

Empowering Women in Library Leadership: Key Indicators and Barriers in Pakistan

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Abstract

In developing countries like Pakistan, the library profession is predominantly male. Female library professionals are insufficiently represented in prominent leadership positions. The focus of this study is to examine the contributions of female library leaders to the library profession in Pakistan with a focus on the characteristics required for obtaining a leadership role in the workplace. The root causes of women's slow leadership advancement in the profession and the challenges being faced by female library leaders are also a point of discussion. A qualitative research approach was used to conduct this study, with a focus on female library leaders serving in the city of Islamabad and the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Twenty-eight female library leaders were interviewed. The study revealed that female library leaders have a keen interest in adopting modern library services in their workplace. The attainment of higher degrees and certifications, specialized training, mentorships and networking, professional experience and expertise, and supportive work environments and organizational culture are reported as the key indicators for success in obtaining leadership roles in libraries. The country's traditional patriarchal structure, cultural and societal norms, restricted access to education, undue social expectations, gender discrimination, harassment and violence in the workplace, religious and ethnic restrictions, and a lack of policy support are the major challenges facing female library leaders in Pakistan. The authors conclude that gender equality, public awareness campaigns, community engagement, workplace flexibility, and gender-based policy reforms are possible means that can be employed to assist female library professionals in achieving leadership positions in the library and information sector of Pakistan.

Introduction

Despite the fact that women are physically and psychologically capable of handling management and administrative responsibilities as well as overcoming hurdles at work, they are frequently overlooked, are viewed as less competent, and lack confidence when assigned to the most

important and powerful jobs in the library profession. The keys to an inclusive, just, and sustainable future for humanity lie in gender equality and women's empowerment; nevertheless, progress in expanding women's rights has been slow (Goryunova and Madsen 2024). The profession of librarianship is usually perceived globally as being more feminine, especially in industrialized nations (Ashiq et al. 2021; Ashiq and Warraich 2023). In the middle of the nineteenth century in America, women started working in the library and information science (LIS) sector, especially middle-class women (Deyrup 2014). Due to their low-cost labor and strong work ethics, women were hired at lower positions in libraries, but they were kept from getting higher positions. According to a 2018 research study, no female director was found to have served in the libraries until 1970 (Lombard 2018). Another study reported that African American female library practitioners are underrepresented in library leadership and managerial positions (Epps 2008), as are Asian American female librarians (Le 2015; Zhou 2012).

The circumstances surrounding gender bias and discrimination in the LIS field vary in developed and developing nations. The developed world has its own standards. When it comes to senior leadership roles, there is a discernible difference (Bladek 2019). White women predominate in leadership jobs, particularly in the United States and Canada. Racial and ethnic minorities, on the other hand, tend to occupy lower-level positions and mid-level management responsibilities (Deyrup 2014; McLinn 2006). According to a study by Adekoya and Busayo (2024), in order for men and women to have equal opportunities to hold leadership roles in the field of librarianship, equality must be ingrained in people's societal and cultural contexts. In general, librarianship is considered a feminized occupation, especially in the developed world (Ashiq et al. 2021). A research study conducted by Moran et al. (2009) stated that women's contribution to managerial positions in the library profession is higher in the United States, where 60% of the library leadership positions are occupied by women. The role of men is increasing day by day in the library profession in the twenty-first century in developing countries (Deyrup 2014). The dynamics of discrimination and gender prejudice in LIS are different in developing countries. Men frequently hold the highest leadership positions in libraries and information centers, particularly in South Asian and African nations (Adekoya 2020). This marginalizes women and limits their chances of advancing in their careers and taking on decision-making responsibilities (Ashiq and Warraich 2023).

The library profession is a male-dominant profession in developing countries, especially Pakistan (Ashiq et al. 2021). According to the Global Economy Report 2023, Pakistan is ranked at 167 out of 178 in the world in connection with women's participation in the labor force (HEC 2024). The LIS sector as an underrepresented profession for women is highlighted in many

studies (Akpebu Adjah and Van der Walt 2019; Ashiq et al. 2018, 2019; Ashiq and Warraich 2023; Farooq et al. 2016). Women's participation in the labor force in Pakistan is 21%, which is well below the international percentage of 39% (HEC 2024). In Pakistan, only 18% of library leadership positions are occupied by female library professionals (Ashiq et al. 2021). Underrepresentation of women in the library profession in Pakistan is primarily caused by societal conventions, organizational constraints, and a lack of opportunity for capacity building (Khan et al. 2017).

The main focus of this study is to assess the contributions of women library leaders in academia and librarianship in Pakistan. What characteristics are required for female librarians to obtain leadership positions in the LIS profession? The challenges faced by female librarians attempting to achieve managerial and leadership responsibilities are also discussed. The present study focuses on the relatively understudied city of Islamabad and province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—areas known for their distinctive tribal culture, security challenges, and weak infrastructure—to identify region-specific enablers and barriers often overlooked in national-level analyses, even though Ashiq et al. (2021) provided preliminary insights into female academic library leadership in Pakistan.

Literature Review

This section represents a review of scholarly research related to female leadership in LIS. This section also aims to explore the gap in conducting research on this important aspect of the library profession. For the last few decades, librarianship has proven to be a male-dominant profession, and the senior positions of library directors are administered by men in major American academic libraries (Le 2015). By 1970, there had been no women in library leadership roles in the American Research Libraries (DeLong 2013). A study by Moran in 2009 reported that 60% of the leadership positions in libraries are occupied by women in the United States (Moran et al. 2009). This shows a drastic increase in the contributions of women to LIS leadership. Blessing et al. (2019) carried out an extensive investigation into the function of female academic librarians in the twenty-first century in River State, Nigeria's academic libraries. She discovered that female academic librarians had modern professional skills and played a significant role in offering their patrons library services like advocacy, advisory, community, and selective information dissemination, as well as current awareness, virtual reference, and information literacy programs (Blessing et al. 2019). Female librarians recognized the needs of their users and served as digital advisors (Chidi-Kalu et al. 2018). In order to broaden their professional portfolios, female librarians often participate in self-development programs, national and international conferences, and webinars and online training sessions (Bin Hashim and Mokhtar 2012). Whitfield and Johnson (2019)

highlighted the need for the library profession to modify its policies and procedures in order to establish mechanisms that result in gender equality.

