

Does Leadership Matter? Exploring the Role of Transformational Leadership in Strengthening Women-Friendly HRM Practices for Career Progression.

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Abstract: *Women's career progression is still a critical issue for organizations, especially in societies where their structural, cultural, and institutional environments can hinder women's access to leadership roles and higher professional positions. While more and more organizations are implementing women-friendly HR policies, the effectiveness of such measures is highly dependent on the practice of fair implementation, with managerial support playing a significant role. This research aims to explore the relationship between women friendly HRM practices and women career progression while considering transformational leadership as a moderator. The quantitative research design was adopted and data was gathered from 200 working females who were working in various formal organizations in Quetta, Balochistan, Pakistan. Convenience sampling was used because there was no existing sampling frame. The data was analyzed using SPSS Version 27 by reliability analysis, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and Hayes PROCESS Macro Model-1. The results showed that women friendly HRM practices have positive and significant effect on women's career progression. The findings further indicate that transformational leadership enhance the affect of women friendly HRM practices on career progression of women by supporting, motivating, recognizing and giving developmental advice. The research highlights the importance of equitable promotion practices, flexible work policies, mentorship programs, equal opportunity initiatives, and leadership that promotes and supports women's career development to minimize obstacles and better advance women in the workplace. The findings indicate that in order to advance gender equality and to bolster women's career progression, and engagement in higher organizational positions, inclusive HRM systems is needed. The study contributes to the overall discussion about equality at work, HRM for inclusion and sustainable organizational development and their connection to SDG 5 (Gender equality) and SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth).*

Keywords: Women-friendly HRM practices; transformational leadership; career progression; gender equality.

1. Introduction

Gender inequality is still one of the significant issues in the organizations and society that limits the career development of women in various professions. Despite the introduction of national policies to promote gender equality, international development agendas, and organizational diversity initiatives, women are still underrepresented in leadership, senior management, promotion opportunities and career advancement positions. This ongoing inequality indicates that despite formal commitments to women's equality, there is still some way to go before these goals are translated into tangible outcomes in the workplace, as stated by Rasheed et al. (2024) and Agarwal et al. (2025). The situation is even more critical when the structures, policies, and cultural practices of organizations remain more conducive to the advancement of men rather than women (Ketchiwou & Dzansi, 2023; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

There are a number of barriers at the individual, organizational and institutional levels that impact women's career progression. Kossek and Buzzanell (2018) said that a conflict between work and family life, along with organization expectations, can be a problem for women's career development. Also, gender biases, inequitable promotion practices, mobility restrictions, lack of access to networks, and unequal development opportunities are still barriers to women's access to leadership positions (Ketchiwou & Dzansi, 2023; Shrestha et al., 2024). Thus, women's underrepresentation in leadership is not just an individual problem; it is a broader issue of systemic change which requires organizational and structural change (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024, Rasheed et al., 2024).

The “glass ceiling” effect, which involves an invisible obstacle that keeps women from moving up to top-level jobs despite their relevant education, experience and ability, is also closely related with gender disparity in labor force participation. Ketchiwou and Dzansi (2023) pointed out that women are still held back in their upward mobility by biased promotion systems, informal male dominated networks and the absence of leadership support. Likewise, Fang et al. (2021) pointed out that women are still underrepresented in networks and leadership opportunities in many organizations. This can result in women's career development being slower, less predictable, and less flexible compared to men's, particularly in organizations that have hierarchical structures and traditional gender norms (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Shrestha et al., 2024).

To overcome these difficulties, several organizations have taken up women friendly HRM practices to ensure fairness, inclusion and equal opportunities in the workplace. Support for women's advancement, such as mentoring programs, equal training opportunities, and career development support, were among the practices that were identified as important by Leišytė et al. (2022) and Joo et al. (2023). Other HRM practices that are women-friendly are flexible working arrangements, fair promotion policies, family-friendly policies, objective performance appraisal systems, and leadership development opportunities (Rasheed et al., 2024; Kumari & Kaur, 2025; Odunga et al., 2024). These practices are designed to minimize gender barriers and establish organizational conditions to encourage women participation, promotion, and development.

HRM is strategic in the promotion of gender equality due to the fact that HR policies impact recruitment, selection, training, appraisal, promotion, remuneration and employee development systems. Khalil (2016) highlighted the importance of gender sensitive HRM systems in minimizing gender discriminatory practices and better opportunities for women to participate in careers. In the same way, Garcia et al. (2023) asserted that inclusive HR policies are crucial for enhancing equality and fairness in organizational systems. Hence, it is important to see that women-friendly HRM practices are not just for individual employees but also a

strategic approach to fortify diversity, equity, and inclusion in organizations (Rasheed et al., 2024; Menzies et al., 2025).

But the presence of women friendly HRM policies does not mean the career development of women. If HRM practices are to have significant employee outcomes, they need to be done consistently and communicated clearly (Bowen & Ostroff 2004). Nishii et al (2008) also said that employee perception of HR practice is a key determinant of how fair, accessible and effective the HR practices are. Therefore, even if a gender-friendly policy is put in place, its impact may be minimal if it is not backed by management or is not fairly applied (Wright & Nishii, 2004; Ketchiwou & Dzansi, 2023).

The Ability–Motivation–Opportunity framework is an important theoretical lens to understand a potential contribution of women-friendly HRM practices to women's career advancement. According to Malik and Lenka (2019), HRM practices can help to enhance the capabilities, motivation, participation and growth of employees. For women's careers, examples of ability-enhancing practices are training, mentoring, coaching and professional development. Motivation-enhancing practices could include fair reward and recognition measures along with promotion systems, and opportunity-enhancing practices could encompass flexible working, leadership development programs, availability of networks, and involvement in decision-making processes (Rasheed et al., 2024; Kumari & Kaur, 2025; Menzies et al., 2025).

Women friendly HRM practices that directly target women's structural and procedural barriers in the workplace can boost women's career progression. Joo et al. (2023) proposed that mentoring programs can help women develop their careers, access professional networks, and be seen. Leišytė et al. (2022) also pointed out that a fair promotion and development process can help to minimise gender imbalance in career progression. However, flexible working and family-friendly policies may also be useful to help women balance work and family commitments without compromising their professional development (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Rasheed et al., 2024). Women's professional capacity can also be enhanced through equal training and development, which can prepare women for leadership positions (Menzies et al., 2025; Odunga et al., 2024).

