

Institutional Support, Sociocultural Barriers, and Career Advancement Among Women Police Officers: A Case Study of District Bhakkar, Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: The present study examines the institutional, socio-cultural, and psychological challenges faced by women police officers in District Bhakkar, Punjab, Pakistan. Gender-based discrimination, restricted career progression, and work-related stress are common challenges faced by women officers that impact their job performance and well-being. The primary aim of this study is to investigate their impact on women constables' job satisfaction, career progression and mental well-being in a male-dominated police force. The aim of the study was to find the level of gender discrimination, socio-cultural factors influencing the performance, analyze to institutional support mechanisms, and evaluate the psychological effect of working conditions of women officers. For this study, the researcher used quantitative research approach. A structured questionnaire on 5-point Likert scale was used to gather data from 108 women police constables. Demographic and perceptual data were assessed using descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation, whereas inferential statistics like chi-square tests examined variable correlations. The findings reveal that gender discrimination, work-life imbalance, lack of promotion opportunities, and inadequate institutional support are the most significant challenges faced by respondents. Furthermore, psychological stress and emotional exhaustion were found to be highly prevalent among women officers due to tough job conditions and limited support systems. The study concludes that both institutional and socio-cultural factors significantly hinder the professional growth and well-being of women participants in District Bhakkar. It recommends policy reforms, gender-sensitive training, improved workplace facilities, and stronger psychological support systems to enhance gender equality and organizational effectiveness in policing institutions.

KEYWORDS: Institutional Support, Socio-Cultural, Psychological Challenges, Professional Growth, Well-Being of Women Police

Introduction

Women's involvement in policing has attracted more and more attention worldwide due to its impact on gender equality, effective policing and community policing. Women police officers are an essential component of the response to gender-based violence and contribute to building trust and access to justice for women and vulnerable

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people. In light of this, to ensure a more representative and women-friendly law enforcement environment, many countries have enacted policies to promote women's participation in law enforcement agencies. As a result, a number of countries have developed policies aimed at increasing women's representation and fostering gender-inclusive environments in law enforcement agencies (UN Women, 2023; UNODC, 2022). These efforts have not succeeded, however, in combating the institutional and socio-cultural barriers that women still encounter, especially in developing countries. Women's professional growth and psychological well-being are limited due to gender discrimination, limited promotion opportunities, lack of organizational support, and traditional gender norms (Cordner & Cordner, 2021; Prenzler & Sinclair, 2023). Women often face disparities in career advancement and workplace discrimination in more male-dominated workplaces, like police departments, where these issues may be more pronounced.

Pakistan has made efforts to recruit women in the police force; however, the number of women in the force is low in rural areas. Women in police jobs sometimes face discrimination, lack of institutional support, and societal pressure in the job that can prove challenging to balance work and family life (UN Women Pakistan, 2023). These can have a negative impact on their career health and progress. While women's problems in policing have been discussed in earlier studies, few studies have explored the intersection of institutional and socio-cultural contexts on the professional well-being and career mobility of women police officers in rural Pakistan. To close this gap, the present study explores these relationships among the female police officers of district Bhakkar, in Punjab. The results are likely to yield data which will be used to shape gender-sensitive policies, enhance the practices of Police Officers and boost the professional career of women in the Police Service of Pakistan.

Literature Review

The increasing participation of women in policing has become an important focus of criminological and organizational research due to its implications for institutional effectiveness, legitimacy, and gender equality. Empirical research indicates that women's participation can contribute to better community engagement, better responses to gender-based violence, and better procedural justice outcomes via more empathetic policing practices (Rabe-Hemp, 2008; Brown & Silvestri, 2020). Despite these benefits, women remain grossly underrepresented in police bodies around the world, especially in South Asia where institutional and socio-cultural norms limiting women's participation are well entrenched in the police profession (Morash & Haarr, 2012). The institutional context is a key determinant of women police officers' professional experiences. Previous studies have identified gendered police cultures, unequal opportunities for training, discriminatory promotion systems and poor facilities for women in police work as systemic factors that affect women's performance in police work (Martin, 1980; Prenzler & Sinclair, 2013). Police organizations have traditionally been built around traits expected of men, which include relying on physical strength, risk-taking in work, and extended work hours, which disadvantages women and reduces their career advancement. This means that women tend to be overrepresented in clerical or 'soft policing' jobs, and are less likely to have leadership or operational roles – influencing their professional development and job satisfaction.

