidents in the interviews. Every participant shared between one and three incidents, resulting in 39 incidents. At this process stage, we utilized an inductive approach, employing a data coding procedure to transform raw information into more abstract categories (Mortari *et al.*, 2023). Examples of these categories include favouritism, nepotism,

hierarchy, respect for seniors, global collaboration, cross-cultural exchange, modifying traditional settings and cultural sensitivity. We then grouped these categories into more abstract clusters based on their similar meanings and labelled each cluster accordingly (Mortari *et al.*, 2023). The resulting clusters were hierarchical systems, lack of openness, distrust, unethical behaviour, hidden transparency, bureaucracy, global integration, respect and modern values. Following this phase, we adopted a theory-driven approach, analyzing these clusters through the lens of the logic of appropriateness theory and related research questions (Aspers, 2009; March, 1994; Mortari *et al.*, 2023; Weber *et al.*, 2004). Following several discussions within our research team, we ultimately identified and interpreted three decision-making strategies across the clusters: patriarchal, withdrawal and mentoring strategy.

It is important to acknowledge that our positionalities as female scholars with diverse backgrounds—particularly in terms of age, nationality, and ethnicity—inevitably shaped both our approach and perspectives on the topic (Cunliffe, 2003; Widmer *et al.*, 2009). Additionally, our experiences in societies where gender equality occupies very different positions further influenced how we framed the research. The first author's insider familiarity and long-standing association with Pakistani HEIs facilitated rapport with the participants and heightened sensitivity to local nuances. This familiarity also aided in clarifying the meaning of particular incidents, both for the purposes of the study and for colleagues in the research group who did not share a Pakistani background. At the same time, such closeness occasionally made it difficult for the first author to step back from specific incidents in order to identify broader, more abstract patterns.

Furthermore, as a female representative of the local culture and its embedded male power structures, the first author sometimes encountered challenges in adopting a fully critical stance toward male respondents' views, which may have constrained the scope of critique. On the other hand, since the other members of our research group come from societies where gender equality—understood in a Western sense—is highly valued and globally ranked, their ideas and suggestions required critical and open discussion (Widmer *et al.*, 2009) and reflection from the perspective of the studied Islamic society. Moreover, in some cases, the first author's extensive knowledge of local circumstances also created a risk of overinterpretation. For example, within the research group, we discussed whether the respondents with international professional experience might be more inclined toward CL with women, yet this pattern was not detected in the data. To counterbalance such risks of overfamiliarity, interpretations were regularly and critically discussed within the research team. Coding decisions, for instance, were made collaboratively to enhance transparency and mitigate potential biases.

Findings

In this section, the findings are presented, and each strategy is discussed in detail.

Patriarchal strategy

In this strategy, the interviewees acknowledged the pressure to increase collaboration with women in leadership roles but chose not to act on it. A total of 23 incidents reflected the patriarchal strategy. The interviewees saw the situation as one in which men hold leadership power, while women are excluded or relegated to subordinate roles, requiring male control to participate in leadership. Exerting power over women was central to this strategy. For example, one interviewee criticized modern, particularly Western, ideas of equality and excluded a woman from leadership activities after she challenged the traditional gender order (Khalid *et al.*, 2017; Shah *et al.*, 2020):

I cannot prevent uninvited NGOs or agencies, under the guise of promoting gender equality, from interfering. Some of these entities have a specific agenda and could exploit the situation, potentially damaging someone's reputation. This incident reminded me of my past experiences. I promptly transferred my female employee to another campus and restricted her involvement in certain

activities. My staff supported this decision. In this society, a woman's *izzat* [honour] is often seen as more fragile and easily compromised than a man's. (MP8)

Another interviewee highlighted a conflict between the institution's official commitment to gender equality and senior management's disregarded actions in practice, which became evident when men and women were required to travel together for a related project, as illustrated in the following statement:

The university signed a memorandum of understanding with Community World Service Asia to implement a capability enhancement programme for students and staff to promote inclusivity, equity and leadership development across genders. Special emphasis was placed on empowering young staff and students to develop skills, foster leadership collaboration and build valuable networks. However, at the last moment, senior male management withdrew female students and staff from the programme, citing travel-related concerns. (MP5)

Although the respondents acknowledged growing external pressures to advance gender reform and increase women's leadership, particularly from international bodies, they resisted incorporating these expectations into their decision-making. Senior management at the top of the organizational hierarchy was identified as opposing women's and men's collaboration in leadership, although others may also have shared similar views. Consequently, these men's identities were shaped as *opponents of leadership collaboration between men and women*, influencing their choices regarding what they experienced as appropriate behaviour in the studied dilemma (March, 1994; Weber *et al.*, 2004).