Women-friendly HRM practices are significant but leadership behavior is vital to ensure that the practices are effective rather than symbolic. Canterino et al. (2024) stated that supportive leadership is essential for inclusive HR policies to be effectively implemented. Transformational leadership is especially crucial since it encourages empowerment, inspiration, fairness, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation in the workplace. Kim and Shin (2017) said that the transformational leaders can build the work environment that can motivate and support employee development. As the women's career progression is concerned, the transformational leaders can break gender stereotype, acknowledge women's potential, involve them in the business, and provide them leadership opportunities (Sista & Utama, 2019; Farzana & Charoensukmongkol, 2024).

Transformational leadership also can enhance the association between women friendly HRM practices and women's career progress by providing just and equitable application of HR policies. Loghman et al. (2024) highlighted the role of leadership support in shaping employees' perceptions of organizational policies and opportunities. Gender-sensitive and inclusive leadership could result in increased female access to mentoring, flexible working arrangements, promotion opportunities and leadership development without fear of judgement or negative career impacts. On the other hand, women-friendly HRM practices can fail if they are not supported by the leadership, remain hierarchical and are dominated by males (Ketchiwou & Dzansi, 2023; Garcia et al., 2023).

In developing and traditional contexts, the lack of representation of women in leadership is especially significant. Despite the increased participation of women in education and employment, their advancement to senior jobs in professional positions remains limited by cultural and organizational constraints, as noted by Thelma and Ngulube (2024). In the same way, Kalaitzi et al. (2019) and Fang et al. (2021) reported that the opportunities women have for professional development, decision-making and career-building networks vary from men by sector. The patterns indicate that formal organizational structures as well as informal workplace practices have impacts on women's career development (Ketchiwou & Dzansi, 2023; Garcia et al., 2023).

This is particularly important in the case of Balochistan, Pakistan, where women are highly constrained by socio-cultural, institutional and organizational barriers for their career progression. Women engage less with organizational life due to traditional gender roles, cultural expectations, limited professional mobility and limited access to workplace networks. Kossek and Buzzanell (2018) emphasized that the work–family demands and lack of institutional support can make women's careers even more difficult. These barriers can hinder women's access to employment opportunities, leadership roles, training, mentorship, and long-term career development in Balochistan (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024; Ketchiwou & Dzansi, 2023; Shrestha et al., 2024).

While awareness of gender-sensitive and women friendly workplace practices in Pakistan is growing, so is its implementation, which varies by region and industry. Rasheed et al. (2024) proposed that if feminine-friendly HRM practices are properly implemented and supported it could lead to improvement in women career outcomes. But in Balochistan, the effectiveness of these practices can be limited due to weak institutional enforcement, male dominated leadership, sociocultural resistance and limited awareness of gender-inclusive employment policies (Kumari & Kaur, 2025). Even if organizations do implement flexible work arrangements, mentoring programs, or fair promotion policies, women may not reap the benefits unless the workplace culture and the way leaders behave in their jobs support these programs (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii et al., 2008).

Although the empowerment of women and gender-inclusive HRM are receiving growing attention, women's career development in Balochistan is still limited. Women's access to promotion, leadership, training, mentoring, and networks to enhance their careers is still restricted by structural and cultural barriers. Canterino et al., (2024) highlighted that inclusive HR practices can either be hindered or enhanced by leadership behavior. Loghman et al., (2024) also noted that the presence of inclusive policies is not enough to affect employees' positive outcomes; it needs organizational leadership to make it happen. Thus, policies are not enough and should be complemented by transformative leadership and an organizational culture that embraces diversity and inclusivity to ensure real impact (Garcia et al., 2023; Rasheed et al., 2024).

Women friendly HRM practices, gender equality, leadership and women career development have been examined in the past, however, these issues have been examined separately. Bak et al. (2021) suggested that both leadership and HRM need to be investigated together to gain a better understanding of organizational outcomes. Similarly, Canterino et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of leadership in driving change from inclusive policies to action. HRM studies are mainly on designing policies and implementing, and leadership studies are mostly on the behavior of the leader without involving HR systems and the growth of women's careers in the study. This separation restricts the comprehension of the combined impact of HRM practices and leadership on women's career progression, especially in culturally and institutionally restricted settings (Garcia et al., 2023; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

Hence, the influence of women friendly HRM practice on women career advancement in Balochistan and the role of transformational leadership in this relationship is targeted in this study. Rasheed et al., (2024) concluded that implementing practices like fair promotion, training, mentoring, flexible work arrangements, and family-supportive policies can be used to enhance women's career outcomes. In a similar vein, Farzana and Charoensukmongkol (2024) proposed that transformational leadership can contribute to women's empowerment by fostering an empowering and equitable work environment. This study adopts the perspective that the transformational leadership enhances the effectiveness of women-friendly HRM practices by fostering fairness in the implementation, empowering women, providing support and allowing for their inclusion (Kim & Shin, 2017; Canterino et al., 2024).

This study primarily aims to examine the effect of women friendly HRM practices on women promotion and career advancement in Balochistan. In particular, the study investigates the impact of fair promotion policies, flexible working, mentoring, family friendly policies, equal development opportunities and leadership support on women's advancement in the organisation. Supportive leadership is a key factor that can foster women's engagement and development, as emphasized by Sista and Utama (2019). Furthermore, this study examines how transformational leadership can play a pivotal role in fortifying the relationship between women-friendly HRM practices and women's career advancement through fair implementation, empowerment, and inclusive workplace behavior (Canterino et al., 2024; Farzana & Charoensukmongkol, 2024).

This work is of theoretical and practical importance. Theoretically, it helps to add information to the field of gender equality, HRM, leadership, and women's career development because it brings together women-friendly HRM practices and transformational leadership in one model. Garcia et al. (2023) stated that sustainable equality requires gender-inclusive organizational systems, and Bak et al. (2021) highlighted the need for the integration of leadership and HRM views. In practical terms, the study could contribute to the creation of better HRM systems that will facilitate the career progression of women and lessen the gender gap in the workplace (Rasheed et al., 2024; Menzies et al., 2025).

Finally, although formal equality policies are important, women's career development should not be entirely based on them, but on supportive HRM systems, on fair organizational procedures, and on leadership that actively drives inclusion and empowerment. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) stated that HRM systems should be communicated clearly, consistently and supported by organizational leaders. Similarly, transformational leadership can facilitate the role of women friendly HRM practices in facilitating opportunities for women's career advancement. Understanding the interaction between women-friendly HRM practices and transformational leadership is therefore crucial to facilitate sustainable progress in women's advancement and to eliminate deep-seated gender inequalities in Balochistan as highlighted by Rasheed et al., (2024); Ketchiwou & Dzansi, (2023); and Thelma & Ngulube, (2024).

