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FEMALE LEADERSHIP, INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SDG 16 IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN: UNRECORDED REASONS AND THE GAP BETWEEN POSITION AND INFLUENCE

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
female leadership, SDG 16, unrecorded reasons, feminist institutionalism, representation influence gap, informational exclusion, interpretive phenomenological analysis, Punjab, Pakistan	Pakistan reserves seats for women in its legislatures, appoints women as deans and directors in its universities and sets gender quotas in some ministries, yet women hold less than five per cent of senior positions in public institutions and the country's scores on institutional and gender indicators remain near the bottom of international rankings. This article asks what stands between a senior post and the power to decide, and whether that obstacle takes the same form across different kinds of institution. It draws on one part of a multi-site phenomenological study of sixty women leaders in Punjab: twenty in public-sector universities, twenty in political and policy-making institutions and twenty in the Punjab Police. Interviews of fifty-five to ninety-five minutes used a single twenty-question semi-structured guide and were analyzed through interpretive phenomenological analysis, with themes generated by the six-phase procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis reported here covers nineteen accounts of nineteen participants: fifteen describing barriers and the strategies used against them, and four comparing the three fields. Three results follow. First, the distinction between formal and informal institutions does not fit these accounts. In every case the formal process exists and runs: the committee meets, the posting board sits, the party has rules and offices. What is informal is not the process but the reasoning behind the decision, and one participant states the consequence exactly when she says that neither reason is ever put in writing, so it is not open to challenge. The operative distinction is therefore between decisions whose reasons are recorded and decisions whose reasons are not. Second, informational exclusion is a mechanism, distinct from the denial of resources or of network access: one officer can see her formal record but not the informal one, because it is made in rooms she is never invited to. Third, the gap between holding a post and deciding an outcome appears in all three fields in different forms, and individual navigation does not close it. Of the fifteen barrier accounts only three describe an attempt to change a rule or create a record. The contribution is a revision of feminist institutionalism for this setting, from formal against informal to recorded against unrecorded reasons.
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Introduction

Pakistan has a population of over 220 million, and women are almost half of it. Their participation in senior government institutions, universities and the civil service is less than five per cent (Moazzam, 2024). Half the population sits outside the decision-making process, and the result is institutions that are weaker, less trusted and less accountable than they would otherwise be. The United Nations adopted seventeen Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda. Goal 16 commits states to strengthening institutions in support of peace, justice and inclusion by 2030. Hope (2020) argues that SDG 16 is not a technical governance target but an undertaking to build institutions that people can trust, that give access to justice and that keep them free from violence, particularly those who are left out. Without that foundation the goals on education, health and economic development cannot be sustained. The link to gender equality is well established. Using data from many countries, Amanuma et al. (2023) found that a greater proportion of women in governance institutions is consistently associated with better scores on social and institutional SDG indicators. Nash et al. (2025) add that when women lead in a transformative feminist way, explicitly challenging unjust power systems, governance outcomes improve in measurable terms.

Pakistan has signed SDG 5 and SDG 16 and is party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action. Its measured performance sits elsewhere. Pakistan ranked 145th of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index in 2023, and UN Women (2021) places it near the bottom of the Gender Inequality Index. Formal labour force participation of women is below 22 per cent, among the lowest in South Asia. Women are appointed as deans and directors in the public universities of Punjab but seldom as vice-chancellor (Rafiq et al., 2024). The institutional setting is under strain. Kazma Baqi (2024) identifies lack of financial resources, political instability, poor coordination between departments, weak human resource development and weak monitoring as the main barriers to institutional capacity. Aslam and Muzaffar (2025) identify political instability as the largest single obstacle to SDG 16, and Pakistan has had four prime ministers since 2018.

Against that background this article examines one narrow question. Where women do hold senior posts in Punjab's public institutions, what prevents the post from carrying the power to decide, and does that obstacle take the same form in a university, a legislature and a police force? The question matters because a barrier that lies in the formal rules can be amended, while a barrier that lies in what is never written down cannot be amended until it is first made visible.

Statement of the Problem

Pakistan's approach to women's leadership has been based on quantity. It reserves seats for women in parliament, increases the representation of women as deans and directors in universities, and sets gender quotas in some ministries. Having women in positions is not the same as having women in power, and the gap between female representation and female institutional power is the problem this study addresses. Gysman (2018) presents the same problem comparatively. In her study of the Southern African Development Community, countries with more women in political positions did

not necessarily perform better on SDG 5 or SDG 16 targets, because those women were not genuinely able to decide. Moazzam (2024) asks the question directly for Pakistan: are women in Pakistani governance making a difference, or is their presence a façade? About 21 per cent of National Assembly seats are held by women, most of them reserved rather than directly won, while legislative power rests with committee chairs and informal political circles that remain male.

The same pattern appears inside institutions. Rafiq et al. (2024) interviewed fifty female deans and directors in the public universities of Punjab, whose participants described being physically present while having to fight continually for their decisions to be taken seriously. They described institutional cultures saturated with patriarchal norms, gender discrimination in decision-making, exclusion from the informal networks where significant university decisions were made, and the additional burden of managing male staff who did not accept female authority. At policy level Sadaf (2025) found gender equity commitments rarely implemented because of limited capacity, the absence of gender-disaggregated data and poor coordination between ministries.

The problem is also under research. Pakistani studies have concentrated on women's political representation at national level, or on women's experience in a small number of university settings. No phenomenological study has recorded the lived experiences of female leaders in several institutional settings at once, in a way that shows whether those settings reinforce or contradict one another. For this research the problem narrows to the mechanism. If women are present without being able to decide, something is converting formal inclusion into practical exclusion. Identifying what that something is, in institutions with different structures, is an empirical question, and it has not been asked of female leaders in Punjab across more than one field at a time.

