

## Strategies to Overcome Work Barriers: An Exploratory Study of Women Executives in Pakistan

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This phenomenological study explores such strategies that facilitate women to reach higher managerial position. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven women executives serving in different sectors. The findings reveal that women are enjoying the status to be at top tier. Although they have faced many work barriers such as work and domestic pressures, social and familial commitments and gender stereotypes yet they are also using various strategies i.e. empathic intelligence, endurance-hope, self-efficacy to cope with these barriers. Further, it has been found that traditional spouse supports one of the strongest themes that women executives have highlighted during their discussion. The key value added by this phenomenological study is to provide a perspective of women executive's adaptive strategies to be at the top tier specifically in the non-traditional context of Pakistan.

**Key words:** women executives, work barriers, Pakistan, gender stereotypes, glass ceiling

In today's era of emerging economies, companies are striving to achieve competitive advantage by being creative and innovative solutions of the problem (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2013). Corporate firms are started to acknowledge the corporate value of women (Iqbal, 2013) by encouraging their participation to perform at key managerial positions for the sake of diversity and organizational success (O'Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2008). With the emergence of globalization in corporate world, working women are now showing their significant representation on managerial positions not only in developed region but also in developing countries such as Pakistan. Evidence revealed that the presence of women executives in corporate boards provides a diversity in decision making orientation of the company and also plays a large role in maintaining good board governance (Adams & Ferreira, 2009). Firms that are having at least three women executives as board members show significant rise in financial performance (Joy et al., 2007).

There are number of reports available focusing on the barriers that could keep women away from reaching upper-echelon positions in corporate world. Some researches highlight the successful strategies that actually drive women to be at the top tier position (Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Helfat, Harris, & Wolfson, 2006). Similarly, women are trying to use various strategies in order to impel themselves to reach upper-echelon positions (Schein, 2007). Therefore, it is important to get an insight into different strategies used by women executives in order to reach at top level positions. The phenomenological study is a stepping stone in exploring those strategies that made women executives successful in the context of Pakistan. The findings will advance qualitative literature about successful women's strategies that can be used to reach top tier positions.

The paper is structured as follows: it begins with describing the literature review to highlight the prevailing gap followed by data collection and analysis, results, discussion, conclusion and implications.

### **Socio-economic status of working women in Pakistan**

The prevalence of patriarchal ideology in Pakistan has restricted women's role primarily to the arena of the home as mothers, wives and caregiver (Ahl, 2006) and to take care of her husband and children (Dawson & Henley, 2012). However, the traditional conservative gender stereotype roles of women are breaking down in Pakistan with the introduction of more liberal views about women's role. This encourages women participation in economic activities and women work side by side

with men in variety of professions (Khalid & Frieze, 2004). Most of the women who go out to work show confidence in their capabilities even in the fields that are male dominant (Guney et al., 2013).

Pakistan is a developing country having total population of 184.35 million where male and female are represented 51.35% and 48.65% of the total population respectively (Pakistan bureau of statistics, 2012-13). Statistics reveal that female participation in the work force rose to 15.57% in 2013. The realization of working women's significant contribution in the economy encourages many corporate employers in Pakistan to establish women friendly places. Currently, women are occupying 5% of corporate top-tier positions in Pakistan (Iqbal, 2013). Hence, evidence shows that more women are joining the workforce and moving up the corporate ladder in Pakistan.

#### **Successful women orientation: barriers and facilitators**

Though women are showing their significant participation in the workforce and are performing in various domains of occupation, they are still underrepresented at the top tier positions in the organizations. It appears that few females will be able to reach higher position. The empirical evidence reveals that men and women experience different circumstances while doing a job such as male career orientation is supposed to be linear while female's career is characterized by interruptions and exits (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008). Many research studies highlight the invisible and strong barrier of 'glass ceiling' for a women working in organizations (Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008; Baker, 2003). This barrier restricts women's access to the higher managerial positions within their companies (Baker, 2003). Indeed, women have to display agentic traits (assertiveness, confidence and independence) to be at top tier position. If women show agentic traits they are penalized for gender non conformity but if they do not they are judged as not agentic enough (Korabik, 1990).

