

## **The Triple Burden: Female Heads of Department Navigating Professional, Institutional, and Domestic Demands in Pakistani Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

Female Heads of Department (HoDs) in Pakistani universities carry several overlapping responsibilities of institutional leadership, domestic work, and academic productivity. The conflicting requirements result in a triple burden that impacts professional performance, emotional health, and work-life balance. Despite some research exploring issues of women's leadership roles and work-family conflict, few studies have explored these two issues together in the context of higher education in Pakistan. A phenomenological qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, is used to examine the lived experiences of female HoDs at Pakistani universities. The results indicate that the responsibilities of the institutions, the expectations of the families and the pressures of research are not different demands, but are continuous and concurrent negotiations. Participants reported that administrative complexity, emotional exhaustion, gender inequity, stunted academic work, and constant handling of housework were experienced. The study also shows that women leaders are involved in continuous emotional work and in constant negotiations of their identities in gendered institutional environments. The coping strategies were prioritizing time, managing their emotions, and seeking assistance from family and colleagues, but participants pointed to the importance of institutional reform and gender sensitive policies. The study provides an indepth understanding of the interconnected challenges encountered by female academic leaders in Pakistan, and calls for the creation of institutional structures and leadership arrangements that are enabling.

**Keywords:** Triple burden, female HoDs, academic leadership, higher education, work-life balance, Pakistan.

### **Introduction**

Women have become equal partners with their men counterparts in almost every field of life, education, research, leadership and so on. They have become more common in higher education, where they are used as teachers, researchers and academic administrators (Pasque & Nicholson, 2023). Women's role in leadership positions within universities has increased, e.g., Heads of

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Departments (HODs) who are important in academic institutions, are required to manage the affairs of their department, and to supervise faculty members, ensure the quality of academic work and implement institutional policies (Fauzi et al., 2024a). However, the professional journey of women in academia remains more complex than that of their male colleagues due to the presence of multiple overlapping responsibilities (Angervall, 2018).

Working women are also expected to fulfil household responsibilities (Zeba and Khan, 2021). As they must perform academic leadership duties alongside, women operate under multiple layers of pressure (Sumra & Schillaci, 2015). Female academic leaders are therefore required to manage institutional duties, domestic responsibilities, and research productivity simultaneously (Mayya et al. 2020; Thelma & Ngulube 2024). The three dimensions are referred to as the triple burden: institutional pressure, domestic responsibilities and academic expectations. All three impact the daily life of female HODs and their capacity to balance several roles (Fauzi et al., 2024b).

The first dimension, institutional pressure, is associated with the administrative responsibilities of an HOD, such as supervising the functioning of the department, controlling faculty performance, coordinating academic activities, settling internal conflicts and ensuring policy implementation (Saleem et al., 2022). These responsibilities often involve working beyond regular hours and require constant availability, making it difficult for individuals to find time for personal and professional recovery (Maseko, 2025). The domestic burden, the second dimension, encompasses family-related responsibilities. In the Pakistan context, where most of the societies are patriarchal, women are expected to be responsible for cooking, family care and doing household chores irrespective of their job status (Sarwar & Imran, 2019). The dual role which involves balancing work with domestic responsibilities is a great emotional stress (Akanji et al., 2020).

The third dimension is academic pressure; the HODs are expected to maintain research productivity, be current in their research, and help with publication indicators that determine institutional ranking and career advancement (Kwiek, 2018). Time and capacity required for scholarly work are taken up by institutional and domestic responsibilities, leaving less time and capacity to devote to academic production and an extra layer of professional pressure (Barney et al., 2022; Ceci et al., 2014). Sociocultural factors such as traditional gender norms in Pakistan, which have a significant influence on the roles women play in society, add to these pressures, as beliefs about women's priorities may give them less motivation to pursue careers than men (Sarwar & Imran, 2019). Female leaders also can receive less institutional support and more scrutiny compared to their male peers (Baker, 2010; Shollenberger, 2025). In Pakistan, research on gendered institutional contexts has shown that cultural and societal norms impose different psychological costs on women who live in gendered roles historically assigned to men, exacerbating the burden of the triple burden beyond that of structures themselves (Ali & Habib, 2025).

