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Barriers To Women's Upward Career Development: An Analysis of the Civil secretariat, Peshawar

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The focus of this research to understand how gender stereotypes and work life balance affect their opportunities for professional growth of females working in civil secretariat Peshawar.

Methodology: Data was collected through survey from female employees throughout five distinct government organizations. Barriers of upward career mobility was measured using the Indra and Tanusia (2013), 10 item scale which assess career advancement, organization policies and limitation managerial position. As for work life balance, it is measured using 8 items of the version of Kow et al. (2012). On the other hand, 06 item scale created by Mukulu (2012) were used to assess gender stereotypes. The 63 female public servants in Peshawar Civil secretariat were participated in this study.

Finding & Results: The results indicate that work–life balance and gender stereotypes significantly influence women’s upward career development. The model explains 60% of the variance, showing that these barriers are strong predictors of limited career progression among female employees. However, gender stereotypes emerged as the strongest predictor of career barriers, highlighting the persistent challenges faced by women in attaining leadership positions.

Conclusion/ Limitations & Future Research: The results suggest that promoting work life balance through flexible work arrangements, encouraging continuous education, and addressing gender biases in promotion processes could enhance female career advancement. Despite the valuable insights gained, the study acknowledges limitations such as its focus on the public sector, potential response bias, and the need for further research incorporating diverse socio-economic and cultural factors. Future research should explore comparative studies across different industries and evaluate the effectiveness of HR diversity programs in mitigating gender-based career advancement barriers.

Keywords: *Women; Barriers; Career Advancement; Work life balance; Gender Stereotypes.*

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1. Introduction

The understanding of career patterns and the obstacles that people, especially women, encounter in advancing their careers has been greatly enhanced by the increasing academic focus on the gendered aspects of occupations (Kausar & Tlaiss, 2011; Villaroya and Barrios, 2022). Over the past few decades, the number of competent female executives and directors has steadily increased across various industries, reflecting a positive shift in workforce dynamics (Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2008). Since the 1960s, women have made major achievements in pursuing careers, breaking traditional barriers and making significant contributions to the labor market. In Globally, the participation of women in the workforce has grown tremendously over the years. Women make up nearly half of the total population, demonstrating their significant presence and potential within the labor force (Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2008). Despite this, only a small proportion of employed women hold administrative and managerial positions, accounting for approximately 3.0% of the total female workforce (Rahamah-Abu-Bakar, 2012). This statistic highlights the ongoing challenges faced by women who aspire to positions of leadership. Interestingly, research suggests that many women pursuing managerial careers possess equal, if not higher, educational qualifications compared to their male counterparts, indicating that their underrepresentation in leadership positions is not due to a lack of skills or competencies (Wood, 2008; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Furthermore, the participation rate of women throughout the global workforce showed a slight increase from 46.8% in 2010 to 47.9% in 2011, signifying a gradual but steady rise in female workforce engagement (Department of Statistics, Malaysia). However, despite these advancements, the representation of Women holding positions of authority and power in the executive level remains relatively low. In Pakistan, the probable proportion of women having high-ranking managing roles, particularly in the public sector, stands at approximately 10% (Maimunah & Roziah, 2008). This statistic underscores the structurally gendered nature of the labor market, where women in managerial positions often face unique challenges in asserting their leadership roles. Given these circumstances, organizations are increasingly recognizing the strategic importance of employing and retaining women in the workforce. As businesses and industries continue to grapple with the challenge of finding and retaining talented employees, fostering an inclusive work environment that supports women's career advancement will become even more crucial in the future. Encouraging women's participation in leadership positions is not only beneficial for gender equality but also essential for maximizing the potential of a diverse and skilled workforce (Said & Shah, 2017).

According to (Schien, 2007; Padavic & Reid, 2020), there are still obstacles for women to reach managerial positions in the business world, particularly in the public sector. Women make up over 40% of the global workforce, but an unacceptably small percentage of executive positions, she pointed out. Based on their research, the researchers have come to the conclusion that guys in the public sector around the world have a "think manager, think male" condition. There are 29.72 million people living in Pakistan as of the most recent national census in 2017, with 14.6 million

being male and 13.8 million being female. This breaks down to 50.7% of the total population. On the other hand, according to (Loutfi, 2001), there are 1,966 men (72.3%) and 752 women (27.7%) in upper management. The worrying decline in the success of the policy known as "At least 30 % Women in a Management Position" since 2004 is accompanied by this proportion. Despite an increase of 752 women reaching senior management positions in 2012, the ratio dropped to 27.7%, according to the Ministry of Women, social empowerment (2013).

