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Impact of Socially Constructed Choices on Female School Heads' Educational and Career Choices in Pakistan: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: This study presents findings from a larger study exploring the career trajectories of female schoolteachers who become school heads. The study was carried out in Peshawar, Pakistan. Female school heads' career choices have been termed socially constructed as it explores the influences of predominantly male-dominant social structures on women's career choices. The study explores the contributors to and influence on female school heads' decisions to join the teaching profession within the context of the predominately traditional and conservative society in north-west, Pakistan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for in-depth and rich accounts of ten female school heads. The findings of this study suggest that in the educational and career choices of female school heads, their parents and especially fathers play a significant role. The findings also suggest that keeping the cultural realities in mind females opt for the culturally acceptable professions: school teaching in the current context. The study reveals limited choices of education and careers for women in traditional societies. This calls for efforts to broaden such choices for women for a more equitable social ordering. Further, wider scope studies may be conducted for greater generalizations and broader understanding regarding the issue.

Keywords: Female school heads, career trajectories, parental influence, career decisions, traditional-conservative society

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Introduction

Female school leadership has been an important focus of educational research since the 1980s (Mckillop & Moorosi, 2017). Research has been carried out to explore several issues including barriers to female career paths leading to school headship (Coleman, 2007), socially constructed stereotyping and professional role socialization (Cubillo & Brown, 2003), and other related aspects of female lives and career trajectories (McLay 2008; Moorosi, 2010; Oplatka, 2004). The problems and the issues identified in gender-related research regarding women's school headship are context-dependent (Gronn, 1999), therefore the need for research on women school heads career paths assumes significant importance.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is one of the four provinces of Pakistan, where the cultural setting is traditional and conservative; however, rapid changes are coming with access to information technology and an increase in the ratio of female education. As a result, more and more women are entering the job market. This trend has also been witnessed in the education sector. According to the recent statistics from the education department of KP, there are 43921 female schoolteachers and among them, 495 are school heads, who are leading girls' schools (Education Department, 2015-16). It is expected that this ratio will increase more in the coming years. Studies related to women's career trajectories are thus, of high importance in understanding the influences and choices that they have to make while taking educational and career decisions (Coleman & Fitzgerald, 2008; Gronn & Ribbins, 1996), within the context of this study.

This study seeks answers to the main research question: what trajectories do the careers of female school teachers who become school heads follow in KP, Pakistan? The study explores socially constructed choices available for women in choosing their professions. The objectives of the study are:

1. To explore the career trajectories of female schoolteachers who become school heads in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.
2. To explore the possible impact of socially constructed choices on female school heads' career trajectories.

Literature Review

Human attitude, thinking, and behavior are often influenced by socialization processes (Stolley, 2005). Socialization is a process, where an individual acquires and learns how to act and behave in a certain manner in social structures (Berger, 1966; Stolley, 2005; Marsh & Keating, 2006). The process of socialization starts from early childhood and continues till death (Cooley, 1963; Giddens, 2006). The agents of socialization are immediate family, relatives, peer groups, educational institutions, and society as a whole. Based on socialization an individual start to develop a sense of self, and identity

(Mead, 1934). Thus, a sense of self and identity provides a base for humans to perform various social roles (Eagly, 1987). One of the products of the socialization process is the gendered role, where a female is socialized into the role of home care-taker and a mother (Faulkner, 2015; Lumby, 2015) and a male into the role of breadwinner for a family (Hochschild & Machung, 2012).

With the rapid changes in the socio-economic structures of traditional societies, women's entry into the job market has witnessed an increase, but still, cultural factors have considerable influences on the choices of careers for males and females differently (Evetts, 2000). Marks and Houston (2002) studied, 92 young females aged 15-17, views about their careers aspiration and choices. The participants of their study answered that their career would be mainly determined by their roles as parents and were not certain to continue their jobs because of family responsibilities and bringing up children. Similarly, Gartzia and Fetterolf (2016) explored 230 male and female university students' expectations about their education, career, and family life in the future. They concluded that females paid more concern to their families while choosing a career. This proved that women's education and career choices are strongly associated with their home care-taker role (Pifer & Baker, 2016). Likewise, studying the career and educational trajectories of a group of women Hostetler, Sweet, and Moen (2007) found that gendered roles expectations; taking care of children and husband, have put greater influences on the female career decisions.

