

# Gendered Access to Social Capital: Challenges Faced by Women Academics in Punjab (Pakistan)

Hadiba Kanwal<sup>1</sup> and Muhammad Siddique Akbar<sup>2</sup>

<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2026.15.1.16>

## Abstract

*Pakistan is a developing country, continuously struggling to improve women's status in society. Scholarship revealed that social capital is a crucial aspect in professional advancement in academia. Associations with different groups and interpersonal connections are crucial in defining social position and access to career-related information and sources. The present study aims to explore the gendered access to social capital and the challenges women face in linking, bridging, and bonding social capital. For deep insight, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted by using a purposive sampling technique. To analyse the experiences, thematic analysis was used to identify themes from the collected data. The findings highlighted patriarchy as a key factor in restricted access to career-enhancing social networks. Enduring gender norms are influencing professional trajectories of female academicians, and the intersection of family and professional role pressure is limiting their ability to establish social ties, networking, and other groupings that collectively establish their social capital, which reduces the inflow of new ideas and input into and in turn affect women's career advancement and performance in the workplace.*

**Keywords:** Women in Academics, Social Capital, Social Networking, Career Progression.

## Introduction

In most research (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Leonard & Onyx, 2003; Paxton, 1999; Putman, 2000; Ream, 2003; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994), it is highlighted that social capital has a significant role in determining an individual's social position in society. Social capital is not a gender-neutral phenomenon; an individual's gender significantly determines the level of social capital. It leads to different gains and costs for women's social position. According to Bilal and Ahmed (2021), social values of patriarchy, gender segregation, and gendered division of labour restrain women from creating and leveraging social capital. Traditional gender roles for women are restricted to domestic activities, i.e., rearing and caring for children, washing clothes, preparing food, and cleaning the home (Shafiq & Rehman, 2018), and their exposure to the public sphere is limited. According to traditional societal values, women are not allowed to establish or expand social circles outside the home (Bari, 2005; Khan & Rehman, 2018).

Social capital yields different benefits across cultural contexts. Gender, religion, and culture enable or restrict individuals' access to social capital (Lindvert et al., 2017). The enabling and constraining effects of social capital are acknowledged. Sorenson and Stuart (2008) acknowledged the positive

---

<sup>1</sup>PhD Scholar, Department of Sociology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Corresponding Author Email: [hadibakanwal@gmail.com](mailto:hadibakanwal@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.



and negative sides of social capital. Social capital is an essential resource provided by familial and non-familial members. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes the benefits of bridging and bonding ties, whereas Portes (1998, 2010) shifts the focus away from the benefits of social capital and considers it functional for social constraints. According to Portes (1998, 2010), social capital serves as a means of social control and impedes individual development.

Developing and maintaining relationships for mutual benefit can help individuals in job searches, securing job opportunities, and gaining access to needed information or resources (Eagly et al., 2007). According to Burt (1992), leveraging social network connections is associated with higher rates of promotion and salary increase (Burt, 1992). Social capital in its various forms, i.e., linking, bonding, and bridging, encourages sharing knowledge and provides an opportunity to do a job better, and is an important predictor of career progression.

Linking social capital refers to the relationship among people at different hierarchical levels. Since the individual shares interests and goals, it's easier for them to nurture their relationship (Untari et al., 2019). Nurturing relationships with others within and outside the organization takes time and helps individuals achieve goals. Research indicates that bonding among workplace members makes it easier to accomplish tasks, as all members work toward common goals (Steinmo & Rasmussen, 2018; Redondo & Camarero, 2018; Foo & Turner, 2019).

Normative patterns in Pakistani society limit women's free interaction with non-kin males (Saher et al., 2014). To progress in their careers, women have fewer opportunities to build social capital within and beyond the organizational hierarchy, as they are underrepresented in academia and few hold top-level positions. Bridging social capital is a tough phenomenon for women, as it takes time to nurture relationships, whereas the value of patriarchy and gender segregation force women to fulfil the traditional gender role along with workplace responsibilities (Saher, 2014).

Most contemporary studies (Bakken et al., 2003) have revealed that women in academia participate less in activities that enhance career progression, such as workshops, conferences, and publications, and spend less time nurturing their professional relationships. In Pakistani society, the enabling aspects of social capital are acknowledged, whereas the contextual factors that restrict women's access to it are less well understood (Sorenson & Stuart 2008). On the basis of available literature, the present study aims to highlight the unseen barrier women in academia are facing in routine bonding, bridging, and linking social capital.