Significance of the Study

This Study has four values. Theoretically, it brings together transformative feminist leadership theory, social contract theory and servant leadership in one design, a combination not previously applied to governance and higher education in Pakistan. Methodologically, it uses interpretive phenomenological analysis where most existing Pakistani work uses surveys, policy analysis or document analysis, so that the meaning participants give to their own situation becomes evidence rather than background. Practically, the findings reported here change where a reform effort should look. If a formal process can run correctly and still produce a gendered outcome, then auditing whether a policy exists will show nothing. What must be examined is whether anyone was obliged to record a reason under it. That is a specific and inspectable requirement, and it follows from the data rather than from a general commitment to equity. The comparison itself also matters. Universities, legislatures and the police govern differently and resist differently. Reading the three together shows which part of the obstacle belongs to a particular institutional form and which part is common across them, and that distinction decides whether a remedy must be designed for one institution or can be written once.

Research Questions

The parent study is guided by one central question: how does female leadership contribute to peace, justice and institutional development, as set out in SDG 16, in the public-sector universities, political and policy-making institutions and the Punjab Police of Punjab, Pakistan? Three supporting questions focus on the investigation, and this article reports the analysis bearing on the second and the third. Question 1 is answered from a different body of data in a companion article. This article is confined to the barrier accounts and the cross-field comparison that answer Questions 2 and 3 and shares no extract with the companion. One inconsistency in the parent study should be recorded. Its earlier statement of the research questions names education policy bodies as the third field, while its design, its fieldwork and its interview guide name the Punjab Police. The formulation used here follows the design and the instrument.

Research Question 1. What leadership strategies and practices do female leaders in these institutions use to promote peace, social harmony, institutional transparency, ethical decision-making and justice within their specific institutional settings in Punjab?

Research Question 2. What socio-cultural, organisational and structural barriers limit female leaders' ability to contribute to SDG 16 outcomes across these institutions in Punjab, and how do female leaders navigate those barriers?

Research Question 3. How do they lived experiences of female leaders across the three fields intersect and diverge in ways that reveal the systemic conditions shaping and limiting female leadership's contribution to SDG 16 in Pakistan?

Theoretical Framework

Four bodies of theory are used, and they do different work. Two are normative, and two are explanatory and therefore testable against the accounts.

Transformative Feminist Leadership

Nash et al. (2025) define effective leadership not by who holds power but by what leadership produces for the community. Transformative feminist leadership challenges unjust power systems, works towards equality and justice through community development, and places the good of the community above the standing of the individual leader. The framework separates women who challenge patriarchal institutional norms from women who occupy positions without challenging the system, and it explains why institutional context matters: the same woman will achieve less in a highly resistant institution than in a supportive one. It also explains why SDG 16 asks for inclusive institutions rather than for women on organisational charts.

Social Contract Theory

Singh and Singh (2024) hold that institutions acquire legitimacy from citizens' confidence that they will act justly, respect rights and work for the public benefit. Exclusionary, unresponsive and corrupt institutions destroy that contract, and the result is low institutional trust, disengagement

from governance and weak SDG 16 outcomes. The framework supplies the criterion applied here: an institution is legitimate to the extent that it gives the people subject to it reasons they can see and contest. That criterion is what makes an unrecorded reason an institutional failure and not merely an inconvenience.

Feminist Institutionalism

Waylen (2014) holds that informal institutions may support or undermine formal ones and that they tend to survive formal reform, and that opposition is likely where a formal rule change would upset privileges resting on ambiguity. Mackay (2014) describes nested newness, a formally open procedure enclosed within an older procedure that settles the outcome first. Annesley and Gains (2010) locate real decision-making in the core executive rather than in the formal legislative process. This is the framework for the data revise, and the revision is set out in Section 9.2.

Role Congruity Theory and the Accommodation–Transformation Distinction

Eagly and Karau (2002) explain prejudice towards female leaders as a conflict between the expectations attached to the leader role and those attached to the female role. Pape (2020) distinguishes strategies that help an individual succeed under existing gendered rules from strategies that change those rules and warns that documenting the first can make institutional obstacles look like problems for women to solve. Choi and Ko (2025) and Latu et al. (2013) hold that women's influence rises once numbers pass a threshold and that the presence of successful women affects how other women perform. Srinidhi et al. (2020) describe norms shifting in response to a change in procedure. These four supply the explanatory apparatus for the strategies reported in Section 9.6 and the comparison in Section 9.8.

Keeping the normative and the explanatory frameworks apart matters. The first two describe what a legitimate institution would look like, and a study that uses them as measuring instruments will find its participants falling short of an ideal. The second two predict behaviour and can be tested. The framework was fixed before coding, which makes it easier to see what it anticipates and harder to see what it does not.

Literature Review and Research Gap

Comparative literature establishes that presence is not influenced. Amanuma et al. (2023) found, across many countries, that a greater share of women in governance institutions goes with better scores on social and institutional SDG indicators. Gysman (2018) showed for the Southern African Development Community that countries with more women in political positions did not necessarily perform better on SDG 5 or SDG 16 targets, because those women were not genuinely able to decide. Moazzam (2024) puts the same question to Pakistan and names the distinction this article uses, between representation and inclusion: about twenty-one per cent of National Assembly seats are held by women, mostly reserved rather than directly won, while legislative power sits with committee chairs and informal circles that remain male. Khan (2025) finds that women legislators nonetheless contribute substantially to policy on women's rights and welfare, which suggests that the gap is a matter of degree and of arena rather than a total exclusion.