There are several studies on women in higher education leadership and a lack of awareness of the overlapping responsibilities of women during their career (Hussain et al., 2025; Thyen et al. 1999; West et al. 2013; van den Besselaar & Sandström 2017). Research on women's working experiences has been more about the general problems of working women and less on women as academic leaders like HODs (Thien et al., 2025). There is a research base on the impact of caregiving on careers, but it does not have a strong analytical strand of research regarding leadership decisions and productivity (Aslam et al., 2023). Domestic responsibilities are not

usually specifically examined in leadership studies (Potgieter et al., 2011). Most of the existing research relates to Western contexts, and there is limited research on countries such as Pakistan (Rana et al., 2024; Khalid, 2021).

The study seeks to explore the lived experiences of female Heads of Department (HoDs) in Pakistani universities, with particular attention to their leadership roles, work–life balance, and the institutional and sociocultural contexts that shape these experiences. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do female Heads of Department (HoDs) in Pakistani universities perceive and describe their experiences of academic leadership?
2. What gender, organizational, and sociocultural obstacles do female Heads of Department face in their leadership roles?
3. How do institutional expectations, domestic responsibilities, and research-related pressures influence the emotional well-being, professional identity, and academic productivity of female HoDs?
4. What strategies do female Heads of Department use to balance the demands of academic leadership and personal life?
5. How do female HoDs perceive the influence of institutional structures and support systems on their leadership experiences and work–life balance?

## **Literature Review**

This review draws together literature on gender socialization, women's academic leadership, emotional labour, and institutional factors influencing the triple burden, beginning with theoretical underpinnings, moving to empirical results, and ending with identified research gaps that inspire the present study.

### **Gender Socialization, Identity and Leadership**

Gender socialization is important in shaping leadership identity and future career paths. The identity control theory (Carter, 2014) states that people internalize societal expectations and engage in behaviour in line with those expectations; and that the beliefs held by the community influence how women perceive decision making and leadership. In societies where gender relations are highly polarized, such norms are passed down from one generation to the next. Based on cross-cultural data from Delhi and Shanghai, Basu et al. (2017) show that parental control and cultural norms create gender norms throughout the adolescent years; and the gendered dispositions of these norms persist at higher levels of professional life.

Eagly and Karau (2002) describe this phenomenon in terms of role congruity theory: When women are perceived as leaders, they are subject to prejudice because their leadership role is incompatible with the traditional feminine role, which values nurturing and deferring to authority. This prejudice shapes leadership challenges before women even enter professional environments, and continues to operate throughout their careers. Research on gendered anxiety in Pakistani institutional settings has further documented how cultural norms around gender performance generate distinctive forms of professional stress for women in non-normative professional roles, stress that is psychologically experienced, not merely structurally produced (Ali & Habib, 2025).

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## **Institutional Structures and Gender Inequality in Higher Education**

While universities are officially dedicated to meritocratic hiring, studies repeatedly reveal gender-segregated leadership in universities. Irregular distribution of senior leadership in Higher Education (HE) is due to entrenched gender norms, as reported by Banker and Banker (2017), and by lack of professional networks, cultural norms, and institutional support, as reported by Bush et al. (2022) in the African context, which similarly mirrors the Pakistani situation. The qualitative evidence provided by Hussain et al. (2025) relates to Pakistan specifically, and the problems of stereotyping and lack of mentorship are identified as constraints. Morley (2013) suggests that the male dominance is reproduced in informal networks and power structures within universities. Fazal et al. (2025) add the cultural taboos and moral policing that women leaders face in Pakistani universities, placing them in a situation where they are subjected to both formal institutional hierarchies and informal community policing.

Bano and Nadeem (2024) discuss about the identity conflict in women leaders, how expectations from job and society influence their performance as leaders and how supportive family environment could partially address the issue. Appelbaum et al. (2003) show that women use very effective collaborative leadership styles, with good communication and decision-making abilities that foster inclusive organizational cultures. But these skills are not enough to overcome structural and cultural barriers. While women are subject to discrimination, Anastasiou and Oikonomou (2020) have found that the outcomes of leadership is not a gender issue, but is dependent on the leadership style and the context of the organisation. The pressure that is placed on female HODs is also linked to the ongoing institutional cultures that demand women to continually demonstrate their competence in settings where authority is not assumed.