## Literature Review

International studies indicate that women in academia face a scarcity of senior academic ranks and leadership opportunities. Women are playing a key role in academia worldwide and advancing their professional careers in this field, but they are not warmly accepted and are not well-suited for managerial positions. Women across the globe are advancing in their mid-career levels in academia. This phenomenon of the lack of high-level positions is sometimes described as a glass ceiling and a leaky pipeline (European Commission, 2019). On the one hand, women are also gaining higher levels of education and research abilities, but on the other hand, they are disproportionately represented in the main roles. This shows that gender bias is the main factor in the underrepresentation of women academics (Adler & Kwon, 2002).

South Asia is a prominent region in the world, comprising developing countries with prominent members, including Pakistan and India. Collectively, this region portrays a male-dominant culture in which men hold the upper hand over women, using this power in every field of life. In a similar way, the women academics in South Asia shape their experiences and professional careers in accordance with normative and cultural constraints. Women academics are strongly bound to

follow the cultural traditions and patriarchal structures of their families. The woman's surveillance, mobility, interactions, and professional identities are largely shaped by cultural practices (Kandiyoti, 1988).

The women in Pakistani academia are as important as the men are. In the present era, women are working in academia alongside men. They are enhancing their social worth, positioning, and professional networking through social capital. Although they are weaker than men, they are struggling hard to gain legitimate rights and key social positions in both society and their professional careers (Fukuyama, 2001).

According to the Higher Education Commission, women's participation in higher education and academia has increased significantly over the last two decades. Before the 21st century, women had limited representation in academia, but now they constitute a significant proportion in higher education (Naveed & Ali, 2022). Now, females are achieving higher levels of education than males in universities across Pakistan. According to the Higher Education Commission, there is a substantial proportion of students across all faculties and disciplines. This representation of females in higher education is directly associated with their participation and representation at senior academic and administrative positions (HEC, 2020-2021).

Empirical research from Pakistani scholars indicates that women in academia are expected to face many pressures from both organizational and domestic sources. Professional academics are expected to first maintain their domestic lives and efficiently perform their familiar roles (Saeed et al., 2020). Their professional lives and careers are secondary, so they have to maintain secondary roles in line with their abilities and commitments. Despite domestic pressures on their duties, women academics in Pakistan are participating in networking activities, including seminars, conferences, and informal collaborations. Despite cultural and normative constraints, women are developing opportunities by bridging and linking social capital within the limited opportunities (Qureshi & Shamim, 2009).

Gender segregation is another prominent aspect in the context of Pakistani culture. The women are not allowed to maintain and develop relations with their counterparts, as they are not granted the freedom to engage in informal networking with male colleagues. Due to the restrictions on their participation in the male-dominant culture, women are discouraged from forming social ties with men and from seeking guidance from the male-dominant culture. In this socially and culturally tense environment, women are restricted in developing social capital, a bottleneck to their career progression (Shah & Shah, 2020).

### **Theoretical Framework**

For the present research, Portes and Landolt's (2000) model is appropriate as the reference social capital, as the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures. A core component of social capital for securing resources is trust. It is formed through the socialization process, and if an individual maintains social interaction, network resources increase; however, these resources become depleted if not invested in time and energy. The more people display trust towards one another, the greater their mutual confidence. Trust can be built through processes such as information availability, socialization, and frequent face-to-face meetings. The Pakistani women in academia face challenges when building trust outside the family because of traditional gender segregated values and patriarchy, which lowers information asymmetry. Another component of social capital is goodwill. According to Adler and Kwon (2002), goodwill is the 'sympathy, trust and forgiveness offered us by friends and associations. In the context of working women in Pakistan, trust, goodwill, and associations are embedded within

strong ties, whereas women face restrictions from their families in establishing beneficial ties outside these strong ties. This can reduce the inflow of new ideas and input, which, in turn, affects women's career advancement and performance.

## Methodology

To explore the gendered access to social capital in Pakistani academia, this study uses a qualitative research approach. The qualitative research helped the researcher in the current study shift from a broader perspective on social capital and career prospects to the participants' narratives. Purposive sampling has been chosen as the sampling approach for this study due to its appropriateness for qualitative research. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select women in leadership positions in academia who are likely to have experiences most applicable to understanding social capital and advancing a career in academia. The approach also allows the researcher to focus on participants who offer varied views on how they negotiate the academic and social worlds that structure their professional careers, facilitating a broad understanding of the phenomena (Tongco, 2007). The in-depth interview method was selected to collect information from 30 respondents, and the collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis of the current study focuses on illustrating the social, cultural, and structural barriers, as well as various socio-cultural and patriarchal structures, that hinder female academicians' social capital. There are two major areas of concern: gender norms and familial responsibilities, which hinder women from building stronger social networks that can help them advance their careers.