In this strategy, the managers interpret traditional conservative cultural and religious gender norms in Pakistan in ways that reinforce male-dominated leadership (Bano and Nadeem, 2024; Nadeem and Sully de Luque, 2020). They referenced the cultural practice of *Otaq*, which they viewed as an example of collaboration in leadership within their organization. According to Shaikh *et al.* (2023), this tradition is prevalent in Sindh province, where the study was conducted. Shaikh and colleagues note that *Otaq* is a male-dominated form of leadership cooperation in which leaders gather to discuss work-related issues. Typically, women and lower-class men are excluded from this process.

The respondents justified their behaviour by invoking patriarchal and conservative paternal norms, framing women's exclusion as appropriate on the grounds of male control and protection. For example, one respondent spoke of the need to protect women in the following way: "Females' safety and well-being are our [men's] priority, and their modesty could be at risk" (MP4). They cited religious practices, such as veiling (*purdah* or *hijab*), as limitations on women's ability to collaborate with male colleagues. Barqawi *et al.* (2025) and Omair (2009) empirically affirm that culturally adapted religious interpretations in Muslim societies often enforce gender-specific rules, such as dress codes intended to promote respectful and dignified behaviour.

These findings align with prior research showing that traditional norms in Pakistan often position women as weak and unsuitable for public and leadership roles (Bano and Nadeem, 2024; Khalid *et al.*, 2017; Shah, 2010; Shaikh *et al.*, 2023). Male managers adopting this strategy adhere to conservative patriarchal norms, particularly emphasizing *izzat*, and frame control and protection of women as necessary for preserving organizational and personal reputations (Malik and Courtney, 2011). As a result, gender-related challenges are treated as peripheral, while calls for gender-inclusive leadership are viewed as disruptions rather than opportunities for institutional development. This strategy ultimately reinforces male dominance in leadership and reflects broader patterns of gender segregation and conventional norms within Pakistani society (Bano and Nadeem, 2024; Nadeem and Sully de Luque, 2020; Shah, 2010).

To sum up, the male managers who regarded the patriarchal strategy as appropriate interpreted the expectations to advance women's participation in CL as harmful interference with their preference for a patriarchal leadership model that resists gender inclusivity. By

constructing their leadership identities in opposition to gender-inclusive collaboration, they reinforced entrenched sociocultural norms and conservative religious interpretations that marginalize women in leadership roles.

Withdrawal strategy

This strategy was complex for the interviewees, but they acknowledged the need to increase women's participation in leadership roles within their organization. However, at the same time, they recognized strong pressure to conform to patriarchal conservative norms in their behaviour. Eleven incidents illustrate this withdrawal strategy, in which respondents recognized gender inequality in leadership collaboration as a problem requiring reform. For instance, one respondent (MP 9) highlighted the issue metaphorically: "Our women have often been like seeds cast into barren soil, buried before they could grow".

However, the respondents faced significant challenges due to the hierarchical and patriarchal norms that dominated both their organization's practices and the broader cultural context of Pakistan. For example, one respondent described an event in which, despite recognizing the need for reform, he chose to withdraw from pursuing the reform while avoiding potential sanctions:

I wanted to help her, but decided not to intervene in religious matters that could escalate tensions. My senior colleague suggested a few options, but I stopped him. We chose not to intervene. The woman resigned because she was forced into a new family system with different religious expectations. Although there was an opportunity for her to continue working on another campus, she refused. Her departure was a significant loss and placed a considerable burden on us. Islam grants her equal rights, just like us. These misinterpreted conservative practices will remain unresolved. (MP2)