## **The Domestic Burden and Work-Family Conflict**

The home aspect of the triple burden is well documented. Sultana (2013) demonstrates that working women are constantly struggling to manage their family and work duties and researchers like Zeba and Khan (2021) and Buddhapriya (2009) reveal that the family responsibility is considered one of the main hindrances for the career growth of working women. Kadale, et al (2018) point out psychological effects, which include increased stress among working mothers. Hochschild's (1989) concept of the "second shift" (unpaid domestic labor performed by women after they return from their paid professional work) is pertinent to the female HODs in Pakistan as their accounts of the fully functioning second shift at home perfectly align with this concept.

Poduval and Poduval (2009) explain that there is a constant struggle between work and family roles, and Perry-Jenkins (2005) explains that work-family conflict is exacerbated when economic strain and lack of support resources constrain individual coping. In Pakistan, the lack of institutional childcare services, the requirement of working hours and the culturalisation of domestic work as a non-negotiable feminine task exacerbate the domestic dimension of the triple burden compared to other studies conducted in western countries.

## **Academic Productivity and Research-Related Pressure**

Higher education systems globally demand continuous research productivity as a marker of professional success and institutional ranking (Berggren et al. 2022; Kwiek, 2018; Mayya et al.

2020). Acker and Armenti (2004) show that academic mothers face a systematic loss in research productivity as a result of their competing roles as teachers, administrators, and housewives, and these losses are manifest in real disadvantages to academic mothers in promotion and professional recognition over the course of their careers. This is confirmed by Barney et al., (2022), who look at it through the lens of a job demands-resources framework. Buddhapriya (2009) argues that organizational cultures favor male career paths by constructing the ideal academic worker as someone free from caregiving obligations; an assumption that renders female HODs structurally invisible to performance metrics that are formally gender-neutral. Islam et al. (2024) further demonstrate that biased promotion systems and limited access to training opportunities institutionalize workplace inequality. The research pressure dimension of the triple burden is therefore not an additional inconvenience but a structural mechanism of gender inequity embedded within higher education's own reward systems.

### **Emotional Labor and Its Consequences**

Emotional labor, the effortful regulation of feeling as a form of professional work (Hochschild, 1983), constitutes a central but often invisible dimension of female academic leadership. Participants in studies of women's leadership are consistently expected to maintain departmental harmony, mediate interpersonal conflict, and provide emotional support to students and colleagues as naturalized extensions of their gendered roles, not as formally recognized responsibilities. The biopsychosocial consequences of sustained emotional labor in institutional contexts are significant: chronic suppression of authentic emotional response and continuous performance of professionally appropriate affect deplete the psychological resources on which both leadership and personal well-being depend (Ali & Ali, 2026b). In Pakistani higher education, the absence of institutional acknowledgment of this labor means that its costs accumulate invisibly and are borne almost exclusively by individual female leaders.

### **Coping, Resilience, and the Case for Structural Reform**

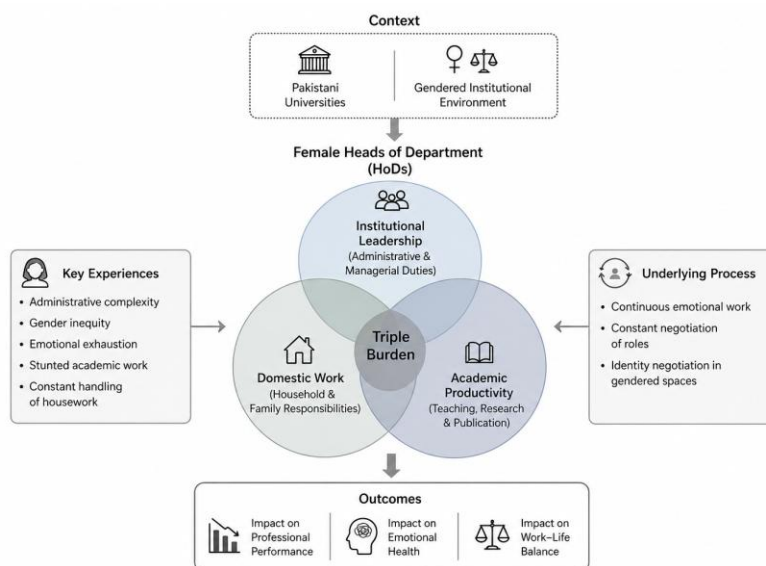
Women academic leaders employ various coping mechanisms, such as relational support, time management, emotional self-regulation, and personal boundary-setting (Hussain et al., 2024; Bano & Nadeem, 2024). These do not tackle the structural conditions that create the triple burden, and are effective in the short term. There is a danger in celebrating women's resilience, which is a systemic problem, as an individual one (Appelbaum et al., 2003). While the reform literature is largely focused on structural interventions, flexible scheduling, workload equity, research support for female leaders, and mentorship programs, most of these proposals lack empirical evaluation, and few address sociocultural norms that extend women's obligations beyond the workplace (Alli et al., 2021; Bush et al., 2022). Sustainable change must be approached as a process that takes the academic environment as the place of change and is evidence-based, contextual, and action-oriented (Ali & Nauman, 2026). The present study's findings bear directly on this reform agenda.