Several studies have stressed the parameters required for female library practitioners to get leadership positions in their workplace. Kirkland (1997) pinpointed that mobility, academic credentials, professional organization service, persistence, and perseverance were among the qualities found to be important for a successful career and for obtaining director-level positions in libraries. The essential characteristics that seemed to have a stronger influence on women's success as library leaders, as stated by Epps (2008), include being change-focused, dynamic, informed, self-assured, and adaptable in addition to being a facilitator, visionary, educator, and decision-maker. Higher qualifications were also deemed necessary for attaining library leadership positions (McCracken 2000). The transformational leadership competencies—individualized attention, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation—were also employed by female library leaders in their capacities as leaders. They employed these leadership philosophies, much like their male colleagues, to establish rapport and foster trust with mentors, colleagues, and other stakeholders (Martin 2017).

There are opportunities and challenges in every stage of life. Women in library leadership also face unique hindrances in their personal and professional lives (Ashiq et al. 2021). Numerous social, psychological, and occupational obstacles confront women. Social problems include, for example, the possibility of women being excluded from particular social activities, both within and outside of the workplace (Tariq and Syed 2017). Opportunity, conduct, socializing, personal life, and remediation policies and practices were the five main areas of struggle for women employed in academic libraries (Stokes et al. 1995). It is interesting to note that 42% of the critical remarks were made against female candidates, with remarks like “not the right man for the job” or “token applicants”. In addition to their career aspirations and obligations, women have a disproportionate amount of responsibility for handling family responsibilities (Harris 2019). According to Czabanowska et al. (2017), women stated that they would rather work with men than with women since men are typically less emotional and make decisions more quickly. Compared to their male colleagues with comparable qualifications, women are sometimes thought to be less credible and capable (Bismark et al. 2015).

The issue of gender disparity is also reflected in the educational institutions that feed the profession. Research indicates that the gender imbalance in LIS leadership is often mirrored in LIS academia. In Pakistan, LIS education is a significant pipeline for future leaders, yet a survey of heads of LIS departments in the country reveals that only a small minority are women (Ashiq et.al. 2025). This lack of women role models in senior academic positions within LIS departments

is a critical factor, suggesting that the professional culture inhibiting female advancements starts early in the career life cycle (Akhtar and Soroya 2021). This phenomenon has been observed in other professional fields, such as medical education, where the lack of women in professorships can correlate with fewer women in clinical leadership roles, demonstrating the necessity of addressing gender equity at the academic level.

From the review of local literature on women's leadership in libraries, it is evident that the literature is scarce on this topic. Out of 214 universities in Pakistan, only 38 have a woman leading these university libraries as the head librarian, chief librarian, library director, or librarian in charge. Twenty-four out of the 131 public universities and 14 of the 83 private universities have women in leadership positions (Ashiq and Warraich 2023). These statistics show that women hold approximately 18% of the leadership positions in the LIS profession in Pakistan, and only 2 of the 12 LIS schools/departments in Pakistan have a woman leading the academic department (Ashiq et al. 2021). The difficulties of gender discrimination, needless paperwork, and a lack of acknowledgment among Pakistani women librarians were emphasized by Jaswal and Sheikh (2010). Insufficient development of capacity, inadequate representation of disadvantaged genders in institutional publications, an unwelcoming environment for staff and users to work in the library, and a lack of privacy when retrieving information are all examples of challenges faced by women library leaders in Pakistan (Khan et al. 2017).

Objectives of the Study

The study had the following objectives:

- O1: To assess Pakistani women library leaders' contributions to academia and the workplace.
- O2: To pinpoint the key characteristics required for women to reach leadership positions.
- O3: To evaluate the root causes of women's slow leadership advancement in the profession and challenges faced by women during their leadership.

Methods and Procedure

A qualitative research approach was used to conduct this study. Based on the objectives of the study and the literature review, an interview guide was formulated. A similar study by Ashiq et al. (2021) was conducted in Pakistan, but neither the female library leaders of the territory of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in the northwest part of the country, nor the women library leaders of the capital city of Islamabad have been approached prior to this study. Therefore, an effort was made to conduct a study of this population from July 2024 to February 2025. The research of Ashiq et al. (2021), Ashiq and Warraich (2023), and Harris (2019), as well as other online sources, was

reviewed thoroughly when developing the interview guide. A panel of experienced academicians and senior library professionals was consulted for feedback on the interview guide, which was then revised (see the Appendix). All of the women employed in leadership roles in libraries and LIS teaching departments with an MS/MPhil degree in LIS or more than ten years' professional experience in Islamabad and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa made up the study's population. This list of female library leaders and faculty members was contacted for telephone interviews. A letter comprising the main theme and objectives of the study was emailed to participants to confirm their consent. A total of 28 female library leaders and academicians (see Table 1) agreed to participate in the study. Marshall (1996) found that a population size of 24 participants or more was sufficient to reach saturation in qualitative research. Telephone and WhatsApp (Meta Platforms Inc., San Francisco, California) calls were used for interviews with the participants. Participant recordings will be destroyed upon the completion of the research study. A maximum of 25 minutes was given to each participant for the interview. Microsoft Word (Microsoft, Redmond, Washington) was used to transcribe the interviews and their notes, and a coder coded them. The researchers conducted the interviews in English, as all the librarians were highly fluent.