Exploring the perceptions of 9 Indian mothers in England about their views concerning their daughters' education and career choices, Khambhaita (2014) argued that as compare to other cultures, women in the Indian Subcontinent make their decisions about education and career within the socio-cultural realities. Now it has become clear while choosing education or a profession woman have to take into consideration the gendered-role-expectations that the society and culture expect from them. Therefore, women choose those careers which are considered as "family-friendly" careers and education is considered one of them (Jackson & Scharman, 2002, p. 185). Concerning gender, the factors determining the young women's career choices and paths are the focus of research (Aveling, 2002; Correll, 2004). Overall these studies highlighted the importance of socio-cultural factors that influence the educational and career choices in Pakistan.

In the context of Pakistan, Qureshi and Ravieya (2007) stated that women have to take into consideration their families and home responsibilities before joining a profession. This view is supported by Noreen and Khalid (2012) who studied the experiences of women in higher education in Pakistan and concluded that through market forces women are coming to jobs, and getting higher education but still have to take into consideration family, culture, and religious consideration while deciding about their careers. Career choices and the factors that influence them have been studied in different social sector organizations in Pakistan, like in business graduates (Sarwar & Azmat, 2013), girls' schooling (Khan, Murtaza, & Shafa, 2012), and challenges that working women face (Ali, 2013). There, however, seem to be no significant research specifically on the influence of a predominantly male-dominant social structure on

women's career choices in Pakistan in general and in the north-west of Pakistan in particular, where the social structure tilt more towards male-dominance when it comes to making general life or career choices. Exploring the impact of female gender and male dominance on women's career choices was, therefore, considered important to explore. Besides, in-depth qualitative studies have not been conducted on the issue and therefore, this study aimed to explore the issue in-depth through the perspectives of women school heads and to have a first-hand, naturalistic account of their perceptions. The study, therefore, aimed to explore the influences of societal structures and parental influences on the decisions of the female school heads' educational and career choices.

Methodology

Philosophical Lens

Feminism assumes that cultural and social factors influence one's life. Feminists challenge attempts aimed at silencing women's voices (Burns & Walker, 2005). It tries to answer philosophical questions related to research methodology, reality, truth, and knowledge. It gives importance to the experiences and voices of women about topics such as gendered oppressions and gender inequalities. About feminist methodology Burns and Walker (2005) argue:

> What feminist methodologies have in common is a shared commitment to drawing attention to the deep and irreducible connections between knowledge and power/ (privilege), and making problematic gender in society and social institutions to develop theories that advance practices of gender justice (p.66).

The feminist approach has also been used in feminist leadership studies (see, Heilman, 2001; Maher, 1997; Watts, 2009). Such studies mainly see if leadership styles among male and female leaders are alike or different. Kark (2004) found that majority of studies with feminist leadership viewpoint, consider women leadership styles slightly more democratic, charismatic, or transformational. Thus, this study also adopts a feminist leadership viewpoint to explore what trajectories the careers of female school teachers who become school heads follow in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, and socially constructed choices available for women in choosing their professions.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative narrative research design. Narrative research design is useful in understanding how people are affected by social and cultural structures-how, where, when and by whom (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). This research design is also preferred to study feminist issues (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Therefore, the narrative approach was deemed appropriate to explore the perceptions of female school heads (Shamim & Qureshi, 2010; Cohen et al., 2011).

Sampling

There were 75 female school heads in the district of Peshawar (KPESED, 2015-16), for this study 10 female school heads were selected through snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), for interviews to explore their lived experiences and perceptions about their educational and career choices in relation to their family, socio-cultural background, and career trajectories. Snowball sampling is a useful qualitative sampling technique used in situations where initial access to participants is faced with certain difficulties. The difficulties in access in the context of this study arose from the particular socio-cultural norms where access to female participants for direct interaction is often restricted. Besides, snowball sampling helps in getting access to information-rich participants. The first author of this study who mainly collected the data had to get access to initial participants who later helped to identify other information-rich participants who were willing to participate in the study. Snowball sampling, therefore, was useful in collecting quality data in this study. The female school heads selected for this study had school leadership experiences ranging from 2 to 13 years and had an age range between 36 to 52 years. All participants were married, lived with their husbands and children except one widow who a son and a daughter.