Work on Pakistan's universities describes the same gap from inside. Rafiq et al. (2024) interviewed fifty female deans and directors in Punjab and report patriarchal institutional cultures, gender discrimination in decision-making, exclusion from the informal networks where significant decisions are made, and the burden of managing male staff who do not accept female authority. Nosheen et al. (2025) report retaliation by relocation among university leaders in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Samo et al. (2019) find that women leaders are perceived as less capable under pressure. Sadaf (2025) finds gender equity commitments rarely implemented, for want of capacity, gender-disaggregated data and coordination between ministries. Policing is the least studied of the three fields in this literature.

The institutional theory is where the gap in this literature lies. Feminist institutionalism gives an account of why formal reform often fails: informal institutions survive it (Waylen, 2014), and a new formal procedure can sit nested inside an older one (Mackay, 2014). The account is persuasive and it is pitched at the level of institutions rather than of decisions. What it does not specify is which part of a decision is informal when the formal procedure itself is working correctly. Pape (2020) supplies the other half of the problem, the risk that cataloguing how women cope turns a structural barrier into a personal skill deficit, but the literature does not resolve it empirically.

Five gaps follow, and the parent study addresses them. First, Pakistani work on female leadership treats national political figures or selected university settings, rarely both and never alongside a third public institution in the same design. Second, almost no empirical work captures the lived experience of women leaders in relation to SDG 16 outcomes, because most existing research uses surveys, policy analysis or document analysis, so that women's own meaning-making is largely absent. Third, studies of leadership style in Pakistan seldom connect style to institutional outcomes specified as SDG 16 targets. Fourth, the integrated framework used here has not previously been applied to governance and higher education in Pakistan. Fifth, research on female political leadership has concentrated on the national level, and provincial representatives in Punjab have received almost no attention.

To those five this research adds a sixth, which emerged from the data. The literature asks whether informal institutions defeat formal ones. It does not ask whether the formal process can run exactly as written and still produce a gendered outcome because nobody is required to record why. That question is the subject of the analysis below.

Methodology

The study works within an interpretive paradigm and uses a qualitative, multi-site phenomenological design. The decisive events in this setting are informal and leave no record and are available only through the accounts of those present.

Sixty women took part, twenty in each of three fields: public-sector universities, political and policy-making institutions, and the Punjab Police. The higher education group comprised deans, directors and heads of department in Punjab public universities with three to seventeen years in a current or recent senior role. The politics and policy group comprised National and Punjab Assembly members, senators and senior Higher Education Commission policy staff, with between

one term and fourteen cumulative years. The police group comprised officers of Deputy Superintendent rank and above working in gender crime, investigation, administration, training and public protection, with four to twenty-six years in the force and two to thirteen at senior rank.

All interviews lasted between fifty-five and ninety-five minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Thirty-five were held in Urdu, fifteen in English and ten in both. Fifteen respondents across the three fields took part in member checking. One semi-structured guide of twenty questions in six sections was used with all participants, with probes differing by field and marked HE for higher education, POL for politics and policy and PP for the Punjab Police. Keeping the twenty questions identical across the three fields is what makes comparison between them possible, since differences between fields could not otherwise be separated from differences between instruments. The guide is reproduced in full as the Appendix.

Urdu extracts were translated into English. Translation is not neutral transfer but an act of interpretation, and Temple and Young (2004) note that words concerning honour, respect and family do not carry their register or their force between languages. Urdu extracts should be read as conveying what was said with less confidence than English extracts convey the act of saying it.

The researcher is part of the instrument. The analysis was carried out by a person trained in Pakistani institutions and familiar with the leadership literature produced in Western contexts, and that shaped what was treated as significant in the transcripts. The theoretical framework was fixed before coding, which makes it easier to see what the framework anticipates and harder to see what it does not.

The analysis reported in this article uses nineteen of the thirty-five extracts in the parent study, drawn from nineteen participants: seven in higher education, six in politics and policy and six in the police. Fifteen of these concern barriers and the strategies used against them; four concern the comparison between fields. The remaining sixteen extracts, which describe leadership practices, are analyzed in the companion article and are not used here.

Data Analysis

The method applied was interpretive phenomenological analysis, with themes generated through the procedure set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The two are not the same but they are compatible. Phenomenological analysis is case-specific, requiring the researcher to work through the participant's own reading of her situation before moving across cases, while thematic analysis supports cross-case work. Both are used here: each extract is followed by a paragraph that reads that account, and the work across accounts appears as sub-themes and cross-field patterns. Where a case does not fit a theme, it is reported rather than concealed. Analysis was performed in NVivo.

Interview data establish what participants said and perceived. They do not establish that events occurred as reported or that consequences followed from them, which is true of all interview research. Four tiers of evidence are therefore distinguished. A Tier 1 statement is the participant's own words, translated where the interview was in Urdu, and is signalled by described or said. A Tier 2 statement is something the participant states that no one has verified, signalled by reported or

according to. A Tier 3 statement is the researcher's reading, extending beyond what the participant said, signalled by suggests or can be read as. A Tier 4 statement rests on a document such as minutes, a policy, a case register, a posting record or an official report, and would be signalled by corroborated by.

There is no Tier 4 evidence in this study, because the document review and institutional observation have not been analyzed. Almost all outcome statements are Tier 2 and almost all interpretive paragraphs are Tier 3. That is the ordinary position of interview evidence, and it is stated here so that no claim is read as more than an interview can carry.