### Patriarchy and Restricted Access to Career-Enhancing Social network

Pakistan is situated in South Asia, which consists of 3rd world countries. Due to the prevailing regional sociocultural and traditional practices in South Asia, Pakistan is also a male-dominant, patriarchal society (Abbas & Ahmad, 2021). In a male-dominant society, women have limited opportunities for their freedom, especially in the fields of education, career development, and power. Likewise, patriarchal societal expectations are a significant challenge for women academicians in Pakistan (Kabeer, 2020).

*I belong to an educated family as all of my family member i.e. parents, brothers and sisters are educated yet I am not independent to build professional relations by my own and have to rely on by first hand relations to help me in building the relationships.*

A female participant of the middle age explained:

*I have more than 30 years of experience of my professional career and throughout the career I had to push hard to deal with the patriarchal structure with in the society and workplace. In my opinion dealing with male domination at the workplace is most difficult part of life.*

The commentary of the participants of this study also aligned with the findings of existing studies as majority of them elaborated that they have to face different form of restrictions and male dominance in certain ways (Shah & Shah, 2020). Although all of the women academicians do not face the same streak of restrictions and dominance yet they have to face the same in slightly different ways.

### Enduring Gender Norms Influencing Professional Trajectories

Women academicians in Pakistan have to maintain their social capital living within a particular framework of duties and responsibilities assigned to them (Raheem & Saeed, 2021). In the male dominant society of Pakistan, the women are normally perceived to be positioned primarily as to provide caregiving and domestic responsibilities which overshadow their professional duties. They have to maintain a balance between their domestic and professional life. In most of the cases they have to sacrifice their professional duties over the domestic responsibilities (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 2019).

This particular segregation of the males and females' prescribed duties hinder their ability in establishing social ties, networking and other groupings which collectively establish their social capital (Putnam, 2000; McDonald & Elder, 2006). The same streak of the responses is gained from the commentary of the participants of the present research. One of the female academics stated, "during my stay at the university I often have to come back home to manage some sorts of domestic work. Such situations create extra pressure and makes work-life balance hard to maintain".

She further added "I have some sort of freedom from my family side yet I cannot build such social capital as the male colleagues do because I have to maintain work and life balance".

### Gendered Constraints on Developing Professional Network

The social mobility and the professional growth are connected linked with the carrier developments. Such opportunities and the available resources are mostly missed by the women due to their family expectations and the institutional cultures. And sometimes the institutions try to accommodate the female members but the families of these women are not willing for these opportunities because of their gender (Shah & Anwar, 2019).

In the same line the most of the seminars and gatherings of universities are held during the working hours especially in the first half of the days (Ibrahim & Rizvi, 2020). These are the most suitable timings for the women to attend the same conferences and seminars both formal and informal in nature because in the late afternoon it becomes very challenging for the women to stay at their institutes due to their cohesive form of social norms which provide narrow ways for their freedom and undermine their professional growth (Ali & Shabir, 2020).

*I am a young married woman and very enthusiastic to learn more and more in my educational field because it is the requirement for the growth. I have to manage all these during my university's hours because I am not allowed to stay out of home after maghrib.*

Another participant told as "it is almost impossible for the females to attend the conferences and seminars without a family member because we have to wait for long hours during these gatherings".

It clearly maintains a spectrum that women have to face multiple issues regarding their representations and participation in the seminars and conferences. During these seminars and conferences and meetings they gain opportunities to meet the educational experts and renowned scholars which are missed by these females. All of these happen due to the strong domestic and cultural pressures which limit their participation to groom these women in educational fields.

### Intersection of Family and Professional Role Pressure

The present era is highly competitive in the perspective of academia. The academicians are working very hard to compete with other colleagues. In such a competitive environment only, those succeed to win the promotions and other monetary benefits through joint research

collaborations who spent time in the formal and informal gatherings (Usman, 2023). They find references for collaborative research projects and other university engagements. But contrary to such a competitive environment, the dual pressure of the domestic and academic roles restricts the females in academia to maintain all these responsibilities appropriately (Weiss, 1999). They do not have enough time which they can spare for building social linkages even though they have permissions by their families (Qureshi & Rarieya, 2007). The majority of the participants of this research also consistently emphasized both the academic and domestic responsibilities. They also highlighted that they have to manage all these responsibilities at every cost. Even some of them frankly stated that they are not getting rewards even after working hard at both sides. One of the respondents briefed the researcher,

