

## BETWEEN DUTY AND DIRECTION: WOMEN LEADING CHANGE IN RURAL SINDH

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15770859>

### Keywords

Women's Leadership, Family Dynamics, Women Leadership, Identity Negotiation, Traditional Norms

### Article History

Received on 21 May 2025

Accepted on 21 June 2025

Published on 30 June 2025

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### Abstract

*This qualitative research investigates the leadership journey of women in Khairpur Mirs, a rural district of Sindh, Pakistan, where traditional norms and gendered expectations often restrict women's public roles. While equality has gained global momentum, rural patriarchal settings continue to limit women's participation in leadership and decision making. Through purposive and snowball sampling, ten women leaders, spanning NGOs, educational institutions, and local governance bodies were interviewed using a semi-structured format. Their narratives, analysed using inductive thematic analysis, revealed four major themes: negotiating family expectations, managing dual identities, reshaping self-perceptions, and influencing community perspectives. Participants shared how they balance leadership responsibilities with cultural expectations, often drawing on familial alliances or quiet resistance to maintain legitimacy and social acceptance. Despite societal barriers, these women act as change agents within their communities, challenging stereotypes and encouraging gradual shifts in gender norms. Their lived experiences underscore a powerful narrative of resilience and adaptation, offering valuable insights for gender policy, community development, and leadership training initiatives in similar contexts. This study highlights the complex interplay between, tradition, and agency in rural Pakistan, contributing to the broader discourse on women's empowerment in culturally conservative societies.*

### INTRODUCTION

While women globally have made considerable progress in attaining leadership roles, significant gender disparities continue to exist, particularly in executive and governance positions (Shoukat & Awan, 2025). Despite growing global advocacy for gender parity, women still occupy only about one-quarter of parliamentary seats and equivalent

leadership roles, underscoring persistent systemic inequalities (Goryunova & Madsen, 2024). Much of the scholarly literature on women's leadership originates from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) societies, limiting its applicability in diverse cultural contexts (Li et al., 2021). This has led to an increasing call for research

that explores leadership experiences in traditional, non-Western environments. South Asia exemplifies this paradoxical landscape. Although the region has produced high-profile female leaders—including prime ministers and senior corporate executives—the overall labour force participation of women remains among the lowest in the world (Morley & Crossouard, 2015). Only 28% of South Asian women aged 15 and above are employed, in contrast to the global average of 48%, highlighting enduring socio-cultural and structural barriers (Schafer, 2019). In Pakistan specifically, despite the symbolic prominence of figures such as Benazir Bhutto, the majority of women continue to experience restricted mobility and minimal decision-making power (Azeem, 2020). Embedded within a deeply patriarchal societal structure, Pakistani women are largely expected to fulfill roles as homemakers and caregivers, while men dominate both the public sphere and familial authority (Zulfiqar et al., 2024). In rural areas, conservative traditions such as purdah (female seclusion) and early marriage remain prevalent, reinforcing that a woman’s “proper” place is at home under male guardianship (Agha, 2021; Hossein, 2022). Rural Sindh is a region where these traditional norms are most pronounced. In Khairpur Mirs district, gender roles are deeply entrenched: men typically manage external affairs and leadership, while women are expected to maintain family honour through domestic responsibilities (Agha, 2015; Agha, 2021). Although recent initiatives have improved female literacy and inclusion, progress remains slow. In parts of rural Sindh, female literacy rates are below 23%; drastically lower than those of males (Shewaram, 2023). Such gaps limit the number of women both qualified for and confident to assume leadership roles. Even when policies mandate women’s participation (e.g., legally reserved seats in local councils), cultural resistance often undermines their involvement. In Sindh’s local government, 33% of seats are reserved for women to boost political participation (Express Tribune, 2016); yet many women councillors still struggle to be heard. Despite these challenges, several women in rural Sindh have emerged as leaders and running local NGOs focused on community development, serving as headteachers, or holding positions in village councils. Their journeys are

remarkable given their context and illustrate a negotiation between two worlds: the traditional realm of family and cultural expectations, and the modern realm of public leadership. This article asks: How do women leaders from Khairpur Mirs navigate the tension between their leadership roles and traditional identities? What strategies do they use to gain legitimacy and support, and what personal transformations do they undergo? Through focusing on first-person narratives, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of grassroots women’s empowerment in South Asia. Personal stories provide nuances that quantitative data or broad surveys may miss—such as the influence of familial relationships, internal conflicts, and subtle forms of resistance. Prior research in Pakistan has largely relied on quantitative measures or focused on urban professionals, leaving a gap in capturing the voices of rural women leaders. Addressing this gap is essential for academic completeness and for designing effective development interventions. The following sections review literature on women’s leadership and empowerment, detail our methodology, present the thematic findings with direct quotes, and discuss the implications of our results.