Moreover, the promotion of competent women to senior or higher managerial positions is still a critical and needful topic. Men control most positions of power in organizations. The lack of opportunities for women to advance in their careers has a negative impact on their quality of life and has created both professional and personal obstacles, according to an interview with (Saadin et al., 2016). For example, when people stay in the same job for a long time, their salaries don't go up, and when their standard of living goes up, their day-to-day expenses don't go down either. Researchers had given out short questionnaires to fifteen female employees who had encountered career progression obstacles in order to learn about the detrimental effects of these obstacles. Twelve out of fifteen respondents said that, despite working in the public sector, they are having trouble advancing in their careers as a result of gender stereotypes and the inability to strike a work life balance. Despite growing global attention to gender and career advancement, the specific barriers limiting women's upward career development in Pakistan particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa remain insufficiently explored. Key obstacles identified in other contexts, such as gender stereotypes and work-life balance challenges, have not been adequately examined in this regional setting (Shah et al., 2020; Rahamah-Abu-Bakar, 2012; Said & Shah, 2017), nor has the effectiveness of government and corporate gender-inclusivity initiatives. This gap limits understanding of the factors that constrain women's career progression in public-sector institutions. Additionally, the effectiveness of government and corporate initiatives aimed at promoting gender inclusivity in leadership positions remains under-researched (Said & Shah, 2017). This study contributes by empirically investigating how gender stereotypes and work-life balance challenges influence the career development of female employees in the Civil secretariat Peshawar. It provides region-specific evidence from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, addresses a significant research gap in the Pakistani context, and offers insights that can inform policy and organizational interventions aimed at enhancing gender equity in leadership pathways.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Barriers for Upward Career Mobility

Anything that limits or restricts people's ability to go forward is considered a barrier. Physical or immaterial, real or imagined, these obstacles can arise at any point. When it comes to women in leadership positions, many companies are having trouble clinging on to their most talented employees. Discrimination as well as the glass ceiling are two obstacles that make progress slower (Liang et al., 2008; Said & Shah, 2017). Understanding the obstacles women encounter and learning from the career strategies of successful women who have broken the glass ceiling while juggling job duties and family obligations is crucial if we are to break the glass ceiling along with remove the barriers that prevent women from reaching their full potential.

The purpose of career development is to help employees achieve their goals while also meeting the demands of the firm in a structured way (Mooney, 2022; Kow et al., 2012) offer a definition of career development as a person's contribution and behavioral process leading to factors such as occupation choices, role integration, professional pattern and identity, work values, and decision-making style. Improving present performance, encouraging individuals to seize opportunities for future jobs, and accomplishing corporate goals and objectives are all reasons to realize career mobility. Studies have shown that women have a far more difficult time advancing in their careers than males do. This is likely due to the fact that women have historically prioritized caring for their families and children before furthering their education. Dealing with this disease presented a challenge of balancing work and family obligations.

In addition, a study discovered that women were underrepresented in upper-level management positions due to their placement in specialized fields such as public relations, finance, and personnel. Since presidents and chief executive officers are typically male employees, the role of women in leadership positions is mainly irrelevant (Karen, 2013), there has been a lot of research and debate about women's underrepresentation in upper-level management roles as more of them have joined the workforce. When compared to men, women encounter more obstacles on the path to advancement in the workplace. Women continue to face a glass ceiling even as they obtain executive expertise in many nations. According to studies, women face obstacles in their careers at a far earlier level than men do, and they continue to face the glass ceiling as they rise through the managerial ranks. Gender stereotypes in the workplace, particularly in the public sector, have received little attention from empirical researchers, as pointed out by (Kholis, 2017; Barker et al., 1999). They concluded that women may be able to overcome career hurdles up to a certain point in the hierarchy, but that beyond that point, more rigid barriers may be encountered.