The literature reports a number of individual and situational factors that significantly contribute to women's successful orientation towards higher managerial positions (Tharenou & Conroy, 1994; Aycan, 2004). The individual factors consist of three elements: women's attitudes and behavior, demographic characteristics and early enculturation in the society (Aycan, 2004). The first element (women attitudes) involves level of commitment, positive thinking, high self-efficacy, internal attribution of success, passion towards goal attainment and salient career identities towards mobility and relocation (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1993). Similarly, second element demographic characteristics also plays significant role towards women career advancement. It is evident that women who are in a leading positions in the organization possess higher educational degrees (Adler, 1993) and socioeconomic status (Adler & Izraeli, 1994). The third element of individual factors is early enculturation which helps women to grow in their respective fields. This enculturation is embedded in the paternal encouragement and maternal professional background that are positively associated with women successful career orientation (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987).

Work situation (organizational culture and practices) and domestic situation (spouse support and familial responsibilities) are the significant components that represent the situational factors (Aycan, 2004). The first factor (work situation) explains the culture and practices of the organizations and second factor (domestic situation) describes women's family life, especially married women who are supposed to take care of their in-laws and look after their children (Aycan, 2004).

Hence, there are number of barriers and opportunities that exist for women executives in both their family and career domains, however, challenges are more widely discussed in literature as compared to adaptive strategies that woman executives exhibit to be at top tier positions.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The women executives were selected from education and media sector as per the convenient availability of the participant. Table 1 presents the participants employment title. Most of the women participating in research had the age groups: 51-60, 31-40 and 41-50.

**Table 1**

<i>Participant's profile</i>	
<b>Code</b>	<b>Job Title</b>
A	Head of the Department
B	Head of the Department
C	Deputy Controller radio Station
D	Head of the Department
E	Head of the Department
F	Head of the Department
G	Production manager

### **Sampling and data collection method**

Drawing on the interpretive assumption of small sample selection in natural setting (Hussey & Hussey, 1997), a purposeful or convenience sampling technique is appropriate for the selection of sample from population. Therefore, convenience sampling technique was used for the selection of 7 participants (Marshall, 1996).

Semi-structure interviews were conducted with 7 women executives working in various public and private organizations in order to understand those strategies that make them successful at leading positions because one cannot understand human behavior without understanding the meaning attributed to these behaviors (e.g. their thoughts, beliefs, feelings and values).

### **Interview Protocol**

Interview protocol consisted of 7 to 10 questions which were used to rank the participants perceptions regarding their successful career transitions and transformations. The interview questions were adapted from literature and modified according to the objectives of the study (Cain, 2015; Wippermann, 2010; Linehan, & Walsh, (2001). For example, the interviewer asked about the job description of women executive, her professional work experience with the current organization, her overall experience as working women, barriers during her career transitions, facilitators that contributed to her success and strategies how to overcome these barriers.

### **Data analysis strategy**

One of the most widely used forms of analysis in qualitative research is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is generally defined as a method of identifying, analyzing and recording data received from participant's transcriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The objective of my research study is to explore the interpretive explanation of the experiences of women executives regarding their successful career transitions and transformations using various strategies. Therefore, thematic analysis using Nvivo 10 software was used for the data analysis. The emerging and predefined themes were formulated using Nvivo 10.

## **Results and Discussion**

When the women were specifically asked to share their overall experiences of being women executives, then all of the women found it an encouraging experience which gives them opportunity to realize their potential and to participate in the economic development of the country. All their accounts mentioned that it is a great sense of achievement for them to be in leading position because of the sense of empowerment which they will get being an executive woman is important to them. Some of the excerpts regarding the overall experience to be women executives are quoted below:

*"I have a wonderful experience. It's an amazing feeling to work as head of department. Initially I faced many difficulties especially after my marriage because husband had his job in some other city and mine in some other city but later on everything got settled (Dr. B)"*

*"This is what which I actually want to be in my life. I always dreamt of having a career and now I am very satisfied with it. I think it is wonderful to have a successful career progression but this is not a piece of cake, every day is not a good day..... Some time I feel very down, upset but overall I am very satisfied with my decision to work as professional instead of spending my whole life to perform household duties (Ms. G)"*

### **Work Barriers**

To work in a senior position is not something which an individual can achieve easily. One has to exert all efforts to reach the top position, specifically for working woman, the situation is getting more stressful because being a woman, one has to do domestic responsibilities along with professional requirement such as to attend job from 8am to 5pm. Household pressure is also there and as per the traditionally defined role of male and female (Garcia & Welter, 2013); women do not expect their partners to assist them in performing job.