Another respondent described a complex event he faced while considering how to advance women's opportunities and visibility in leadership roles. Ultimately, he chose to adhere to traditional gender norms to sidestep the negative consequences for himself and his team members:

I found myself caught at the crossroads of two powerful, often opposing forces, leading to a conflicting situation. I wanted to empower the women in my team and ensure their voices were heard, but I felt pressure to uphold cultural values that emphasize protecting their traditional roles and the expectations of those around me. This inner conflict made me reconsider how to honour progress towards gender equality without sacrificing tradition. I envisioned showcasing women's strengths and evolving roles, but the pressure from the predominantly male organizing committee led me to rethink how far I could push. I had to compromise, respecting the traditional norms that many still view as essential for maintaining power. (MP9).

Unlike the patriarchal strategy, the withdrawal strategy acknowledges the importance of gender-inclusive CL. However, despite recognizing its value, the interviewees adopted an identity tied to *pragmatist conformists*—adaptable and practical in decision-making yet firmly aligned with established norms and accepted behaviours. This identity shaped their view that promoting women's participation in leadership would be ineffective and inappropriate, potentially jeopardizing relationships within their organizations and with influential stakeholders.

The withdrawal strategy was justified by the institution's reliance on women's modest behaviour to uphold its reputation and adherence to *izzat* (Malik and Courtney, 2011), which could be threatened if women were too visible in leadership collaborations with men. Publicly supporting gender-inclusive leadership was viewed as a career risk, highlighting the role of self-interest and individualistic values in decision-making (Omair, 2009). Informal male networks, such as the *Otaq* setting (Shaikh et al., 2023), pressured respondents to conform to traditional gendered unwritten norms. Like the patriarchal strategy, this approach also limits collaboration between men and women in leadership, but differs in demonstrating some

interest in and willingness to pursue such collaboration. Thus, the withdrawal strategy reflects a small step towards gender-inclusive leadership.

In sum, within the withdrawal strategy, the interviewed male managers framed the situation as a challenging dilemma between traditional patriarchal leadership and more gender-inclusive CL. Although they recognized the need for modernization approach in leadership, they adopted a pragmatic, conformist identity, aligning with the patriarchal model, shaped by rooted conservative socio-cultural and religious norms. This stance was driven by concerns that embracing modern CL could jeopardize the managers' own career and their team's success in a male-dominated environment, as well as informal pressure from male colleagues. Consequently, despite some personal inclination toward and reflection on gender-inclusive CL, the managers ultimately upheld the traditional patriarchal leadership model.

Mentoring strategy

The mentoring strategy differs from both patriarchal and withdrawal strategies. It emphasizes the respondents' deliberate choice to support gender-inclusive CL and advance women's leadership, particularly highlighting that collaboration between men and women enhances education and contributes to the success of both individual institutions and Pakistani HEIs more broadly (Islam *et al.*, 2023). This strategy is reflected in five incidents. The respondents acknowledged the traditional gendered cultural and religious traditions and viewed them as challenging to change, although they believed they needed modernization and transformation despite the slow and complex process. The interviewees advocated gradual, culturally sensitive, mentoring-oriented initiatives that, they believed, could break down barriers to women's collaboration with men in leadership and challenge outdated gender roles. The practical efforts to facilitate the experiences of collaboration between men and women, combined with strong support, especially from senior male managers and an emphasis on women's high competence, were viewed as essential for driving change. One manager described the following incident in which he sought to advance this change:

I initiated the Adventure-Based Experiential Team-Building Learning project in collaboration with universities, industries and key stakeholders. Given the project's significance and the influential male members involved, I wanted to oversee it personally and observe any challenges before entrusting key leadership duties to my female colleague. Guiding our male members on how women can contribute to this project became necessary. Initially, I involved her in smaller leadership tasks to help her observe and understand how leadership works in practice. Her dedication, deep understanding and consistent involvement proved that she could make bold decisions and tackle challenges. She found me and other colleagues supportive of her journey. Just as strong roots help a tree grow tall, women also need a supportive foundation to thrive. (MP11)