## Literature Review

### International Perspectives on Women’s Leadership and Gender Norms

The global discourse on women’s leadership has intensified in recent years, with increasing recognition of the persistent underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles. International policy frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, emphasise the importance of gender equality and advocate for women’s full and effective participation in political, economic, and public spheres (Leproni & Azara, 2025). Empirical evidence supports the notion that diverse leadership teams enhance organisational performance and stimulate innovation (Alblooshi, Shamsuzzaman, & Haridy, 2021). Nevertheless, the global “leadership gap” remains a pressing issue, as structural impediments—such as the glass ceiling and ingrained cultural biases—continue to restrict women’s advancement. Despite advocacy and progress, women currently occupy only 26.7% of

parliamentary seats worldwide, highlighting the scale of the disparity and the ongoing need for transformative policy and cultural change (Bishop, 2021).

A substantial body of literature attributes these gaps to deeply rooted gender norms. Leadership is traditionally associated with masculine traits, and women are often expected to adhere to norms of modesty, deference, and domesticity (Macrae & Baur, 2024). Kark and Eagly (2010) explain that women leaders must navigate a complex labyrinth of biases, proving their competence without transgressing femininity. In non-Western contexts, where collective and patriarchal values prevail, women's leadership journeys involve extensive negotiation of societal expectations. Research in African and Middle Eastern settings, for example, has shown that women often rely on family approval and kinship networks to gain acceptance (Hussein & Manthorpe, 2012).

### Women's Leadership in South Asia: Tradition vs. Change

In South Asia, while prominent female leaders have emerged due to family political legacies, everyday gender norms remain highly conservative. Women's workforce participation and representation in local governance are among the lowest in the region (Nazneen, 2018). Social norms typically prioritise men as breadwinners and decision-makers, while women are expected to focus on home-making and defer to male authority (Fillion, 2023). Recent data reveal that only about 28% of South Asian women participate in the labour force, compared to nearly half globally (Mukhopadhyay, 2023). Cultural factors, such as early marriage and safety concerns, particularly limit girls' education in rural areas (Subramanee, 2022). A 2019 World Bank report noted that women in South Asia face multiple layers of opposition, from family objections to community disapproval possibly when pursuing leadership roles (Ravindran et al, 2024; Saifuddin et al., 2019). Initiatives such as gender quotas in local government have been introduced to ensure women's representation. In India, constitutional amendments reserved one-third of panchayat seats for women, while Pakistan's decentralisation reforms brought a large quota for women in local councils (Jayal, 2006; Jabeen, 2019).

In Sindh, 33% of seats are reserved for women (Express Tribune, 2016). Although these policies are intended to promote empowerment, entrenched patriarchal norms often reduce women's roles to token participation (Irshad et al., 2023; Shafiq, Arshad, & Riaz, 2024). Women in reserved seats may be excluded from real decision-making, confined to less influential committees, or pressured to conform to male-dominated voting patterns (Qureshi & Ahmad, 2022). Moreover, studies in rural Punjab, Pakistan, have shown that aspiring women often require male patronage to even consider leadership, highlighting how personal agency is mediated by family authority (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022). Scholars have also described how women engage in "bargaining with patriarchy" (Mufi & Jalalzai, 2021), strategising within existing norms rather than outright rebelling. For example, rural women may perform household duties diligently to secure permission for public roles. In Bangladesh, women leaders have framed their public work as an extension of maternal duty. Such narratives allow women to reconcile their leadership identity with traditional expectations (Nazrul, 2024).