2. Literature Review

Organizational systems, leadership behavior and the application of gender-inclusive HRM practices can have a significant impact on the career path of women in organizations. Women's advancement depends not only on their education, skills or professional abilities, but on the organization's policies, promotion systems, leadership, mentoring opportunities, flexible work systems and fairness in career development. According to Rasheed et al., (2024), women-friendly HRM practices can help minimize the hurdles and enhance the access of women to career promotion opportunities. Likewise, Ketchiwou and Dzansi (2023) provided a description that organizational culture, workplace structures, and leadership support influence women's career development. While some strides have been made towards gender equality in

many organisations, women still encounter challenges including gender stereotypes, gender-biased promotion practices, work–family balance, lack of access to networks and male-dominated leadership (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Shrestha et al., 2024; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Thus, women-friendly HRM practices and transformational leadership are crucial aspects in facilitating women's career advancement and alleviating gender inequality within organizations (Joo et al., 2023; Canterino et al., 2024).

2.1 Women Friendly HRM Practices and Career Progression

Women friendly human resource management practices are those organization policies which address women's inclusion, equality and career development in the organization. These are fair promotion practices, family and maternity-friendly practices, flexible working practices, mentoring and sponsorship programmes, equal access to training, transparent performance assessment and gender-inclusive career development practices. Leišytė et al. (2022) stated that by providing equal training and development opportunities, women can enhance their professional skills and have greater opportunities for career advancement. Likewise, Joo et al. (2023) highlighted that mentoring and career support play a crucial role in boosting women's confidence, visibility, and leadership preparedness. These HRM practices are important because they can contribute to removing structural barriers that hinder women's access to leadership roles and opportunities for career advancement (Khalil, 2016; Biswas et al., 2016; Rasheed et al., 2024).

Women-friendly HRM practices can also contribute to the promotion of gender equality by incorporating the principles of Equal Opportunity in all HRM practices including recruitment, selection, promotion, training, compensation and performance appraisal. Garcia et al. (2023) pointed out that gender-inclusive HRM systems can help minimize discrimination and ensure fairness in organizational decisions. Whereas, if HR policies are designed appropriately and implemented fairly, women have a better chance of equal opportunities for promotion and professional development. Rasheed et al. (2024) also proposed that women-friendly HRM practices can help in the reduction of gender bias since they will be evaluated based on their competence, performance, and potential, instead of the traditional gender norms. As noted in the literature, these practices are especially significant in societies that have cultural norms, familial pressures, and geographical limitations that exacerbate barriers for women's career growth (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

The most significant HRM practices that help women to balance work and family are flexible working and family-friendly policies. Pas et al. (2011) determined flexible work, and family-responsive policy, can contribute to women's job continuity and retention. Likewise, Park and Park (2025) and Essandoh et al. (2023) found that maternity support, childcare facilities, and family-friendly policies have a positive impact on promoting women's career opportunities, particularly in challenging industries like healthcare and academia. Such policies are very significant as there are many times when women face break in their careers on account of domestic duties and society pressure. Additionally, Bodkin and Fleming (2019) described how the “leaky pipeline” phenomenon of women dropping out of or decelerating their professional paths to senior management can be minimized through gender-sensitive support systems.

Another important characteristic of women friendly HRM practices is the importance of mentoring and sponsoring which gives guidance, job exposure, knowledge about the organization and access to influential decision makers to women. Kumari and Kaur (2025) reported that mentoring assists women with an understanding of the requirements for promotion, workplace politics and leadership expectations. Joo et al. (2023) also described that sponsorship can help women's advancement through their active recommendation and advocacy for women in making promotion-related decisions. The practices are particularly relevant with regards to the ‘glass ceiling’ that still hinders capable and experienced women

from accessing senior leadership positions. The formal rules, informal barriers in the organization, biased perception of leadership and unequal access to networks are all barriers that limit women's progress in their careers as the glass ceiling persists (Ketchiwou & Dzansi, 2023; Kumari & Kaur, 2025).

The Ability–Motivation–Opportunity framework can be helpful to explain the theory behind women friendly HRM practices and the impact on women's career progression. Malik, Lenka (2019) said that HRM practices boost employee's outcomes through enhancing their capabilities, boosting their motivation, and opportunities for participation and development. In terms of women's work, training and mentoring can enhance women's skills and abilities, fair reward and promotion systems can boost women's motivation, and flexible working and leadership opportunities can open up avenues for women's professional development. According to Rasheed et al. (2024), women-friendly HRM practices can positively impact women's career outcomes by fostering their competence, confidence, and opportunities within the organization. Thus, it can be inferred that women-friendly HRM practices can positively influence women's career progress when they improve women's skills, encourage women to pursue their careers and offer them meaningful career progression opportunities (Menzies et al., 2025; Rasheed et al., 2024).

The implementing of women friendly HRM practices depends on the sincerity, fairness and consistency while implementing. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) stated that HRM systems should be effective if clearly communicated, consistently applied and strongly supported by management. Nishii et al. (2008) also pointed out that the perceived HR practices influence the extent to which HR practices are perceived as fair, available and helpful. Even otherwise well-designed HR policies can be ineffective in supporting women's career progression if they are not implemented transparently or if they are not supported by a gender-equality friendly organizational culture. Wright and Nishii (2004) noted that HR practices have an impact on the employees based on the way that they are implemented and the way that they are experienced in the workplace. Therefore, it is essential to ensure transparency in the implementation, leadership commitment, and accountability in order to reap the benefits of women-friendly HRM practices from women.

The literature indicates that gender sensitive practices in HRM are positively correlated with satisfaction, retention, promotion and career mobility of women in the long run. Deniz et al. (2012) demonstrated that positive HR practices can enhance women's experience in the workplace and career continuity. Rasheed et al., (2024) further reported that by providing inclusive training systems, family-supportive policies, and formal mentoring programs, there will be an improvement in the likelihood of women's career progression. Conversely, discriminatory practices, inadequate HR implementation, and limited development opportunities can result in the stagnation of skills, low morale, and limited career advancement for women employees (Ketchiwou & Dzansi, 2023; Kronberg et al., 2024). From this literature, it can be expected that women friendly HRM practices will build supportive organization in which women will be able to overcome the gender barriers and get better career opportunity.

H1: Women friendly HRM practices positively influence women's career progression.

