

LEADING IN THE SHADOWS: INVISIBLE WORK AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR OF WOMEN IN ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATION IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Women academic administrators in higher education often sustain the moral and emotional fabric of universities through invisible work and emotional labour that remain unacknowledged within formal leadership discourses. This qualitative study explores how women in Pakistani universities perform, negotiate, and derive meaning from this hidden labour. Grounded in the theoretical lenses of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), feminist ethics of care (Noddings, 2003), and postcolonial feminism (Mohanty, 2003), the study investigates how care, emotion, and power intersect to shape women's leadership experiences in male-dominated academic environments. Eighteen women administrators from public and private sector universities across Punjab and Sindh participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Five major themes emerged: Performing Calm, Invisible Support Systems, Emotional Double Bind, Care as Resistance, and Institutional Silence. Findings reveal that women's leadership is characterized by strategic emotional regulation, relational diplomacy, and moral attentiveness that sustain institutional harmony but remain institutionally unrecognized. Emotional labour, while exhausting, also functions as a form of agency, allowing women to lead through empathy, trust, and moral influence rather than positional authority. The study argues that invisible emotional work constitutes the affective infrastructure of higher education in Pakistan. Recognizing this labour as legitimate leadership practice requires a paradigm shift in institutional evaluation systems, leadership development programs, and policy frameworks. Such acknowledgment not only advances gender equity in leadership but also strengthens the emotional ecology of universities.

INTRODUCTION

In the formal hierarchies of higher education, leadership is often imagined through visible authority, titles, policies, and strategic decisions. Yet beneath these visible layers lies an invisible architecture of care, coordination, and emotional balancing that sustains the everyday life of universities. Across global contexts, women occupy a disproportionate share of this "shadow work": the unseen, unacknowledged

emotional and relational labour that keeps institutions functional and humane (Blackmore, 2013; Morley, 2014; Gill & Donaghue, 2016). This invisible work includes mentoring colleagues, mediating conflicts, attending to student crises, and performing the emotional smoothing that ensures organizational stability. In Pakistan's higher education system, marked by hierarchical governance,

bureaucratic rigidity, and deeply gendered institutional cultures, these forms of hidden labour are both pervasive and undervalued. Although women's representation in academia has increased over the last two decades, leadership spaces remain highly masculinized, privileging authority, control, and rational decision-making over empathy and relational care (Qureshi & Ramzan, 2022; Rind & Mughal, 2021). Women academic administrators, often working as heads of departments, coordinators, or registrars, navigate complex expectations that require them to embody authority while simultaneously performing affective labour to maintain harmony and collegiality (Ahmed, 2020).

The concept of emotional labour, first articulated by Hochschild (1983), describes the management of feelings to create publicly observable emotional displays aligned with organizational norms. Within academic administration, women are frequently expected to perform such labour, displaying patience, calmness, and emotional regulation, even in conflict or overwork (Gonzales & Núñez, 2014). Over time, this emotional regulation becomes institutionalized as part of professional identity rather than a discretionary act of care. Scholars have argued that higher education's neoliberal shift has intensified this burden, where women's caring dispositions are commodified as "soft skills" rather than recognized as core leadership competencies (Acker, 2012; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). In the Pakistani context, the gendered moral order further complicates this dynamic. Leadership is filtered through cultural expectations of modesty, respect, and deference (Hassan et al., 2021). Women leaders, therefore, engage in what Acker (1990) called "doing gender" at work, balancing the dual performance of professionalism and culturally appropriate femininity.

Their emotional labour often extends beyond their job description: providing informal counselling to students, mediating faculty disputes, and carrying the invisible moral weight of institutional care. These acts of maintenance are critical to institutional well-being yet remain absent from evaluation systems, promotion criteria, and leadership training frameworks (Shah & Shah, 2012; Nadeem & Zia, 2023).

Recent scholarship across global higher education emphasizes that emotional labour is not simply affective work but a political practice that reveals the moral and gendered economies of academic institutions (Blackmore, 2020; Lynch, 2019). Feminist leadership scholars contend that recognizing this labour is essential for understanding how universities actually function, and who sustains them (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Fitzgerald, 2014). In developing contexts, particularly South Asia, women's invisible contributions to academic governance are both culturally specific and structurally constrained (Naseem & Khan, 2020). Despite policy reforms promoting gender equity, leadership in Pakistani universities continues to reflect patriarchal logics, with limited attention to emotional and relational dimensions of management (Zafar & Farooq, 2021). Against this backdrop, this study explores how women academic administrators in Pakistan perform, negotiate, and sustain invisible work and emotional labour within higher education institutions. It focuses on their lived experiences, their daily affective negotiations, emotional resilience, and the subtle forms of leadership exercised beyond formal authority. The research also interrogates how these practices of care and mediation contribute to the moral and organizational fabric of universities, even as they remain institutionally unrecognized.