### The Pakistani and Sindh Context

Pakistan ranks low on global indices of gender equality, with marked disparities in education, health, economic participation, and political empowerment (Hamid & Akram, 2025). In rural Sindh, society is often organised along tribal or feudal lines, where large landowners wield considerable power and traditional customs, such as arranged marriages, dominate (Khosro, 2024). Ferdous (2010) observed that the further a community is from urban influence, the stronger the patriarchal norms become, often viewing women's autonomy as a threat to social order (Agha, 2021). At the same time, Sindh has a history of progressive movements and active NGOs (Dashti, Moulabaksh & Ali, 2021). Over recent decades, girls' education has expanded in parts of rural Sindh, and some women have pursued higher education and returned to serve their communities. Government reports, such as the National Report on the Status of Women (2023), note improvements in literacy and health but also persistent gaps—especially in rural zones (National Commission on the Status of Women, 2023). Cultural biases often prevent parents

from sending girls beyond primary school, and economic necessity frequently forces early marriage. Studies focusing on women's leadership in urban Pakistan (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022) show that family ideologies shape career trajectories; in rural settings, this influence is even more pronounced as family honour is closely linked to a woman's behaviour. Women who take public roles risk being accused of neglecting their family duties, and severe opposition from families and communities is common (Agha, 2015; Bhatti et al., 2011). However, anthropological work by Agha (2021) reveals that some rural Sindh women strategically negotiate patriarchal constraints by initially engaging in socially acceptable roles i.e., from working on health or education to build trust. Over time, by demonstrating competence and maintaining respect for social norms, they gradually expand their influence. Some even transform the attitudes of previously sceptical male kin (Raza et al., 2023). The literature indicates that while women's paths to leadership in traditional societies like rural Sindh are fraught with obstacles, those who do emerge develop nuanced ways to balance their new roles with cultural expectations (Talpur, Mahar & Ahmed, 2023; Shoukat, Awan & Jokhio, 2025). Yet, a research gap remains: most studies either rely on broad quantitative measures or focus on urban experiences, leaving the detailed, personal accounts of rural women leaders largely unexplored. This study addresses that gap by providing an in-depth qualitative examination of these leadership journeys.

### Research Gap

The existing literature offers valuable insights into women's leadership and the influence of patriarchal culture, yet a significant gap persists. Quantitative analyses indicate that rural women in Sindh are among the most socio-economically and politically disempowered in Pakistan (Bukhari et al., 2024). Government and NGO reports similarly highlight that, despite some progress, rural Pakistani women's participation in formal decision-making remains extremely low. However, granular personal narratives detailing how individual women overcome these barriers are scarce. Most scholarship either reports percentages (e.g., of women in leadership) or focuses on urban, middle-class experiences. Consequently,

the voices of rural women leaders, detailing their compromises, negotiations, and resistance strategies – are largely absent. This omission has practical implications, as policies and empowerment programmes often assume a linear model of change (e.g., “provide quotas or microcredit and women will be empowered”). Without an understanding of the complex social negotiations women must undertake, such interventions may fail or have unintended consequences. Another gap is the temporal and regional specificity. Ethnographic research from the 2010s and beginning of 2020s (Agha, 2015; Agha, 2021) focused on private negotiations within families rather than on public leadership roles. With recent changes in governance, technology, and NGO presence in rural Pakistan, there is a need for contemporary studies that capture current experiences. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on women leaders in a rural, traditional context and using qualitative methods that centre their own voices. It asks not only “what barriers do they face?” but also “how do they overcome or navigate those barriers?” and “how do they reconcile their dual identities as tradition-bearers and change-makers?” By doing so, the study contributes context-specific insights, narrative depth, and an emphasis on women's agency, while also bridging high-level policy with on-the-ground experience.

### Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design within an interpretivist paradigm to explore the nuanced experiences of women leaders in rural Sindh, recognising that participants' meanings and realities are socially constructed and best understood through their own narratives. A phenomenological approach was utilised to capture the essence of their lived experiences, while inductive thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns. Open-ended, in-depth interviews served as the primary data collection method, allowing participants to share their stories in their own words. Purposive Snowball sampling was used to select women holding or recently holding leadership positions in Khairpur Mirs, Sindh, including community leaders/activists (e.g., NGO founders), educational leaders (e.g., headmistresses and senior teachers), and political leaders (e.g., Union

Councilors) and this was supplemented by snowball sampling, resulting in a final sample of ten participants, aged from their mid-20s to mid-50s, representing various villages and roles. Data collection occurred between March and June 2024 through semi-structured interviews conducted in Sindhi (with occasional Urdu/English), lasting approximately 40–60 minutes each, and were audio-recorded (with consent) and supported by field notes. Rigorous ethical protocols were followed; informed consent was obtained, pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity, and recordings were securely stored and later deleted, with interviews scheduled to avoid undue attention in close-knit communities. The researcher, an insider–outsider from Sindh, built trust with participants before commencing interviews, and ethics standards were strictly followed in accordance with established guidelines, with participants also provided support information for sensitive issues.

#### Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated from Sindhi to English. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative steps:

- Familiarisation: Reading and re-reading transcripts and listening to recordings to ensure immersion and accuracy.
- Coding: Conducting line-by-line coding manually, writing significant concept directly on the transcripts (e.g., “husband support,” “community gossip,” “double burden,” “pride,” “religious justification”).
- Searching for Themes: Clustering similar codes into candidate themes such as “Family Gatekeeping.”
- Reviewing Themes: Refining candidate themes by ensuring each was well supported by data from multiple participants.
- Defining and Naming Themes: The final themes identified were: (1) Navigating Patriarchal Norms in Family and Marriage, (2) Balancing Dual Roles and Responsibilities, (3) Evolving Self-Identity and Empowerment, and (4) Impact on Community and Changing Perceptions.

- Writing the Report: Representative quotes were selected to illustrate each theme, with interpretations linked back to the research questions.
- Techniques such as member checking and peer debriefing enhanced credibility. A reflexive journal was maintained to monitor and mitigate researcher bias.

#### Findings and Thematic Analysis

Despite differences in leadership roles, participants shared similar experiences in negotiating their identities and traditional expectations. Four major themes emerged:

##### 1. Navigating Patriarchal Norms in Family and Marriage

A dominant theme was the negotiation with patriarchal family structures. Participants explained that their decision to assume leadership roles was not made in isolation but required negotiation with family members. Male family members and elder females often acted as gatekeepers. For example, Farzana (45, headteacher) recalled, “When I was first offered the chance to head the community school, my husband said no outright. He was worried about what people would say that I was neglecting the family or becoming too ‘modern.’ It took many late-night conversations and intervention from my father-in-law to change his mind.” Farzana’s account illustrates the tactical use of family hierarchy.

Saima (30, NGO project coordinator) explained that her in-laws agreed to her taking a job only if she promised that household duties remained her responsibility: “I had to promise my mother-in-law that I wouldn’t speak to men as part of my job unless necessary. For the first year, I woke up at 4 a.m. to cook and clean.” This is an example of the “patriarchal bargain” described by Kandiyoti (1988) and Critelli (2012).

For unmarried participants, parental approval was crucial. Nida (27, Union Council member) noted that while her father was supportive, her mother feared that “no one would marry a girl who is always out in public.” With support from a local mentor, her mother gradually accepted her role. Ayesha (52, retired principal) credited her late father’s support, stating, “He trusted me and defended me against family gossip.”

Marital dynamics also played a role. Rubina (34, health NGO leader) recalled, “As our project succeeded,

people began calling me 'Dr. Rubina.' My husband felt insecure and questioned his role, so I made sure to highlight his support." Additionally, in-law relationships were complex; while some mothers-in-law eventually became allies, others, like in Shabnam's (40, councilor) case, remained disapproving. This theme shows that women's leadership in rural Sindh is deeply intertwined with family dynamics, requiring negotiation and the strategic use of cultural norms (Shoukat, Awan & Jokhio, 2025).

## 2. Balancing Dual Roles and Responsibilities

The second theme centers on the challenge of juggling leadership responsibilities with traditional domestic roles. Participants described a "double shift," managing both public work and domestic duties. Zehra (38, headteacher) explained her day: "I wake up at dawn to prepare breakfast and get my kids ready, then I manage a school of 300 students, and upon returning home, I cook dinner, help with homework, and attend to family duties."