2.2 Transformational Leadership and Women's Career Progression

Transformational leadership is another form of leadership that motivates employees by idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. Transformational leaders, described by Kim and Shin (2017), inspire their staff, provide guidance and assistance to them, invite staff to participate in decision-making, and help them to perform at their best. Canterino et al. (2024) also posited that transformational

leadership can foster a more inclusive and empowering work environment. Transformational leadership plays a pivotal role in women's career advancement by breaking down gender barriers, fostering women's engagement, and ensuring access to leadership roles (Sista & Utama, 2019; Farzana & Charoensukmongkol, 2024).

Fostering women's career progression often requires leadership by those who explicitly promote fairness, inclusion, and equal access to career opportunities. Joo & Nam (2019) proposed that supportive leadership may enhance employees' confidence and involvement in organizational development. Likewise, Novianti (2017) stated that inclusive leaders can help to deconstruct barriers in the workplace and help employee development. Women can be supported through transformational leadership by being recognized for their potential, being encouraged to participate, challenging gender-biased norms, and by establishing an environment where women feel valued, trusted and motivated to pursue promotion and leadership. Thus, transformational leadership has a direct impact on enhancing women's confidence in their careers, visibility in the workplace, and engagement with the organization.

Another way in which transformational leadership can benefit women is by improving their access to developmental opportunities. By thinking in terms of the individual, a leader can find out what kind of support that woman needs to succeed in her career so she can be coached, given feedback, mentored and challenged with more difficult assignments. Jauhari et al., (2024) supported the argument that leader support is important in access to professional development opportunities and Poetz and Volmer, (2023) emphasized the importance of leader support for career growth. Whether inspirational motivation leads women to establish ambitious career goals, or intellectual stimulation leads them to be involved in decision making, problem solving and innovation, is a matter of choice. These leadership behaviors can help to boost women's confidence and readiness to take on more senior roles (Kim & Shin, 2017; Canterino et al., 2024).

In male-dominated workplaces and workplaces with a hierarchical structure, leadership support plays an important role, as women may not be part of informal networks, decision-making processes, and leadership opportunities. Ketchiwou and Dzansi (2023) stated that women are generally held back by the male-dominated organizational structures, which limit their access to influential networks and visibility at the higher levels. Garcia et al. (2023) also highlighted the need for inclusive organizational practices to minimize gender barriers. Such workplaces may benefit from having transformational leaders, who champion justice, decrease biased practices and enhance the visibility and recognition of women. In traditional settings like Balochistan, women's career mobility and leadership engagement could be affected by sociocultural and institutional factors (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024; Shrestha et al., 2024).

Leadership also plays a key role in the realization of gender-inclusive HRM practices as effective organizational practices or symbolic policies. According to Bowen and Ostroff (2004), HR practices need to be properly implemented and communicated to make sure that the desired outcomes are achieved. Nishii et al. (2008) also suggested that HR practices have to be seen by employees as fair and available practices to be successful. So, new strategies such as fair promotion policies, flexible work arrangements, mentoring programs, or family-friendly policies might not be effective for women if leaders are not actively encouraging women, or women are afraid of repercussions for using them. Transformational leaders can help narrow this divide by clearly advocating for women-friendly policies and by making sure these policies are applied in an equitable manner (Canterino et al., 2024; Coun et al., 2021).

In addition, transformational leadership can foster a corporate environment of trust, fairness, inclusion and empowerment. According to Sista and Utama (2019), transformational leaders provide empowerment to their employees, promote participation and boost their confidence. Farzana and Charoensukmongkol (2024) also stated that transformational leadership could help

the development of women by fostering a supportive and equal work environment. Transformational leaders can improve women's access to social capital, organizational support and career-enhancing opportunities by mentoring women, visibility of their contributions, and participation in decision making within an organization. These leadership attributes can boost women's self-efficacy, presence, and preparation for leadership (Trinkenreich et al., 2022; Yao & Ma, 2024).

From the literature reviewed, it is expected that transformational leadership will have a positive impact on career progression of women. An inclusive environment which supports women's development, discrimination reduction and enhances promotion and access to leadership opportunities can be created by transformational leaders. Canterino et al. (2024) stated that transformational leadership can facilitate inclusive change in organization's by means of fairness, empowerment and participation. Thus, transformational leadership is a factor that is important in the organization to support women's career development and promote gender equality in the workplace.

H2: The role of transformational leadership is positively affecting women's career progression.

2.3 Moderating role of Transformational Leadership in the relationship between Women friendly HRM Practices and Women's Career Progression.

If implemented fairly in the organization with the support of the leadership commitment, women-friendly HRM practices can help in enhancing women's career progression. But HRM policies can be ineffective if leaders don't translate formal policies into actual support in the workplace. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) suggested that HRM systems will be more effective when they are done consistently and effectively communicated. Wright and Nishii (2004) also outlined that HR practices effectiveness rely on how employees encounter them at the workplace. Thus, transformational leadership can be considered as a mechanism that can enhance the positive link between women-friendly HRM practices and women's career progression by implementing HRM practices fairly, consistently, and inclusively (Canterino et al., 2024; Rasheed et al., 2024).

Transformational leaders can act as facilitators, who can make formal HR policies practical support for women's careers. For instance, mentoring policies are more successful if leaders actively promote women's participation and link them with influential mentors. Mentoring systems can be employed to enhance the career advancement of women, providing them greater visibility and career guidance as suggested by Joo et al. (2023). Kumari and Kaur (2025) also reported that women's access to promotion opportunities can be enhanced by sponsorship and leadership support. When leaders don't punish or stigmatize women for using flexible work policies, these policies are also more beneficial. In the same vein, fair promotion policies are likely to be more beneficial to women when leaders are not gender-biased in their promotions, but use objective promotion criteria (Ketchiwou & Dzansi, 2023; Garcia et al., 2023).

The AMO framework is also used to explain the moderating effect for transformational leadership. The ability, motivation and opportunity that women-friendly HRM practices give women is further enhanced by transformational leadership that creates a supportive work environment that allows women to avail opportunities without feeling discriminated and excluded. Malik and Lenka (2019) found that HRM practices are effective when they enhance the ability, motivation and opportunity of employees. Rasheed et al (2024) also contended that the adoption of women-friendly HRM practices can help enhance women's career outcomes in conjunction with inclusive organizational systems. As such, transformational leadership is seen to be a boosting force for the impact of women-friendly HRM practices, including those of fairness, empowerment, and career development (Canterino et al., 2024; Menzies et al., 2025).