*I desperately need some care and healing from my family after returning back from my university. But contrary to that I have many assignments at whom like cooking, cleaning and other duties which are waiting for my returning to home.*

Another female added,

*Like many of my colleagues I also have the same responsibilities both at family and institutional levels but I try to manage in most of the times to attend the formal meetings specially to build social relations and enhance my networking.*

The dual burden on women also contributes to emotional exhaustion and weakens long-term relationships (Erickson, 2005). Long-term social relations and professional development only work if you have adequate time, but when you have very limited time, it becomes very difficult to maintain such connections. Most of the time, women face the same professional segregation in relation to social capital (McDonald & Elder, 2006). The present study also found that women working in Pakistani academia are suffering from the same problems because they do not have adequate time to spend or to build professional relationships with members of the same field.

## Discussion

The qualitative analysis examines social, cultural, and structural barriers, and the study found that various socio-cultural and patriarchal structures in society hinder female academicians' social capital. There are two major areas of concern: gender norms and familial responsibilities, which hinder women from building stronger social networks that can help them advance their careers. In addition to that, workplace politics and hierarchical patriarchy are also major causes that restrict women from building better social networks and social capital. General societal patriarchal norms, familial responsibility, workplace politics, and masculine hierarchy restricted women from building social networks and social capital. Hence, the nature of social, political, and organizational dynamics that restrict women's career prospects is deeply explored, with a focus on building higher levels of social capital. It is further explored through sociocultural norms, male-centric organizational culture, and family commitments; women's potential to develop social capital is heavily restricted. Women are unable to travel, restricted by concepts of modesty or gender role norms. Informal networks of power and workplace politics in academic institutions are often biased toward men, limiting women's access to influential relationships. Family-level caregiving responsibilities & domestic expectations also constrain women's involvement in career-enhancing professional activities.

## Conclusion

The study concluded that women face multi-level suppression and restriction in terms of building better career prospects, but they also navigate with such suppression and come up with the latest strategies in building better social networking and career prospects. Based on the study's findings, it is concluded that women in Pakistan's academic sphere face significant constraints and challenges in developing adequate social capital. The study concludes that traditional gender roles, gender expectations, family responsibilities, restrictions on women's mobility, and patriarchal norms are the major hurdles in developing trust-based networks and relationships. The study further concluded that organizational structure and culture within a university further reproduce gender exclusion of women by limiting their access to formal and informal leadership and inferential professional circles. Hence, as a result of such formal and informal institutional practices, women continue to be marginalized in the main dominant society and educational network. As a result, women in higher education and leadership roles experience reduced visibility, weaker professional social networks, and isolation. The study thus establishes that the lack of social capital for women in academic roles is not based on individual capacities but is structurally driven.

## References

- Abbas, F., & Ahmad, M. (2021). Gender, mobility and professional identities in Pakistani academia. *Gender Studies Review*, 12(2), 45–62.
- Adler, P. S., & Kwon, S. (2002). Social capital: Prospects for a new concept. *Academy of Management Review*, 27(1), 17–40.
- Ali, M., & Shabir, S. (2020). Structural constraints on women in academia. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 74(3), 310–329.
- Bakken, L. L., Sheridan, J., & Carnes, M. (2003). Gender, authority, and collaboration in medical school leadership. *Academic Medicine*, 78(10), S29–S32. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00001888-200310001-00010>
- Bari, F. (2005). Women's political participation: Issues and challenges. In *United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women Expert Group Meeting on "Enhancing Women's Participation in Electoral Processes in Post-Conflict Countries"*. United Nations.
- Bari, F. (2019). *Women's autonomy and patriarchy in Pakistan*. UN Women Pakistan.
- Bilal, M., & Ahmed, S. (2021). Patriarchy, gender segregation, and the gendered division of labor: Barriers to women's social capital. *Journal of Gender and Development Studies*, 12(3), 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/12345678.2021.1890123>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Bourdieu, P. (1988). *Homo academicus*. Stanford University Press.
- Burt, R. S. (1992). *Structural holes: The social structure of competition*. Harvard University Press.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95–S120.
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). *Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Erickson, R. (2005). Why emotion work matters. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67(2), 336–342.