Figure 1: The Hidden Architecture of Women's Leadership

This inquiry contributes to feminist and postcolonial leadership scholarship by foregrounding care, emotion, and invisibility as epistemic sites of power rather than as deficits. It seeks to move the conversation from women's *absence* in leadership to their *presence in unseen forms of leadership*. By examining the affective and relational dimensions of administration, the study argues that invisible work is the quiet infrastructure through which Pakistani universities survive daily complexities.

The article is guided by three questions:

1. How do women academic administrators describe their experiences of invisible work and emotional labour?
2. In what ways do institutional cultures shape the performance and recognition of such labour?
3. How do women negotiate agency and authority through emotional and relational practices in male-dominated academic contexts?

Through these questions, the study aims to render visible the hidden emotional economies of academic leadership and to expand what counts as legitimate labour and leadership in higher education.

Literature Review

Emotional Labour and the Gendered University

The term *emotional labour*, first coined by Hochschild (1983), refers to the management of emotions to meet

organizational expectations. While initially applied to service industries, the concept has been widely adopted in education, healthcare, and public administration to understand how professionals sustain the emotional climate of institutions (Wharton, 2009; Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2013). Within universities, emotional labour has become central to the everyday functioning of academic life. It encompasses the affective effort of mentoring students, maintaining collegiality, navigating conflict, and performing enthusiasm under heavy workloads (Gill & Donaghue, 2016).

Feminist scholars argue that emotional labour in academia is profoundly **gendered**. Women are expected to perform care, empathy, and relational management as part of their professional identity (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Blackmore, 2013). This work is often invisible because it occurs in interpersonal spaces, helping distressed students, soothing tensions in meetings, or mentoring junior staff, rather than in formal outputs like research or publications. Consequently, the neoliberal university rewards measurable productivity while undervaluing affective contributions that maintain its social and moral infrastructure (Lynch, 2019; Berry & Cassidy, 2013). Studies from Western contexts highlight that women academics carry a "triple burden": academic productivity, administrative service, and emotional

caretaking (Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Emotional self-regulation, appearing calm, approachable, and endlessly supportive, becomes a form of institutional survival (Fotaki & Harding, 2018). However, such

work is frequently dismissed as “soft” or “natural,” reinforcing gendered divisions of labour that render care invisible (Blackmore, 2020).



Figure 2 “Dimensions of Invisible Work in Higher Education”

Feminist Perspectives on Leadership and Care
Educational leadership has long been theorized through masculinized paradigms that privilege control, rationality, and managerial efficiency (Blackmore, 2013; Fitzgerald, 2014). Feminist leadership theories challenge this tradition by introducing *relationality* and *ethics of care* as central to good leadership (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003). Rather than separating reason from emotion, feminist perspectives view leadership as an ethical and affective practice grounded in empathy, trust, and attentiveness (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Within academia, this care-based model often manifests through collaborative decision-making, mentoring, and community-building, forms of leadership less visible in hierarchical reporting structures (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). Women leaders are therefore engaged in a paradox: they sustain the social fabric of institutions while remaining excluded from formal power narratives that privilege performative authority (Blackmore, 2020). In postcolonial societies such as Pakistan, where gendered norms of modesty and respect shape public behavior, care-oriented leadership intersects with cultural expectations. Women administrators must navigate multiple moral codes, being strong but not aggressive, authoritative yet nurturing (Hassan, Shah, & Khalid, 2021). These

contradictions require what Noddings (2013) called *engrossment*, the ethical attention to others’ needs, while managing the emotional toll of compliance with patriarchal structures.

Invisible Work in Higher Education

“Invisible work” refers to activities essential for organizational functioning but unrecognized in formal evaluations (Daniels, 1987; Star & Strauss, 1999). In academic settings, invisible work includes mentoring, informal advising, administrative coordination, and emotional support (Acker, 2012). Such tasks disproportionately fall upon women, who are socially conditioned to perform care and emotional management as moral obligations rather than professional achievements (Bird, 2011). Recent research suggests that invisible work operates as an affective infrastructure underpinning universities. It sustains collegiality, mitigates conflict, and creates the emotional stability necessary for academic life (Gill, Kelan, & Scharff, 2017). Yet because it lacks visible outputs, it is often excluded from performance metrics, promotion criteria, and reward systems (Morley, 2014; Lynch, 2019). This invisibility contributes to occupational fatigue and a sense of devaluation among women administrators (McKenzie & Hodge, 2020). In South Asian contexts, invisible

work is intensified by hierarchical bureaucracies and cultural expectations of service. Studies in Indian and Sri Lankan universities show that women leaders often perform “cultural diplomacy,” mediating tensions through empathy, patience, and relational tact (Fernando & Prasad, 2019). This diplomacy mirrors the Pakistani experience, where women administrators handle emotional and institutional crises behind the scenes, often without formal acknowledgment (Nadeem & Zia, 2023).