Another respondent recalled how a successful leadership example set by a woman, coupled with the necessary male support (Bano and Nadeem, 2024), can be a more effective approach for showing people the benefits of women's participation in leadership compared to attempting to change the traditional autocratic leadership structures in Pakistani organizations (Khalid *et al.*, 2017; Nadeem and Sully de Luque, 2020). The following excerpt from the interview highlights this viewpoint:

I encountered resistance: Why a female for this challenging position? I answered that there is a good saying: fix yourself first; the rest will follow. It was the first time in this university's history that a young female was appointed director of finance. She was very smart; she didn't form a new team but relied on the previous team to see what mistakes or dishonesty were committed and why. She maintained religious and cultural values during her duties and stayed modest in her professional relationships. She showed that making the right decisions, having integrity, having clear communication and getting things done on time mattered more than how she looked. (MP9)

In contrast to the patriarchal and withdrawal strategies, the respondents who adopted the mentoring strategy positioned themselves as allies, seeking to legitimize and support women's

participation in CL. They described assisting younger women through practical efforts, such as helping them gain membership in relevant committees, networks and groups to increase their visibility. Moreover, highlighting women's high competence was emphasized as a mechanism to promote their participation in CL. The respondents told that they organized mixed-gender groups to provide men with direct experience collaborating with women and offered advice and coaching to women, emphasizing that the change process would require women's patience. One interviewee (MP7), who advised a woman that the process takes time, stated: "I reminded her that the journey is a marathon, not a sprint; every hurdle demands patience and perseverance to reach the finish line".

Despite the respondents' awareness of the need to advance women's roles in leadership, they emphasized that their organizations still tend to rely on traditional, conservative gender norms and expectations. The interviewees mentioned that women should not have to navigate their leadership careers and collaborate with men alone. Instead, male managers, particularly those in top HEI positions, should create a supportive environment for women to develop as leaders and collaborate with men. They emphasized that a crucial element for success in change is that women receive ongoing guidance and supportive mentorship from influential and trusted male figures.

Thus, in this strategy, the interviewees regarded the paternal guidance and mentoring provided by senior male managers to younger women as crucial for advancing women's participation in CL. Although this dynamic could be interpreted as a traditional senior male-female power relationship, the respondents framed and understood it positively and offered no criticism of such efforts. Furthermore, the shift toward gender-inclusive CL was also framed as a result of women's competence, emphasizing that women can contribute a valuable advantage to leadership (Lämsä *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, the interviewees did not propose broader structural reforms, instead relied on individually oriented solutions to promote change.

In this strategy, male managers recognize that collaboration between women and men in leadership positions is crucial for effectively addressing complex global challenges and ensuring their institution's competitiveness in global cooperation (Khalid *et al.*, 2017; Malik and Courtney, 2011). Regarding the process of moving toward gender-inclusive CL, the man's identity can be described as that of a discreet paternal mentor who must consider sociocultural and religious traditions. The respondents saw themselves as influential figures and role models within their organizations. The mentoring strategy fosters progress without provoking cultural clashes or resistance to traditional gender norms. It seeks to lay the foundation for reform by drawing on modesty, a key principle of Islam, while at the same time promoting a more modern interpretation of culture and Islam (Althalathini *et al.*, 2022; Syed, 2008; Syed and Van Buren, 2014), emphasizing the benefits.

In the mentoring strategy, male managers perceived supporting women's participation in CL as both appropriate and necessary. They constructed their identities as senior paternal mentors, assisting in a polite and discreet manner younger women in pursuing success in CL. The targeted change was viewed as gradual, with rules applied in ways that are relatively overt yet careful not to be perceived as revolutionary or in violation of Islamic principles and cultural tradition.