Table 2 reports the themes and relevant strength of work barriers as mentioned by women executives during their interviews. The most reported category is work and domestic pressures which woman executives face most of the time during their career transformation stage. Social and familial commitment and gender stereotype are reported as second and third important barriers that woman executives exhibit respectively. Whereas, harassment and lack of intellectual ability are cited as fourth and fifth important factors that hinder women's professional growth. The detailed discussion along with participant's quotes is given below:

**Table 2***Themes and Relevant Strength of Work Barriers*

Participants	Gender stereotype	Harassment	Lack of intellectual ability	Social and familial commitments	Work and domestic pressures
Dr. A	0	0	0	3	2
Dr. B	2	0	0	0	1
Dr. C	0	0	0	2	1
Ms. D	1	2	0	0	1
Ms. E	1	0	1	2	4
Ms. F	3	0	0	1	3
Ms. G	0	0	0	0	2
	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>14</b>

***Work and domestic pressures***

Men have to stay at work from 8am to 4pm and women are supposed to follow similar timings regardless of their responsibilities at home. Role conflict theory discusses that it is quite difficult for a woman to perform multiple roles at one time (Dierdorff & Ellington, 2008). Most women executives have highlighted various work and domestic stressors that actually hinder their professional growth. Some of the excerpts are given below:

*“Females having work commitment of 8am to 4pm is definitely facing the biggest challenge of their life when they have a family, have so many people depending on them and they are having kids as well. So it is very expensive decisions to sacrifice your personal affairs for your professional growth (Ms. D)”*

*“Being a head of department it is way tough to deal with many intellectual minds because one man show is not possible. You have to work as a team. People irritate and corner you (Dr. B).”*

***Social and familial commitments***

The women executives report that they lack social respect because of the gender bias associated with woman. Women are not taught to make their own independent decisions, they are told to be subservient to men and are not free to choose a career path. Most of the women articulate that they wanted to have some other career orientation but due to family and societal pressure they chose the career which they do not actually want to be in. One of the participants Ms. D highlights that

*“I am a teacher because I had been told in my young years that teaching timing and work environment is suitable for ladies. It was inculcated. That limits my choice. I might be a very good banker I might be a very good scientist but I didn't turn up (Ms. D)”*

Dr. A account also echo Ms. D

*“I wanted to pursue clinical side as a career but due to the pressure of my father in-law, I had to sacrifice my wish and I served non-clinical side but this was something which I wish even today as well”*

Apart, from having restriction on career choice, most of the women also report that they had to face pressure from society when they choose their profession that was not considered a noble profession in conservative society. Ms. G, senior producer articulates that

*“Sometime society did not like media profession. They consider that women in media profession is not a family oriented women but I never care about these myth. I always try to put my keen focus on my given assignments and task (Ms. G)”*

Many females also report that while they are enjoying the benefits of being at the top, they also sacrifice their familial commitment which sometime becomes a key challenge during their career transition. Some of the emerging excerpts are given below:

*“One of the challenge is the activities of your home and your kids which are most important for you. Some time I feel like that my home is suffering, my kids are missing me (Dr. A)”*

*“When I got married my family pressure was very much there. I know I cannot stay after 4. So my family commitments shape my career. I am happy with that. I am not dissatisfied, definitely at the end you need to go back to your family (Ms. E)”*



**Gender stereotype**

The gender stereotype stems from the gender roles (Eagly & Wood, 2011) means that women may not be taken seriously in leadership positions. Male chauvinism is the most critical element of the reported findings. Such as one of the participant Ms. G articulates

*“The biggest challenge is to face male chauvinism. Our professional identity always stand secondary to gender reality. If you are a beautiful woman then people will be looking at you in a different direction. So that is a reality of our society (Ms. G)”*

It may be hard for a Pakistani man to accept women’s decisions wholeheartedly. They sometime pretend that they are very happy from women’s decisions but in reality, the grudges are due to a tag of superiority that society gave to a man.

*“Yes in organization you have to face many challenges like ignoring attitude of your male senior staff. They did not prefer to ask any advice from you because they have a tag of superiority over women and they believe that if they will going to ask any help it will deteriorate their credibility (Dr. B)”*

So, when women are putting efforts to reach at executive posts then it is harder for woman to get success because of male chauvinism.

**Lack of intellectual ability**

One of the accounts also highlights the importance of intellectual ability that becomes challenging for women to grow in their profession. Sometimes hard work facilitates women to be at top tier position but due to our conservative upbringing, we not taught to make our decisions independently which later adversely affects our professional career because we are more dependent on our male counterpart. Ms. D articulates that

*“I think the mental make-up of our women do not support them for executive position. It has been very hard to find female as independent thinker or intellectually groomed. That’s why, they hardly reach at the level of executive position. If you have these qualities of independent thinking and intellectual ability then system supports women (Ms. D)”*

**Harassment**

The harassment comes in many forms when you are working as a professional woman but one of the key forms is sexual harassment which many women may face during their careers. Although in my study only 1 woman executive highlights this challenge during her interview.

