



**Fact-checking Mediatized Gender Perceptions:
Women Faculty Members and their Classrooms in Pakistani Universities**

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Abstract:

There is a construct of mediatized apprehensions implying that presence of male and female students in university classrooms creates difficulties in teaching process, especially for female teachers. To put a reality check to these mediatized apprehensions, the researchers evaluated media reports and conducted intensive interviews of female faculty leaders, mostly in top universities of Islamabad. Questionnaires for these intensive interviews addressed the gender apprehensions and were unconstructed. An analysis of these intensive interviews shows that female teachers in most cases do not take into consideration gender barriers in classrooms and in their offices. Female teachers not only focus in classroom and lab activities, they also actively gave advice and did mentoring of their students to make them successful in their practical lives. The second dimension of their profession is that maintaining balance between their domestic and organizational obligations makes their job harder than men. Hence, the mediatized apprehensions about female faculty members being subject to gender discriminations were found to be removed from reality as far as teaching in classrooms is concerned. This study is governed by the theory of mediatization of gender and is qualitative in nature.

Keywords: Female faculty, mediatized apprehensions, mediatization, Intensive Interview, workplace harassment, gender discrimination

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INTRODUCTION

Enough research has been dedicated to gender discrimination and workplace harassment. An analysis of the cases of gender discrimination reported at concerned ombudsperson's office shows that little complaints have been filed by university teachers regarding discrimination at classroom and lab, which form most part of their workplace. However, little research was found dedicated to this problem. To fill this gap, we reached out to female faculty leaders at International Islamic University, Quaid-i-Azam University, FC College University, and other institutions. The replies of the female faculty leaders showed that they are not concerned about gender discrimination or harassment at their classrooms and labs, where they interact with male and female students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a trend of girl students outshining boy students in secondary and higher secondary examinations (Tribune 2022, Urdu Point 2022). They also outnumber boys in these institutions (Tradingeconomy 2022). Similarly, at Karachi University, female students outnumber male students (Ashraf 2012). This rise in number of female students is also taking place in other universities (Nawaz 2014). Though the number of female students and faculty members has been rising in Pakistani universities, two issues are not being addressed. First is administrative and related to lower number of women acquiring administrative and to positions (Batool, Sajid & Shaheen 2013).

Second issue is related to public perception about this rise. Overall, it is reported in media that Pakistani society is male chauvinist with little room for women to rise up. This construct is a product of mediatization of gender in society (Sajid, Shehzad & Zahra 2017). Mediatized apprehensions about gender discrimination run contrary to the data on their achievements and presence in all levels of educational institutions as far as education is concerned. But little research is directed to deconstruct mediatized apprehensions about gender discrimination and biases at workplace, in classrooms and on campus. This research aims to deconstruct this image through intensive interviews of faculty leaders.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Do female faculty members face some gender-related barriers in classrooms or in their offices in Pakistan?

METHODOLOGY

Empirical research process has been adopted in this study. The process can be divided into two stages. At the first stage, we studied and observed cases of discrimination against female university teachers. To carry this out, we keep record of gender discrimination cases in universities reported in mainstream newspapers. The study is qualitative in nature, and the data was not meant to draw any comparisons due to time constraints. But cultural background of the respondents was kept in consideration to have a representative sample (Hanitzsch 2007).

We were interested to understand the method of discrimination so that we could have some guidelines for the unconstructed interviews that were to be conducted in the second stage of the study (Greswell 2010). Intensive interviews of seven respondents were conducted and reported. Intensive interviews help collect such qualitative data and draw conclusions (Hochschild 2009).

One of the research team members has a background in journalism. He conducted these interviews for his report in You! magazine of The News International (Shehzad 2021). However, due to space constraints, these interviews could not be fully incorporated or analyzed in the magazine report. That report though worked as the basis to conduct this study.

Sample

Originally, 20 female faculty leaders were selected for the study using convenient sampling techniques. Eight of them did not participate in the process. Due to different reasons and time constraints, interviews of five more could not be conducted.

Seven respondents could successfully be interviewed on WhatsApp, email, written replies or in person. These respondents and their replies satisfactorily served to have meaningful debate on the theory of mediatization and this is one of the goals of adopting the method of intensive interviews (Lindlof, & Taylor, 2011).

Findings

Respondent No 1 is a professor of education. She has been head of department, and dean of faculty of social sciences in a public sector university. Currently, she is working in a leadership role on campus.

She states that if a woman is committed to her profession, there are no gender barriers for her. She said that she is driven by passion for education. Before getting a university job, she was working as a teacher at a college. In college, her job was regular and more structured than in university. She, however, quit college because university had broader prospects of research and learning which were more important to her than job security.