One further caution applies throughout. Several questions in the guide contain an answer within the question. Participants were asked whether their leadership had been questioned because of their gender, whether family responsibilities had affected their leadership, and whether their institution had become more accountable because of women's leadership. These are useful questions and they are leading. Where a finding arises in answer to such a question, it is the participant's interpretation of a frame the interviewer supplied.

Thirty-five extracts are reported from thirty-five participants: thirteen of the twenty in higher education, eleven of the twenty in politics and policy and eleven of the twenty in the police. Twenty-five participants are not quoted. One extract per person gives breadth across the sample and carries two costs. No participant appears under more than one topic, which is the depth a phenomenological analysis would ordinarily provide, and selecting one passage from each transcript risks selecting the most eloquent rather than the most typical. Any statement about how common a pattern therefore requires the full coded data set.

One coding step is specific to this article. Each account of a decision about a person, an appointment, a promotion, a posting, an allocation or a committee outcome, was read with four questions put to it. Did a formal process exist and convene? Did it reach a recorded outcome? Was a reason given in a form the affected person could, see? And did the participant respond by introducing a record, a criterion or a published rule, or not at all? The unit of coding is the decision account rather than the participant, and where an account does not permit a question to be answered it is left unanswered rather than given a default. The five navigation strategies in Section 9.6 were then classified against Pape's (2020) distinction between working within gendered rules and changing them. All this coding was carried out by the researcher alone, which is a limitation.

Findings and Discussion

Nineteen accounts are reported, one from each of nineteen participants. Fifteen describe barriers and the strategies used against them, grouped under five headings; four compare the three fields. The barriers operated at four levels: the individual encounter, the organisation, the structure and the wider culture.

Authority contested on grounds other than the decision

The most frequently reported barrier was having a decision questioned for a reason that had nothing to do with the decision.

In my faculty, I am a published author more than my male colleagues. My students' satisfaction ratings have improved. In my years running my department, I have seen its research output increase each year. None of these things matter in a room when anyone who has never read a single paper of mine tells me without reservation that he's not sure a woman can take the strain of being a dean. Not me, he's not talking about me. He's talking about his notion about women. I have found out that it is not possible to change his thought. I'm just making it harder for his idea to be a policy in the institution.

(HE-06)

HE-06 separates two things carefully. Her publications, her students' ratings and her department's research growth do not operate in the encounter that counts, because her colleague is not talking about her at all; he is talking about his idea of women. That separation produces her conclusion: she cannot change his idea, and she can make it harder for his idea to work as institutional policy. This is role congruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002) experienced from inside, and the response it produces is procedural rather than attitudinal.

I'm on a committee talk. A male co-worker rephrases what I said (and sometimes verbatim) and the committee reacts to him. I've witnessed this phenomenon time and time again, and I have some strategy. He restates my point and I say, 'Yes, as I said. Clearly. Every time. It's something very small. However, little details merge into what the room comprehends as a valid source of ideas.

(POL-10)

POL-10 describes a mechanism that works sentence by sentence. Her counter-move costs nothing and involves no confrontation, and she repeats it every time. Her own assessment is that small things accumulate into what the room treats as a legitimate source of ideas. This is norm change at the smallest scale that Srinidhi et al. (2020) describes, and the account is valuable precisely because the unit of change is so small.

On my second day in the unit, a report was to be prepared by the next morning for me, the officer by whom I gave the instructions. He told me, 'Let me tell you it is first with Sir.' This unit did not have 'Sir'. He was referring to my predecessor. Who had left. I glanced at him for a moment and I said, 'Sir's not available. I am your commander in chief. It will need to be ready by eight tomorrow, according to the report. He presented the report at 7:45. I don't know whether he had made an early start due to his efficiency or to see if I was serious. In any case, the report was available.

(PP-07)

PP-07 records the testing of a new commanding officer. Her reading is deliberately limited: she does not know whether the officer produced the report early because he was efficient or because

he wanted to see whether she was serious, and she declines to decide. The restraint is instructive, because the obvious reading was available to her and she did not take it.

Two qualifications apply to this group. The near-universal reporting of this barrier partly reflects near-universal asking, since the guide supplies the gendered reading before the participant speaks. The accounts that carry weight are therefore those that describe behaviour concretely enough for a reader to draw the inference independently, as HE-06 and POL-10 do. The second qualification concerns where the barrier operates. It operates in descriptions, attributions and manners, which is the register no formal accountability mechanism reaches. That is what connects this barrier to the next one.

Unrecorded reasons

The second barrier is hard to challenge because of what it is.

The actual meeting occurs prior to the meeting. The senior professors sit down together (informally over tea, at someone's house) and decide about what will happen. Then it's for the formal meeting and it takes 20 minutes. Did not receive an invitation to the pre-meeting. I didn't get the idea of why my proposals are failing for two years even though I received proper formal support. Then one of the younger female staff informed me what was going on. After grasping the architecture, I was able to engage with it, but I needed to develop other non-formal relationships to do so.

(HE-14)

HE-14's account is nested newness in Mackay's (2014) sense: a formally open procedure enclosed within an older one that settles the outcome first. Two details matter. It took her two years to discover the arrangement, during which her proposals failed while she had formal support. And she learned of it from a junior female colleague, so a second woman was the channel through which the exclusion became visible at all.

There's a party, and then there's a party. There are official party rules, committees, positions. The true party consists of five or six men that have been together for thirty years. They decide. The official party systems act on. I am a part of the official party. I don't play with real people. I know exactly who was called to whom and who goes where and who's mobile the party chief answers to: I know the signals because I have learnt them. I am NOT inside these signals. Although I can read them,

(POL-17)

POL-17 describes in a legislature what Annesley and Gains (2010) call the core executive. Her adaptation deserves note. Unable to enter the inner circle, she has learned to read its signals: who is called, who travels, whose calls the party chief answers. It is a way of navigating without access, and it requires continuous attention that colleagues inside the circle never have to pay.