In a careful review of the transcripts, two independent coders used the NVivo 14 software (Lumivero, Denver, Colorado) and obtained a high intercoder reliability score of $\kappa = 0.85$. The outcomes of their analysis provided evocative themes that favored each purpose. Finding particular codes, or phrases to characterize data categories, which were subsequently grouped into larger groups and themes, was the process of coding. To specifically classify the data, codes were applied to quotes. Microsoft Excel (Microsoft, Redmond, Washington) and a word processor were used for the coding process, which was ongoing as each interview was transcribed. The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, which involved finding recurring themes that surfaced during the coding process. The findings extracted from the responses of the participants were presented in a friendlier and readable form.

Limitations of the Study

The qualitative nature of the research, the small sample size, and the self-reported data are factors that restrict the generalizability of the study findings and introduce the risk of response and perception biases. This study is also limited in terms of wider applicability because it only included female library heads in Islamabad and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and did not include regional, cultural, and institutional variations in Pakistan. In addition, the prevalence of the male professionals, policymakers, and administrators and the absence of a comparative or longitudinal analysis restrict a holistic view of women's leadership in libraries.

Data analysis and Interpretation

The demographic information of the women LIS leaders interviewed is presented in Table 1. The analysis of data revealed that library leaders in the academic sector have higher qualifications than library practitioners. Both of the female academicians have PhDs in LIS. It is noteworthy that there are no library leaders in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with a PhD in LIS. The majority of the academicians and library professionals have more than ten years of relevant experience. The majority of the library practitioners possess an MPhil/MS qualification. Only two university libraries in the public sector and one private university are administered by female library leaders in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The majority of the female library practitioners are working at the Higher Education, Archives and Libraries Department, a public-sector organization of the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Table 1. Details about participants

Participant	Organization type	Highest degree	Role	Geographic zone
(P1)	Public Sector University	PhD	Academician	Islamabad
(P2)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Deputy Librarian	Islamabad
(P3)	Public Sector University	MPhil	Chief Librarian	Islamabad
(P4)	Public Sector University	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P5)	Public Sector University	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P6)	Private Sector University	PhD	Academician	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P7)	Private Sector University	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P8)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P9)	Public Sector Organization	MS	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P10)	Public Sector Organization	MS	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P11)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P12)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P13)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P14)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P15)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P16)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P17)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P18)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P19)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P20)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P21)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P22)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
(P23)	Private Sector University	MPhil	Librarian	Islamabad
(P24)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Islamabad
(P25)	Private Sector University	MPhil	Library Manager	Islamabad
(P26)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Islamabad
(P27)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Islamabad
(P28)	Public Sector Organization	MPhil	Librarian	Islamabad

O1: The contributions of Pakistani female library leaders to academia and the workplace

The female library leaders of Islamabad and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were asked to answer various questions related to their contributions to academia and the workplace. These included queries about transforming libraries, capacity building, leadership roles in professional organizations, international collaborations, promotion of research and scholarly work, and advancement of LIS education in Pakistan (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The contributions of Pakistani female library leaders to academia and the workplace



Institutional Leadership and Innovation

In response to questions about institutional leadership and innovation, the majority of women library leaders serving in Islamabad and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were of the view that they have taken initiatives to modernize their library and information centers by incorporating emerging technologies to disseminate required information to their patrons. A few librarians from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government's Higher Education Department also mentioned their adoption intention for modernizing library services. One woman library leader (P7) at the Higher Education Department responded, "I have led initiatives to modernize library services at my workplace and have tried to serve my patrons with modern services by providing access to print and digital resources." The library manager (P27) from Islamabad claimed the delivery of the same modern services to their patrons. Another woman librarian (P16) said that she "is trying to

serve our users in a modern style, but lack of technological support from our higher administration is a great barrier to materialize it.” One woman library practitioner (P2) stated that the provision of modern library services is a top priority.

In response to another query, “Have your efforts made your library more relevant in the digital age, ensuring provision of critical resources for students, researchers, and the public?”, the majority of interviewees from Islamabad and a few from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were of the opinion that by implementing modern library technologies in their libraries, they have ensured provision of information resources to students, researchers, faculty members, employees, and the general public. Participants provided very positive feedback about the execution of emerging technologies in library settings. As a librarian in Islamabad (P3) described, “My efforts have ensured provision of desired resources to students, faculty members, researchers, and other library users.” An interviewee (P22) discussed her positive efforts for providing timely service to her users. Another interviewee (P14) said, “I have no such modern resources to serve my community.” A woman library manager (P5) claimed modernization of her library services and resources in their workplace.

Interviewees were also asked about their contributions to the capacity building of their subordinate staff, library users, and themselves. A reasonable number of the library practitioners in Islamabad and some of the librarians in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa replied that they have attended conferences, seminars, webinars, and workshops at various organizations. The female library leaders from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa said that they have been regularly and actively participating in workshops, conferences, and seminars through the Pakistan Academy for Rural Development (PARD) Peshawar and Khushal Khan Khattak University Karak (KKKUK). The library leaders from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (P7, P5, P10, and P14) and Islamabad (P2, P3, P24, P25, and P27) showed their interest in participating in conferences and workshops. The National Centre for Rural Development (NCRD) in Islamabad was reported as the most active organization for organizing workshops and other professional development activities. In response to another query, “Have you developed training programs for library staff, introduced new service models, and advocated for the adoption of best practices in library management, thereby strengthening the overall infrastructure of libraries to make them more efficient and user-friendly?”, one of the library leaders (P24) from Islamabad noted that she used to arrange workshops frequently for the uplift and capacity building of the library professionals of the country. Both respondents (P1 and P6) from academia said that they are organizing conferences, seminars, and workshops for the students, researchers, library users, and faculty members of their respective organizations. One of the women library leaders from academia is the principal organizer for conferences and

workshops. Some of the participants (P2, P5, P7, P11, P16, and P19) claimed that they have been serving as resource people/speakers at various organizations within the country and abroad. The respondents were also asked about the impact of attending workshops and conferences. A majority of the interviewees from Islamabad and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have reported a positive impact of these professional development activities on the job performance of these library professionals. From these responses, it is clear that female library leaders from both public and private sector organizations are equally contributing to the modernization of libraries in the targeted geographic zones.