At the beginning, no one was ready to give her room to sit and work on campus. Workload of classes was enormous and most of her day was consumed in walking through the corridors. She was not given an office to sit in. While teaching at a university in Islamabad, she was also pursuing her PhD in another university in Rawalpindi. It was not easy to move between these two cities but she completed her PhD as a regular student while teaching education on campus. She then succeeded in gaining a scholarship for her post-graduate from a university in the UK.

In the UK, she faced cultural shocks and difference in work habits. She said she could hardly get accustomed to the mass transit system in the UK but later she enjoyed it. She now has been to different European capitals but she says that the mass transit system in the UK is the best of all. In the UK, she did not stay with her relatives as she had to focus on her education. Living independently built confidence in her personality and honed her work skills. She was among the few who completed their degree on time there in the UK. "No gender barriers stopped me," she tells us.

Back on campus, she remained dean at faculty of social science in two consecutive terms. She focused on maintaining discipline and she had a reputation of a strict boss. For her, men and women were teachers and staffers with no regard to their gender. "Performance comes before anything else to me," she says. She says that she takes decisions on merit and not on the basis of gender.

Regardless of gender biases, it is evident that women students are more committed to their studies than men. Even at MS and Ph.D levels, men students are not generally as committed to their studies as their women class fellows, she said, adding that men students have many things on their mind other than education.

Women students have family obligations and children but even then they perform better than men which can be verified by the results of MS and PhD programs uploaded on university websites, she said. She said the marking criterion does not have a gender discrimination. Holding different key offices, she had a clear understanding of women teachers and other staff members fired up with the urge to outshine their female peers. It means that women do not form a united front against men in offices, she says. Sometimes, women are engaged in leg pulling for very petty things, she said, which is not very common in men.

She said teaching and research are her prime focus and she does not let gender come in her way of her pursuits. She said in the past, women could not attain very prominent positions in universities and other higher education institutions. But things have changed. Medical colleges, engineering universities and other institutions of higher education are turning out a good number of women professionals regularly. Similarly, women produce better results in CSS and competition exams for civil and military officers.

Respondent No 2 is widow of a Bloch Sardar who remained chief commissioner of Balochistan. She served a women's university in Balochistan as the its first vice chancellor. She said that it was challenging for her to be the founding vice chancellor of the first ever university for women. She said Baloch women had talent but they were lacking ways to tap that talent. After formation of this university, it was harder for her to convince girls to come to campus.

When the ad for recruitment of women teachers was released in media, she and others were overjoyed to see that 600 applications were filed against 27 vacancies. The volume of applications would be many times higher in any other province but for Balochistan, it was good as the administration was fearing that no one will apply. However, only one Baloch girl could win a faculty job. Other successful candidates were also from Balochistan but they were not Baloch. She recalls that she liked mixing up with young university girls instead of sitting all day in her office like a bureaucrat. It was very pleasant when students would see her and say "hello". She says that she was always confident interacting with girls on campus and her interactions were encouraging.

She is in favor of separate universities and classes for women students so that they could study freely. "Women move comfortably among women and women's universities in the US are called Seven Sisters," she said. She said Seven Sisters are delivering quality education and are counted among top universities. "Have you not seen schools and colleges for girls? Then why not universities?" she questioned.

It is necessary to understand culture of an area, she said. Girls and female teachers come to the campus wearing Chadars or Burqas, she said, but once on campus, they fold their veils up, put them aside and move freely. "This is their comfort zone. But they cannot do it in co-education environment. Cultural norms must be understood and respected if you want to bring about a change in a closed society," she said. "I move across the world. I could not wear in Balochistan the dress I wear in the US or in Islamabad. In Balochistan, I wear Balochi dresses. The point is that the

way forward for women is winding,” she said. She said she started a driving schools inside the university for the girls to learn driving. The driving instructor would charge Rs4,000 per learner per month otherwise but with the university he agreed to charge Rs3,000. “I announced that the girl who could furnish a kind of no-objection letter from her family is eligible to learn driving. Parents did not have objections as long as this activity took place inside the campus. But now that I visit Balochistan, especially Quetta, these girls are comfortably driving on city roads and there is a sense of empowerment attached to driving cars,” she said.

Education is an agent of change for women in real sense and universities are its source, she said. When the gates of King Edward Medical College, Lahore, were opened to women, she recalls, there were few of them at the start. But now you would see that all the front rows are filled by girls, she said. Similarly, all the top achievers in CSS exams are now women, she said. “In ever city and village, you will find competent women PSP and DMG officers solving problems. It has become possible through education. If you ask me about my achievement, I would ask you to look at the rise in the number of women from Balochistan in all professions. The university that I started has a fundamental role in it. This change could not have been possible had we wasted our energies are fighting the patriarchs on roads.”

She said a woman needs a family on her back to move forward. “But if the men are non-sense and unsupportive, this woman should go about exploring her talent without them. Marriage should not be taken as a dead weight. Women should shed bad men and find good ones. If good ones are not available, living alone is not a bad option. Many successful women have not compromised on their principles and lived their lives alone,” she said.