All of the participants initially had school teaching positions before they were promoted to school leading roles based on seniority and open competition through an Independent Public Service Commission body that recommends personnel for appointment in different government departments. There was no direct selection of a candidate for the post of school headship. For school headship, they had to have certain required academic and professional qualifications and school teaching experience.

Data Collection Tool

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was developed in light of research objectives. This was then peer-reviewed by the three authors and some modifications were made in the interview protocol: Where do you come from? What is your parents' economic and educational background? Where (urban or rural) have you received your school education? What other profession did you want to join? Why you did not join the profession you wanted to join initially? Who influenced your choice of the profession: mother, father, brother, sister, and why? Before the data collection process, the modified protocol was pilot tested to make it more relevant to the aims of this study and to remove possible ambiguities in it. The duration of interview sessions was between 20 to 30 minutes, which were conducted in the school offices of these female school heads. The interviews were recorded through a smartphone voice recorder. During interviews, prompts were used to direct the interviews in the right way and also to get clarification from the respondents about their career choices. The interviews were transcribed after the interview sessions.

Reliability and Validity of the Data

The terms reliability and validity are considered more suitable in the context of quantitative research. In qualitative researches, trustworthiness is deemed appropriate (Morse et al., 2002). According to Johnson (1997), different strategies can be used to enhance the validity of qualitative research including extended fieldwork, use of verbatim data, investigators triangulation, participants' feedback, and peer review. In addition, for external validity or generalizability in qualitative research, there should be a detailed description of the research process and settings. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) argue that trustworthiness can be achieved by:

1. Credibility (internal validity): which can be fulfilled by different methods of triangulation.
2. Consistency or dependability (reliability): which can be achieved by peer examination, audit trial, triangulation, and researcher's position.
3. Transferability (external validity): which can be adopted by careful selection of sample and rich thick description.
4. In addition, for them, "ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves investigating ethically" (p. 237).

Thus, in this study, triangulation was used to enhance credibility. The consistency was achieved by taking interview transcriptions to the participants for review and the sample was selected carefully along with an audit trail for transferability and rich thick description. One of the authors collected data through face-to-face interviews with the heads to ensure its trustworthiness, verbatim were used, and details of participants, data collection, and analysis are given in the methodology.

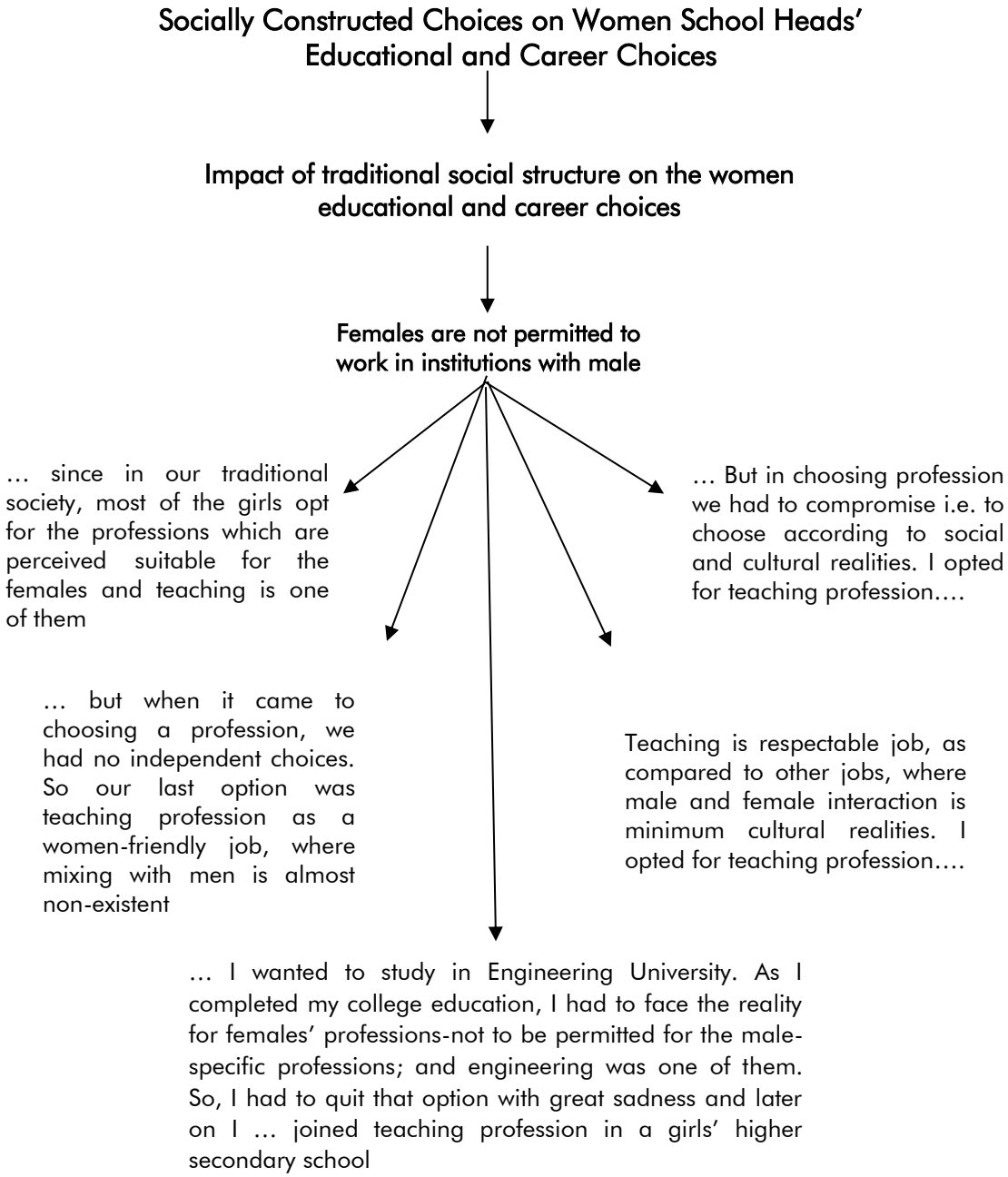
For ethical considerations, being narrative research design, the respondents' shared personal information was kept confidential and informed consent was taken (Esbensen, et al., 1996). For maintaining anonymity pseudonyms were used.