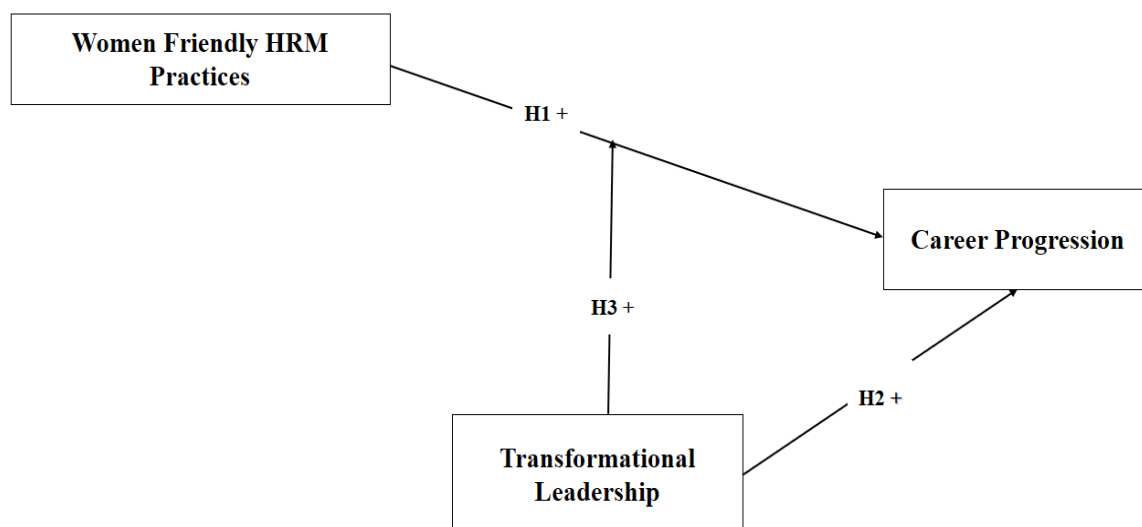
A higher level of transformational leadership is more likely to help women-friendly HRM practices lead to positive career outcomes. Kim and Shin (2017) described that transformational leaders motivate employees by providing a positive and inspiring workplace. Farzana and Charoensukmongkol (2024) also proposed that the concept of transformational leadership can enhance women's confidence and engagement in professional development. With clear leadership support for gender equality, women may feel more comfortable with the policies in place and take part in training, mentoring and leadership development. Conversely, in the absence of transformational leadership, women-friendly HRM practices could be perceived as unattainable, inconsistent, or not supported by management (Nishii et al., 2008; Ketchiwou & Dzansi, 2023).

The influence of transformational leadership in Balochistan is potentially significant as women's career advancement can be influenced by sociocultural norms, institutional barriers, limited mobility, and access to professional networks. Thelma and Ngulube (2024) noted that women's progress in traditional settings is hindered by cultural and organizational challenges. Structural barriers to women's access to career opportunities continue to be highlighted as well (Shrestha et al., 2024). In these situations, women-friendly HRM practices are insufficient without the support of leaders in implementing these practices and establishing a fair, inclusive and empowering culture in the workplace.

Hence it is expected that women-friendly HRM practices will have a positive correlation with women's career progression which will be further enhanced by transformational leadership. Canterino et al. (2024) stated that transformational leaders can foster inclusive organizational change by engaging people, promoting fairness, and challenging discrimination. Rasheed et al. (2024) also concluded that the effectiveness of women friendly HRM practices is related to the proper implementation and support from the organizational level. It is, therefore, expected that the impact of women-friendly HRM practices on women's career progression will be greater at high level of transformational leadership.

H3: The relationship between women friendly HRM practices and women's career progression is positive and is moderated by the Transformational leadership.

2.4 Conceptual Model



3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study used a deductive approach, with hypotheses being derived from previous empirical research and theories and tested using survey data. The study design was a cross-sectional survey design, as a snapshot of responses was used. Setia, (2016) stated that cross sectional design is suitable if researchers want to find out relations among variables during a given time and in limited population. Thus, this design was appropriate to study the relationship among women friendly HRM practices, transformational leadership and women's career progression. Ability–Motivation–Opportunity framework was used conceptually to guide the study. Appelbaum et al. (2000) elaborated that HRM practices can have a positive impact on employee outcomes through enhancing employee capacities, employee motivation, employee participation and employee development. For the purpose of the present study, women friendly HRM practices were taken as the organizational practices which may facilitate the career progression of women and the transformational leadership was taken as a moderating variable which may enhance the relationship between women friendly HRM practices and women career progression.

3.2 Measures and Instrument

Data were obtained using a structured questionnaire that was derived from validated measurement scales. In quantitative studies of organizations, Hinkin (1998) stressed the importance of applying existing instruments to enhance the reliability and content validity of the study. A 20 item scale developed by Chiu and Ng (2001) was used to measure women friendly HRM practices. This scale focused on the level of supportive HRM practices offered by organizations such as flexible working opportunities, promotion opportunities, family-friendly policies, and career development support for women. Answers were recorded on a 5-point scale (1 = To a Little Extent to 5 = To a Great Extent).

The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (20 items) created by Bass and Avolio (1995) was used to measure transformational leadership. This scale measured four key dimensions of transformational leadership: inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation and idealized influence. Women's career progression was assessed using a five item scale adapted from Ng et al., (2005) which measured career progression, perceived career advancement, promotion opportunities, professional growth, and career development. Both transformational leadership and women's career progression were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that was self-administered. The questionnaire was given online and on paper to boost accessibility and response rate. Mixed-mode survey distribution can be helpful if the population of interest does not have equal access to both digital and non-digital survey modes or when access to the field is restricted, as Dillman et al. (2014) reported. The questionnaire was split in two sections. Demographic data (age, education, work experience, type of organization, job position) was gathered through the first section. The second section comprised of measurement items of women friendly HRM practices, transformational leadership, and women career progression. All the respondents were informed that the study is conducted for academic purpose before participation. The sample consisted of only volunteers and confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents were guaranteed. Explain these steps were taken to promote honest responses and to minimize response bias.