“I was married at 14 and was widowed at 43. My first husband encouraged me when I decided to do Ph.D from Manila, where he was appointed in the Asian Development Bank (ADB). But I knew that I had to be at home at the time when my kids and husband leave in the morning and when they come back in the afternoon. If you take challenge for an opportunity, you will keep an eye on your goal,” she said. She is in her 70s and her elder son is in late 50s.

Respondent No 3 is a professor in the Department of Microbiology in a top-notch university in Islamabad. Her research work has been presented and praised both at national and international platforms. Teaching has been appealing to her all along. Interested in exploring new and novel things, she geared up to a career of research and learning. Her work fulfills her and at the same time it is generating betterment in the society. While teaching, she gets the opportunity to interact with young and talented people.

There are talented young people in both the genders and she focuses on her job to unlock this talent. She thinks that education brings people up leaving all gender barriers behind. Teaching at the university, she has observed that education leaves a better impact on students from different socioeconomic groups. She is least bothered about anything other than her research and teaching. “I always wanted to work where my impact would not only be on a few people, but generations. And university is that place,” she said.

Being a professor, she has also to look after some administrative affairs. She believes that university teachers, male or female, have a very important role to play in the lives of students, on and off campus. The teachers are torch-bearers. The students, male and female, come here from far-off

areas, she says. In addition to teaching theories and research, a teacher has to be there to listen to their problems and offer advice as they are away from their homes. Doing all these things, a teacher takes on different roles. She is a teacher, a career counsel, a soothsayer and a parent to her students who are gathering confidence to find a place to start their professional journey.

She thinks that gender norms sometimes make the process of communication complex. If not outright discriminative, some of these norms are subtle approval for male dominance and many female students and teachers go through these barriers. Moreover, students have different social and ethnic backgrounds. Many male students are not ready to accept a woman as their supervisor and superior. She says that these inbuilt biases lead to gender discrimination and there is a need to remove them from the society.

Respondent No 4 is a scientist and student advisor at a leading public sector university in Islamabad. Traditionally, this job is meant for male teachers given its rough nature dealing with protests and strikes that go violent frequently. The slightest of imprudent move could cost the student advisor a bad repute or even worse. The university where the respondent is a student advisor is known for prolonged strikes and ethnic tensions. Most of the groups that go on strikes and engage in violent fights are made up of male students. Girls, usually, distance themselves from such activities and focus on their studies.

The respondent, an associate professor, is from an educated family and went to good schools. From school, she was interested in understanding concepts instead of memorizing lessons. She won 'Roll of Honour' in graduation before getting admission to the university she is employed by now. Done with her MSc. and M Phil. from here, she got a scholarship from Medical University of Vienna, Austria. In Austria, she won 'Austrian Life Science Award' for identifying a novel prognostic marker for prostate cancer.

Upon her return, she chose to serve her alma matter though she had job offers from other universities. She says that she gets up early and finish doing many things when others were sleeping. Before coming to office, she checks her emails and scheduled meetings. She had to travel for an hour or more to reach university. In addition to classroom teaching, she has her lab in the department where she supervise research projects of her male and female students.

In addition, a good number of students visit her office every day as she is the student advisor. She is out to resolve their problems as much as she can. In addition, she attends meetings where she is engaged in discussion with male participants and bosses. In all this routine, she does not have time to think about any gender barriers. Coming to university and going back home, she is perturbed by rash driving and hurry on roads. The administrative roles that she has adopted have made her a good listener and a problem solver not only in her office, but also on the road.

She believes in being kind, and compassionate for others. She thinks for youth and teaching them morals, respect, manners and ethics. Everybody should have a sense of responsibility and courage to right the wrongs they make. Instead of focusing on producing high achievers, university teachers should focus on turning out good human beings who do not indulge in any kind of gender discriminations. She thinks that Pakistani youth are very talented and there is a need to tap that talent to make them productive and beneficial for the society. She is interested in making the youth an asset for the future and gender barriers do not bother her.

She believes that her fellow teachers and students do not discriminate on the basis of gender and are cooperative and supportive in most cases. Working environment on campus is conducive for both genders. She, however, has a face some problems of time management due to her administrative tasks. Taking classes and evaluating papers are also painstaking activities and at the same time she has to be engaged in administrative work extensively. Her school-going daughter also awaits her in the evening and she tries to give her full attention. She brings her daughter to university during school vacations and other holidays where they both play games and watch movies online. She agrees that it is harder for a woman to manage both office and house than a man.