The Pakistani Context: Gender, Culture, and Academic Leadership

Pakistan’s higher education landscape reflects broader social hierarchies where authority and gender intersect. Despite an increase in female academic participation, leadership remains concentrated among men (Rind & Mughal, 2021). Institutional culture often reinforces male dominance through informal networks, limited mentorship opportunities, and gendered assumptions about competence (Shah & Shah, 2012). Women leaders in Pakistani universities are frequently tasked with *moral* and *emotional* responsibilities beyond their official roles, acting as student counsellors, mediators, and institutional caretakers (Ahmed, 2020). These expectations draw upon cultural scripts of femininity rooted in Islamic and patriarchal moral orders (Hassan et al., 2021). Consequently, emotional labour becomes both a mode of survival and a source of empowerment, allowing women to exercise influence through empathy and relational authority (Naseem & Khan, 2020). However, this invisible emotional labour also reproduces systemic inequities by normalizing unpaid affective work. Institutions often rely on women’s dedication to “service” while denying them access to strategic leadership spaces (Qureshi & Ramzan, 2022). Thus, while women’s contributions sustain the emotional economy of universities, their leadership remains hidden beneath the surface of formal recognition.

Identified Gaps

Despite growing international attention to gender and emotional labour, **empirical evidence from Pakistan’s higher education sector remains sparse**. Existing studies primarily focus on gender barriers or representation (Shah & Shah, 2012; Rind & Mughal,

2021), rather than on the *affective and invisible dimensions of leadership*. Moreover, few analyses integrate feminist ethics of care and postcolonial perspectives to explain how women navigate cultural expectations within administrative power structures. This study addresses these gaps by examining the invisible work and emotional labour of women academic administrators in Pakistan. It seeks to uncover the tacit affective practices that sustain universities and to theorize care as a form of leadership power rather than emotional subservience.

Theoretical Framework

Women’s leadership in higher education cannot be understood through managerial or functionalist models alone; it must be examined as an *affective, moral, and political practice*. This study draws on three interconnected theoretical traditions, **the theory of emotional labour** (Hochschild, 1983), **the feminist ethics of care** (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003), and **postcolonial feminist perspectives** (Mohanty, 2003; Mama, 2007), to illuminate how women in Pakistan’s universities perform leadership through invisible work and emotional engagement. Together, these lenses explain the complex intersection of emotion, care, and power that defines “leading in the shadows.”

Emotional Labour Theory

Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) foundational concept of *emotional labour* describes the effort involved in managing one’s emotions to produce feelings deemed appropriate by organizational culture. Within the university setting, emotional labour manifests in administrators’ need to appear calm, empathetic, and composed even while managing crises, interpersonal conflicts, or bureaucratic pressures (Wharton, 2009; Ogbonna & Harris, 2004). For women academic administrators, emotional labour is both a **requirement and a resource**. It sustains institutional harmony but also reproduces gendered expectations that women are inherently nurturing and patient (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Blackmore, 2020). In patriarchal educational systems, this expectation becomes internalized: women are not only expected to perform professional competence but to *emotionally manage others*, students, colleagues, and subordinates, often without recognition or compensation (Fotaki & Harding, 2018). In Pakistani

universities, this emotional labour takes culturally specific forms. Women leaders regulate their emotions according to moral scripts of respect, humility, and modesty (Hassan et al., 2021). Anger or assertiveness is often perceived as inappropriate, forcing women to perform what Hochschild (1990) called “deep acting”, aligning their inner feelings with outward emotional displays acceptable to others. This constant management of affect not only sustains institutions but shapes the moral economy of leadership itself.

Feminist Ethics of Care

The feminist *ethics of care* (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003) challenges abstract, rule-based moral theories by foregrounding empathy, relationality, and responsiveness to others’ needs as central moral principles. Leadership, from this perspective, is not a hierarchical command but a relational process rooted in attentiveness, trust, and dialogue (Held, 2006; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). In higher education, this framework reframes women’s emotional and relational work as *moral labour* rather than mere sentimentality. Caring practices, listening to distressed students, mentoring colleagues, or maintaining team cohesion, constitute an ethical stance toward others and toward the institution itself (Tronto, 2013). This challenges the neoliberal model of leadership that privileges efficiency and competition over well-being and inclusion (Blackmore, 2020; Lynch, 2019). Within Pakistani academic culture, the ethics of care intersects with religious and cultural values of compassion (*rehmat*), respect (*adab*), and mutual responsibility (*amanah*). These values often guide women’s leadership conduct, even when formal structures fail to acknowledge them. By viewing their roles as moral stewardship, women sustain the emotional ecology of universities. However, this same ethic can render their work invisible, as care is culturally framed as a personal virtue rather than an institutional responsibility (Ahmed, 2020).

Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives

Postcolonial feminist theory provides a critical lens for understanding how global discourses of leadership and gender interact with local histories of patriarchy,

colonial bureaucracy, and religion (Mohanty, 2003; Mama, 2007). It resists the universalizing tendency to view women’s experiences through Western liberal frameworks and instead emphasizes *situated agency*, how women navigate structural constraints within specific socio-political contexts (Spivak, 1988; Lewis, 2002). In the Pakistani higher education system, colonial legacies of centralized control and bureaucratic hierarchy persist (Ali, 2013). Women administrators often operate within these rigid structures, using emotional diplomacy, tact, and moral persuasion to influence decisions in spaces where direct power is restricted (Naseem & Khan, 2020). Their leadership thus exemplifies what Mahmood (2005) described as “agency within submission”, exercising influence through culturally sanctioned modes of deference and relational negotiation. Postcolonial feminism also draws attention to the politics of visibility. Western feminist narratives often valorize assertive, individualistic leadership, but in many non-Western contexts, *strategic invisibility* can be a form of resistance and self-preservation (Pande, 2018). Women who “lead in the shadows” preserve institutional stability while subtly contesting patriarchal norms. Their invisible work, therefore, is not absence but an *alternative modality of power*, one that values relational influence over positional dominance.

Integrating the Frameworks

Together, these three perspectives, emotional labour, feminist ethics of care, and postcolonial feminism, offer a layered understanding of women’s leadership in Pakistan’s higher education. Emotional labour explains the affective dimensions of daily administrative life; the ethics of care interprets these practices as moral and relational; and postcolonial feminism situates them within broader cultural and historical power dynamics. This integrated framework positions invisible work not as marginal but as central to the life of institutions. It views emotional and moral labour as both a burden and a form of agency: women sustain universities through care and emotional regulation, even as the institutional structures remain indifferent to their labour.

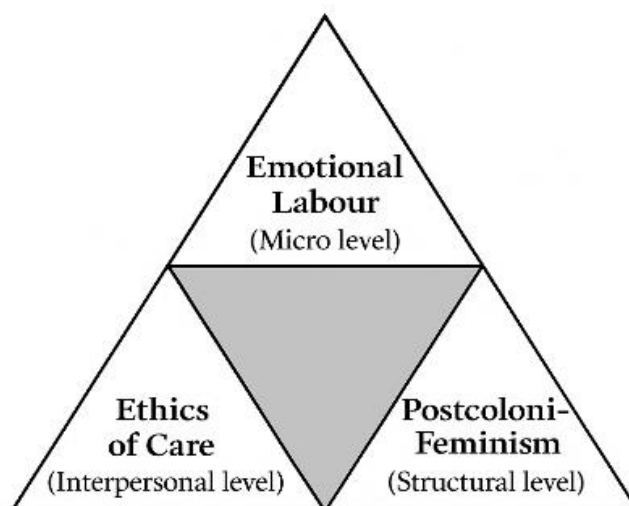


Figure 3 “Intersections of Care, Emotion, and Power”

A triangular or layered model showing how Emotional Labour (micro level), Ethics of Care (interpersonal level), and Postcolonial Feminism (structural level) intersect to shape women’s leadership experiences.) This theoretical grounding guided both the design of the study and the interpretation of findings, helping reveal how women’s invisible emotional practices simultaneously reproduce and subvert patriarchal institutional orders.

Methodology

Research Design and Paradigm

This study adopted an interpretivist qualitative paradigm aimed at understanding how women academic administrators in Pakistan experienced and

made sense of invisible work and emotional labour within higher education institutions. The interpretivist stance assumes that social reality is constructed through meaning-making, interaction, and context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was therefore most appropriate for exploring participants’ subjective understandings of emotional and relational work that are rarely articulated in institutional discourse. A phenomenological research design was employed to capture the essence of lived experiences (van Manen, 2016). This approach allowed the study to focus on participants’ inner worlds, the feelings, meanings, and embodied practices that constitute their leadership roles. It provided space for reflection, emotion, and narrative nuance that quantitative or survey-based approaches could not capture.

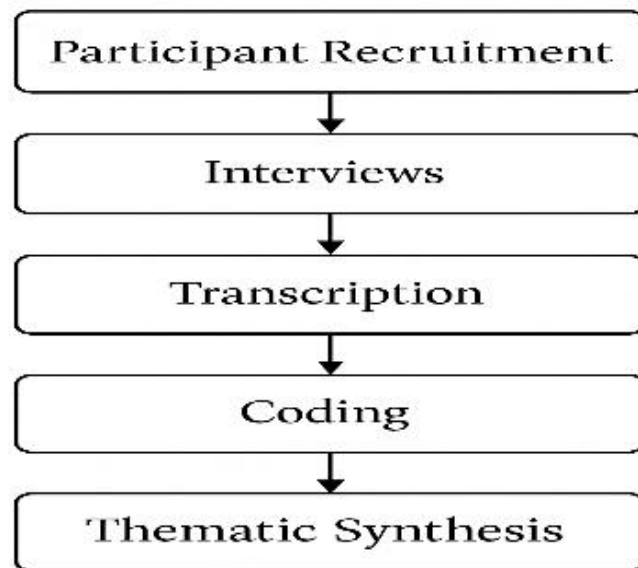


Figure 4 Research Process Overview

Research Setting

The study was conducted within public and private sector universities in Punjab and Sindh, Pakistan. These two provinces were chosen because they host the highest concentration of higher education institutions and present diverse institutional cultures, from state-controlled bureaucracies to privately managed, semi-autonomous universities. This diversity enabled comparison between differing administrative structures and gendered expectations. Higher education in Pakistan remains a gendered arena shaped by hierarchical governance, bureaucratic accountability, and socio-cultural norms (Shah & Shah, 2012). Women's participation in leadership has expanded, yet their emotional and invisible work remains institutionally unacknowledged. Conducting research in this context thus provided insight into how care-based and relational leadership practices sustain academic institutions.