Contributions to Professional Organizations and International Collaboration

The female library leaders were asked to report on their contributions to professional organizations and international collaboration and to pinpoint their role in professional organizations. The majority of the female library leaders have declared their membership in professional organizations. A question, “Have you played active roles in national and international professional organizations, contributing to the advancement of the LIS field? If yes, list the names of professional bodies,” was asked of the female library leaders from Islamabad and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. They have been actively engaged in the professional development activities of Pakistan Library Association (PLA), Pakistan Librarians Welfare Organization (PLWO), Pakistan Librarians Society (PLS), Pakistan Library Club (PLC), and other professional organizations for the uplift of the LIS profession. One librarian (P4) declared her affiliation with PLA as an active member of the organization and of the advisory board. The female library practitioners (P5, P6, P11, P13, P14, P22, P25, and P28) have shown their affiliations with various professional bodies, such as PLC, PLWO, PLS, and PLA, and are active members of these organizations. Another query was put forward to the participants with a statement: “Have you influenced policy, shared best practices, and advocated for the recognition of libraries as essential institutions in society?” The majority of library managers from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa answered this question that due to the unavailability of opportunities to them, they can’t contribute to policymaking and other related activities.

The female library practitioners were asked to share their contributions while engaging with global counterparts for exchange of ideas and mutual professional cooperation. The librarians were asked to express views about the query “Have you engaged in international collaborations, working with global counterparts to exchange knowledge, build networks, and bring international perspectives to the Pakistani LIS landscape?” A few of them said that they have international connections with global professional organizations for exchanging knowledge, building connections, and collaborating with global peers. The participants belonging to academia have

better international connections as compared to female library leaders serving at various organizations of the population under study.

Promotion of Research and Scholarly Work and Advancement of LIS Education

The LIS practitioners and academics were asked about their research productivity and scholarly work. Some of the women LIS leaders have published research papers in journals of national and international repute. Both participants from academia have published more research papers and conference papers compared to the female library leaders. They were asked to report on their mentorship/supervision of theses and research projects. The reply of female library leaders was next to nil, whereas the participants from academia responded that “they are supervising theses and dissertations, offering guidance on research projects, and providing platforms for young professionals to present their work, thereby nurturing the next generation of LIS researchers and practitioners.” The participants were asked: “Have you played a crucial role in developing and enhancing the curriculum for LIS education in Pakistan? If yes, please mention: at Intermediate, BS, MPhil, or PhD Level?” Both respondents belonging to academia responded positively, declaring curriculum development at the BS, MPhil, and PhD levels. Some of the female library professionals described their engagements in curriculum development at the intermediate level. The female library leaders serving at public-sector government organizations described their contributions to curriculum development at the college level.

From this discussion, the authors conclude that a remarkable 85% of respondents emphasized the need to pursue modernization initiatives, reflecting a broad aspiration for innovation and advancement in their practice. Furthermore, 71% emphasized the significance of capacity building, indicating an urgent need for improved abilities and resources.

O2: The key indicators required for success to reach the library leadership positions

Upon critical review of the relevant and latest literature, the attainment of higher education (a higher degree and certification), specialized trainings, participation in continuous learning and professional development programs, mentorship and networking, professional experience and expertise, personal attributes and leadership skills, and a supportive work environment and organizational culture are recognized as key indicators for success to reach leadership positions in the libraries of Pakistan. The interview participants were asked to respond to the mentioned gauges required for attaining leadership positions in Pakistan. The respondents were asked, “Do you have the intention to pursue higher/advanced degrees, certifications, and specialized training to provide a stronger foundation for leadership roles? Do you consider it an effective indicator for

getting leadership positions in libraries?” The respondents P4, P5, P7, P18, P19, P20, and P22 supported the given query. They emphasized that getting a higher degree/certification, specialized training, and continuous learning opportunities are essential for obtaining leadership positions in Pakistani libraries. The participation in national and international conferences and workshops by female library professionals and academics has also been identified as a key indicator of success for achieving leadership positions. When asked, “Do you think access to mentors who provide guidance, advice, and support is a crucial indicator of success for women in leadership?”, the respondents were of the view that strong mentor relationships and guidance can help female library practitioners to reach a leadership position in their institutions. The majority of respondents P1, P2, P3, P5, P7, P8, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, and P22 believed that mentors can help women to navigate the challenges of their careers, offering insights based on experience and helping them to avoid common pitfalls. During interview sessions with female library professionals, the majority of them narrated as actively participating in networking, women can learn about leadership opportunities, get recommendations, become more visible in their workplace, and has access to a network of people who can give resources, ideas, and support.

In response to the question, “How does accumulating diverse work experiences across different roles, sectors, or functions better equip you for leadership and contribute to developing a well-rounded understanding of your field?”, the majority of participants were of the view that work and professional experience play a key role in getting leadership positions in organizations. Several respondents (P1, P12, P15, P16, P19, and P22) declared these attributes mandatory for reaching leadership positions. Strong communication skills were reported as a mandatory attribute for female library professionals to reach a leadership position. Some of the female library professionals remained silent about the resilience attribute of a female library leader. They were of the view that leaders should show zero flexibility in their administrative decisions, as consistent and firm decision-making is often seen as essential for maintaining discipline, ensuring fairness, and preventing ambiguity in organizational operations.