### **Research Gaps**

Three gaps in the existing literature motivate this study. First, the three dimensions of the triple burden are rarely studied in combination; most research examines work-family conflict, leadership barriers, or research productivity pressure in isolation, missing their mutual reinforcement. Second, micro-level qualitative research attending to the phenomenological texture of female HOD experiences within Pakistan is underrepresented. Third, intersectional

analysis considering the simultaneous influence of gender, institutional type, and sociocultural context remains scarce. This study is designed to address all three.

**Figure 1.** Conceptual thematic map illustrating the interconnected dimensions of the triple burden experienced by female Heads of Department in Pakistani higher education



## METHODOLOGY

The study employs qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to capture lived experiences of female Heads of Departments in Pakistani higher education institutions who are simultaneously facing academic productivity pressures, domestic responsibilities and institutional responsibilities. The study is based on the interpretivist paradigm which assumes that reality is socially constructed and meaning given to experiences is the best object of enquiry. A phenomenological approach is most appropriate as it captures the negotiation of the triple burden in the sociocultural and institutional contexts, describes the stressors experienced by female academic leaders and interprets the experiences of female academic leaders. The methodology adopted is specifically derived from Clark Moustakas' phenomenological framework (1994) which is grounded in lived experience, meaning making and the essence of the phenomenon studied.

Participants were selected by purposive sampling to ensure that they have direct and meaningful first-hand experience of the phenomenon. The following criteria were used to include female HoDs from public and private sector universities in Pakistan: 1) they were serving as Head of Department for at least one year, 2) they were active in teaching and research, and 3) they had family responsibilities or care taking duties. The study sought to recruit ten participants, and ended up with complete recorded interviews of 8 female HoDs, a number that is sufficient for this phenomenological inquiry, where depth is more important than generalizability.

In-depth semi-structured interviews was the main data collection technique, allowing the participants to express their experiences in their own words, but stay focused on the

research questions. Interviews were the instrument that was used because leadership identity, work–family conflict, and emotional labor are complex, social, and emotional issues. Interviews were 45-60 minutes in length and were carried out in person or online based on participant availability. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim (with consent of all participants). The interview protocol was structured in four interrelated domains: burden of the institution, burden of the household, academic productivity pressure, and emotional experiences and coping.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data in this study, which is phenomenological thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006,2020,2021) and phenomenological interpretation. The first step was to immerse oneself in reading transcripts repeatedly, to become well acquainted with them. Key statements and meaning units that were linked to the lived experience of the triple burden were then identified and coded inductively. Codes were organized into larger themes which included themes of institutional burden, emotional exhaustion, work–family conflict, identity negotiation, pressure on productivity, and adaptive coping. The analysis shifted from classification to interpretation, that is, understanding how these burdens are felt in a broader gender and cultural context, and compiling individual accounts into a composite narrative of the central nature of the phenomenon.

Extended interaction with data, member checking, systematic documentation of research decisions and reflexivity journaling for researcher bias helped to ensure trustworthiness. All the ethical procedures were followed, including informed consent, anonymization of the participants through pseudonyms, the confidentiality of all the interview material, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All interviews were conducted in a sensitive and respectful manner, given the emotional and institutional sensitivity of the topics discussed.

## **FINDINGS**

This section reports the results of the phenomenological study that investigated the lived experiences of female Head of Departments (HoDs) in Pakistani universities in dealing with the interweaving context of institutional leadership, domestic responsibilities, and academic productivity. Using thematic analysis, five themes were identified, all of which were connected to the complexity of the ‘triple burden’ as it was explored; these themes were Navigating Multiple Responsibilities, Gendered and Institutional Challenges, Emotional and Professional Consequences, Identity Negotiation and Leadership Experience, and Coping Strategies and Institutional Support. Together, these themes shed light on the lived experience of female academic leaders in a setting of competing expectations, relational work, and limited personal time.