Socio-cultural norms are also a major barrier to women's involvement and progression in the police service. In developing settings, traditional gender norms still remain that women are responsible for the household and caregiving duties, which still results in work–family conflict (Morash & Haarr, 2012). Cultural expectations can contribute to role strain, organizational stress and decreased organizational commitment on the part of women officers. Moreover, stereotypes and doubts about women's competence in policing also contribute to this occupational segregation and restrict women's acceptance in operational policing positions (Brown & Silvestri, 2020). It is well understood that employee professional well-being is a critical factor in employee performance and

organizational sustainability. It encompasses perceived quality of professional life, work engagement, job satisfaction, and psychological well-being. In policing, job demand, violence, inadequate organizational support, and role ambiguity have repeatedly been linked to a decrease in well-being and an increase in burnout (Violanti et al., 2017). On the other hand, positive leadership, fair organizational policies and workplace environments have a great impact on officers' psychological resilience and job satisfaction. Policing career progression is closely tied to merit-based promotion systems, opportunities for professional development, and transparency of institutions. But studies have shown that women are often faced with "glass ceiling" situations in police departments, as informal networks, biased appraisal systems, and inadequate mentoring opportunities slow their promotions up the ranks (Prenzler & Sinclair, 2013; Brown & Silvestri, 2020). These structural inequalities can affect women's promotion and lead to uneven representation at the higher levels of the organization.

The study is based on Gender Theory and the role theory of Kahn et al (1964), which explain the professional challenges encountered by female police officers. Gender Theory emphasizes that policing is influenced by the socially constructed gender roles, which often place men in operational and leadership positions and women in caring and supportive roles, resulting in occupational segregation and restricted opportunities for women to advance their careers. According to Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964), role conflict and role ambiguity occur when expectations clash and are unclear within multiple roles, which can lead to stress, decreased professional wellbeing, and restricted career advancement for police women.

Although existing literature provides valuable insights into institutional and socio-cultural barriers in policing, most studies have examined these determinants in isolation. Very little empirical focus has been directed towards their joint impact on professional well-being and career progression, especially in rural policing environments in developing nations like Pakistan. Districts have unique administrative, cultural and social contexts that can exacerbate gender issues. Hence, there is a distinct need for empirical studies on institutional and socio-cultural conditions that would take a comprehensive view of the influence of both components on the professional health and progression of women police officers, taking into account the context of the country.

Research Hypotheses

H1: Discrimination, lack of promotion, and insufficient facilities significantly impact the professional performance and job fulfillment of women police officers in Bhakkar.

H2: The presence of socio-cultural norms and the traditional expectations of gender roles is a significant determinant of involvement, professional development, and decision-making autonomy of the women police officers in District Bhakkar.

H3: Gender-responsive e.g., (Women Police Stations, training programs, and supportive policies) positively affect the level of empowerment, confidence, and effectiveness of women police officers in the District of Bhakkar.

Methodology

The present study employed a quantitative research design and a descriptive cross-sectional approach to examine the organizational, socio-cultural and psychological factors affecting the performance of women police officers at District Bhakkar in Punjab, Pakistan. The quantitative approach was chosen to allow quantitative measurement of variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) such as gender discrimination, job satisfaction, career advancement, institutional support, and psychological well-being, as well as to analyze the relationship between these constructs. The study population included all 108 women police officers of District Bhakkar across operational units, women police stations and administrative offices of District Bhakkar. As the population was relatively small, a census sampling technique was employed, meaning that all officers who were eligible to be sampled were included in the study to

avoid sampling error and increase representativeness. The participants were those who had at least 6 months of service and gave informed consent, and male officers, newly recruited staff or those on extended leave or training were not included because of data relevance and reliability issues. A structured questionnaire was created using the five-point Likert scale adapted from the key domains of gender and policing research (UN Women, 2020) to gather data. The content of the instrument was determined to be valid using expert opinion; a pilot study was performed to improve the clarity of the instrument, and Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.82$) was taken as a measure of the internal consistency of the instrument (Field, 2018). The data were collected using face-to-face administration so that the data could be accurate and the response rates were high. Descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, and standard deviation) and chi-square tests were performed to examine the correlations between the important variables in the analytical data using SPSS version 25. Throughout the study, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were all upheld