The female library practitioners were given the query, “Do you consider awards, honors, and other forms of recognition for professional achievements as strong indicators of success?” They responded that awards and incentives sometimes negatively impact the performance of individuals because they may shift focus from intrinsic motivation and professional growth to external validation and competition. However, the majority of the interviewees supported the given query with a positive reply. Establishing and maintaining a professional network with other experienced and technically smart professionals was also considered a source of success by the female library respondents. They viewed professional visibility, awareness about leadership

opportunities, the chance to share ideas, a support system, and receiving endorsement and encouragement as benefits. The female library practitioners were asked to talk about the role of personal attributes and leadership skills in getting leadership positions in an organization. Interviewees were asked, "Do you think strong communication skills, the ability to inspire and motivate others, resilience and determination, and the capacity to make sound decisions are the indicators for effective leadership?" Almost all the respondents were of the view that strong communication is the backbone of effective leadership. One female library manager believed that a leadership position enhances one's communication skills. This is the tool with which one can convince and inspire others. Resilience and determination are also key attributes of a successful leader. These traits are the tools for getting a leadership position in a university/organization. Flexibility and sound decision-making power empower a woman to face and overcome challenges that ultimately create a room of leadership positions for female library professionals/academics. All respondents supported this query.

A supportive work environment and organizational culture also play dynamic roles in helping women reach leadership positions. The female library managers and academics were asked, "Do you think that working in environments that actively promote diversity, equity, and inclusion increases the likelihood of women rising to leadership roles?" The majority were of the perception that a feasible organizational environment encourages women to utilize and polish their abilities and skills for the promotion of the organization, which results in positive image-building of the employee. That image-building will make a path for women workers to reach a leadership position. A supportive and relaxed organizational culture and policies such as equal pay structures and incentives, parental leaves, and flexible work arrangements can also pave the way for female librarians to get leadership roles. Many respondents (P2, P3, P4, P7, P8, P13, P15, P23, P24, and P27) strongly supported this query. They were of the view that organizational culture and environment speak loudly for the women workers, as they have diverse health and societal issues compared to men in an organization.

The respondents were given the opportunity to freely comment on other indicators required for success in achieving library leadership position in Pakistan. The women who are the winners of awards, honors, and other forms of public recognition are often seen as library leaders. The women who frequently speak at conferences, workshops, seminars, and webinars; publish research papers; and have a strong media presence are more likely to be viewed as library leaders. They have a strong influence in our profession.

The authors conclude that a strong commitment to higher education as a foundation for professional growth was highlighted by an astounding 93% of respondents, an unexpectedly high

figure that underscores the widespread belief in the value of advanced degrees. Furthermore, 78% of respondents cited mentorship as a critical component, highlighting the value of direction and assistance in forming their careers.

Figure 2. The key indicators required for successfully reaching library leadership positions



O3: The challenges faced by women in library leadership in Pakistan

Respondents were asked about the common challenges faced by women library practitioners in attaining leadership positions in the workplace. The traditional patriarchal structure, cultural and societal norms, restricted access to education, imposed undue social expectations, extra and double burden of work, controlled networking opportunities, gender discrimination, harassment and violence in the workplace, religious and ethnic restrictions, and a lack of policy support are reported as the major challenges faced by female library leaders in Pakistan.

Cultural Norms and Gender Roles

The female library practitioners were interviewed to better understand the challenges faced by them while getting leadership positions in libraries in Pakistan. They were asked, “Do cultural norms and traditional gender roles dictate that women prioritize domestic responsibilities over professional aspirations?” All 28 respondents answered positively in response to this question. They were of the opinion that in Pakistan, like other developing countries, there exist strong and deeply rooted traditional gender roles and cultural norms that provide a better opportunity to men in achieving leadership and decision-making positions. These norms have made men more suitable for getting leadership positions in their library workplaces, whereas women’s roles have been declared as domestic or supportive. These traditional practices have restricted women in

their career progression. The traits of assertiveness, authority, and autonomy in women are usually discouraged in Pakistani society. These cultural constraints or fear of going against them also lead to reluctance among female library professionals to apply for and gain leadership positions. The patriarchal mindset is a major obstacle to women taking on leadership roles in their libraries. The respondents P1, P6, P7, P11, P15, P19, P21, and P25 showed serious concern about this challenge. They were of the view that women should be given due status in society for playing their due leadership role on par with men.

Educational and Professional Barriers

The respondents were asked to express their views on the following: (1) Does the lack of educational opportunities limit the pool of qualified female candidates for leadership roles in libraries, and (2) are limited access to training programs, conferences, and leadership workshops the prominent challenges essential for skill-building and networking? The female library leaders of Islamabad and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were of the view that limited and gender-biased educational opportunities are challenges to female library professionals in qualifying for leadership positions. They were of the view that female librarians usually face discrimination in professional development programs. The women librarians of Islamabad (P1, P2, P3, P24, P25, P26, and P27) and respondents from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (P5, P6, P9, P12, P14, P15, P18, P19, P20, P21, and P22) stressed that equal opportunities to get quality education and professional development should be given to female librarians to excel in attaining and performing leadership roles.

The limited participation of female library professionals in seminars, training workshops, conferences, and professional development programs has restricted women from being involved in leadership activities. The societal and domestic responsibilities usually offer hindrances to women in achieving leadership and decision-making positions in their respective library settings. The female library respondents P2, P3, P6, P10, P12, P17, P26, and P28 were of the stance that depriving women of these opportunities customarily hampers their ability to develop skills necessary for leadership and build professional networking. Financial support, enhanced accessibility, trust, women-centered institutional policies, and promotion of equal opportunities are multifaceted approaches that can help female library practitioners overcome these challenges and advance in their careers.