*“I experienced sexual harassment that was the most awful moment of my life when my boss asked me to had physical relationship with him for the sake of promotion. I got demoralized from these moments but I tried to get myself calm and handle situation silently (Ms. G)”*

However the rest of the women are very much satisfied that they do not face any type of harassment challenge in their professional career.

**Strategies to overcome barriers**

Strategies are actually the ways for individuals to grow in their career orientation. The most resounding characteristics of strategies is to be consistent in your efforts.

Table 3 shows women executives reported strategies (mentioned as themes) during their interviews. The majority of the women cited empathic intelligence as most important strategy which they exhibit at their workplace. The second most cited categories are endurance-hope, self-efficacy, and trilogy of P’s (passion, perseverance, patience) demonstrating women executives’ behaviors towards handling prevailing barriers. However, hard work, commitment, and keep silence are the least reported themes in the data. The detail on emerging themes has provided below.

**Table 3**  
*Themes and Relevant Strength of Strategies*

Participants	Commitment	DRL	EI	Endurance-hope	Hard work	Keep silence	PAO	Self-efficacy	Trilogy of P's
Dr. A	0	0	2	1	1	0	1	0	2
Dr. B	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	2
Dr. C	0	0	2	0	1	1	0	2	2
Ms. D	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	2	1
Ms. E	1	2	4	3	0	0	1	4	0
Ms. F	1	2	2	1	0	0	1	0	0
Ms. G	0	0	2	1	0	1	1	0	1
	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>

**Legends:**

\*DRL= Delineate relationship limitations

\*EI= Empathic intelligence

\*PAO= Positive attitude-optimism

**Delineate relationship limitations**

When women are working in male dominant society then it is better to draw a line of restriction which should be clear to their subordinate or to their bosses. When women are asked to explain certain strategies of leadership then one of the emerging finding is about delineating relationship limitations in their working environment, although few of the women strongly supported this delineation of relationship limitation. One of the excerpt articulates:

*"There are certain limitations, certain boundaries which we have to keep between us. So, it's really helping when working in a male dominant sector (Ms. C)"*

**Empathic intelligence**

The concept of empathic intelligence is an emerging phenomenon that is getting researcher's attention these days. This term signifies the concept of emotional intelligence that is defined as someone's ability: (a) to understand individual feelings, (b) to listen to others and to feel them, and (c) to express emotions in a productive manner (Goleman, 2001). One of the leading themes of women executives is to be considerate with the other people (empathic intelligence). The excerpts of the women executives confirm:

*"To speak clearly is very integral element when you are sitting on a certain position. If you have open communication and give room to your juniors that they can talk to you freely on any matter then the relationship goes smooth and everyone is get more focused to perform their tasks because being a boss you give them room to talk and share their views (Ms. G)"*

*"You consider that other person thinks like you. It's a biggest learning for you that every person has his own thinking and approach. If you want to have a healthy environment of your set-up where everyone is working all together and you want to keep everyone with you. You must listen to them that what is their approach to work (Ms. E)"*

**Endurance-hope**

Being an executive, the element of endurance cannot be put aside. This is the key philosophy of the executives that they carry with them since from very first day of their career transition. While discussing the concept of strategies specifically, hope is one of the leading constructs but most of the women did not use the conception of hope. They link this word more with the endurance and tolerance. The excerpt of the participant who use endurance as strategy is discuss below:

*"I think that hope gives what makes you put one foot in front of the other. Sometime you are facing worst time or sometime you are enjoying good times. It's all about how you handle the situation with endurance and hope (Dr. B.)"*

**Positive attitude-optimism**

A positive attitude drives an individual to carry their dreams when there is no hope. The narrations of women executives are given below showing how they view this optimism in various circumstances.

*"I always take challenges in a positive way such as my colleague had 6 to 7 publications and I had not any publication on my panel. So, during my summer holidays, I also worked hard to write 3 papers. For instance if I take it negative then I can't be successful in my life. I always accept challenges (Dr. B)"*

*“So definitely this is my view point that positivity is very important in your life if you are not positive about your surrounding you cannot survive (Ms. D)”*

**Self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy is the self-confidence that women possess as a strategy and it is the second most cited theme. The excerpt of woman executive articulates:

*“I think first thing is self-efficacy, you need to be confident about you if you are not confident about you, and you cannot make to this position (Ms. D)”*