2.2 Work life balance

A work life balance is achieved when the demands of one's job and family responsibilities are not compatible with one another; that is, when carrying out the duties of one job causes it difficult to carry out the duties of the other. No matter how many hours a woman works outside the home, she is still expected to take care of the house and her children, according to multiple studies. According to (Hinnerich, 2017; Burke and McKeen, 1994), Working women report higher levels of stress compared to working men. In addition, other studies showed that women may have it worse when it comes to family responsibilities once they reach a certain managerial level where they are expected to give their all to the organization. Some people believe that women should prioritize being a good parent and wife before achieving success as a manager, while others believe that women should prioritize taking care of their elderly parents and children. According to (Ann et al., 2002) argues that if women do not get married and no have children, there is no need to manage job and family responsibilities. Additionally, she discovered that women holding prominent jobs in the study, such as bank employees and local government officials, were extremely uncommon to have children. According to Miller's (2004) research on female engineers, the biggest obstacle to their advancement is the pressure to balance work and family responsibilities. Because of the long hours (12-14 hours a day), women in engineering do not advance to senior positions. Because of the long hours and lack of breaks, many women aren't ready to give up their personal lives just yet at least not until their children are grown. Her research at Oil Company also shows that women are expected to uphold the patriarchal structure, which leads to personal success in the short term but seems to be unable to alter the industry's core beliefs in the long run.

Research on the advancement of female public sector officers has shown that women continue to confront substantial barriers, such as unsupportive work schedules and heavy household obligations. In fact, additional research has shown that women are more likely to experience role stress as a result of the demands of juggling many responsibilities at home, in the workplace, and with their families. As a result of their demanding work schedules, professional women have less time to unwind after a long day than their male counterparts. On the other hand, research by (Gormley et al., 2023; Indra et al., 2013) found that respondents generally agreed that having to work extra and take on additional responsibility at work negatively impacts their family life. The reason behind this is that putting in extra hours at work is difficult for them. Plus, it proved that women are more capable of taking care of children than men, which led to the assumption that women were born to be the workers and mothers. This line of thinking lends belief to the idea that women face significant obstacles in advancing their careers due to their family obligations. Thus, we proposed that:

H1: Work-life balance significantly influences women's upward career advancement.

2.3 Gender Stereotypes

According to (Gormley et al., 2023; Heilman, 1999) there is a lack of defined guidelines in leadership evaluations, which has led to reports of discrimination and prejudice. Some have hypothesized that gender bias in appraisal is to blame for the dearth of female executives. When it comes time to evaluate female employees, gender stereotypes are a major roadblock. Particularly when women excel in traditionally male-dominated fields, these stereotypes might cause their abilities to go unrecognized and their contributions to be underappreciated. These prejudices have the potential to color the way female employees are evaluated.

According to (González et al., 2019; Heilman, 2001), there has been a marked disparity in the advancement chances afforded to male and female employees due to the subjective nature of evaluations of women in both the public and private sectors. The persistence of biased decision-making, which hinders the advancement of women to senior executive positions in numerous organizations, may be explained, in part, by the absence of systematic criteria including well-structured norms on organizational evaluation processes. Furthermore, standards that are not clearly defined notify subjective judgments of what is acceptable in place of equitable, objective standards. In such environment, gender stereotypes may come into play. Based on (Choudhary, 2022; Eagly et al., 1992), these women credentials and performance are not fairly evaluated. Similar views are expressed by Schein (1992) reported that women were significantly better performers than men in many of skills required for effective leadership. Based on previous research done by Green et al. (2004), most of the respondents agree that the amount of pay should granted to both sexes when they carry out similar duties. In the same way, women typically work in lower-paying administrative roles in heavy sectors where males predominate (Green et al., 2004; Coleman, 2020). Furthermore, respondents in a survey by Edwards et al., (2010) identified six Australian government departments where the Senior Executive Service has been successful. Things like high-profile positions and reputation are typically held by men. Gender stereotypes have historically ensured that men have had more access to leadership roles in organizations than women. Hence, we suggest that:

H2: Gender stereotypes significantly influence women's upward career advancement.

Figure 1 shows the recommended analytical framework for studying the difficulties that women face when attempting to move up to managerial positions.