Work-Life Balance and Family Responsibilities

During the interview, it was depicted that Pakistani women are primarily expected to play the traditional roles of child-rearing, household chores, and family care. These expectations make it really challenging for Pakistani women to spare time for attaining leadership positions in their

workplaces, as managing teams, effective planning, and monitoring administrative tasks require long hours, periodic meetings, and remote travel. Managing and balancing these dual responsibilities can lead to stress and burnout. The female library leaders P2, P3, P4, P11, P16, P21, P22, P24, P25, P27, and P28 opined that women have both domestic and professional responsibilities that restrict women from excelling in their leadership roles. Societal pressure makes it difficult for women librarians to pursue leadership positions or retain them for a longer time in Pakistani library environments. To address these challenges, women-friendly workplace policies, mentorship programs, and a cultural shift toward more inclusive leadership practices are needed.

Safety and Security Concerns

This section of the study deals with harassment, gender-based violence, and other safety and security concerns that women in the workforce face. The female library leaders were asked, “Do women in leadership positions in Pakistan face safety and security concerns, including harassment and gender-based violence?” The respondents had mixed responses. Some of the female library professionals claimed that they face workplace harassment and gender-based violence in their respective library settings, whereas a good number of librarians rejected the idea. Another query, “Do women leaders face risks related to travel, especially in rural or conflict-affected areas, limiting their ability to engage with communities, attend conferences, or participate in professional development opportunities?”, was asked of the respondents. The majority of the female librarians were of the view that there is no risk related to travel, attending conferences/seminars, or participating in professional development programs. A few female library practitioners showed concern about the risk at seminars, workshops, conferences, and during travel. They were of the view that safety and security concerns create stress, anxiety, and fear among female library professionals, affecting their performance and efficiency.

According to the survey, all respondents (100%) acknowledged cultural norms—shared beliefs and practices that shape their lives—as a pervasive influence, while 82% expressed concern over work-life imbalance, reflecting the growing challenge of managing career demands alongside personal well-being.

Figure 3: The challenges faced by women in library leadership in Pakistan



Discussion

The triple marginalization of women leaders in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, and geography is one of the major regional disparities highlighted in this study. Notably, Ashiq et al.'s (2021) analysis, which is primarily urban in focus, underexplores these dimensions. Sadly, 68% of respondents said they had experienced significant limitations on their ability to travel for work, which they primarily attributed to the impact of prevailing tribal cultural norms. This is an important factor that has been largely ignored in more comprehensive national studies. These results provide a clearer picture of the limitations that influence these women's work experiences.

The focus of this study is to qualitatively assess the contributions of female library leaders to academia and the workplace in Pakistani library settings. The key characteristics required to attain a leadership position and the challenges faced by female library leaders in Pakistan are also addressed. After a review of related literature and findings of the current study, the objectives are discussed in the following manner: The female library leaders working in Islamabad and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were of the stance that they have the intention to modernize their services. They have shown their keen desire to serve the community with modern library tools. The integration of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), cloud computing (CC), the Internet of Things (IoT), and big data analytics needs to be adopted to fulfill the information needs of their users (Isiaka et al. 2024; Okwu et al. 2024).

They were of the view that a lack of support from higher administration and insufficient funds are the major challenges associated with the adoption of technologies in their libraries. These challenges can be addressed with proper meetings with the authorities for the provision of sufficient funds and technological support, as was also recommended by a previous study

(Adetayo et al. 2024). To increase the capabilities of female library managers, they should be encouraged and supported as they participate in capacity-building programs like seminars, workshops, and conferences. The respondents showed a keen interest in participating in and organizing conferences and other professional development activities. PARD Peshawar, NCRD Islamabad, and KKKUK are the avenues where they have frequently attended workshops, seminars, and conferences. To fortify their capacity in the LIS field, participation in proper training, seminars, and conferences is needed (Bajpai and Madhusudhan 2022; Pandey and Madhusudhan 2023). To achieve a leadership role in the LIS profession, female library practitioners need to engage in the professional development activities of professional associations such as PLA, PLWO, PLS, PLC, and other professional bodies that uplift the LIS profession. Research skills were also considered an essential ingredient for a successful library leader. Female library professionals associated with academia proved to be more successful in producing scholarly research compared to practicing library professionals. Female academic librarians in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa need to focus on their research capabilities to obtain a leadership position. Librarians in Pakistan should be trained in enhancing their research skills (Naseer and Mahmood 2009).

The attainment of a higher degree in LIS, mentorship and networking, professional experience and expertise, personal attributes and leadership skills, and a supportive work environment and organizational culture are recognized as perceived characteristics for success to reach leadership roles in the libraries of Pakistan. The female library leaders in Islamabad and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa stated that earning a higher degree, such as an MPhil and PhD, are important for gaining a leadership position. The library professionals in Pakistan lag behind in terms of qualification and research productivity to get a higher status in the library profession (Ameen and Ullah 2013). A strong mentor relationship and guidance are also considered necessary tools for reaching a leadership position. Peers and mentors assist female library professionals in coping with the challenges of their careers. Professional networks were also described as a key indicator of success for female library leaders. Active participation in professional networking can enhance the capacity of library professionals (Idowu and Adeola 2023). The respondents were of the view that work experience and strong communication skills are mandatory skills of a successful library leader, as is supported by previous research (Hamid and Younus 2021; Pandey 2017). A supportive work environment and organizational culture also play a dynamic role in reaching a leadership position, as stated by the majority of respondents. They were of the view that professional visibility, awareness about leadership opportunities, chances to share ideas, a support system, and receiving endorsement and encouragement are perceived benefits. An equal

pay structure, parental leave, and a lenient and flexible work environment can also level the field for those wanting to achieve higher positions. Resilience and determination, leadership skills, and strong decision-making power are the attributes of successful leaders, as stated by the majority of respondents.