3.4 Population and Sampling

The study population comprises of working women employed in banks, NGO, retail organizations and real estate organizations in the formal sectors of Quetta Balochistan. Convenience sampling technique was adopted as a complete and updated list of all the eligible working women in these sectors was not available. Saunders et al. (2019) provided that non-probability sampling is appropriate when access, time and/or organizational permission are limitations. Convenience sampling was thus deemed suitable to choose the respondents as they were accessible, willing to participate and relevant to the research topic. The findings from convenience sampling may not be statistically generalizable but Etikan et al. (2016) argued that such sampling is acceptable in field based organizational research when access to the target population is difficult. A total of 200 respondents completed the questionnaire. This sample size was deemed suitable for quantitative analysis such as correlation, regression and moderation testing. Field (2009) said that bigger samples means more stable statistical estimates and Plonsky and Gonulal (2015) stressed the need to have a sufficient sample size for multivariate analysis to be used in applied research.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were collected and then analyzed in SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were used to describe the demographic profile of the respondents. Second, the internal consistencies and reliability of the scales of measuring was tested by Cronbach's alpha. Thirdly, Pearson correlation analysis was used to understand the direction and magnitude of the correlation between women friendly HRM practices, transformational leadership and women career progression. Next, multiple regression analysis was used to test the direct effect of women friendly HRM practices on women's career progression. Finally, Hayes PROCESS Macro Model 1 was used to examine the moderating role of transformational leadership. Hayes (2018) indicated that Model 1 can be used if the study has one independent variable, one dependent variable, and one moderator. During the study, women-friendly HRM practices were used as independent variable; women career progression as dependent variable and transformational leadership as moderating variable.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic profile of respondents was analyzed using frequencies and percentages as it was categorical in nature. Demographic analysis is significant in quantitative research as it helps to provide background information about the sample and explain the characteristics of the subjects who participated in the study (Saunders et al., 2019). Demographic factors such as age, marital status, highest qualification, work experience, organization type, employment level, employment status and department/functional area were included

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	N	%
Age	20–25 years	34	17
	26–30 years	54	27
	31–35 years	59	29.5
	36–40 years	31	15.5
	Above 40 years	22	11
Marital Status	Single	115	57.5

	Married	74	37
	Divorced/Widowed	11	5.5
Highest Qualification	Bachelor's degree	105	52.5
	Master's degree	65	32.5
	M.Phil./Ph.D.	30	15
Work Experience	Less than 1 year	21	10.5
	1–3 years	60	30
	4–6 years	58	29
	7–10 years	33	16.5
	More than 10 years	28	14
Organization Type	Bank/Financial institution	74	37
	NGO	54	27
	Real estate firm	27	13.5
	Retail/Corporate chain	45	22.5
Employment Level	Entry-level/Junior staff	146	73
	Mid-level management	34	17
	Senior management	20	10
Employment Status	Permanent	77	38.5
	Contractual	74	37
	Part-time	49	24.5
Department/Functional Area	Human resources	49	24.5
	Finance/Accounts	44	22
	Marketing/Sales	41	20.5
	Administration	30	15
	Operations/Supply chain/Other	36	18

Table 1 indicates that the largest age group was 31-35 years with 29.5% of the respondents followed by the age group 26-30 with 27.0%. This means that the majority of respondents were at the early/mid stages of their career. As to marital status, most of the respondents were single (57.5%) and 37.0% were married. According to the educational profile, over half of the respondents possessed a bachelor's degree and 32.5% possessed a master's degree. This indicates that the sample was qualified and appropriate for the work of exploring issues of career advancement in formal workplaces.

From the work experience profile, it can be seen that 30.0% of the respondents have 1-3 years' experience and 29.0% have 4-6 years' experience. These categories accounted for 59.0% of the sample population, which means that the majority of respondents had an early to moderate professional background. By organizational type, banks/financial institutions had the highest number of respondents followed by NGOs and retail/corporate chains. In terms of employment level, 73.0% of the respondents were at entry or junior level, and 10.0% were at senior management level. This distribution is significant as women at junior and mid-level may have a different career progression experience compared to women in senior roles (Saunders et al., 2019).

4.2 Reliability Analysis

To check the internal consistency of the measurement scales, reliability analysis was performed. Reliability as defined by Cronbach, (1951) is the degree of consistency and stability of a measuring instrument. Cronbach's alpha was employed in this study because it is one of the most accepted internal consistency measurement in quantitative study. Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70 or higher is deemed acceptable, and a value greater than 0.80 represents good reliability, and a value greater than 0.90 represents excellent reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2
Reliability Statistics

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Women-friendly HRM practices	20	0.951
Transformational leadership	20	0.947
Women's career progression	5	0.895

The reliability statistics are shown for three major variables of the study in Table 2. The Cronbach's alpha value of women friendly HRM practice was ($\alpha = 0.951$), which shows excellent internal consistency. The internal consistency of the Transformational leadership was also very high ($\alpha = 0.947$). The reliability of the Women's Career Progression reported by ($\alpha = 0.895$) shows strong reliability. An alpha value of ≥ 0.70 was recommended as a threshold for the scales to be considered reliable for further statistical analysis, and all values were above this threshold (Hair et al., 2019).

4.3 Validity Analysis

Validity analysis was carried out to check if the measurement instrument was appropriate for the constructs intended to be measured. Validity is the degree to which an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure (Hair et al., 2019). Construct validity was determined by Exploratory Factor Analysis in this study. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) has been widely employed in quantitative studies to investigate whether the variables or items in a study create meaningful underlying factor structures (Costello & Osborne, 2005). To determine if the data were suitable for factor analysis, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were used. The KMO value is acceptable at >0.60 , and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is significant, indicating that the correlation matrix is suitable for factor analysis (Kaiser, 1974; Bartlett, 1954; Hair et al., 2019).

Table 3
Exploratory Factor Analysis Results for Construct Validity

Measure	Value
KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.671
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	$\chi^2(6) = 139.911$
Significance Value	$p < .001$

Extraction Method	Principal Axis Factoring
Rotation Method	Promax Rotation
Number of Factors Retained	2
Cumulative Variance Explained	75.31%
Factor Correlation	0.422

The results in Table 3 indicated that the KMO value was 0.671, which is greater than the recommended value of 0.60. This shows that the sample was satisfactory for conducting a factor analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, $\chi^2 (6) = 139.911$, $p < .001$, also was significant, indicating that the variables were sufficiently correlated for factor analysis. Cumulative variance explained was 75.308% indicating that the retained factor structure accounted for a significant amount of variance in the data. Thus, the results of the measurement model showed acceptable evidence of construct validity (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 4
Communalities and Factor Loadings

Variable	Communality	Factor Loading
Women-friendly HRM practices	0.302	0.758
Women's career progression	0.339	0.606
Transformational leadership	0.035	—

Note. “—” indicates that no salient loading was reported in the pattern matrix output. In Table 4 it is observed that women friendly HRM practices had high factor loading value of 0.758. The loading for women career progression was also acceptable of 0.606. But the factor loading of transformational leadership was not salient and had a low communality of 0.035. It means that transformational leadership in the future can be further examined at the item level or confirmatory factor analysis. Overall, the results revealed a KMO value of above 0.5 and a significant Bartlett's Test and high cumulative variance explained, which suggested that the data was generally suitable for factor analysis.