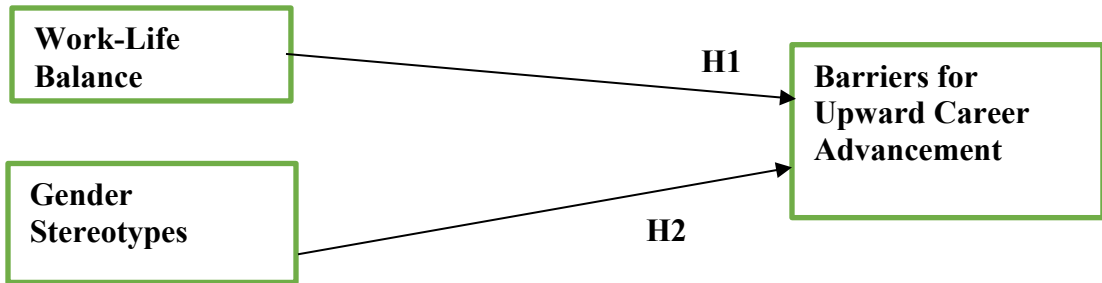


Figure 1. Sources: *Indra et al., (2013)*

2.4 Social Role Theory

According to Eagly (1987), societal expectations assign different roles to men and women, with women traditionally associated with communal characteristics such as caregiving, emotional support, and domestic responsibilities, while men are linked to agentic traits like leadership, assertiveness, and decision-making. These socially constructed norms shape how organizations and individuals interpret suitability for higher-level positions. When applied to the context of the Civil secretariat Peshawar, Social Role Theory suggests that gender stereotypes within society and institutions can limit women's perceived leadership potential, influence supervisors' expectations, and shape promotion decisions. This theoretical lens directly supports the study's hypotheses (Said & Shah, 2017; Choudhary, 2022), which is to determine whether the lack of career development among female employees is related to the widespread presence of gender stereotypes and challenges in balancing work and family life. Social Role Theory explains that when women are expected to prioritize domestic roles, they face greater work–life conflict, reduced opportunities for developmental assignments, and fewer expectations of advancement—thereby reinforcing the very barriers the study seeks to investigate. Thus, Eagly's framework helps clarify how deeply rooted social norms create and sustain the structural and interpersonal obstacles that impede women's upward career progression.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study used a survey-based design for its investigation. This study utilized simple random sampling technique. The respondents come from five distinct departments: local government, health, elementary and secondary education, higher and college education, and population welfare. This makes for a very diverse sample. All female employees of the Civil secretariat in Peshawar are part of the study's population. Employees of the Civil secretariat in Peshawar who are women serve as the unit for assessment in this study.

3.2 Measurement

Barriers of upward career mobility work as a dependent variable and was measured using the Indra and Tanusia (2013), 10 item scale which assess career advancement, organization policies and limitation managerial position, The scale has a reliability of 0.86. As for work life balance as an independent variable, it is measured using 8 items of the version of Kow et al. (2012) while the reliability of the scale is 0.83. On the other hand, 06 item created by Mukulu (2012) were used to assess gender stereotypes and the scale reliability is 0.89. Every single reply was evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Multiple Regression Analysis

Testing the hypothesis in this study was done using multiple regression analysis. In business research, multiple regression analysis is a frequently used multivariate technique. The regression coefficients show the relative importance of each independent variable in predicting the dependent variable; thus, multiple regression analysis offers an objective way to evaluate the strength and nature of the relationship among the two sets of variables. The results shown in Table 1 indicate a coefficient of determination of 0.774 and 0.600, respectively, with a p-value less than 0.01. Both the independent and dependent variables exhibit strong variance, as indicated by the value of R. So, work life balance as well as gender stereotypes account for 77.4 percent of the variation in career development. However, combined independent variables effectively explained 60.0% of the variation in career advancement hurdles (R²). The high R-squared value shows that the model successfully fits the data. Gender stereotypes had a higher beta value (0.486) than work

life balance, according to the results. Evidence like this suggests that women working in the Civil secretariat in Peshawar attribute the lack of opportunities for promotion to gender guidelines.

Table 1: *Regression Analysis*

Independent Variables	Beta	Sig.
Work life balance	0.457	0.001
Gender Stereotypes	0.486	0.014
R	0.774	
R Square	0.600	