In sum, while the mentoring strategy represents the most supportive and gender-inclusive approach identified in this study, it is important to acknowledge its inherent ambivalence. The respondents described mentoring largely as paternalistic, with senior male managers acting as protectors, gatekeepers, and legitimizing authorities for women's participation in CL. Such support can be enabling, particularly in conservative patriarchal organizational contexts, by creating safe and culturally acceptable pathways for women's inclusion. At the same time, however, paternalistic mentoring may reproduce gendered power relations by reinforcing men's authority as mediators of women's legitimacy and progression, rather than challenging the structural conditions that marginalize women. As feminist and critical leadership scholars have noted, supportive practices that rely on benevolent male authority can simultaneously

advance women's opportunities and sustain hierarchical gender relations (Acker, 1990; Fletcher, 2004; Chappell and Mackay, 2017). Recognizing this tension does not diminish the significance of mentoring in the studied context; rather, it highlights how gender-inclusive CL change in patriarchal settings often unfolds through incremental and relational strategies that both enable progress and constrain deeper structural transformation.

Discussion and conclusion

This study drew on Islamic feminist perspectives (e.g. Althalathini *et al.*, 2022; Bardan, 2001; Barqawi *et al.*, 2025; Islam *et al.*, 2023; Karimullah and Aliyah, 2023; Karimullah *et al.*, 2023; Salem, 2013; Seedat, 2013; Syed, 2008; Syed and Van Buren, 2014) to argue that gender reform, particularly the advancement of women's representation in CL, is necessary within Islamic societies and organizations. This argument was examined in the context of Pakistani HEIs, which constitute the societal and organizational setting of the study. The study aimed to critique mainstream organizational leadership research, which has predominantly focused on leadership models developed in Western—particularly Anglo-Saxon—societies (Collinson, 2011; Guthey and Jackson, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2012) and treated them as universal, by providing contextually grounded insights into CL from a gender perspective in the study setting.

The study identified three decision-making strategies—patriarchal, withdrawal, and mentoring—that constitute the meaning structure of the studied male managers' experiences as they navigate pressures to implement gender reform for women's roles in CL, while simultaneously adhering to traditional cultural norms and interpretations of Islam. The findings indicate that male managers' interpretations of gender reform related to CL are not univocal, but rather, they are diverse, ranging from resistance to acceptance. Our empirical inquiry, consistent with previous studies on the Pakistani educational sector (e.g. Bano and Nadeem, 2024; Shah *et al.*, 2020; Shaikh *et al.*, 2023), demonstrates that women's roles—particularly in leadership within HEIs—are complex and often contradictory, encompassing both barriers and opportunities.

The findings indicate that the studied male managers' CL-related decisions are shaped not only by cultural traditions (Guthey and Jackson, 2011; Nadeem and Sully de Luque, 2020; Shaikh *et al.*, 2023), but also by locally interpreted Islamic religious norms. This highlights the situated and dynamic interplay of culture, leadership, and gender, as these are mediated through religious tradition. From this perspective, we argue that feminist scholarship would benefit from more explicit engagement with religion-based theorizing, rather than relying on implicitly secular analytical frameworks. Consistent with Salem (2013), we contend that feminist scholarship has often struggled to engage meaningfully with the intersections of religion and gender, raising critical questions about whether feminist knowledge production remains implicitly secular or tends to position religion as inherently patriarchal. This analytical concern is particularly salient in non-secular contexts, where religion—through its multiple, contested, and locally negotiated interpretations—constitutes a central dimension of organizational leadership and organizational practice more broadly.

Although the male managers in this study tended to rely on or adapt their decision-making to entrenched conservative patriarchal traditions and norms in Pakistani organizational life, an important finding is that opportunities for change in gender relations within CL were still evident. Rather than through structural reforms, the managers perceived that change could be promoted by supporting individual women discreetly, in line with the local tradition of paternal guidance and mentorship for younger women. This finding aligns with Barqawi *et al.* (2025), who argue that in conservative Islamic environments, subtle strategies—such as mentoring, role modeling, and competency development (as reflected in the mentoring strategy in this study)—can be more effective in promoting gender-related change than overt or revolutionary advocacy. Such approaches may be particularly useful when localizing the interpretation and practice of CL from a gender perspective in Pakistani HEIs, as they are less likely to be

perceived as violating cultural tradition and Islamic principles, especially when advanced by top male managers. However, as noted by Barqawi *et al.* (2025), Syed (2008), and Syed and Van Buren (2014), meaningful change also requires a reinterpretation of the intertwined conservative cultural traditions and Islamic principles.