Many women did not receive much domestic support. Hina (31, craft centre organiser) noted, "Even when I got help for a few hours, my sister-in-law taunted me for not doing my own work." Some developed practical strategies, such as cooking in batches and forming support networks. Mehnaz (50, community health volunteer) described a cooperative with neighbours where they rotated childcare and cooking duties.

However, the stress of balancing roles was evident. Sadaf (29, lecturer) described feeling constant guilt when work interfered with home or vice versa. Moreover, participants consciously modulated their behaviour in different settings. Nida explained, "In council sessions, I speak assertively, but at home, I tone it down to show respect."

Despite these challenges, some women noted positive outcomes. Farzana expressed pride in becoming "a superwoman" for managing both a household and a school. Zehra's teenage son, for example, began helping with chores, indicating that their efforts also serve as a model for the next generation. Nonetheless, the ability to balance was sometimes facilitated by privileges i.e., having a cooperative husband or access to a home generator that which may not be available to all.

## 3. Evolving Self-Identity and Empowerment

The third theme captures the evolution of self-identity as these women engaged in leadership. Initially, many experienced self-doubt and imposter syndrome. Mehnaz (50) recalled, "When I first went door-to-door to discuss sanitation, I felt so small just an ordinary woman who didn't finish college." A turning point came when a young mother expressed gratitude, affirming Mehnaz's impact and boosting her confidence.

Over time, as women achieved milestones, they began to identify as leaders. Rubina (34) shared that through persistent effort, practicing public speaking and negotiating challenging situation, she transformed her self-perception and now confidently presents herself to donors.

At the same time, participants did not reject their cultural identities. Ayesha (52) noted, "In our culture, women are expected to serve. I expanded that idea to serve my community." This reframing allowed them to integrate their "empowered self" with their traditional identities. Many also found strength in collective identity; Nida (27) remarked, "At trainings with other councilors, I feel part of a sisterhood of empowered women." Some initially downplayed their contributions, but as confidence grew, they began to claim credit for successes. Farzana, for instance, now asserts her personal role in increasing school enrolment. Still, participants maintained a careful balance, ensuring they remained modest. Hina (31) explained that she always dresses and behaves traditionally to avoid backlash. Saima (30) passionately stated, "This isn't just work—it's my mission. Allah has given me a path to help my community's women."

There were also moments of crisis. Shabnam (40) recounted a period when her proposal for a skills centre was mocked, leaving her questioning her path. With support from colleagues and reminders of her responsibilities, she recovered and grew even more resolved. Overall, Theme 3 illustrates a dynamic journey of self-discovery where external validation, personal effort, and cultural continuity interact to form an empowered identity.

#### 4. Impact on Community and Changing Perceptions

The final theme highlights the broader impact of these women's leadership on community attitudes. Many participants observed that their visible roles led to shifts in perceptions within their families and villages. Nida (27) explained that after her election, young girls began asking her how to follow in her footsteps, demonstrating the importance of representation.

Rubina (NGO leader) actively mentored younger women: *"Whenever we run a project, I involve a few younger women as trainees. Two of my assistants have since started their own initiatives."* This "pay it forward" approach multiplies the impact of empowerment and builds community support.

Changes in men's perceptions were also noted. Farzana (headteacher) shared an anecdote of a father who, initially opposed to his daughters' education, later sought her advice on his younger daughter's schooling. Although some resistance persisted, Shabnam (40) noted that a few elders still mock her for working outside—such voices diminished as tangible benefits, like improved education and health services, became apparent.

The role model effect extended beyond immediate leadership roles; Mehnaz (50) observed that more women began attending village meetings and engaging in local issues. Younger men and boys, too, started showing respect, with Saima (30) noting that boys now call her "Aapa" (elder sister) and volunteer at NGO events.

Theme 4 underscores that women's leadership can create a ripple effect, generating tangible improvements (better schools, healthcare) and intangible shifts (increased aspirations, breaking psychological barriers) in community norms. Although change is gradual and uneven, the collective impact suggests that sustained efforts can transform traditional mindsets.