Descriptive statistics

Table 1

Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Demographic Variable

Sr	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
1	Age		
	18–25 Years	24	22.2%
	26–30 Years	31	28.7%
	31–35 Years	27	25.0%
	36–40 Years	16	14.8%
	41 Years and Above	10	9.3%
2	Education		
	Matric	18	16.7%
	Intermediate	34	31.5%
	Bachelor	39	36.1%
	Master	13	12.0%
	Other	4	3.7%
3	Marital Status		
	Single	37	34.3%
	Married	58	53.7%
	Widowed	7	6.5%
	Divorced	6	5.5%
4	Having Children		
	Yes	64	59.3%
	No	44	40.7%
5	Length of Service		
	Less than 1 Year	14	13.0%
	1–3 Years	36	33.3%
	4–7 Years	41	38.0%
	More than 7 Years	17	15.7%
6	Rank of Respondents		
	Constable	69	63.9%
	Head Constable	24	22.2%
	ASI	11	10.2%
	Other	4	3.7%

Sr	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
7	Area of Deployment		
	Urban	26	24.1%
	Semi-Urban	39	36.1%
	Rural	43	39.8%
8	Residence in Posting District		
	Yes	82	75.9%
	No	26	24.1%
9	Duty Performed in other District		
	Yes	29	26.9%
	No	79	73.1%
10	Family Background		
	Rural	71	65.7%
	Urban	37	34.3%
11	Primary Breadwinner		
	Yes	46	42.6%
	No	62	57.4%

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic profile of the respondents, including age, education, marital status, family profile and professional experience. The results show that the age group of the women police officers of District Bhakkar was predominantly of young age, 26-30 years (28.7%) and 31-35 years (25.0%), indicating that the majority of the women police officers are in the early to mid stage of their careers. Regarding education, with a Bachelor's degree, over half of the population had a degree of education (36.1%), followed by intermediate education (31.5%), and a relatively small portion had a master's degree (12.0%) or other qualifications (3.7%). As for marital status, over half were married (53.7%) and 34.3% were single, which is indicative of the two-fold burden of work and family life, with 59.3% saying that, for them, work and family life are a dual burden because of children. With regard to work experience, the majority of respondents (38.0%) had 4-7 years of experience and 33.3% had 1-3 years of experience, indicating a focus on early to mid-career. The rank distribution shows that there is little representation in high ranks (63.9% were constables). The deployment pattern reveals that 39.8% were deployed in rural areas, 36.1% semi-urban and 24.1% in urban areas, which indicates the rural nature of policing in District Bhakkar. Furthermore, 75.9% were posted in their home district, indicating fewer mobility barriers. There was also a lack of career mobility, as most respondents did not have any prior experience of inter-district or inter-provincial transfers. Most of the respondents were from a rural family background (65.7%), which reflects the socio-cultural environment of the area. Lastly, 42.6% said they were the primary earner for their families, emphasizing the role they play in their finances in addition to their work.

Table 2

Institutional Challenges among Women Constables (N = 108)

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev	Weighted Score	Level of Agreement
Gender discrimination affects work	4.02	0.91	4.02×108=434.16	High
Lack of promotion opportunities	3.88	0.95	419.04	High
Poor workplace facilities	3.79	1.01	409.32	Moderate-High
Workplace harassment	3.95	0.88	426.60	High

Table 2 shows that women constables experience a high level of institutional challenges in the study area. Both gender discrimination ($M = 4.02$) and workplace harassment ($M = 3.95$) have a high agreement level, meaning that they are important to their work environment. Promotion opportunities ($M = 3.88$) and poor workplace facilities ($M = 3.79$) were also some of the issues reported as important. This is evidenced by the overall mean score ($M = 3.91$), which shows that institutional barriers are very common and have a significant impact on the work experiences of female constables.

Table 3

Chi-Square Test: Institutional Factors vs Job Satisfaction

Variable Pair	χ^2 Value	df	p-value	Cramer's V	Decision
Institutional factors $\times$ Job satisfaction	16.84	2	0.000	0.41	Significant

A chi-square analysis was used to explore the relationship between institutional factors and job satisfaction for women constables. The result shows that there is a significant association between the two variables ($\chi^2 (2, N = 108) = 16.84$, $p = 0.000$), and that the differences in level of job satisfaction are highly associated with institutional conditions. The value of the effect size (Cramer's $V = 0.41$) indicates the level of association between the organizational environment, policies, and organizational support in the institution and the job satisfaction of the respondents, which is moderate. Therefore, the hypothesis (H1) is accepted as the results indicated that good institutional conditions have a positive effect on the job satisfaction of police officers of Bhakkar district.