Data Analysis

The data analysis method used in this study was Thematic Analysis where themes emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1995). After reading and re-reading, the data was coded. The process of open coding was used where all the interview transcriptions were coded to allow the emergence of themes. Quotations and comments that support themes were identified. The categories were then reviewed by the researchers and themes were finalized. Figure 1 below is a sample of thematic analysis showing a theme, code, and attached quotations with the code.

Figure 1.

A sample of thematic analysis showing theme, code, and attached quotations with the code.



Findings

The findings of this study suggest that early socialization in family and later on in social structures influenced women's education and career choices. After data analysis, the two main themes emerged as the Impact of traditional societal structure and parental influences on the respondents' career choices.

Impact of Traditional Societal Structure on Women's Career and Educational Choices

The first theme that emanated from the data analysis process was the influence of traditional social structure on the respondents' educational and career choices. The respondents emphasized that their education and later on careers in the society are influenced by the society where girls are socialized in the role of taking care of their homes and raising a family. Alina, whose father had a small business and her mother worked in health care, was brought up in an educated family in a traditional social setup where females are only permitted to join 'women friendly' careers like teaching in girls' institutes. Consequently, she preferred to choose teaching in girls' schools. The traditional social structure had a significant influence on her career choice. She said:

> I wanted to become a lawyer since one of my cousins who was living in Peshawar was a lawyer in High Court. Since I was living in a faraway village with my parents, therefore, I could not pursue my wish and ultimately I had to choose teaching as a career… since in our traditional society, most of the girls opt for the professions which are perceived suitable for the females and teaching is one of them. (Alina)

Javeria was also influenced by the traditional social setting. She was born in a rural area and attended girls' school. She had a father, a mother, one brother, and six sisters. Her father was a farmer and had a respected position in his village. Her mother was an uneducated housewife. Javeria maintained that it was difficult for her to choose education and career freely:

> From school life, I had a great interest in Math subject; and I used to be the topper of the math subject. At this age students always have a passion for a particular subject to study and a profession to join. So, I wanted to study at an Engineering University. As I completed my college education, I had to face the reality for females' professions-not to be permitted for the male-specific professions; and engineering was one of them (if I had applied for the Engineering University I would have been easily enrolled). So, I had to quit that option with great sadness and later on, I did a master in Mathematics with distinction and joined the teaching profession in a girls' higher secondary school. (Javeria)