Respondent No 5 writes poetry and teaches literature. She decided to start teaching after birth of her child. But later she quit due to her family responsibilities. But her husband, a government servant, encouraged her to continue telling her that she would take care of the child. Her parents are educated and they also liked her decision to start teaching. She likes teaching literature and is dedicated to her job. Teaching literature, she also learnt from her students different lessons. One day, she got late at university due to examination activities, her son was not very happy. Later she fell sick and it became harder for her to go to university. She said that she was not harassed at by male colleagues or students at universities.

Respondent No 6 is an assistant professor in an historic college that has now become a chartered university in Lahore. She is also Editor of the Forman Journal of Social Sciences. She graduated in BSc Honors from the London School of Economics, UK. At that time, she was looking for a direction to move in the future. After her children grew up, her father-in-law encouraged her to study, read and write. He was retired principal of a medical college. He got her education certificates verified, made her learn driving and took her to university for doing M. Phil.

She said after assuming the university job, she intended to become for her students what her father-in-law was for her. It is not fully true that marriage and joint family system impedes woman's growth. In her case, it is quite the opposite. She was encouraged to explore her talent after marriage and her in-laws supported her in taking on university teaching job, knowing that she had to deal with both male and female colleagues and students there. She likes teaching sociology that she calls queen of all social sciences. In sociology, a student also learns politics, religion, family, education, health, culture, stratification, development, and more.

Sociology is the best discipline for women who want to understand society and the mechanism of barriers. In the job market, sociologists are preferred for their understanding of community and communicative skills. Sociologists know how to decipher consumer data and make informed decisions that will benefit business, which is why employers like them. It is especially good for women because it enables them to work from home. The urge to be social and form a policy is inbuilt in women which is why they perform better in sociology discipline and job market, she believes.

She thing that women have an urge to take care of those in need which leads towards refining their commitment for community mobilization so that interests of the marginalized segments are protected. She said the organizations she has worked with are safe and inclusive for women. Always, she was respected and regarded by her male and female students and colleagues. She believes that this environment of respect and gender equality is behind the excellence of the

institutions she is teaching at. Male and female students come to this institute from all parts of the country and the faculty members cherish this diversity of background and the gender mix.

Counseling committees and advisory boards have been set up to facilitate students and guide them on how to proceed forward regardless of their gender, she says. Women also head different faculties and departments here in a hassle-free manner. Similarly, women students are also in leadership roles and they lead different committees. She quoted Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah: "No nation can ever be worthy of its existence that cannot take its women along with the men."

Respondent No 7 teaches Chinese language at Air University, where she also had graduated from. Her father is a businessman. Accompanying him to China during his visits, she got interested in Chinese language and learnt it. Now she teaches Chinese language to engineering students. They learn this language because Pakistan Engineering Council has set learning of a foreign language part of degree requirement so that they are able to catch jobs in global market. Up to 35 percent of population speaks Chinese language and the respondent is keen to go to more advance levels of learning this language. She believes that learning Chinese language increases prospects of job for young professionals as Chinese companies have set up their offices in Pakistan and they need workforce.

She is new in the teaching profession and sometimes faces difficulty in understanding psyche of students. Every student has their own level of understanding and thought process. Though she teaches Chinese language at university, she also takes part in business with his father. Combination of these two tasks have made her stronger to take up new challenges. She says that teaching has enhanced her confidence and communicative skills. She thinks that women should be independent enough to be able to resolve their problems, not least in challenging situations. She opines that every woman has to make much of the most of the education she had gained and she should learn to transfer this knowledge to younger generation.

She does not rule out existence of harassers from society. They are everywhere, she says. It is true that women face more challenges than their male counterparts. The challenge that she faces is close gap between her and her students' ages. During first semester of every class, this kind of age fallowness generates some hurdles in communicative process. Sometimes she gets unrealistic questions from students. Sometimes these questions are collected to create more confusion. She also faces hardship in controlling the class as the students are all adult and she cannot browbeat or scold them. Most of the students are well behaved. She says that her university has a very encouraging environment for learning and teaching regardless of gender.

CONCLUSION

There are apprehensions fed to the society by media that women are not fit to lead men in any field. Though these apprehensions are fanned by social media, especially WhatsApp and TickTok, this research was limited to analysis of such cases reported in mainstream newspapers. We developed guidelines to raise unconstructed questions to respondents on the basis of these reports. It has been found that female faculty leaders do not take into consideration gender barriers in delivery of their job. They deliver lectures in classrooms and go to the extent to offering counseling for career building and character building of their students. One of the respondents looks after student affairs

of the entire university being the student advisor. However, only one respondent faces some difficulty because of near age fellowship with students. Moreover, she is not full-time teacher as she has to take part in business of her father. Overall, we can say that mediatized perceptions and apprehensions about gender barriers have proved far removed from reality as far as campus study and teaching is concerned. This study will lead to development of a model for female faculty members at Pakistani universities to understand their professional contributions and its mediatized perception in the society.

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