Postings are determined by a board. Board considers years of experience, qualifications, etc., and performance records. All paper is equal. But the high-visibility operational posts (those which

invariably end up with a promotion for the officer) invariably go to male officers. When a reason is provided (and sometimes there is a reason) it is related to 'operational requirements' or 'team dynamics'. The terms refer to: we don't think that's the kind of environment a woman is going to find suitable, or we think that male officers won't accept a female officer as the commander. Both reasons are never put in writing. Thus, it is not subject to argument.

(PP-16)

PP-16 is the most developed case of this barrier. The discrimination operates entirely inside a formal framework. A formally neutral vocabulary is used, and she states what it means. Her final sentence explains why the mechanism survives: neither reason is ever written down, so it is not open to challenge.

These three accounts show that the distinction between formal and informal rules does not fit this data. In all three the formal process exists and runs. The committee meets. The posting board sits. The party has rules and offices. What is informal is not the process that delivers the decision; it is the reasoning behind the decision.

The better distinction is between decisions whose reasons are recorded and decisions whose reasons are not. This single revision does two things. It explains why formalization recurses as a strategy, since a reason has to be recorded before it can be contested. And it marks the limit of that strategy, because where no reason is stated at all, formalization can make concealment harder but cannot produce a reason by itself.

The revision also tells a document review where to look. The documents that matter are the ones that record reasons: promotion criteria, committee scores, posting and transfer records, committee membership lists. The question to put to them is not whether a policy exists. It is whether anyone was obliged under that policy to give a reason.

Resources, networks and information

The third barrier concerns what makes a position effective once it has been obtained.

A travel fund exists for the conference. It is allocated by the Vice Chancellor, as recommended by deans. I am a dean. I made a recommendation for three female faculty members to go to an international conference. Two of my suggestions were not taken up. It was said that 'budget constraints were the reason. In the same semester, four faculty members of a different faculty went to a conference in Europe and were all males. In the same semester, there were four male faculty members in another faculty who attended a conference in Europe. I didn't register a formal grievance. I started making a journal. My records have been a bit longer now for three years. The pattern is uniform.

(HE-02)

HE-02 was given budget constraints as the reason and reports an allocation in the same semester that is inconsistent with that reason. Her response is the one that recurs through this data: she began

keeping a record and now has three years of it. The pattern she reports is her own account of her own records, and those records should be obtained.

When bills are brought to committee, they have already been drafted to have a chance of passing. The draft is circulated verbally among the more senior members (I mean the men who have been around in the party for decades) and a formal process has not yet started. When I'm around, I will see that the positions have been taken and deals made. I can change; I can't mold. It is not the same to tweak something they already agree with each other as to influence what they are deciding! I have developed into a good amender. But I was here to form.

(POL-09)

POL-09 draws the clearest line in this data between amending and shaping, and it is the sharpest statement of the representation–influence gap. One qualification is needed. In parliamentary systems much legislation is drafted by the executive and settled within the party before reaching committee, so a non-executive member of either sex may find that she amends without shaping (Annesley & Gains, 2010). Without a male comparator the study cannot say how much of this gap is gendered. What the account does establish is that an electoral mandate did not by itself give her access to the arena in which legislation is formed. That is a finding about where power sits.

Senior officers make decisions as to where a player goes. These officers get together for socializing. They play cricket. They have dinner. They go to the same events. I'm not one of these things, it's not that I'm told I can't come, it's that I don't get the invitation. And in those areas, officers' true evaluations take place. Those conversations will make or break your reputation. I've got a really good record. But in those conversations, I don't know what my reputation is, I am not in those conversations.

(PP-17)

PP-17 describes something the other two do not, and it should be treated as a separate mechanism. She knows her formal record and cannot know her informal one, because it is made in rooms she does not enter. Her phrasing, that it is not that she is told she cannot come but that the invitation never arrives, describes an exclusion that leaves no trace and gives her nothing to object to. She cannot manage a reputation she cannot see. This is neither a denial of resources nor network exclusion in the ordinary sense. It is informational exclusion, and a study of the conditions for influence should name it separately.

The guide names the sites where this barrier might appear, research funding, conference travel, committee chairs, party information, postings and operational roles, so the resources discussed in these extracts sit in a frame the interviewer supplied. That makes comparison across fields possible and weakens any claim that participants named these sites unprompted.

The double burden as a problem of institutional design

Participants in all three fields described the relationship between work and care. The analysis follows their own accounts in treating this as a question of institutional design.

Student faculty meetings at 7 am. Emergency committee: call on weekends. Late night events (until 9pm or 10pm). Each one, on its own, is easy to handle. But at the same time, I am a mother. My husband is supportive, not like this at seven in the morning when the kids have to be ready for school it's I that show up. I haven't met someone. Have not attended conferences. There are costs associated with each absence. My male colleagues don't have these absences at the same rate. The gap grows over the course of 10 years.

(HE-15)

Late meeting of assemblies. Sometimes to midnight. The Assembly building does not offer any childcare facilities. For those who live outside Lahore, no family accommodation is available. The model of legislator is a man who has a wife who oversees the home. My husband does not do the housework; he does it with me. But on the days that I sit, I am in Lahore and he is at home and I call at 11 pm asking about the homework for children. It's not a complaint, but it's a statement. Description of what the job really involves which is not included in the formal description.

(POL-15)

POL-15 describes rather than complains, and the description is what gives her account force. She identifies a structural constraint in terms that cannot be dismissed as a personal grievance: the model legislator is a man with a wife who runs the household, and the part of the job this creates appears in no formal description of it.