### **Theme 1: Navigating Multiple Responsibilities**

The most prevalent theme in all of the interviews was the experience of leading at the institution, at home, and at the desk, all at the same time. The participants spoke about a way of life of constant role changes and a constant blurring of the lines between work and personal life. Administrative duties, meetings, faculty liaison, student matters, accreditation, institutional reporting, often carried over into evenings and weekends. But unlike many of his male peers, professional duties did not take the place of domestic duties; both were performed concurrently.

*"When I return home, my second shift begins. At the university I manage faculty and students, but at home I manage children, meals, and emotional responsibilities. There is no real break between the two." (P2, Public University)*

Another participant described the experience as a constant state of mental fragmentation:

*"Even during meetings, part of my mind is thinking about unfinished household responsibilities. And when I am home, I am still checking emails and dealing with university matters." (P4, Private University)*

Participants repeatedly emphasized that institutional systems assume leadership exists independently from domestic life, whereas their lived reality involved constant negotiation between the two domains. Research-related responsibilities further intensified this burden, with participants describing the difficulty of sustaining reading, writing, publication, and scholarly engagement within lives organized around interruptions.

*"Research requires uninterrupted thinking, but my life is built around interruptions." (P7, Public University)*

## **Theme 2: Gendered and Institutional Challenges**

The other key theme explored was the gendered experience of leadership. Leadership expectations were not solely influenced by organizational structures, but also by societal beliefs about women's authority, emotional behavior, and professional demeanor. Participants repeatedly indicated that organizational structures were not the only factors that influenced leadership expectations, but also held societal assumptions about women in terms of what they are expected to do and how they should do it. Male leaders tended to gain automatic institutional legitimacy, female leaders had to continually prove themselves competent.

*"A male HoD is often assumed to be authoritative. A female HoD has to prove she deserves authority." (P6, Private University)*

Assertiveness emerged as a complicated terrain. Being firm risked the label of "difficult"; being collaborative risked the perception of weakness. This double bind, women required to be simultaneously authoritative and appropriately feminine, was a recurring feature of participants' accounts.

Institutional culture also emerged as a significant constraint. Higher education institutions were perceived as highly hierarchical and bureaucratic, with power being held at the top and few HODs having the means to make decisions on their own relative to the outcomes of their department. Participants also highlighted differential expectations over emotional labor, in which female HoDs were expected to provide emotional support for others, resolve interpersonal conflicts and maintain the harmony of the department, which are not formally required but culturally naturalized as HoD's feminine relational work.

*"People expect women leaders to absorb tension quietly and keep relationships smooth." (P2, Public University)*

## **Theme 3: Emotional and Professional Consequences**

One of the key results was that being responsible for a number of overlapping roles had a strong emotional and psychological effect. Chronic exhaustion, emotional overload, guilt and ongoing

mental fatigue were identified by participants as core aspects of their work. Along with them went responsibilities, in institutions and in homes, which made rest impossible.

*"You may leave the office physically, but mentally you remain occupied." (P3, Public University)*

*"There are days when I feel emotionally emptied out because everyone needs something from me." (P1, Public University)*

Guilt was a pervasive emotional experience. Participants expressed guilt towards family when professional work came first, and anxiety when family work encroached on professional responsibilities; and anxiety about academic and leadership accountability when domestic work encroached. These conflicting expectations were internalised, giving rise to a chronic emotional stress that, beyond its personal fatigue, is a systemic injury to the profession that increases over time and does not usually appear in institutional indicators of professional performance (Ali & Ali, 2026b).

*"No matter what you do to make the one thing work, the other suffers and you feel guilty for it." (P8, Private University)*

A constant worry was research productivity. Issues of publication expectations, promotion criteria and keeping academic visibility despite limited uninterrupted time for scholarship were discussed.

*"You are expected to publish like a full-time researcher while functioning as an administrator and caregiver at the same time." (P4, Private University)*

Emotional isolation was a further consequence. Participants felt that society celebrated successful working women without recognizing the emotional price of that success, a normalization of burden that rendered their experiences institutionally invisible.