#### Discussion

The findings resonate with and add nuance to existing literature on women's leadership in patriarchal societies. Several patterns emerge:

#### Family as Gatekeeper and Enabler:

Our study confirms that familial dynamics are central to women's leadership. Farzana's and Saima's narratives show that negotiating with family members, often through a "patriarchal bargain" (Kandiyoti, 1988) is crucial for obtaining permission. These findings echo those of Chaudhary and Dutt (2022) and Agha (2015; 2021), illustrating that family support or opposition profoundly affects women's ability to engage publicly.

#### The Double Burden of Leadership and Domestic Work:

Participants consistently described managing a "double shift" that blends public responsibilities with traditional domestic tasks—a phenomenon also documented as the "second shift" (Hochschild, 2003). Our findings, similar to those reported by Agha (2021), reveal that this burden is often compounded by limited support at home. However, emerging shifts i.e., increased involvement of children or occasional support from husbands which suggest that even deeply entrenched gender roles can evolve.

#### Identity Negotiation and Internal Empowerment:

The transformation from self-doubt to a confident leadership identity is central to our findings. As noted by Shahriar (2013) and echoed by our participants, mastery experiences and positive community feedback drive this evolution. Importantly, women in rural Sindh do not reject their traditional identities; instead, they reframe their roles in culturally resonant ways that integrate service, family, and public leadership. This nuanced empowerment challenges simplistic Westernised models and underscores the importance of context.

#### Community-Level Change and Backlash:

Our findings demonstrate that women's leadership can gradually shift community norms. The role model effect, as seen in Nida's and Farzana's experiences, confirms that representation is a potent tool for social change. While backlash rooted in traditional notions of honour and purdah which remains a challenge (Chaudhry, 2023), sustained, visible success appears to reduce resistance and foster broader acceptance.

This finding is consistent with research on local governance in India and other regions.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice:**

The study suggests that structural measures like gender quotas (Express Tribune, 2016) are necessary but insufficient on their own. They must be accompanied by capacity-building initiatives, community sensitisation, and practical support for domestic responsibilities. Engaging families and communities is essential for creating an enabling environment that sustains women's leadership.

### **Limitations and Future Directions:**

While the study provides rich insights, its focus on a single district and a small sample size limits generalisability. Future research should include additional regions, perspectives from family members and male colleagues, and longitudinal studies to track long-term change.

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to explore how women in rural Sindh reconcile traditional societal expectations with modern leadership roles, and the findings paint a picture of cautious but determined progress. The women's leadership journeys in Khairpur Mirs are stories of negotiation that are mere a constant balancing of roles, values, and expectations. Far from outright rejection of their culture, these women found ways to work within and gradually stretch the boundaries of tradition. They secured family support by proving that being a good daughter or wife is not incompatible with being a capable leader – in fact, they redefined what a “good” daughter or wife could be, one who brings benefits to family and community through her public engagement.

A key takeaway is that personal empowerment and social change are deeply interlinked. As these women grew in confidence and capacity, they not only transformed their own self-concepts but also began to shift the perceptions of those around them. Their leadership had ripple effects: families became more accepting, other women grew more ambitious, and communities started to appreciate the value of women's contributions beyond the home. Change manifested in small but significant ways which a

husband sharing household tasks, a father encouraging his daughter's education, a village elder acknowledging a woman's expertise. These are meaningful strides in a context where not long ago, the idea of a woman leader would have been dismissed out of hand.

The research also highlights the resilience and ingenuity of these women. They navigated obstacles by employing a variety of strategies: leveraging kinship dynamics, doubling their workload to meet all expectations, framing their work in culturally acceptable terms, and leaning on support networks when available. Their journeys were not without setbacks – moments of self-doubt, health strains, or community backlash – but their ability to persevere and adapt speaks to an underlying strength. It is a strength born of necessity and aspiration: the necessity to maintain harmony and dignity, and the aspiration to improve their lives and those of others.

From a policy and development perspective, the findings suggest that investing in women's leadership in traditional areas is a high-yield endeavour, but one that requires sensitivity to context. Simply placing women in positions (through quotas or appointments) is not a panacea; they need mentorship, peer support, and an enabling environment. Efforts to educate communities about the benefits of women's participation, and to provide women with resources (education, healthcare, legal rights) that bolster their bargaining power at home, are essential accompaniments. The women in this study benefited from role models, from modest educational attainments, and from legal openings – scaling such factors could help more women emulate their paths.