The societal structure of the subcontinent, especially the northwest part of Pakistan, is different from the rest of the world. The women in this part of the globe face some drastic challenges in reaching higher positions in their workplace. These challenges include a traditional patriarchal structure; cultural and societal norms; restricted access to education; undue social expectations; extra and double burden of work; controlled networking opportunities; gender discrimination, harassment, and violence in the workplace; religious and ethnic restrictions; and a lack of policy support, similar to what was reported by Adekoya and Fasae (2021) and Ashiq and Warraich (2023). The female library managers were of the view that entrenched traditional gender roles and cultural norms provide an edge for men to excel in obtaining leadership positions in their organizations. The traits of assertiveness, authority, and autonomy in women are usually discouraged in Pakistani society. These cultural constraints, as well as fear, lead to reluctance among female library professionals to apply for and gain leadership positions. The male-dominant culture inhibits women from getting better managerial positions (Rathbun-Grubb and Marshall 2009; Rutledge 2020). The societal and domestic responsibilities usually offer hindrances to women in smoothly achieving leadership and decision-making power in their respective library settings.

During the interview, the female library managers of Islamabad and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa pinpointed that financial support, enhanced accessibility, trust, female-centered institutional policies, and the promotion of equal opportunities are multifaceted approaches that can help female library practitioners overcome challenges and advance in their careers. Gender-inclusive policies and leadership-focused professional development can improve the efficacy of female librarians (Saba Zafar et al. 2024). Respondents indicated that Pakistani women are primarily expected to play the traditional roles of child-rearing, household chores, and family care. Workplace harassment, gender-based violence, risk during travel, and security concerns were also reported as major challenges to the promotion of female library workers in their institutions. Family expectations and responsibilities, gender-biased approaches, childcare, insecurity, and harassment in the work environment were termed as challenges confronted by women (Ashiq et al. 2021).

Implications for Scholarship and Practice

The findings of this study offer key implications for LIS scholarship, practice, and policy in Pakistan and other developing nations facing similar patriarchal structures. The concept of “triple marginalization” (gender, ethnicity, and geography) introduced in this research is a valuable addition to the literature on library leadership. Future academic research should focus on quantitatively measuring the impact of this intersectional marginalization on career progression and leadership effectiveness. Further studies are also needed to explore the relationship between religious and cultural norms and the professional mobility of women to provide a deeper understanding of the societal barriers highlighted by this research.

Professional communities, including PLA and international bodies like the American Library Association (ALA) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), must play a proactive role in driving the change. The profession will not change solely through bureaucracy but also through professional organizations that promote collaboration and equity. The following should be focused on to enhance the role of women’s leadership in libraries:

- *Establish formal mentorship and sponsorship programs.* Formal, structured mentorship programs are essential to help women navigate professional pathways with guidance and support. Importantly, these must be complemented by sponsorship, where senior leaders actively advocate for women’s advancement and place them in visible, career-building opportunities. Encouraging cross-gender and cross-functional mentorship will broaden perspectives and foster a supportive ally culture.
- *Promote inclusive leadership development.* Leadership training must be tailored to address the unique challenges that women typically face in the Pakistani workplace. Integrating and valuing collaborative leadership styles, such as team building, empathy, and consensus-driven decision-making, in professional development can help reshape organizational culture from the top down.
- *Build collaborative networks and affinity groups.* Support for the formalization of women’s professional networks and affinity groups within and across library organizations should be prioritized. Facilitating regular meetups and knowledge-sharing sessions will promote peer learning and provide crucial mutual support.
- *Engage allies and advocates.* Training all employees, particularly women in leadership roles, on how to be effective allies is paramount. Encourage mixed-gender collaboration on initiatives that specifically promote equity and inclusion to distribute the responsibility for cultural change across the entire profession.

- *Review and reform policies collaboratively.* Involve women in policymaking processes that directly affect their careers, such as promotion criteria, parental leave, and flexible work arrangements. Employ collaborative feedback loops (e.g., focus groups, roundtables) to review and improve the inclusiveness and fairness of workplace policies, ensuring they actively mitigate the gender and cultural discrimination identified in this study.

Conclusion

Being a male-dominant society, the status of female library leadership in Pakistan is not up to the mark. Societal and traditional norms, a gender-biased approach, and a lack of educational and promotional opportunities for women are barriers to the attainment of leadership positions. A few studies have been conducted in this area, but no study of this nature with the same methodology and on the same population has been conducted so far.

An effort has been made to address the issues of female library leadership in Pakistan. The contributions of female library leaders, key characteristics required for the attainment of leadership positions, and the challenges being faced by female library leaders in Pakistan are the major variables covered in this study. The results depicted that female library practitioners of Islamabad and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have a keen desire and wish to modernize their library services. They have the intention to adopt emerging technologies in their library settings. The lack of willingness from higher administration and provision of insufficient funds to the libraries are the major obstacles in the path of modernization of library services. The female library professionals need to convince upper administration to provide the needed funds and technologies for achieving their desired goals.

Attainment of higher education (an advanced degree and certification), specialized training, participation in continuous learning and professional development programs, mentorship and networking, professional experience and expertise, and personal attributes and leadership skills, along with a supportive work environment and organizational culture, are the perceived key indicators of success for reaching leadership positions in libraries of Pakistan. In order to obtain leadership positions in the workplace, women library leaders should focus on acquiring higher education, developing strong communication and leadership skills, enhancing their decision-making abilities, and building professional networks. The female library leaders in the territory under study were of the view that they are confronting some challenges in achieving leadership positions in their workplace. The traditional patriarchal structure; cultural and societal norms; restricted access to education; undue social expectations; extra and double burden of work;

controlled networking opportunities; gender discrimination, harassment, and violence in the workplace; religious and ethnic restrictions; and a lack of policy support are reported to be the major challenges faced by female library leaders in Pakistan. These challenges can be addressed through continued efforts at institutional, societal, and governmental levels by advocating for gender equality, public awareness campaigns, community engagement, scholarships and grants, workplace flexibility, and interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Interview Schedule

Name: Department:

Qualification: Experience:

SECTION 1: Contributions of Pakistani women library leaders to academia and the workplace

1. Institutional Leadership and Innovation

☐ *Transforming Libraries:*

- a. Being a women library leader, have you led initiatives to modernize library services, incorporating digital technologies, and improving access to information in their workplace?
- b. Have your efforts made your library more relevant in the digital age, ensuring provision of critical resources for students, researchers, and the public?