4.2 Discussion

Results supported those of Burke and McKeen (1994); Indra et al. (2013) which found a positive correlation between work life balance and successful career development. Here, one strategy to boost employee personal growth is to encourage them to take part in licensed professional examinations. This will help with both attracting and retaining female workers at workplace. In addition, encourage your staff, particularly the women among them, to continue their education immediately. Because once a woman is married, she is likely to devote more time and energy to her family, which could limit her professional advancement opportunities. This company is a good example of the kind that the Minority Shareholder Watchdog Group (2012) has seen in action: management that allows for flexible work arrangements so that employees, particularly women, can advance in their careers. The greatest obstacle to women's professional advancement in Pakistan, however, is their duty to care for themselves and their families. The study on the challenges faced by women managers in Malaysian Government Link Companies (GLC) also found that men are given opportunities to prove themselves through difficult tasks, which makes them stand out before they are promoted (Indra & Tanusia, 2013). Also, numerous studies have shown that education and ongoing learning are key to advancing the ladder of corporate success. This agrees with the findings of Mukulu (2012), who discovered that women might advance to management levels if they had access to training and development programs and educational opportunities. Gaining knowledge about one's chosen profession, together with setting and working towards specific professional goals, can help women advance in their careers. Having access to high-quality information is crucial for building a successful career, thus this is really vital. In addition, the rise in academic achievement might be included. As a larger percentage of Pakistani women now attend college, the country's female literacy rate has risen sharply in recent decades. It is likely that these changes in demographic representation of tertiary level courses by female would go some way toward creating higher levels of aspirations toward more senior role in public sector (Uma et al., 2008). In addition, stereotypes are capable of influencing promotion practices and career advancement opportunities in organization. Strong negative evaluations held about the effectiveness of women participation

especially in public sector. Women in Pakistan are falling behind male colleagues in the advancement to senior management and leadership positions, which can be attributed to persistently negative stereotypes about women's abilities and the increasing number of male-dominated decision-making roles.

Last but not the least, managers, HR staff, and employees themselves are ultimately accountable for advancing one's career within an organization. To help their employees balance work and family responsibilities, managers should make the workplace more welcoming to families. This will help employees stay focused on their regular tasks and achieve their personal goals. In addition, workers should take responsibility for their own career development by making detailed plans and keeping track of their progress. Workers who are good at setting and tracking goals will be more likely to advance in their careers. The results showed a strong correlation between gender stereotypes and barriers to professional development. One way to look at the female evaluation is as a call for women to be treated the same as men when it comes to promotions, regardless of their qualifications.

This involves making sure there is gender diversity in management and all other positions. Despite the fact that the company in question has adopted a diversity program in an effort to increase the representation of women in leadership roles, the majority of the women surveyed felt that the policy's introduction of time flexibility was helpful in reducing their workload.

5. Conclusion and Future Research Direction

5.1 Conclusion

Using a survey from the Civil secretariat in Peshawar as a starting point, this study demonstrates that work life balance along with gender stereotypes are independent variables that contribute to the difficulty of advancing to managerial positions in the public sector. Implications for women's professional growth in the public sector highlight the need of a healthy work life balance. Female public sector employees are fighting for equal opportunity and organizational assistance in the hopes of achieving promotion to top positions, despite the fact that these barriers still remain. They acknowledged that women do have specific duties, but it shouldn't stop them from being involved in the organization. To promote women's advancement, significant transformation is needed in family and organizational structure, such as spouse support in household activities. The next objective is whether gender stereotypes related to career advancement. Gender stereotypes continue to be recognized as a significant factor in evaluations of the female workers. Persistently negative evaluations highlight the importance of watchful human resource practices to help

organizations recruit, retain, and promote the most qualified candidates regardless of gender, which could have severe consequences for women's career advancement in Pakistan.

5.2 Limitations & Future Research Direction

Important findings are uncovered by this research into the barriers to women's career advancement in Pakistan's public sector, particularly concerning work life balance and gender stereotypes. However, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the study primarily focuses on the public sector, particularly the Civil secretariat in Peshawar. The results may not be applicable to other industries due to this specific concentration, such as private organizations, multinational corporations, or non-governmental organizations, where gender dynamics and HR policies may differ significantly.

Secondly, there is a possibility of response bias because the study is based on self-reported survey data. Potentially socially desirable responses may have been given by participants, especially on sensitive issues related to workplace gender discrimination and career advancement barriers. Future research could incorporate longitudinal studies or observational methods to validate these self-reported responses.

Thirdly, cultural and societal norms play a critical role in shaping career progression for women in Pakistan. While this study highlights gender stereotypes and work life balance as key barriers, it does not deeply explore other influential factors such as socio-economic background, workplace culture, or differences in industries. Future studies should consider a broader range of socio-cultural and economic variables that may further impact women's career mobility. Additionally, work life balance is a significant factor in career advancement, further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of flexible work arrangements, parental leave policies, and child care support services in promoting women's professional growth.

Lastly, while this study acknowledges the role of organizational policies in facilitating career advancement, it does not fully examine the effectiveness of existing HR interventions and diversity programs in Pakistan. Comparative studies analyzing successful HR policies in other regions or countries could provide a more comprehensive understanding of best practices that may be adapted to the Pakistani context.

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