4.4 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis were employed to explore the central tendency, dispersion and relationship between the study variables. Pearson correlation can be used to detect the strength and direction of association for continuous variables (Field, 2018). Correlation scores fall between -1 and +1 with positive scores meaning that the variables move in the same direction and negative scores meaning that the variables move in opposite directions (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3
Women-friendly HRM practices	57.96	11.03	<i>1</i>		

Transformational leadership	58.55	10.93	.412**	1	
Women's career progression	12.26	3.05	.444**	.367**	1

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Table 5 indicates that the mean score for Women friendly HRM practices was 57.96 with a SD of 11.03 and mean score for transformational leadership was 58.55 with a SD of 10.93. The mean score for women's career progression was 12.26 with a standard deviation of 3.05. These values indicate the variation of the respondents' perception of HRM Practices, Leadership, and Career Progression.

Results of the Pearson correlation revealed that women-friendly HRM practices had a significant positive relationship with women's career progression ($r = .444$, $p < .01$). This indicates that higher level of women-friendly HRM practices correspond to higher level of women's career progression. That is, some practices like fair promotion procedures, career development support, work-life balance policies, and equal opportunity systems can have a positive impact on women's progress at work. The results also revealed a strong positive correlation between transformational leadership and women's career advancement ($r = .367$, $p < .01$). This suggests that women were more likely to rate their career improvement higher when their leaders were more transformational. Transformational leaders can facilitate women's advancement by providing encouragement, individualized consideration, motivation and opportunity for professional growth (Bass & Avolio, 1995). Moreover, the results showed that there is a significant positive relationship between women friendly HRM practices and transformational leadership ($r = .412$, $p < .01$). This suggests that supportive and inclusive HRM practices for women could be more easily implemented in organizations that have transformational leaders.

4.5 Regression Analysis

To test the predictive impact of women friendly HRM practices and transformational leadership on women career progression, regression analysis was performed. If the researcher wants to find out how much variation in some dependent variable can be attributed to the independent variables then regression analysis is suitable (Field, 2018; Hair et al., 2019). Women's career progression was the dependent variable and women friendly HRM practices and transformational leadership were the predictor variables in this study.

Table 6
Regression Analysis Predicting Women's Career Progression

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI [LL, UL]
Constant	5.2	4.1	1.27	0.206	[-2.88, 13.28]
Women-friendly HRM practices	0.08	0.018	4.44	< .001	[0.044, 0.116]
Transformational leadership	0.15	0.07	2.14	0.034	[0.012, 0.288]

As showed in Table 6, HRM practices that would benefit women positively and statistically affected women's career progression with the value of ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.018$, $t = 4.44$ and $p < .001$). This suggests that the greater the amount of women-friendly HRM practices the greater was the women perceived career progression. This further indicates that the relationship was significant as the confidence interval did not include the value of zero. Hence, the finding is in favor of the argument that women-friendly HRM practices have an important role towards improvement of women career advancement. Women's career progression was also positively and significantly affected by transformational leadership ($B = 0.15$, $SE = 0.070$, $t = 2.14$, $p = .034$). This finding indicates that there is positive influence of transformational

leadership on women career progression. Career leaders with inspirational, individualized, intellectually stimulating and encouraging attributes may be able to help women employees gain access to career opportunities and enhance professional development. Hence, it was concluded that the advancement of women into careers is dependent not just HRM policies but on the leadership behavior of the organization.

5. DISCUSSION

The present study results are significant as it reveals that women friendly HRM practices positively affect women's career progression in formal organizations. Rasheed et al., (2024) and Agarwal et al., (2025) stated that measures like fair promotion systems, flexible working arrangements, equal opportunity policies, mentoring programs, and family-friendly support can help minimize organizational barriers that hinder women's advancement. Likewise, gender-sensitive HRM practices help develop more inclusive work structures by empowering women, retaining them in the workforce and enhancing their career mobility (Khalil, 2016; Biswas et al., 2016). But for this, the presence of women-friendly HRM practices as formal HRM practices is not sufficient, it requires its seriousness, consistency and commitment in practice.

The positive relationship between women friendly HRM practices and career progression also justifies that women progressions are not only affected by their talent and efforts, but also by organizational system. Despite having the necessary education, experience, and passion for the job, women's advancement can still be hindered by biased promotion processes, lack of mentorship opportunities, and inadequate implementation of work-life policies (Ketchiwou & Dzansi, 2023; Garcia et al., 2025). It means that the problem is not just at the surface level of equality, but that there are structural barriers even for women to have access to leadership and promotion opportunities. Important, the implementation of women-friendly HRM practices lacks accountability, monitoring, and managerial support, which can lead to a symbolic policy that does not result in actual career outcomes (Joo et al., 2023; Rasheed et al., 2024).

The results also confirm the notion that fair promotion practices and transparent performance appraisal practices play a pivotal role in women's career advancement. Having clear perceptions that promotion is based on merit instead of gendered assumptions leads women to believe that the organization cares about their professional development (Deniz et al., 2012; Park & Park, 2025). But fair policies alone will not address entrenched inequalities in the workplace. An important interpretation is that while formal systems of HRM can diminish barriers, they are unable to completely remove informal barriers, like restricted access to senior networks, skewed leadership expectations, or cultural assumptions about the role of women (Kobus-Olawale et al., 2021; Kumari & Kaur, 2025).

Another element of the women-friendly HRM practices that seems to be important is mentoring and career support. Previous research indicates that mentoring can offer women various career guidance, professional exposure, confidence, and access to development opportunities that they might not have encountered or been offered (Joo et al., 2023; Kumari & Kaur, 2025). However, mentoring should not be thought of as a “quick fix” unless it is systematic, regular and linked to actual progression opportunities. An important issue is that informal or improperly designed mentoring programs could actually be beneficial to only selected female participants, and could reinforce existing inequities if the mentors, sponsors, and decision makers remain the classic male dominated career networks (Kobus-Olawale et al., 2021; Garcia et al., 2025). The results also show that the effects of transformational leadership on the career progression of women are positive. Transformational leaders use inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and role modelling to support employees and help them feel professionally capable, valued, and

encouraged, specifically in the case of women (Bass & Avolio, 1995; Mansouri, 2016). This aligns with previous studies demonstrating that transformational leadership fosters empowering climates that encourage staff to strive for higher performance standards and enhance their competencies (Canterino et al., 2024; Bai, 2025). But transformational leadership should not be regarded as flawless; its leadership style might be different for different managers, for different departments – and thus women's career experiences might not be consistent in the same organization.