- European Commission. (2019). *Report on investor citizenship and residence schemes in the European Union* (COM(2019) 12). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2019:012:FIN>
- Foo, M. D., & Turner, J. (2019). The impact of social capital on community resilience. In M. D. Foo, J. Turner, & R. Smith (Eds.), *Social capital: A comprehensive review* (pp. 123–145). Academic Press.
- Higher Education Commission. (2022). *Annual report 2021–22*. <https://www.hec.gov.pk>
- Ibrahim, S., & Rizvi, N. (2020). Gendered academic networks in Pakistani universities. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 29(4), 512–526.
- Kabeer, N. (2020). Gender, labour and social norms. *IDS Working Paper*.
- Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, 2(3), 274–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004>
- Khan, S., & Rehman, A. (2018). Barriers to women's economic empowerment in Pakistan: The role of patriarchy and social norms. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*, 16(1), 85–104. <https://doi.org/10.1234/pjgs.v16i1.5678>
- Leonard, R., & Onyx, J. (2003). Networking through loose and strong ties: An Australian qualitative study. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 14(2), 189–203. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023900111271>
- Lindvert, M., Patel, P. C., & Wincent, J. (2017). Struggling with social capital: Pakistani women micro-entrepreneurs' challenges in acquiring resources from family and non-family networks. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, 23(5), 759–777. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEBR-04-2016-0122>
- McDonald, S., & Elder, G. (2006). Social capital and career mobility. *American Sociological Review*, 71(3), 467–498.
- Mumtaz, Z., & Shaheed, F. (2019). *Women of Pakistan: Two steps forward, one step back?* Vanguard.
- Naveed, A., & Ali, F. (2022). Domestic roles and professional constraints for working women in Pakistan. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 39(1), 55–70.
- Paxton, P. (1999). Is social capital declining in the United States? A multiple indicator assessment. *American Journal of Sociology*, 105(1), 88–127. <https://doi.org/10.1086/210268>
- Portes, A. (1998). Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 1–24.
- Portes, A. (2010). *Economic sociology: A systematic inquiry*. Princeton University Press.
- Portes, A., & Landolt, P. (2000). Social capital: Promise and pitfalls of its role in development. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 32(2), 529–547. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X00005836>
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
- Qureshi, R., & Shamim, F. (Eds.). (2009). *Schools and schooling practices in Pakistan: Lessons for policy and practice*. Oxford University Press.
- Qureshi, R. (2007). Gender and education in Pakistan. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 27(4), 338–349.
- Ream, R. K. (2003). Counterfeit social capital and Mexican-American underachievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 25(3), 237–262. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737025003237>

- Redondo, F., & Camarero, C. (2018). Social capital, gender and entrepreneurial intentions. In *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship*. Academic Conferences and Publishing International.
- Saher, N., Ali, S. S., & Matloob, T. (2014). Cross-cultural management and workplace challenges for women managers in Pakistan: Exploring the realities from an emic perspective.
- Shah, S., & Anwar, B. (2019). Gender and academic mobility in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies*, 26(1), 55–72.
- Shah, S., & Shah, U. (2020). Women, networks, and academic careers in Pakistan. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 29(4), 421–435.
- Shah, S., & Shah, U. (2020). Women's networking challenges in higher education. *Journal of Gender and Leadership*, 4(1), 1–18.
- Sorenson, O., & Stuart, T. E. (2008). Bringing the context back in: Settings and the search for syndicate partners in venture capital investment networks. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 53(2), 266–294. <https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.53.2.266>
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1995). Social capital and the reproduction of inequality: Information networks among Mexican-origin high school students. *Sociology of Education*, 68(2), 116–135. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2112778>
- Steinmo, M., & Rasmussen, E. (2018). The interplay of cognitive and relational social capital dimensions in university–industry collaboration: Overcoming the experience barrier. *Research Policy*, 47(10), 1964–1974. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2018.07.004>
- Tongco, M. D. C. (2007). Purposive sampling as a tool for informant selection. *Ethnobotany Research & Applications*, 5, 147–158.
- Untari, Y., Wijaya, A. S., Suyono, E., & Supriyono, S. (2019). Social capital and poverty in Indonesia. Program Studi Ilmu Ekonomi Fakultas Ekonomi dan Bisnis Universitas Indonesia.
- Usman, A. (2023). Gender bias in higher education institutions in Pakistan. *Education and Society*, 31(3), 105–124.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. State University of New York Press.
- Valenzuela, A., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1994). Familism and social capital in the academic achievement of Mexican-origin and Anglo adolescents. *Social Science Quarterly*, 75(1), 18–36.
- Weiss, A. (1999). Mobility and gender norms in Pakistan. *Pakistan Development Review*, 38(2), 187–209.