Table 4

Socio-Cultural Barriers ($N = 108$)

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev	Weighted Score	Level
Gender stereotyping	4.01	0.89	433.08	High
Family responsibility burden	3.92	0.93	423.36	High
Work-life imbalance	4.05	0.87	437.40	Very High
Career discouragement	3.78	0.99	408.24	Moderate-High

Table 4 shows that socio-cultural barriers significantly affect women constables' career progression in District Bhakkar. Strong pressure is put on domestic and societal expectations, as the most critical issues were work-life imbalance ($M = 4.05$), gender stereotyping ($M = 4.01$) and family responsibility burden ($M = 3.92$). Career discouragement ($M = 3.78$) and a moderate-to-high level were also reported. In general, the results show that the socio-cultural aspects play a significant role in affecting the professional development and career advancement of women officers.

Table 5

Chi-Square Test: Socio-Cultural Norms vs Career Development

Variable Pair	χ^2	df	p-value	Cramer's V	Decision
Socio-cultural norms $\times$ Career development	18.22	2	0.000	0.45	Significant

Table 5 shows a significant relationship between socio-cultural norms and career development among women constables in District Bhakkar ($\chi^2 = 18.22$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative

hypothesis is accepted. The Cramer's V value (0.45) shows a moderate to strong association between socio-cultural expectations and traditional gender roles and women's career progress, indicating that this relationship is significant. In general, these results support the notion that socio-cultural barriers are significant to promotion, leadership opportunities and professional development in the police department.

Table 6

Gender-Responsive Support Systems (N = 108)

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev	Weighted Score	Level
Training programs	3.62	1.02	390.96	Moderate
Mentorship access	3.48	1.05	375.84	Moderate
Leadership support	3.55	0.98	383.40	Moderate
Counseling services	3.40	1.10	367.20	Moderate-Low

Table 6 shows that gender-responsive support systems for women constables in District Bhakkar are at a moderate level. Partial institutional support was also observed with training programs (M = 3.62), leadership support (M = 3.55), and mentorship (M = 3.48). Counselling services were rated the lowest (M = 3.40), indicating low levels of psychological support. The overall results indicate that there is support, but it must be strengthened to a great extent.

Table 7

Chi-Square Test: Gender Policies vs Empowerment

Variable Pair	χ^2	Df	p-value	Cramer's V	Decision
Gender policies × Empowerment	13.76	2	0.002	0.36	Significant

The Chi-square analysis was used to test the relationship between the implementation of gender policies and empowerment of women constables in District Bhakkar. The results showed the relationship between the two variables is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 13.76$, df = 2, p = 0.002). The p-value is less than the commonly used level of significance of 0.05; thus, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. In addition, the association between gender equality policies and empowerment reflected by the value of Cramer's V (0.36) was of a moderate level. This means there is a positive relationship between implementation and presence of gender responsive policies and the strengthening of the role of women constables in the police. The results suggest that with supportive organizational policies, the self-confidence, participation, decision-making ability and professional development of women officers in the organizational workplace can be improved.

Discussion

The present study revealed that there is still a problem of institutional discrimination faced by women police officers in District Bhakkar. The relatively high mean scores for gender discrimination (M = 4.02) and workplace harassment (M = 3.95) suggest that policing remains an institution with a masculine culture that favors male officers and disadvantages female officers. Limited promotion opportunities (M = 3.88) also indicate structural barriers to women's advancement in the hierarchy of the police. The findings have indicated that despite the growth of women's participation in the police in Pakistan, they do not enjoy the same degree of equality in terms of power, recognition and career growth in their roles. Decades of research on policing in South Asian settings have documented similar trends of institutional exclusion and gendered disadvantage on the job (Rabe-Hemp, 2008; Brown & Silvestri, 2020; Hussain et al., 2020).

The study also emphasizes that the quality of facilities in the workplace has a profound impact on women officers' work lives. Moderate dissatisfaction in relation to basic amenities – such as lack of separate restrooms, changing areas, gender-sensitive working arrangements, etc. ($M = 3.79$) suggests weak institutional responsiveness to women's needs. These infrastructural deficits lead to feelings of exclusion and a decrease in organizational commitment. Previous studies have repeatedly found the adverse impact of job satisfaction, retention, and mental health in police work environments that are not sensitive to gender (Silvestri, 2017). Such circumstances ensure that there is a strong sense that policing institutions are still built on a male occupation model.