The role of transformational leadership is particularly significant as a leader is a key agent who can influence whether HRM policies are implemented fairly in the day to day activities of the organization. Though an organization may have women-friendly policies, perception of supervisors against its implementation or overlooking women's career aspirations, as well as subjective application of promotion criteria, may hinder women from taking advantage of these policies (Kim & Shin, 2017; Farzana & Charoensukmongkol, 2024). This indicates that leadership is a link between policy and practice. Importantly, poor leadership can undermine the impact of even the best designed HRM systems, and good leadership can make the implementation of HRM policies more relevant by fostering women's involvement, growth, and advancement (Sista & Utama, 2019; Canterino et al., 2024). The findings indicated that there was a positive relationship between women-friendly HRM practices and transformational leadership, which means that the organizational systems and leadership behaviors might be utilized in conjunction for promoting women's advancement. Women-friendly HRM practices offer formal structures for career development and transformational leadership offers the motivational and interpersonal support to make this happen (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Bass & Avolio, 1995). This finding is significant as it demonstrates that HR policies or leadership style cannot be solely considered in isolation and are not the sole determinant of female career progression. A crucial interpretation is that without leaders who can execute HR policies fairly and inclusively, organizations run the risk of failing to improve women's advancement, even if they have written HR policies (Rasheed et al., 2024; Garcia et al., 2025).

Results are also in line with the Ability–Motivation–Opportunity framework which suggests that HRM practices contribute to enhancing the outcomes of employees by enhancing their abilities, their motivation, and opportunities to perform. For the purposes of this study, women-friendly HRM practices are considered to be organizational mechanisms that allow women to have better access to opportunity, and transformational leadership to be mechanisms that allow to strengthen motivation and professional development (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Leišytė et al., 2022). But the framework needs to be taken with a grain of salt since women's career progression is not exclusive to workplace systems. Women's access to and ability to take full advantage of organizational opportunities can also be affected by broader social and cultural norms and expectations, family obligations, and gender norms in employment settings (Ketchiwou & Dzansi, 2023; Agarwal et al., 2025).

These findings are particularly pertinent in the context of Quetta since women's employment and career development could be influenced by both organizational and socio-cultural factors. Given the high proportion of entry-level and junior level employees in the sample, it seems that many women remain in lower-level roles in the organization, a level where systems of career support, mentoring, and promotion are particularly critical (Saunders et al., 2019; Rasheed et al., 2024). This emphasizes the importance of women friendly HRM practices and transformational leadership, as women at the beginning of their careers need to be supported through steps in order to enter the top jobs. Most importantly, if there are no clear pathways from lower-level roles to mid-level and senior roles, women may continue to focus on lower-level roles even though they have qualifications and work experience (Garcia et al., 2025; Park & Park, 2025).

The results indicate that women's career advancement needs to be viewed as a responsibility of the organization, and cannot just be considered an individual's achievement. Formal support systems for women are fostered with women-friendly HRM practices, and the climate of daily work life for women is improved by transformational leadership, which in turn helps women build confidence, visibility, and access to advancement opportunities (Bass & Avolio, 1995; Joo et al., 2023). Simultaneously, the findings need to be assessed critically and supportive policies and leadership behaviors need to be continually carried out to achieve significant results. Even if organizations implement women-friendly HRM practices but do not make any changes in promotion mechanisms, management approach, and work culture, there is a possibility that such practices do not produce significant effects on the career progression of women (Rasheed et al., 2024; Agarwal et al., 2025). Hence, the study validates that women friendly HRM and transformational leadership are both important in promoting women's career progression. Results indicate that women's progress occurs most effectively when organizations implement a combination of fair HRM practices, inclusive leadership behaviors and development-focused leadership practices (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Canterino et al., 2024).

6. Conclusion

The study found out that women-friendly HRM practices are playing positive role in supporting the career progression of women. The results support the hypothesis that workplace characteristics like fair promotion, flexible work, mentoring, equal opportunity policies, transparent performance evaluation and family-supporting practices contribute to an environment where women can be given better opportunities for career progression. The study also validated that the transformational leadership is a factor that helps women's advancement because it is motivating, directing, recognizing, giving confidence and encouragement of professional work. This implies that the career path of women should not be discerned solely as an individual development, but as an outcome of systems within the organization that support women and leadership behaviors that are inclusive. The overall results show that the combination of fair HRM policies with leaders who actively support women's development, participation and progression into senior organizational positions can be a way of improving women's career advancement.

6.1 Theoretical Contribution

This study helps to understand the career progression of women by revealing the role of organizational practices and leadership behaviors as factors in career progression. Women friendly HRM practices are manifested by formal support from the organization such as fair promotion, equal opportunities, mentoring, flexible time arrangements and career development. The added value of transformational leadership is in developing a work environment that encourages the women and makes them feel included and motivated to continue professional development. The research also reinforces the notion that women's career advancement is not a result of their own efforts alone, but is also influenced by organizational structure and management practices. The study highlights the involvement of women in Balochistan, providing context to a less-researched environment where women might encounter social, cultural and workplace challenges. The study, thus, contributes to the knowledge about the role of inclusive HRM systems and supportive leadership in enhancing women's advancement.

6.2 Practical and Managerial implications

The results reveal that the HRM practices that are aimed at women should be conducted practically, consistently and accountably. Policies like a transparent promotion system, equal training opportunities, mentoring, sponsorship, flexible working and fair performance evaluation should no longer be written policies but should be used across departments. Managers should also practice transformational leadership styles by promoting

women's involvement, rewarding their efforts, guiding their career and paving the way for their access to higher roles. This is particularly true of women at entry-level and junior roles, who need clear avenues for career progression. Organizations also need to track the equitable and bias-free use of women-friendly policies. Effective HRM systems and inclusive leadership can help to build a better starting point for women's long-term career progression and leadership participation.

6.3 Limitations and Future Directions

The study is subject to some limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the study was cross sectional, that is, it was conducted by taking data from respondents at one moment. Thus, the results provide an explanation on the relationship between women-friendly HRM practices, transformational leadership and women's career progression, but cannot be used to conclude long-term causal implications. Longitudinal designs are needed for future research to explore the impact of these factors on the career development of women over time. Second, the study was self-report: there could have been response bias or socially desirable responses. Validity should be enhanced in future studies by conducting interviews, soliciting feedback from supervisors, promotion records, and organizational data. Third, the study was conducted in Quetta (Balochistan) and may not be applicable to other cities. Future study should involve a larger number of units from various regions, sectors and organizational levels for greater comparative studies.

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