**Trilogy of Ps (Patience, Perseverance, Passion)**

The conception of trilogy of P’s (Patience, Perseverance, and Passion) is the most important element. When women were asked to share their strategies to cope up with prevailing challenges then they spontaneously name these Ps which they believe are strongly contributed factors to shape their professional and personal lives such as Dr. A confirms

*“If someone works sincerely and with passion, it does not go waste. It became very fruitful for the particular person. The people around you came to know that you have talent you can do it whether you are male or female (Dr. A)”*

**Keep silence**

Some of the women executives also highlight that it is better to be silent on some matters rather than to be outspoken because there are some events that demand silence to avoid any grudges within male dominated organizations. Such as Dr. B said

*“I usually keep myself aside from all these issues and try to finish my work. Focus on my growth (Dr. B)”*

Similarly Ms. G states

*“I never fight with anybody because I believe these things only create masses in your relationships (Ms. G)”*

**Constituents (Moderators) helping women to be eminent at top tier**

Table 4 exhibits the themes and relevant strength of constituents that work for women in practicing various strategies to handle work barriers. There are many type of constituents reported by women executive but frequencies reveals that most of the women talked about their spouse support as one of the leading factors. The views of women regarding husband support is well embedded in literature (Aycan & Eskin, 2005). Wherever ‘familial support’ and ‘working environment’ are the second and third most cited themes by women executives.

Some of the excerpts highlight the importance of this theme are discussed below:

*“I tell you in the life of a married woman the most important character to stop her or take her ahead is her husband. (Dr. A)”*

*“My husband the most respectable persona of my life who always supported me in my professional affairs (Ms. G)”*

The narrations of other cited themes of familial support and supportive working environment are given below:

*“Due to baby care center and my boss supportive attitude I feel relaxed (Dr. B)”*

*“My father, mother, brother and sister support really helps me to flourish and to become an executive. Without their kind support I could not be able to excel in my career (Ms. G)”*

**Table 4**  
*Themes and Relevant Strength of Moderators*

Participants	Familial Support	Husband Support	Supportive Working Environment
Dr. A	1	2	0
Dr. B	1	1	1
Dr. C	2	0	0
Ms. D	1	1	0
Ms. E	0	1	2
Ms. F	0	2	0
Ms. G	1	4	1
	<b>6</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>4</b>

### **Conceptual model of successful women executives**

The conceptual framework emerging from the views of women executives has been presented in Figure 1 (Appendix A). The figure highlights the relationship between work barriers and successful career orientation mediated by adaptive strategies of women executives. It is evident from the reported themes that women often face various barriers at their workplace. Women who actually adopt certain strategies to overcome the prevailing barriers may have better chances of achieving higher positions as compared to those who did not adopt any strategy (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). Thus the model proposes that strategies are playing a mediating role between work barriers and successful career. However, the conceptual framework also highlights the moderators that strengthen the use of different strategies in overcoming the prevailing work barriers.

### **Conclusion**

The women executives were in the favor of endurance, passion, persistence and empathic intelligence which are the key strategies that drive their career orientation. Moreover, these women are naturally using these type of strategies instead of learning about them from literature. It is evident now that leadership traits are built in traits that help people to grow, society just helps in inculcating these skills in individual. Self-efficacy is a type of strategy that is developed through experience. Optimism and hope were innate tendencies for these women. Therefore, the power of a positive attitude and spouse support should never be underestimated when one is focusing on fulfilling a goal in patriarchal society.

### **Research Implications**

The research aims at providing implications for many stakeholders' specifically human resource managers, mid-career working women and women who just start their career trajectory.

It will provide a roadmap for human resource professional to rethink about the policies device for working women. For example, flexible timings and career advancement trainings could be one of the crucial parts of stated policies. It is concluded from findings that most firms demand time dedication of working long hours for employees' (either male or female) growth and development. Managers could design programs that help to encourage women's potential in a positive way. Since, all the women executives are naturally using different strategies to make their ways towards higher positions so, training regarding the development of such adaptive strategies may be warranted. It will provide a chance for male executives to think about the prevailing myth of women's inability to handle critical situations at top executive positions.

This study develops an understanding for the working women who are mid-career about how to use their mental strength to overcome the prevailing barriers. Moreover, findings highlighted that women who possess consistency in their task achievement have better chances to climb the corporate ladder.

Newly graduated women who are just thinking to start their careers should focus on following those women who align themselves with passion to hard work, show consistent attitudes and look for opportunities to career advancement.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study focuses on a relatively small sample which raises an issue of generalizability in other sectors or with larger population. This issue of generalisability is because of the inherent nature of qualitative research study.

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**Appendix A**  
**Conceptual Framework: Figure 1**