Summarising this, the women leaders of Khairpur Mirs are trailblazers of a quiet revolution. They illustrate that it is possible to be respectful of tradition while also being agents of change. Each interview reflected a delicate dance of maintaining identity – as respectful daughter, dutiful wife, loving mother – even as they stepped into new identities as teacher, counselor, or activist. Through courage, compromise, and conviction, they negotiated spaces for themselves where none existed before. Their stories contribute a hopeful narrative to the broader discourse on gender in South Asia: that even in the most entrenched

patriarchal settings, women are finding ways to lead and to redefine the norms, not by negating their culture but by negotiating with it. As they do so, they are not only negotiating their own identities but also the future identity of their community – one where women’s leadership is a respected part of the social fabric. The lessons from their journeys can inform and inspire ongoing efforts to support women’s empowerment in similar contexts, ensuring that these pioneers are followed by many more, until women’s leadership in such communities is no longer the exception but a valued part of tradition itself.

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## Appendix:

Interview Script (Semi-Structured Guide)

### Introduction:

The interviewer greets the participant, introduces herself, explains the study purpose, assures confidentiality, and asks for consent to record.

### Background Questions:

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself (age, family background, education) and what leadership or community role you are currently in?
2. How did you first get involved in this role? (Probe: What motivated you? Who or what influenced your decision?)

### Journey into Leadership:

3. What was the reaction of your family when you decided to take on this position/responsibility? (Probe: Ask about father, mother, husband, in-laws; any objections or support; how the news was broken.)
4. How about the reaction from your community or people in the village when you started? (Probe: Ask if there was any criticism or encouragement from neighbours, local leaders, etc.)

### Balancing Roles:

5. Can you describe a typical day in your life, balancing your work with your home and family responsibilities? (Probe: Ask about household duties you still perform; how you manage time; who, if anyone, helps you.)
6. Have you had to make any compromises or adjustments to fulfil both your role in the community and your role in the family? (Probe: For example, sacrificing leisure, sleeping less, or delegating tasks.)

### Challenges and Support:

7. What have been the biggest challenges or difficulties you've faced in doing this work as a woman in a traditional community? (Probe: Ask for specific incidents of resistance or conflict and how you handled them.)
8. On the other hand, what kinds of support have you received that helped you continue in this role? (Probe: Ask about specific people who supported you—husband, father, mentors, women's groups, NGO training, etc.)
9. How do you deal with negative comments or opposition, if you encounter any? (Probe: Ask if you respond, ignore, or try to educate; how does it affect you emotionally?)

**Identity and Personal Change:**

10. How has doing this work (leading/teaching/serving on council) changed you personally, if at all?

(Probe: Ask about changes in confidence, skills, or outlook on life compared to before.)

11. Do you still feel that you are able to meet the expectations of a “good” daughter/wife/mother in your community’s eyes? How do you feel about that?

(Probe: Ask if there are internal conflicts or guilt, or if you are redefining those expectations on your own terms.)

**Impact and Reflections:**

12. What changes (if any) have you seen in your community as a result of more women like you taking up such roles?

(Probe: Ask for examples of shifting attitudes toward women working or leading.)

13. How do other women and girls in your community relate to you? Have any of them shown interest in following a similar path?

(Probe: Ask if you have become someone they seek advice from; mention any mentoring instances.)

14. In what ways do you think your work has benefited your community? And your family?

(Probe: Ask about tangible benefits like income or new projects, as well as intangible benefits like inspiration or changing attitudes.)

**Future and Advice:**

15. What are your hopes for the future – for yourself in this role, and for other women in your area?

(Probe: Ask if you plan to continue or expand your work; what changes you would like to see in the next generation.)

16. What advice or message would you give to other women in rural areas who aspire to take on leadership or public service roles but are unsure or hesitant?

(Probe: Ask for lessons learned that could help others.)

**Closing:**

17. Is there anything else about your experience as a woman leader that we haven’t discussed that you feel is important to share?

(The interviewer thanks the participant for her time and insights, reiterates the confidentiality of her responses, and closes the interview.)