Participants and Sampling

A total of 18 women academic administrators participated in the study. Participants held mid- to senior-level administrative positions, including Dean, Head of Department, Director, Controller of Examinations, and Registrar. All participants had a minimum of five years of academic or administrative experience, ensuring depth of understanding of

institutional processes and culture. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who were both experienced in administrative decision-making and engaged in emotionally demanding work such as mentoring, crisis management, and mediation (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample intentionally represented variation across institution type (public/private), location (urban/semi-urban), and discipline (social sciences, education, business, and STEM). Demographic data collected included age range, administrative role, years of service, and type of institution. Participants' ages ranged from 35 to 56 years, with an average of 14 years of academic experience. This heterogeneity enriched the data and allowed cross-institutional comparisons. Recruitment occurred through professional networks and the researcher's affiliation with university associations. Invitation emails were sent outlining the study's aims and ethical safeguards. Participants were free to decline or withdraw at any time.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place between March and June 2024. The primary method was semi-structured in-depth interviews, chosen for their flexibility and capacity to elicit rich, narrative data. Interviews were conducted face-to-face whenever feasible and via secure online platforms where travel restrictions

applied. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed an interview guide derived from the literature and theoretical framework.

The guide comprised four main sections:

1. Perceptions and meanings of invisible work;
2. Emotional experiences in leadership (care, frustration, exhaustion, satisfaction);
3. Institutional support, recognition, and gendered expectations;
4. Coping strategies and reflections on leadership identity.

Participants were encouraged to share specific incidents or “critical moments” that illustrated emotional and invisible labour (Tracy, 2020). The interviews were conversational in tone to minimize hierarchy and allow participants to direct the discussion toward experiences most significant to them. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim within one week of completion. Transcriptions were manually verified against recordings to maintain accuracy. Field notes were maintained after each session to capture contextual observations, tone, and non-verbal cues that might enrich interpretation. In addition to interviews, participants were invited to submit brief reflective memos about their typical workday or a memorable emotional challenge faced in their role. These short reflections provided

complementary insights into the unrecorded affective dimensions of their work.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step procedure: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. All transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 14 for systematic coding. Open coding was initially performed line-by-line to identify recurring patterns related to emotion, care, power, and invisibility. Codes were then grouped into conceptual clusters guided by the theoretical framework. Axial coding connected these clusters to broader themes such as “Performing Calm,” “Invisible Support Systems,” and “Care as Resistance.” Throughout analysis, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document interpretive decisions and emotional reactions. This reflexivity ensured awareness of how personal experiences and gendered sensitivities might influence analysis (Finlay, 2012). Data interpretation was iterative, moving between individual narratives and collective patterns to ensure both depth and coherence.

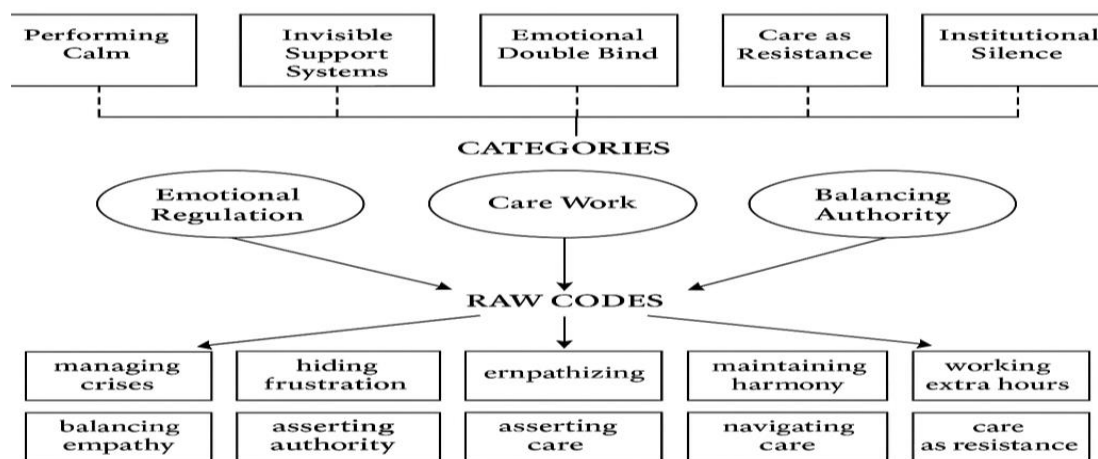


Figure 5 Thematic Coding Map

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, the four classic criteria for

trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), guided quality assurance throughout the research.