Postings change. 2 years here, 2 years elsewhere. It's a job for a male officer. This is a family crisis for a female officer having kids, every 2 years. To move children or not? Do I go alone? Will I turn down the posting (if I do) what happens to my career file? I've already turned down two jobs. I know how I've affected my file. This does not ask these questions. It simply shifts people around and takes it as a gift that people will follow.

(PP-11)

PP-11 identifies a mechanism specific to policing. The same posting rotation that is simply a career for a male officer becomes a recurring family crisis for a woman with children, and declining a posting marks the career file. She has declined twice and reports the consequences. Hardship is thereby converted into a career disadvantage that the record carries forward.

Three points follow. The guide asks how family responsibilities have affected the participant's leadership, which presupposes an effect, so the near-universal reporting of this barrier is partly an artefact of the question. The enabling conditions the participants name are private rather than institutional: a supportive husband whom HE-15 describes as not typical, a co-managed household. The participants themselves argue that private circumstances cannot be the basis of institutional policy. And the sample is filtered: family support and class position help determine who rises, so these participants probably carry lighter care burdens than women who did not reach these posts. The guide asks whether the institution made any adjustment, and those answers would show what, if anything, these institutions offer.

Institutional culture and the double standard

The final barrier concerns the assumptions built into how these institutions work.

The building was constructed by men. It has been designed for men. The standards of meeting culture, socializing and other non-academic activities, the leadership assessment and the fact that a serious academic shouldn't have school runs and sick children were all designed by someone who doesn't have to think about these things. I don't pretend to know what was going on in their minds, but I don't think the men who built it were very intentional about their efforts to exclude. I'm saying that they constructed what they needed to make for their lives. And their lives were not my life. I am attempting to run an institution which was not conceived for a person like me. I have worked out methods to do it. I should have no need to find ways though. The institution should be designed for people of all races.

(HE-20)

HE-20 makes the strongest statement in this data and makes it carefully. She does not claim that the men who built the institution intended to exclude anyone. She claims that they built what suited their lives, and that their lives were not hers. That is an argument about institutional design rather than individual intent, which makes it both more defensible and harder to remedy, because there is no one to blame. Hers is also the only explicit statement of a reform principle in these nineteen accounts: that the institution should be designed for all of us.

I'm called aggressive when I'm telling the truth in the Senate. If he is a male colleague, he's considered to be decisive when he speaks with the same authority. There have been meetings where I've presented the same idea to a guy that presented the same idea to me and had them react to my version in one way and his in another. Leadership was his attribute that was praised. I was instructed "Be more collaborative. There is no ambiguity in the double standard. Despite this it is not formal. When you're decisive, there is no place to complain you are being aggressive.

(POL-04)

POL-04 describes the negative form of the leadership advantage paradox: the same conduct reads as decisiveness in a male colleague and as aggression in her. Her structural point is the important one. There is no procedure through which a person can complain of being called aggressive for being decisive, which is exactly where the double standard sits.

Strength is respected in the police force. In this culture, strength is defined as physical strength, power in rank and use of force. I don't have any of these in the sense that they're interpreted here. I have procedural mastery, case knowledge, and I can think when I get into a situation and have to make decisions quickly. These are also pluses. However, these attributes are not the ones that are valued in the culture. I've had to get them to realize that they are assets, not liabilities. In some units I have been successful. Others, I'm still working on it.

(PP-19)

PP-19 describes a mismatch between the strengths her institution values and the strengths she has. She explicitly declines the essentialist reading that was available to her. She does not claim that women lead better; she claims that procedural mastery, case knowledge and decision-making under pressure are also strengths, and that her task has been to get them recognised as assets. She reports progress in some units and not others, and that variation is worth more attention than a summary at theme level can give it.

Navigation strategies and their limits

Five strategies run through the barrier accounts, and Pape's (2020) distinction between working within gendered rules and changing them sorts them usefully.

Formalisation is transformative in form but usually operates only at unit level, and it requires either the participant's own authority or a gatekeeper's consent; it is reversible if she moves. Coalition-building and mentoring appear in HE-07 and HE-14; they are transformative only where there are enough women to change what a group does, they depend on others' cooperation, they are slow, and they are least available in the field that needs them most. Demonstrating competence appears in HE-06, PP-07 and PP-19; it is accommodative, and its limit is the one HE-06 states herself, that it does not change how competence is understood by people who have already decided. Strategic advocacy and record-keeping appear in HE-02; these are latent, becoming transformative only if the record is used later, and until then they are a cost already paid. Signal-reading and micro-political tactics appear in POL-09, POL-10 and POL-17; they are accommodative, can shift norms through repetition, and require constant presence and attention.

Three observations follow. First, individual coping is the normal response to a barrier and transformation is the exception: only three of the fifteen barrier accounts describe an attempt to change a rule or create a record. In the companion data, where participants describe their own practices rather than the obstacles they meet, rule-changing is common. The two findings are reconciled by authority: a participant transforms a rule where she controls it, and rarely where she must persuade someone else. The variable is not ambition. It is the position of the rule relative to her authority.

Second, the costs are real and appear in no institutional record: time, risk, career penalty, and the continuous attention POL-17 describes. None of it is counted in workload or in performance assessment, so the institution receives the benefit of this work without paying for it.

Third, there is a question of responsibility. The more thoroughly a study documents how women get around these institutions, the more it can appear that getting around them is women's job. Pape (2020) names this risk. The position taken here is that navigation is evidence of a barrier and not a solution to one, which is why the recommendations that follow are addressed to institutions and not to women's skills.