One of the most significant socio-cultural issues that were identified to influence the lives of women police officers was socio-cultural constraints. Women officers face dual pressures from work and home, with high mean scores for work–life imbalance ($M = 4.05$), gender stereotyping ($M = 4.01$), and family responsibility burden ($M = 3.92$). Women's roles in policing can sometimes be regarded as socially inappropriate, restricting their social mobility, authority and acceptance in front-facing roles, especially in conservative social settings. Female police officers also face a "double burden" of work, as evidenced by global evidence, which refers to the combination of work in the police and the care responsibilities expected by female officers, which typically fall to their wives, mothers or girlfriends (UN Women, 2020; Heidensohn, 2015). These expectations have a negative impact on job performance and may cause emotional stress and role conflict.

The results further highlight that institutional and socio-cultural constraints are significant challenges to women's career progression. The concern for reduced career advancement as a result of gender ($M = 3.78$) continues to be a problem, as biased evaluation systems and limited access to career advancement paths persist. Additionally, the statistically significant relationship between socio-cultural norms and career development ($\chi^2 = 18.22$, $p < 0.001$, $V = 0.45$) shows that the socio-cultural norms and career development are related and that this relationship can be explained by cultural expectations and organizational practices. This aligns with research indicating that informal institutional processes and patriarchal norms are interlinked and both hinder the advancement of women in the policing institutions, especially in developing countries (Brown & Heidensohn, 2000; Ahmad, 2022).

As for the institutional supports, moderate ranks indicate a level of gender responsiveness in the police department ($M = 3.51$). There are some structures in place for supporting the well-being of employees, but the relatively low satisfaction level with counselling and psychological services ($M = 3.40$) indicates that employee well-being systems are not sufficiently developed. The strong correlation between institutional support and the confidence of the women officers ($\chi^2 = 13.76$, $p = 0.002$, Cramer's $V = 0.36$) shows that institutional support can influence the confidence of the women officers and enhance their participation. The moderate effect size, however, indicates that interventions are not sufficiently strong to date. This is consistent with the study conducted by Ahmad (2020), which found that gender-inclusive policies in Punjab Police are poorly implemented at the district level and do not have any tangible effect.

These results provide a clear theoretical basis for Gender Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), which suggests that gender expectations are socially constructed and influence gender roles and create the impression of women's fit for leadership. The lower status of women police officers in District Bhakkar is an outcome of the embedded notion of policing as a male domain, which constrains professional recognition and advancement of women.

The findings also support the Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964), which states that role conflict occurs when a person is confronted with competing demands from the various roles they play. In this study, the situation of women policemen is characterized by a conflict between work and traditional roles, which results in emotional fatigue, stress and low job satisfaction. Such a dual-role conflict is a documented predictor of occupational strain for women in challenging occupational roles (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

In general, it is found that the study area police officers (women) are still working in institutional and socio-cultural environments which are structurally unequal to women. For women, there is still a lack of empowerment, confidence and career progression due to deep-embedded patriarchal norms and practices, despite the policy-level efforts being undertaken for gender inclusion. The results indicate that there is a need for thorough institutional changes such as clear promotion procedures, more effective harassment mechanisms, gender-specific facilities and psychological support services.

From a social perspective, it is crucial to have ongoing awareness and sensitization campaigns to break the stereotypical notions and to promote the normalization of women's role in law enforcement. To ensure real gender equality in policing, a two-pronged strategy is needed, one to reform the institutions and the other to transform the socio-cultural norms.

Recommendations

For the better implementation of gender-responsive policies, the Punjab Police is recommended to implement gender responsive policies with an effective monitoring and accountability system so that the policy for equality measures can be implemented effectively. The promotion system should be clear, fair and based on merit without any gender bias, and female officers must be fairly represented in decision-making and evaluation processes to enhance their career advancement opportunities. The infrastructure in the workplace should also be improved with separate facilities for women, safe and supportive working conditions, gender sensitive duty assignments, etc. Effective anti-harassment systems should be in place that provide confidential reporting and have procedures in place to respond to workplace harassment in a timely fashion. Further, it is recommended that work–life balance measures like flexible scheduling and family-friendly measures should be implemented to minimize role conflict experienced by women officers. Regular gender sensitivity training programs should be carried out to encourage an organization with respect and inclusiveness. The psychological counselling and stress management service shall also be enhanced to provide mental health support to female employees. Last but not least, at the community level, messages are required which break the cycle of traditional gender stereotyping and promote acceptance of women in policing.

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