- **Credibility** was achieved through prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of data sources (interviews and memos), and **member checking**, where selected participants reviewed summaries of their interviews for accuracy.
- **Transferability** was supported through detailed contextual descriptions that allow readers to assess relevance to other higher education environments.
- **Dependability** was maintained by keeping a transparent audit trail of methodological decisions, coding iterations, and analytical memos.
- **Confirmability** was strengthened through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing with two academic colleagues experienced in qualitative inquiry and gender studies.

Additionally, inter-coder agreement was established by having a second researcher independently code 20% of the transcripts, achieving an agreement rate of 87%, which ensured analytical consistency.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional review board of the researcher's university. Participants received detailed information sheets describing the study's purpose, confidentiality assurances, and voluntary participation rights. Written informed consent was obtained before interviews began. Given the sensitivity of discussing workplace emotions and gender relations, anonymity was crucial. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and identifying details such as institutional names, titles, or departmental affiliations were omitted from transcripts. Data were securely stored in encrypted files accessible only to the research team. The researcher also engaged in ethical reflexivity, remaining sensitive to participants' emotional well-being during interviews. When distressing topics surfaced, participants were given the option to pause or skip questions. Debriefing followed each session to ensure closure and emotional safety.

Limitations

Although the study generated rich qualitative insights, several limitations were acknowledged. The sample size, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry,

restricted generalizability beyond the studied institutions. Additionally, participants self-selected, which may have introduced bias toward those more reflective or confident in discussing emotional experiences. Time and travel constraints also limited representation from smaller rural universities. Nevertheless, the study prioritized depth over breadth, offering a detailed portrayal of women's emotional and invisible leadership work in context.

Findings and Discussion

Overview

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts revealed five interrelated themes that illuminate the nature of invisible work and emotional labour among women academic administrators in Pakistani universities:

1. Performing Calm: The Politics of Emotional Containment
2. Invisible Support Systems: "The Mother of the Department"
3. Emotional Double Bind: Between Empathy and Authority
4. Care as Resistance: Redefining Power through Relationality
5. Institutional Silence: The Non-recognition of Emotional Work

These themes are not isolated but form a dynamic continuum through which women sustain institutional harmony while negotiating gendered constraints.

Theme 1: Performing Calm , The Politics of Emotional Containment

Nearly every participant described the need to maintain composure even in moments of conflict or personal distress. They were expected to model emotional stability, a requirement seen as essential to their credibility as leaders. However, this expectation often masked deep emotional suppression.

"When something goes wrong, everyone looks at me , not for solutions, but for calmness. Even if I'm breaking inside, I have to smile." (Nadia, Head of Department)

"I cannot afford to lose temper. If a male colleague shouts, it's passion. If I do, it's arrogance. So, I breathe, smile, and absorb." (Sadia, Dean)

These narratives reveal what Hochschild (1983) termed *deep acting*, where emotional expression aligns with institutional expectations rather than inner feelings. Participants associated professionalism with emotional self-regulation, what one termed “the art of swallowing anger.” This finding echoes Acker’s (2012) argument that emotional composure is feminized institutional labor: women sustain the “emotional climate” of universities while concealing their own frustration. Yet, for many participants, containment was not merely compliance but a survival strategy. As Fatima, a registrar, explained: **“If I show frustration, it will be used against me. Calmness is my armor.”**

The “performance of calm” thus operates as both emotional control and political strategy, enabling women to navigate patriarchal scrutiny while preserving institutional decorum.

Theme 2: Invisible Support Systems, “The Mother of the Department”

Participants repeatedly identified their informal caregiving and conflict mediation roles as invisible yet indispensable. They described themselves as emotional anchors for students, staff, and junior faculty.

“Students come to me crying , breakup issues, homesickness, family fights. None of this is in my job description, but I can’t ignore them.” (Ayesha, Coordinator)

“Every crisis lands on my desk , sick teacher, student protest, sudden resignation. I fix it quietly because if things fall apart, it reflects on me.”

(Lubna, Director of Academics)

Several participants used familial metaphors such as “mother,” “sister,” or “aunt” to describe their roles, reflecting how organizational cultures naturalize care as women’s moral duty (Tronto, 2013). One senior faculty member summarized:

“They call me the mother of the department. I nurture everyone but get no recognition when it’s time for promotions.” (Samina, Associate Dean)

This theme illustrates the paradox of care work in higher education: essential for institutional functioning but excluded from measurable performance metrics. Similar to Lynch’s (2019) argument, emotional labour becomes the *invisible infrastructure* of academic life. Women’s invisible support systems also extended to faculty

management, where they absorbed interpersonal tensions. As Nadia reflected: **“When male colleagues fight, I’m expected to mediate. When peace returns, they thank each other , not me.”**

Theme 3: Emotional Double Bind , Between Empathy and Authority

Participants described a constant negotiation between being empathetic and being authoritative. Expressing care enhanced their accessibility but undermined perceptions of strength; asserting authority preserved respect but risked accusations of aggression.