Respect for Pakistani traditions, which position men as protectors of women and their reputations (Shaikh *et al.*, 2023; Shah *et al.*, 2020), was evident across all identified decision-making strategies. This respect resulted in varied outcomes. The patriarchal strategy and the withdrawal strategy minimized women's inclusion in CL to preserve reputational integrity and traditional male power (Nadeem and Sully de Luque, 2020; Shaikh *et al.*, 2023), while the mentoring strategy sought to include women in CL by modernizing traditional gender norms. It reframed the issue from gender equality to the institution's success and global competitiveness (Khalid *et al.*, 2017). In line with Messick (1999), we suggest that how an issue is labelled influences what is considered appropriate. Managers using the mentoring strategy likely aimed to balance traditional norms with international expectations of gender inclusivity, avoiding the perception of disloyalty to local norms and principles and the stigma of being perceived as too radical in a conservative environment (Chappell and Waylen, 2013). This dynamic warrants further exploration in future research.

Following Longman and Segarra (2024), we suggest that re-envisioning leadership in Pakistani HEIs requires both reinterpreting traditional cultural norms and religious principles and developing context-sensitive, innovative approaches. This perspective also opens up possibilities for decolonizing CL and leadership theory, which have been shaped largely by Western epistemologies and assumptions, as noted within critical leadership studies (e.g. Collinson, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2012). As debates around women's education, professional competence, and visibility expand, Pakistani HEIs face increasing pressure to adopt CL practices that enhance women's opportunities in leadership. The key challenge lies not in culture or religion themselves, but in how their frameworks are interpreted, institutionalized, and operationalized.

Methodologically, the data generation process was demanding, as a female researcher interviewed male managers within a highly gendered and hierarchical context—a dynamic that inevitably shaped the research encounter. While not explicitly examined here, studying the relational dynamics in such settings represents a valuable avenue for future research, as do the challenges of accessing qualitative interviews in gendered and non-secular organizational contexts. Qualitative research of this kind prioritizes depth, contextual sensitivity, and analytical insight over representational breadth. Our focus was therefore on generating contributions to leadership research, particularly CL, rather than on numerical generalizability. Future studies could extend this inquiry across diverse societal, regional, and organizational contexts, or through comparative and longitudinal designs, to further elaborate the dynamics identified in this study.

Beyond the contributions and justifications provided, the findings also have practical implications for the studied HEIs and, perhaps, for Pakistani HEIs more broadly. To advance change in male managers' mindsets, leadership development initiatives and training programs can help male managers become more aware of the different decision-making strategies, along with their underlying traditions, assumptions, challenges, opportunities, and outcomes. Evidence-based discussions in gender-sensitive workshops can support this, particularly when led by top managers who serve as role models and wield influence in the often-autocratic organizational context of Pakistani HEIs. The mentoring strategy highlights the value of formal mentoring programs, where senior leaders guide and advocate for emerging female leaders. Moreover, providing leadership training for women to develop competencies and confidence to participate in leadership is equally important. Women-only training sessions can foster peer support from colleagues and senior female leaders who have advanced in CL, offering a culturally sensitive approach. Additionally, creating formal networking opportunities that bring male and female faculty together in cooperation is recommended. We suggest that formal mentoring and networking programs are particularly suitable, as they

can help avoid the challenges that informal connections between men and women tend to pose in the study context.

This study implies that, within the Pakistani societal context, men—particularly those in high-level decision-making positions in HEIs—play a pivotal role in shaping the acceptance of or resistance towards women’s opportunities to collaborate with men in leadership. As highlighted in prior research (Ali and Rasheed, 2021; Shah *et al.*, 2020), the influence of family on women’s opportunities to pursue leadership careers and employment prospects is significant in Pakistan. Although this perspective was beyond the scope of our study, we suggest that it is an important area for future research. In particular, it would be valuable to examine in detail how the dynamics of family relationships and the roles of different family members (e.g. spouse, father, and mother) impact women’s access to leadership opportunities and career development. Additionally, although not a focus of this study, future research could examine male managers with international exposure, as such experiences may shape more progressive perspectives on gender reform.