According to Rubab in her village, it was very difficult for a girl to get a school education, and doing a job was a remote possibility. In this kind of situation, she

planned her education and chose a career in teaching. Her plans are depicted in the following quote:

> The area where we used to live was located about five hours drive from the main city. The village was backward in physical infrastructure-no concrete roads, no basic health facilities, and only one high school for girls with few students, where local female teachers used to teach. We used to live in a conservative social structure especially with respect to female education and profession. Normally the girls were not allowed to go to schools. In such a situation I planned and completed my school education. After this, I applied for a school teaching job and got selected. For the rest of my education, I got through distance learning from Islamabad. Within that cultural set up I did not have any other option but to choose the profession of teaching which was more suitable for females. (Rubab)

Rosina used to live in a village when she was 6 years old her parents died. She was brought up by her uncle in an urban locality, where she completed her education and joined the teaching profession, and later on, got married. She lives in the same city and leading a girls' school:

> Though I was brought up in a city, the family and the environment where I lived were conservative and religious. The people in such an environment do not allow women to work outside their homes. Anyhow, with the support of my uncle and his family members I was allowed to get an education with strict Pardha [wearing a veil by women]. As I completed my college education, I had to choose teaching in a girls' school. So, after a year I was selected for the teaching post in girls' high school and now I am leading a girls' high school. (Rosina)

The same themes came up in the narratives of the other female school heads, who were restricted in their choices of education and careers by the cultural setup of their societies. Jasmin lived in a city, where she got educated and later on joined the teaching profession, now leading a girls' high school. Though she lived in the city, still the influences of socio-cultural realities impacted her career choices:

> We were living in an urban area, in an educated family environment. I along with my two sisters had the freedom to study what we wanted and got university degrees but when it came to choosing a profession, we had no independent choices. So our last option was the teaching profession as a women-friendly job, where mixing with men is almost non-existent. (Jasmin)

Likewise, Sona was also brought up in the city, but she was forced to join teaching as the only profession available to her:

> Our brothers and family members were very positive about female education, so we (I and my younger sister) completed our college education and studied subjects of our choice. But in choosing a profession we had to compromise i.e. to choose according to social and cultural realities. I opted for the teaching profession and my sister for health care. Teaching is a respectable job, as compared to other jobs, where male and female interaction is minimum. (Sona)

Parental Influence

Parental influence and support impacted respondents' educational and career choices. Naz was influenced by parental advice. Her father was a boys' school head and her mother was an educated housewife. Naz wanted to study law and had a strong wish to become a lawyer. However, her father's advice altered her career choice:

> My father was a boys' school head, and my mother was an educated lady. We lived in the city. I was the only daughter of my parents and had two brothers. I wanted to become a lawyer, so I studied law in college and after that, I got admission to a Law College and studied it for a few months. But my father who was very sensitive about my career strongly advised me to join the teaching profession. The reason behind my father's advice was that he thought that teaching was a profession most suitable for females as compared to the legal profession. Therefore, I had to quit Law College and did Bachelor's Education (B. Ed), and applied for a school teaching post. (Naz)

Another respondent who belonged to a far-flung area, where girls' education was almost non-existent and where females were not allowed to take even early school education chose teaching as a profession. She said:

> We were living in a far-flung area where social pressures were enormous regarding women's education and chosen profession. When I was a child I was allowed to go to a nearby girls' school, but as I completed my primary education, I was opposed by some of my family members- brothers and cousins and even my mother- to continue my education. But thanks to my father (the elder of the family) who resisted that pressure and permitted me to continue further education. I was the only girl who had completed school education and later on I was sent to a city for a university degree by my father. When I returned to my village after completion of my education, with the support of my father, I applied for the school teaching job, and now I am a school head living in Peshawar city along with my husband and children. I am grateful to my father for his support. (Gul)

Likewise, the help and support from parents were also evident in the educational and career aspirations of Hameeda, another respondent. Her mother and father were educated. She completed her university education and later on was offered different teaching jobs in various universities, but she opted for school teaching:

> It was the support of my parents that helped me in my choices of education and later on in my career. As I completed my education, I was offered jobs in universities, which I declined, since I did not like the university environment. I wanted to take a teaching position in a girls' school, so applied for that and got selected as a Subject Specialist. In all this career trajectory I had the support of my parents.

While the parents of the women school heads were equally supportive, it was the fathers who influenced in one way or the other, the educational and career aspirations and choices of their daughters.