“If I’m strict, they call me cold. If I’m soft, they take advantage. I’m always balancing on a tightrope.” (Huma, Dean)

“I can’t be too friendly, or male colleagues misinterpret it. I can’t be too distant, or I’m labelled unfeminine. It’s exhausting.” (Rabia, Registrar)

This *emotional double bind* mirrors what Blackmore (2020) describes as the “feminization of responsibility without authority.” Women are expected to manage institutional emotions but denied legitimate emotional expression. The data revealed that women often resolved this tension through *strategic empathy*, maintaining warmth while signaling professional boundaries. Hina, a senior administrator, captured this balance

“I listen with heart but decide with head. That’s how I survive.”

Such strategic emotional intelligence, though essential, comes at a psychological cost. Participants reported fatigue, burnout, and emotional depletion. Yet, as Hina reflected, **“if I stop caring, the system collapses.”** This confirms that emotional labour functions as both personal burden and institutional necessity.

Theme 4: Care as Resistance , Redefining Power through Relationality

Contrary to seeing care merely as compliance, several participants reframed their emotional work as a subtle form of leadership. They used empathy, humor, and relational diplomacy to influence decisions and resolve conflicts.

“I may not have a big title, but when people trust me, they listen. That’s power too.” (Zeenat, Assistant Registrar)

“I learned to lead through relationships, not orders. I make people feel heard; that’s how I get things done.” (Farzana, Deputy Controller)

These narratives align with the feminist *ethics of care* (Noddings, 2003; Held, 2006), where relationality becomes a source of moral and organizational strength. Through everyday interactions, participants built networks of trust that sustained institutional coherence.

In contexts where formal authority was limited, women’s leadership manifested as *affective influence*, a

quiet form of resistance against bureaucratic rigidity. As one participant noted, **“Sometimes, being kind is my rebellion.”** (Shazia, Head of Department)

This echoes Mahmood’s (2005) notion of *agency within submission*, women exercising power through culturally acceptable modes of care and respect. By redefining power as empathy-driven rather than control-driven, these women transformed care into a political resource.

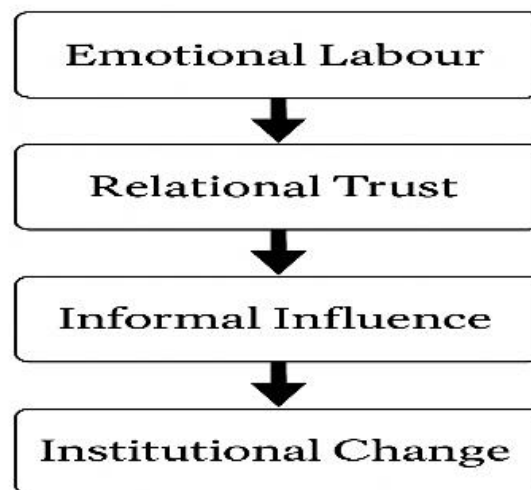


Figure 6 Model of Care as Resistance

Theme 5: Institutional Silence, the Non-recognition of Emotional Work

While emotional labour formed the backbone of institutional stability, participants emphasized its lack of recognition. Their emotional contributions were absent from evaluation criteria, promotions, or workload policies.

“You can measure publications, not patience.”

(Sadia, Dean)

“They say I’m too emotional for leadership, but who do they call when a student commits suicide or when staff morale is low? Me.” (Nadia, Head of Department)

Despite performing tasks critical to institutional survival, women’s emotional work was often trivialized as “personality” rather than professional skill. **“They appreciate my calm nature,”** noted one participant, **“but never call it expertise.”**

This silence perpetuates what Ahmed (2020) calls the *moral paradox of care*: institutions depend on women’s emotional commitment while denying it legitimacy. Several participants expressed frustration that their institutions celebrated “leadership excellence” through managerial performance indicators but ignored the emotional scaffolding that made such excellence possible. The findings confirm Blackmore’s (2013) argument that the neoliberal academy rewards measurable productivity while devaluing relational labour. Yet, even within this silence, women found meaning in their emotional investment. As Samina concluded:

“I know my work doesn’t count in the system, but it counts for people. That’s enough for me, for now.”

Synthesis and Discussion

Across these five themes, the study illustrates that emotional labour and invisible work are central, not peripheral, to women’s leadership in Pakistan’s higher

education. This work sustains the *emotional ecology* of institutions (Lynch, 2019) and redefines what leadership means in a context constrained by patriarchy, bureaucracy, and moral expectations. Performing calm emerges as a survival mechanism within gendered hierarchies; invisible support systems reveal the feminization of institutional care; the emotional double bind reflects structural contradictions of gendered professionalism; care as resistance demonstrates agency through empathy; and institutional silence exposes systemic undervaluation of affective labour. These findings extend Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labour into the educational context of the Global South, illustrating how emotion management is both culturally and politically embedded. They also reaffirm the feminist ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003) as an alternative leadership paradigm, one rooted in moral attentiveness rather than bureaucratic rationality. Finally, through a postcolonial feminist lens (Mohanty, 2003; Mahmood, 2005), this study reframes invisibility not as weakness but as a strategic form of leadership and survival in patriarchal academic systems.