*"People admire working women, but very few recognize the cost behind that image." (P2, Public University)*

#### **Theme 4: Identity Negotiation and Leadership Experience**

The participants identified leadership as a very identity-related experience, a negotiation of the professional selfhood, gender expectations and personal obligations that are continuous. Many entered academic leadership with solid scholarly identities but gradually lost their scholarly identities to administrative tasks that ate away the intellectual and emotional energies that were first focused on teaching and research.

*"I became an academic because I loved teaching and research, but administration gradually consumes that identity." (P7, Public University)*

The pressure to perform professionalism continuously, regardless of emotional state, constituted a further identity burden. Leadership was institutionally expected to embody composure and stability; participants could not show exhaustion openly.

*"You cannot show exhaustion openly because leadership expects emotional stability all the time." (P8, Private University)*

Gender identity was interwoven with professional identity in intricate ways. Participants reported being aware of and adjusting their communication styles, emotional expression, and behavioral presentation according to institutional context, a continuous form of impression management, or consciousness-raising, that involves an increased awareness of how gendered behavior is interpreted and judged. This constant vigilance is similar to the results obtained in the study of gendered professional contexts in Pakistan, where cultural norms have resulted in women who play roles outside of the norm being constantly monitored (Ali & Habib, 2025). Meanwhile, others regarded leadership as a personally significant and symbolically generative phenomenon that goes beyond a person's own aspirations to collective representations.

*"Sometimes I continue simply because younger women in academia need to see that leadership is possible." (P6, Private University)*

### **Theme 5: Coping Strategies and Institutional Support**

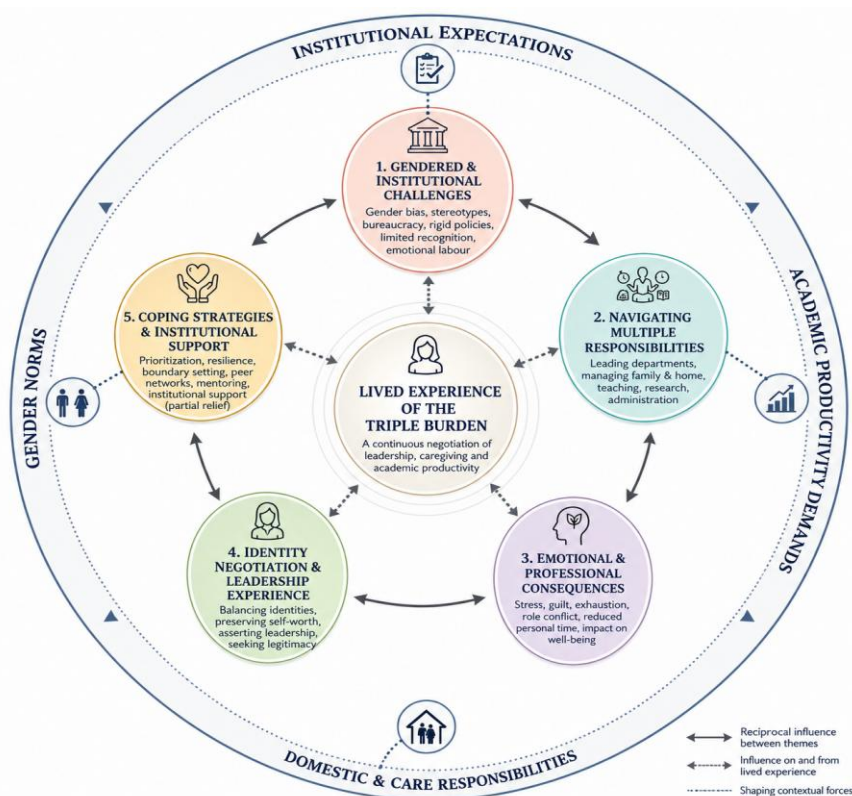
However, participants' coping skills were advanced in the face of all of the difficulties mentioned. Participants indicated that relational support, that is from trusted colleagues, family members and peer networks, was the most important coping mechanism, without which sustaining the role would be impossible. Deliberate setting up of small personal boundaries (e.g., restricting late night communication, protecting family time) and time management, prioritization and emotional self-regulation were also mentioned regularly.