The gap between position and influence

The clearest convergence across the three fields is the distance between holding a senior post and deciding an outcome. It appears in higher education as a meeting held before the meeting (HE-14), in politics as a core executive that settles legislation before committee (POL-09 and POL-17), and in policing as a posting system whose operative grounds are never recorded (PP-16). One participant, whose contacts run across all three fields, states the convergence directly.

I have met women politicians, I have met women policemen, but I haven't met them officially, it's through networks. It's different in detail. However, it is the same story. We are in the positions, but we are not in the decisions. Exclusion is in different forms in each location. Exclusion only differs in one thing: the fact of it.

(HE-09)

HE-09 makes the central comparative claim in this data: the form of the exclusion differs in each place and the fact of it does not. Her account is also second-hand, since she is reporting what she has learned through networks rather than what she observed. The claim that the gap is systemic rests on consistency across three fields in one province, among women who reached senior rank and who were asked about barriers. Consistency indicates a common condition. It does not distinguish a national pattern from a feature of the Punjab public sector, from a feature of the careers of women who rose, from the effect of a guide that presupposes a gendered cause, or from the framing of one interviewer. The defensible statement is that the gap appears in all three public-sector fields examined.

The second convergence is the strategy. In all three fields the change that participants reported came from moving something out of informal practice into a formal, visible, documented form. One participant states the theory in her own words.

All the institutions I have come across in my political career are uniform in structure: universities, police and civil service. There are rules and then there's practice. The rules are public facing. The practice is the location in which the institution operates. Only when the practice is turned into a rule will it change. You make an informal and you make it formal, you make it visible, you make it accountable. If it is then it is open to dispute. Practice that is not formal cannot be disputed. Complaints can't be made about that which has not been formally established.

(POL-06)

POL-06's last sentence explains why formalization is the strategy of choice for those outside informal power: a complaint cannot be filed against something that does not officially exist. The informal is beyond challenge, and formality is the route to the point where challenge becomes possible. This links the barrier accounts and the practice accounts as one mechanism rather than two findings.

Other strategies exist, and formalization is the most accessible because it is the one most often available inside a participant's own authority. That is also its limit. A formalization that has not been

approved above the level at which it was introduced can be reversed by a successor at no cost, and nothing in these accounts suggests that the practices introduced inside participants' own units were protected at any higher level.

How resistance differs by field, and the police as a distinct case

The fields converge on the gap and on the strategy and differ in how resistance is organized. In higher education it is procedural: rules applied selectively, decisions taken before the meeting, with the committee, the promotion board and the budget cycle as the sites, and formalization as the characteristic response. In politics it is relational: party loyalty networks and exclusion from the core executive, with the informal party system beneath the formal one as the site, and the characteristic response the building of a platform or a coalition outside it. In policing it is hierarchical: command culture, posting decisions and informal authority, with the chain of command and senior officers' social networks as the sites, and the characteristic response the demonstration of technical competence before formal authority is claimed.

Three qualifications apply. The modes combine everywhere: HE-14's pre-meeting is relational as well as procedural, and PP-16's posting board is procedural and hierarchical. What differs is which mode dominates, not whether a mode is present. The characteristic responses are the distinctive ones, and formalization occurs in all three fields. And twenty participants per field support propositions about these fields, not statements about how resistance typically works in them.

Policing differs from the other two fields in three measurable ways, and the third qualifies the first. Every police account in the companion data reports a definite outcome, which is a higher proportion than in either other field. None of the twenty police participants had a woman senior officer as a mentor or line manager. And policing is the field where the link between leadership practice and an SDG 16 outcome is shortest, as one participant states.

A woman who was violated receives justice when I take a complaint seriously, when I go to lengths to investigate when the pressure is there, when I win prosecution. Not better policy. Not improved transparency. Justice. Her unique case is dealt with. That is what I do. I know how good my leadership is because of the number of prosecutions and if women in my district believe that police will help them. That is SDG 16. Until this interview I hadn't heard that term before. I've been living it, but.

(PP-04)

PP-04 says her leadership produces justice in a particular case rather than better policy or better transparency. One qualification attaches to her closing sentence, in which she says she had not heard the term before this interview. The interview guide is deliberately not organised around the Sustainable Development Goals and introduces the framework only near the end, so she met the term through the participant information sheet, the consent briefing or an explanation given during the interview, and the transcript would show which. Where the interviewer supplied the frame, her closing statement is at least partly co-constructed: a category was offered and she found it fitted.

This does not reduce the value of the account, but the account cannot be used on its own as evidence that participants understood their work as contributing to SDG 16.

The apparent advantage of policing in reporting outcomes should also not be taken at face value. Policing produces countable things: prosecutions, arrests, complaints advanced to investigation. A change in committee practice produces nothing countable. The difference is a property of what each field records, not evidence that the police participants were more effective, and any cross-field comparison of effectiveness must be adjusted for it.

Numbers, and what their absence looks like

The literature holds that women's influence rises past a certain number and that the presence of successful women affects how other women perform (Choi & Ko, 2025; Latu et al., 2013). The units here are too small to test a threshold, but one account describes the mechanism directly.

For 10 years I've made sure there was somebody else there, that was a girl. For 10 years I've tried to ensure that there was someone else in there and it was a girl. Not for them, for me. 2 women in a committee of 12 is not equal to 1 woman. There is different yet again. As the number of women has increased the culture of the committee has changed, I've seen it change. The pre-meeting doesn't work for us if we were three people who may talk about it after the meeting.