Conclusion and Implications

This study set out to illuminate the *invisible architecture* of women's leadership in Pakistan's higher education, the emotional, moral, and relational labour that sustains universities but remains institutionally unseen. Drawing upon interviews with eighteen women academic administrators, the findings reveal that leadership in these contexts is not enacted solely through formal authority or strategic planning, but through the everyday affective work of care, mediation, and emotional regulation.

Re-centering Emotional Labour as Core Leadership

Across institutions, women leaders described a paradoxical condition: they are both indispensable and invisible. Their capacity to maintain calm, resolve crises, and provide moral stability anchors institutional life, yet this very labour is dismissed as *personality* rather than professional skill. The research demonstrates that emotional labour is not peripheral but *constitutive of organizational effectiveness*. Recognizing this reality demands a conceptual shift, from viewing emotion as a distraction from leadership

to seeing it as the *medium* through which leadership occurs. This reframing extends Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labour into educational leadership, highlighting its double valence as both a burden and a source of agency. Women's ability to perform calm amid chaos, to build trust through empathy, and to lead relationally constitutes a form of affective governance, the moral infrastructure upon which bureaucratic systems depend.

Feminist Ethics of Care and Relational Leadership

The data reveal that women's leadership practices embody the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003), marked by attentiveness, empathy, and responsiveness. These practices generate belonging, reduce conflict, and promote institutional cohesion. Yet, as participants observed, care remains unrecognized within performance metrics that valorize research output and administrative efficiency. Reframing care as *relational leadership* not only validates women's moral labour but also offers a corrective to the hyper-competitive, neoliberal culture of higher education. When institutions acknowledge that emotional well-being and collegial trust are preconditions for excellence, care ceases to be a gendered duty and becomes a shared institutional ethic.

Postcolonial Feminist Reinterpretations of Power

By reading women's narratives through a postcolonial feminist lens, the study exposes how leadership in Pakistan operates within intersecting hierarchies of patriarchy, bureaucracy, and cultural morality. Participants' "strategic calm" and "quiet diplomacy" exemplify agency within constraint (Mahmood, 2005). Their invisibility is not absence but a strategic modality of power, one that values moral influence over positional dominance. This interpretation challenges Western leadership models that equate visibility with empowerment. In Pakistan's context, *leading in the shadows* becomes a culturally intelligible form of authority: subtle, relational, and profoundly ethical.

Implications for Policy and Practice

1. **Institutional Recognition:** Universities should formally acknowledge emotional and relational labour in leadership evaluation

frameworks. Annual performance appraisals and promotion criteria must include indicators for mentoring, mediation, and community-building.

2.

3. Leadership

Development:

Professional development programs under the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and provincial authorities should integrate *affective competencies*, empathy, active listening, emotional regulation, and care ethics, alongside managerial training.

4. Organizational Well-being Policies:

Establishment of counselling units and peer-support circles can redistribute emotional labour rather than isolating it within women administrators. Such mechanisms align with **SDG 4** (Quality Education) and **SDG 5** (Gender Equality) by promoting inclusive and supportive learning environments.

5. Cultural

Transformation:

Institutions must challenge gendered expectations that equate care with weakness. Public acknowledgment of women leaders' contributions through awards, storytelling, and mentorship platforms can reframe care as collective strength.

6. Future

Research:

Further studies could employ comparative or longitudinal designs to explore how emotional labour evolves across career stages and how male administrators engage in, or evade, similar affective work. Quantitative mapping of invisible tasks could also complement these qualitative insights.

Concluding Reflection

This study reveals that women academic administrators in Pakistan are not peripheral actors within bureaucratic hierarchies; they are the *emotional core* of their institutions. Their leadership unfolds in whispered negotiations, patient listening, and unseen acts of repair. As one participant summarized:

“We hold the system together, quietly.”

Recognizing and valuing this invisible labour is not merely a matter of gender equity; it is a precondition for humane and sustainable higher education. When universities learn to see the labour that happens in the shadows, they move closer to becoming spaces of both intellectual and emotional justice.

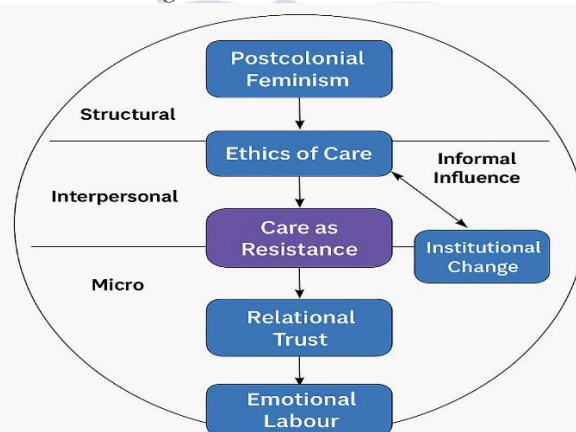


Figure 7 Conceptual Summary: The Emotional Ecology of Women's Leadership in Higher Education

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