Future research with broader data should explore the possibilities of gender-inclusive CL within Pakistani HEIs, especially focusing on the interplay between individual, organizational, and societal levels. Furthermore, since traditions, religious interpretations, and practices regarding gender issues and women’s opportunities to participate in public life vary across Islamic societies (Syed, 2008), examining CL from the perspective of male managers in societal contexts beyond Pakistan would be a valuable direction for future research. We also believe that CL scholars, along with leadership scholars in education (and beyond), should deepen their understanding of cultural norms, religious traditions, and gendered organizational leadership. Furthermore, we emphasize that HEIs play a critical role in shaping the gendered mindsets of future leaders. Therefore, it is essential to gradually cultivate their students’ and leaders’ understanding of the importance of gender in leadership within both professional and societal contexts. Future research should focus on identifying and clarifying effective developmental and educational initiatives to achieve this goal.

To conclude, this study provides insight into pathways toward gender-inclusive CL within Pakistani HEIs, which have traditionally marginalized women in leadership positions. In line with Barqawi *et al.* (2025), we argue that leadership in Islamic societies—such as CL in the Pakistani context—is not merely an economic or efficiency-driven endeavor. Rather, it is a culturally and historically negotiated practice in which religion plays a situated and meaningful role, and gender relations are actively interpreted and contested.

About the authors

Shabnam Aijaz Shaikh is working as a doctoral researcher (Management and leadership) at Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics, Finland. Her doctoral dissertation is under review process. She also works on postdoctoral research projects. Her research interests include collaborative leadership in different sociocultural contexts, gender-related issues in working life organizations, and diverse workforce problems in academic organizations. She has published in various journals, including the *South Asian Journal of Business and Management Cases* and has attended various scholarly conferences in Taiwan, Jordan, Portugal, Iceland and the UK.

Prof. Anna-Maija Lämsä holds an emerita professorship at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and currently works as Chief Researcher at Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania. Her research focuses on ethical and gender-related issues in working life organizations, particularly in management and leadership. She is also interested in exploring these topics across different socio-cultural contexts. Her work has been published in journals such as *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Gender, Work and Organization*, *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, *Gender in Management*, and *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*.

Dr Suvi Heikkinen is working as an Assistant Professor (tenured) in the Department of Management and Leadership at the School of Business and Economics, University of Jyväskylä. She holds the title of docent in responsible business (social responsibility) at the University of Tampere. In her research, she is interested in the mechanisms of social sustainability and how to unpack the questions of inequality, justice and fair treatment in organizations. Her scholarly work has been published in journals such as *Journal of*

Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data is not available.

Appendix

Interview protocol

- (1) Could you please introduce yourself.

Tell me about your duties and responsibilities in this organisation.

What are your personal qualities, values and other interests related to the job?

How long have you been employed in this organisation? How long have you been in this leadership role?

- (2) Leadership in the university.

Considering your personal experiences and interaction with your employees, leaders or stakeholders, what does leadership mean to you?

How do you see collaboration at this university?

What does collaborative leadership (CL) mean to you? How do you see this leadership approach in your organisation?

How do you perceive CL in practice and its appropriateness in this academic organisation? Why?

What are the benefits or productive results of this leadership style?

What kinds of facilities exist in this organisation that make collaboration valuable or productive?

- (3) Considering the societal impact and your position in this leadership or managerial role, what challenges or hindrances have you generally encountered in your leadership practices?

Could you please recall any incident as an example of a situation that exemplifies leadership? (The meaning of leadership in the Pakistani context).

What kinds of situations or incidents have you experienced (positive or negative) while holding a leadership role?

Please give an example of a situation or narrate an interesting story in which you experienced collaboration with women. What happened? Why?

Who were the characters (organisation members) involved in this situation?

What kinds of conflicts did you encounter?

How did you manage the problem?

What was your reaction (positive or negative, satisfied or disappointed, unexpected) to this situation?

How was the problem handled in this situation?

What kinds of strategies did you employ to solve or control this kind of issue?

What was the meaningful lesson you learned from this situation?

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Corresponding author

Shabnam Aijaz Shaikh can be contacted at: shabnam.a.shaikh@jyu.fi