At every stage, however, participants reiterated the importance of not taking coping as a personal responsibility. One participant said, *"Women are constantly adapting to institutions, but institutions rarely adapt to women."* Institutional reform is the right approach to a structural issue, not personal resilience. The ideas and recommendations for reform put forward by the participants were consistent with those found in the wider literature, including flexible working, decreasing administrative burden, leadership development for women, mentoring and gender-inclusive leadership policies (Alli et al., 2021; Bush et al., 2022; Hussain et al., 2025). Participants were also unanimous that institutional policy is not enough to deal with a sociocultural expectation that stretches women's responsibilities beyond work. For sustainable change, it is necessary that institutions view the academic environment itself as a site of continuous, evidence-based change (Ali & Nauman, 2026).

### **Summary of Findings: Thematic Network**

The overarching meaning of the participants' stories brings to light a phenomenological understanding that the role of a female HoD in the context of Pakistani higher education is a perpetual negotiation between leadership, caregiving, scholarship and emotional responsibility. The job is not simply a professional one but a very relational and emotionally charged life, where diverse expectations bring conflict at work and at home. Participants found leadership to be both empowering and exhausting, present but unsupported, professionally fulfilling yet emotionally draining. The triple burden is not just about workload; it's about negotiating multiple expectations of institutional systems, gendered responsibilities, and postcolonial organizational culture, while trying to maintain professional identity, emotional health and personal value.

**Figure 2.** *Thematic Network of the Triple Burden Experienced by Female Heads of Department in Pakistani Universities*



## DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that female HoDs simultaneously navigate multiple, interdependent responsibilities rather than managing separate work and family domains. Professional demands do not replace domestic responsibilities; instead, both coexist and compete within the same time and space. This finding is consistent with Hochschild's (1989) theory of "second shift" that still holds true in higher education in Pakistan. The same thing happened to all of the participants: coming home from a full day of work to start another full day of work, having to deal with children, household chores, and the expectations of family members, and then having to deal with all of the other responsibilities that come with the job, all in the form of emails, calls, and unfinished administrative tasks.

These findings also corroborate Sultana's (2013) and Buddhapriya's (2009) work on the constant pressure of work–family conflict on working women. What this study adds is the specificity of academic middle leadership. Female HoDs are not only working women with families; they are departmental leaders accountable for institutional functioning, managing faculty, and simultaneously expected to sustain scholarly productivity. Research productivity emerged as a critical third dimension of burden: academic writing and publication require uninterrupted concentration, while participants' lives were organized around continuous interruptions. This directly supports Acker and Armenti (2004), who argue that academic mothers experience reduced research productivity as a structural rather than personal outcome. The institutional

model of the ideal academic worker remains constructed around an implicit assumption of freedom from caregiving; an assumption whose gendered implications most universities decline to examine. The triple burden is therefore not a time-management failure; it is a structural condition in which gendered domestic realities collide with institutionally gender-neutral expectations. Participants' experiences confirmed role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002): prejudice arises when women occupy roles traditionally considered masculine, like departmental authority and administrative leadership. Participants described this conflict as personally experienced, the pressure to be firm without appearing aggressive, to be approachable without appearing weak. The double bind is not incidental; it is built into the way female leadership is perceived and evaluated in gendered institutional cultures.

The results support Morley's (2013) argument that universities reproduce male dominance through informal structures and power relationships. Participants described institutional systems as hierarchical and bureaucratic, with decision-making authority retained by senior administration while accountability was distributed downward. This produced the condition of responsibility without power, bearing institutional consequences for outcomes one cannot independently determine. Emotional labor was further identified as a key component of female academic leadership. Participants described being expected to maintain harmony, manage relationships, and absorb tension quietly, expectations not formally assigned but culturally naturalized. These findings build on the existing literature by demonstrating that leadership for female HODs is not confined to administrative duties but encompasses relational and emotional management as gendered obligations.

The emotional and psychological consequences documented, chronic fatigue, guilt, anxiety, emotional isolation, and mental overload, confirm that the triple burden is not merely structural but deeply affective. Responsibilities did not remain in their institutional or domestic containers; they moved across spaces and occupied the same cognitive and emotional terrain simultaneously. This corroborates Kadale et al.'s (2018) finding that psychological strain is a consistent outcome for working women managing multiple responsibilities.