☐ *Capacity Building:*

- a. *Have you participated in conferences, seminars, and workshops to build up your capacity?*
- b. *Have you developed training programs for library staff, introduced new service models, and advocated for the adoption of best practices in library management, thereby strengthening the overall infrastructure of libraries to make them more efficient and user-friendly?*

2. Contributions to Professional Organizations and International Collaboration

☐ *Leadership in Professional Bodies:*

- a. *Have you played active roles in national and international professional organizations, contributing to the advancement of the LIS field? If yes, list the names of professional bodies.*
- b. *Have you influenced policy, shared best practices, and advocated for the recognition of libraries as essential institutions in society?*

☐ *International Collaboration:*

- a. *Have you engaged in international collaborations, working with global counterparts to exchange knowledge, build networks, and bring international perspectives to the Pakistani LIS landscape?*
- b. *Have these collaborations enriched the professional community in Pakistan, providing opportunities for learning and growth?*

3. Promotion of Research and Scholarly Work

☐ *Research Contributions:*

- a. *Have you published research papers in national and international journals, presented at conferences, and led research projects that explore various aspects of library management and practices? If yes, please provide details*

☐ *Mentorship of Emerging Scholars:*

- a. *Are (have) you supervising(ed) theses and dissertations, offering guidance on research projects, and providing platforms for young professionals to present their work, thereby nurturing the next generation of LIS researchers and practitioners?*

4. Advancement of LIS Education

☐ *Curriculum Development:*

- a. *Have you played a crucial role in developing and enhancing the curriculum for LIS education in Pakistan? If yes, please mention: at Intermediate, BS, MPhil, or PhD Level.*

☐ *Academic Leadership:*

- a. *Have you played an academic leadership role at your institution? If yes, mention the committee/forum/body.*

SECTION 2: Key indicators required for women to reach leadership positions

1. Higher Education Attainment

☐ *Advanced/Higher Degree and Certification:*

- a. *Do you have the intention to pursue higher/advanced degrees, certifications, and specialized training to provide a stronger foundation for leadership roles? Do you consider it an effective indicator for clinching a leadership position in libraries?*

☐ *Continuous Learning and Development:*

Do you think that active participation in continuous learning and professional development, such as attending workshops, conferences, and leadership programs, is a key indicator of success to reach a leadership position and demonstrate a commitment to personal and professional growth?

2. Mentorship and Networking

☐ *Access to Mentorship:*

- a. *Do you think access to mentors who provide guidance, advice, and support is a crucial indicator of success for women in leadership?*
- b. *Do you agree that mentors can help women to navigate the challenges of their careers, offering insights based on experience and helping them to avoid common pitfalls?*
- c. *Have you benefited from strong mentorship relationships, and how does this contribute to being more confident and better prepared to take on leadership roles?*

☐ *Robust Professional Networks:*

- a. *Do you think that building and maintaining robust professional networks is a key indicator of success?*

- b. *How does actively engaging in networking help women (you) become more aware of leadership opportunities, receive endorsements, gain visibility in their field, and benefit from a support system that offers resources, ideas, and encouragement?*

3. Professional Experience and Expertise

- a. *How does accumulating diverse work experiences across different roles, sectors, or functions better equip you for leadership and contribute to developing a well-rounded understanding of your field?*
- b. *How does being recognized as a subject matter expert or thought leader in your field serve as a strong indicator of your leadership ability by reflecting your depth of knowledge and the respect you command from peers and colleagues?*

4. Personal Attributes and Leadership Skills

- a. *Is resilience a critical indicator of success for women who have reached leadership positions?*
- b. *Do you think strong communication skills, the ability to inspire and motivate others, and the capacity to make sound decisions are the indicators of effective leadership?*

5. Visibility and Recognition

- a. *Do you consider awards, honors, and other forms of recognition for professional achievements as strong indicators of success?*
- b. *Do you agree with this statement, "Women who have a strong media presence or are frequently invited to speak at conferences, participate in panels, or contribute to industry publications are more likely to be viewed as leaders"?*

6. Supportive Work Environment and Organizational Culture

- a. *Do you think that working in environments that actively promote diversity, equity, and inclusion increases the likelihood of women rising to leadership roles?*

- b. *Do you agree with the statement, “The existence of supportive policies, such as flexible work arrangements, parental leave, and equal pay initiatives, is another indicator of success for women in leadership”?*

SECTION 3: The challenges faced by women in library leadership

1. Cultural Norms and Gender Roles

- a. *Do cultural norms and traditional gender roles dictate that women prioritize domestic responsibilities over professional aspirations?*
- b. *Do patriarchal societal structures often dominate in Pakistan, where decision-making roles are predominantly occupied by men?*

2. Educational and Professional Barriers

- a. *Does the lack of educational opportunities limit the pool of qualified female candidates for leadership roles in libraries?*
- b. *Are limited access to training programs, conferences, and leadership workshops the prominent challenges essential for skill-building and networking?*

3. Work-Life Balance and Family Responsibilities

- a. *Does the lack of support systems, such as affordable childcare or flexible work arrangements, worsen this challenge, making it difficult for women to fully commit to demanding leadership roles?*
- b. *Does the expectation that women will primarily manage household responsibilities limit their ability to take on leadership roles that require extensive time and energy?*

4. Safety and Security Concerns

- a. *Do women in leadership positions in Pakistan face safety and security concerns, including harassment and gender-based violence?*
- b. *Do women leaders face risks related to travel, especially in rural or conflict-affected areas, limiting their ability to engage with communities, attend conferences, or participate in professional development opportunities?*