Interestingly, the story of Sumbal indicates another aspect of her life. Sumbal's father died when she was four years old. She had three brothers, living with their mother in a village:

As I completed my primary education in a nearby school, I was stopped by my educated elder brothers from going to school for further education. But my mother persuaded my brothers to allow me for further education, so with my mother's help, in a male-dominated society, I completed my school education. After this, I wanted to join the teaching profession but for that, I had to go to a city. Here my brothers showed resistance, but as usual, my mother came to my help again. My mother used to accompany me while going to the city to take classes in a professional college. After completion of the teaching course, I applied for a teaching post and got selected, and now I am leading a girls' school in this urban area. I got married as I got a teaching job, but my husband died after five years of our marriage. Now I am living with my son and daughter. What I am today is because of my mother, she is no longer in this world (Sumbal).

Discussion

The findings of this study showed that most of the female school heads were inclined to get an education and choose their careers despite the constraints of the traditional and conservative social structures. These findings reflect studies regarding the role of gender in the adoption of career choices (Whiston et al., 2015; Burridge et al., 2016). According to system theory as argued by Whiston et al. (2015) at macro-level environmental dynamics i.e. socio-cultural set, economic activities, the geographical location of the people, are the most influencing forces that play an important part in the education and career choices of the individual lives. Likewise, literature investigating the education and career choices, in other socio-cultural setups, found that education and career choices and especially of females are determined by the stereotyped perceptions of the society (Moorosi, 2010; O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Siddiqui, 2016).

The current study indicates that female career choices are substantially influenced by socio-cultural constraints. This is in line with Khambhaita (2014) findings who suggest that in the Indian subcontinent culture, girls are significantly influenced by socio-cultural constraints and family in their choices regarding education and career. Similar are the findings of Watt et al. (2012), Kim (2016), and Pifer and Baker (2016). These studies suggest that alongside household and familial responsibilities women preferred to choose the professions which were considered 'family-friendly'. Similarly, Lumby (2015) found that most of the women choose to join medical and teaching professions since these professions are considered more women-friendly as compare to other professions. Similar findings were observed by Maringe and Moletsane (2015, p. 360) who termed teaching as 'feminized profession' for women.

This study also revealed that women chose to join the teaching profession with the support of their parents, particularly fathers. This makes sense in traditional, male-dominated, family-oriented social structures as indicated by of Hall (1996), and Mclay (2008). The current study also suggested that most of the mothers of these female school heads were housewives in the traditional social structures, but they supported their daughters in education and choosing a career in the teaching profession. These findings are in line with the work of (Ribbins, 2008). The findings of this study showed that females took decisions keeping the contextual realities in mind and in doing so

had the support of their parents though in the professions considered women-friendly. These findings are supported by the work of (Cochrane, 2015 p. 165) who maintained that the influence of social realities and parents' influence are vital in the educational and career choices that people make. Similarly, the findings of this study are in accord with the study of Ulas et al. (2016) who argue that it is the nature of society that constructs and assigns particular career choices and professional roles for both men and women. Moreover, findings from this study are supported by the study of Bakio€lu and Ülker (2018) who argue that women's career choices and professions are context-dependent.

Conclusions and Implications

This study highlighted the important role played by social constructions: family and male-dominant social in the educational and career choices of female school heads in Pakistan. The respondents' decisions to join the teaching profession were mostly influenced by these socializing agencies. It could be concluded that family and parental support was vital for directing females' educational and career choices in conservative, traditional social structures. The study reveals limited choices of education and career for women in traditional societies.

This study calls for efforts to be made to broaden educational and professional choices for women for a more equity-based social ordering. One of the major implications that come from this study is that there has to be sensitization concerning women's education and especially their career choices against the disempowering traditional and conservative social setups. İn this regard parents and other male guardians may be sensitized to give freedom of choice to their women in education and choosing professions. This sensitization may also be done through career guidance and counseling at school and college levels, with the cooperation of parents and male guardians of girls, to guide the young girls, in the light of new economic changes, for more diverse professions. This will be a change-agent-step to transform the stereotyped thinking about women's professional role in the socio-cultural structure of this study.

Besides, this study was qualitative and limited to particular contexts. Further, broad scope studies may be conducted for greater generalizations and broader understanding regarding the issue.

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