Guilt was a particularly prominent finding. Participants described a dual guilt, guilt toward family when professional demands took over, and anxiety toward the institution when domestic duties intruded on academic work, that illustrates the psychological cost of inhabiting two roles whose demands are structurally irreconcilable. Sustained emotional labour in institutional contexts in Pakistan has a biopsychosocial consequence, a suppression of the authentic emotional response, a progressive erosion of identity and a health impact of unrelenting stress, all of which are systemic patterns of professional harm that work invisible in a career (Ali & Ali, 2026b). Emotional availability, nonverbal compliance, and the ability to take institutional pressure without protest, all become institutional norms that further reproduce institutional inequality.

One of the important conclusions was that leadership involved a constant process of negotiation of identity. Participants were not doing a professional job but rather the job was changing their sense of self professionally, socially and emotionally. Many reported the tension that developed between scholar and administrator: attracted to the academy by teaching and research, they eventually took their mental and emotional energy away from those commitments by administrative leadership. This identity displacement, the subordination of academic career to institutional need, is under theorized in the literature of leadership.

The findings are directly linked to Carter's (2014) identity control theory as participants showed persistent monitoring and adjusting of their actions based on discrepancies between actual and expected identities. They had to learn how to communicate, how to present their emotions, and how to present their behaviour in different contexts of the institutions so as to control the way they would be viewed through a gendered perspective. This constant impression management was not an individual trait but rather a structural necessity of living in a gendered institution with a leadership position. The findings here confirm the findings of Bano and Nadeem (2024) on identity conflict in low gender egalitarian cultures where participants discussed professional expectations of leadership competence and societal expectations of femininity, care-giving, and emotional availability continuously and not episodically.

Participants were resilient and adaptable in the face of the challenges faced. The most important coping resource was relational support from colleagues, family and peers. There was also an emphasis on time management, prioritization and emotional self-regulation. But there was a consensus that personal coping mechanisms do not solve the structural conditions that create the triple burden, rather they offer temporary relief. This is important, since it contradicts narratives about women's success in leadership that are based on the idea of individual resilience. Many participants said that adaptation should not be a burden on women alone. Institutions need to change.

The participants' suggestions for reform, flexible working hours, mentorship programs, research assistance, gender-inclusive leadership policies are consistent with those recommended by the literature (Alli et al., 2021; Bush et al., 2022; Hussain et al., 2024; Fazal et al., 2025). A major limitation of the reform issue is also that even if the institutional policies are well designed, the sociocultural expectations that go beyond women's work will not be addressed. Structural reform should be at both institutional and societal levels, and should be evidence-based and context-specific (Ali & Nauman, 2026). Resilience is not a desirable trait to idealize. If women are coping with the pressures of the institution, it is not proof that the institution is working; it could be proof that the institution's failures have been proven to be successfully individual.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the lived experiences of female Heads of Department in Pakistani higher education using a phenomenological qualitative research design that aimed to explore and understand the daily lived experiences of women in the role of Heads of Department in higher education institutions in Pakistan, where they often face threefold burden of leadership, household responsibilities, and productivity pressures in their daily professional lives. The results demonstrate that this burden is not a personal management problem, but rather a structural one, the result of the interaction of three factors: gendered sociocultural expectations, institutional cultures that reproduce an ideal academic worker on a masculine and care-free model, and reward systems that are formally neutral but whose effects are structurally discriminatory.

The five themes that emerged from the analysis, coping strategies, identity negotiation, emotional and professional consequences, gendered challenges and institutional challenges, collectively shed light on a condition that is invisible to institutional measures and yet profoundly significant for those who live in it: the women. The constant fatigue, double consciousness, identity loss, and ongoing emotional work described in the results are

occupational injuries that can accrue over the course of a career and affect the health of individuals as well as the functioning of institutions. The fact that female HoDs continue in their posts, many well, many not, is not because institutions have made this possible, but despite the fact that they haven't.

The study provides a micro-level phenomenological perspective on these issues, which has been lacking in the literature that has tended to focus on structural mapping. The implications of this are obvious: Higher education institutions in Pakistan must revise the role and responsibilities of their HODs with appropriate power; streamline administrative burdens; create mentorship and peer support mechanisms for women leaders; and have gender-inclusive leadership policies that include the domestic and cultural aspects of the triple burden, rather than its institutional manifestations. No one is resilient enough to replace institutional equity. This study argues for the types of structural change that the evidence requires.

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