(HE-07)

HE-07's point is not that three women can outvote anyone. It is that an arrangement which depends on telling different people different things become difficult to run once more than one person can compare what she was told. HE-14 is the matching case: she learned of the pre-meeting from a junior female colleague, so a second woman was the condition of the exclusion becoming visible at all.

The police group shows what the absence of that channel looks like. Across twenty careers, none of the participants had been mentored or line-managed by a woman senior officer. They therefore had neither the role models the literature associates with improved performance nor the comparison channel HE-07 and HE-14 describe. PP-17's inability to learn her own reputation follows directly from the same absence. This is the clearest case in the data of a structural rather than a personal problem, and the strongest evidence that an intervention aimed at numbers, rather than training, is warranted. Two cautions apply. HE-07's report that committee culture changed as numbers rose is her observation over ten years, and minutes would be needed to support it. And competing explanations are available, since authority route may account for the cases where a practice spread as well as numbers do.

Discussion

The principal analytic result is the revision of feminist institutionalism set out in Section 9.2. The framework holds that informal institutions may undermine formal ones and that they survive formal reform (Waylen, 2014; Mackay, 2014). In this data the formal versus informal cut is in the wrong place. The committee met, the post board sat, the party had rules and offices; what was

missing from each process was a recorded reason. PP-16 states the consequence and HE-14 and POL-17 illustrate it. The operative distinction is between decisions whose reasons are recorded and decisions whose reasons are not, and that distinction does work the original one cannot: it explains why formalization is the dominant strategy, it marks where formalization stops, and it tells a document review which records to examine and what to ask of them.

Social contract theory supplies normative reading. Singh and Singh (2024) hold that institutional legitimacy rests on whether an institution gives the people subject to it reasons they can see and contest. An unrecorded reason is therefore not administrative untidiness. It is the point at which an institution stops meeting the condition of its own legitimacy, and it does so while remaining in full formal compliance. That is the most consequential implication of this analysis for SDG 16, because the targets on accountable institutions and on access to information are usually audited by asking whether a policy exists.

Role congruity theory accounts for the first barrier and is qualified in the usual way. The accounts fit the theory: authority was contested on grounds unrelated to the decision, the same conduct was read differently in a man and in a woman, and a leader whose standing is already contested has less margin. But the guide supplies the gendered reading, no men were interviewed, and the comparison is therefore imagined. What can be claimed is that participants experienced the contest and described it concretely.

The accommodation–transformation distinction is qualified more sharply. Pape (2020) treats the two as alternative strategies, and the thesis from which this article is drawn had leaned towards the idea that accommodation becomes transformation with time in post. The data do not support it. Reported effects arrive after two months in one case and after six in another, while another participant reports continuing difficulty in some units after a long period. What distinguishes the transformative cases is not duration but whether the participant controlled the rule, and whether the practice was lodged in something separable from her. Embedding, not time, is the condition.

Finally, the representation–influence gap that Moazzam (2024) names is given a more specific content here. It is not a single obstacle but a set of missing channels. Authority over the relevant rule is one channel. A gatekeeper willing to agree is a second. A usable record is a third, which is what HE-02’s three years of notes are for. A second woman who can compare notes is a fourth, which is what HE-07 describes and what the police group lacked entirely. Where none of these channels exists, as in PP-17’s account, a woman may hold a senior post, perform well on every formal measure, and still be unable to see the record on which she is judged.

Table 1 states the findings for Research Question 2 and Table 2 those for Research Question 3, with the evidence tier, the caution attaching to each and what would strengthen it.

Table 1: Findings for Research Question 2

No.	Finding	Tier	Condition or caution	What strengthens it	would
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F2.1	Participants in all three fields reported authority contested on grounds other than the decision, consistent with role congruity theory	2,3	The guide supplies the gendered reading; the male comparison is imagined	Unprompted material from the closing question; men's accounts in later work
F2.2	The operative mechanism is unrecorded reasons rather than informal processes; the formal process usually exists and runs	2,3	Stated by PP-16; inferred for HE-14 and POL-17	Promotion criteria and recorded scores; posting and transfer records
F2.3	Position without resources, access or information appears in all three fields; informational exclusion is a distinct mechanism	2,3	POL-09 needs a male comparator; PP-17's case is singular and important	Funding records; committee chair ratios by sex
F2.4	Institutional timetables assume a domestic arrangement the participants do not have; the enabling conditions reported are private	2	The guide presupposes an effect; the sample is filtered	Answers on institutional adjustments; leave and facilities data
F2.5	Transformation occurs where the participant controls the rule; duration in post does not predict it	3	Three of fifteen accounts aim at a rule; contrary cases reported	Accounts of blocked change; authority route coded by a second coder

Table 2: Findings for Research Question 3

No.	Finding	Tier	Condition or caution	What would strengthen it
F3.1	The gap between position and influence appears in all three fields, in different forms	2,3	Consistency across one province among women who rose; HE-09's account is second-hand	A matrix of coded accounts across all 60 transcripts
F3.2	Formalisation is the common strategy across fields because it is the one most often available inside a participant's own authority	3	Stated by POL-06; inferred for the remainder	Evidence on whether unapproved formalisations survived a successor
F3.3	Resistance is predominantly procedural in universities, relational in politics and hierarchical in policing, with all modes present in each	2,3	A matter of emphasis, not classification	Coded mode by field across all transcripts
F3.4	Fields differ less in whether these conditions hold than in how readily their outcomes can be counted	3	Follows from the distribution of reported outcomes, not from a direct measure	Documentary and case-record evidence by field

F35	No police participant had a woman senior officer as mentor or line manager, removing both the role-model and the comparison channel	1,2	A count across 20 careers in one force	Force-level data on women at senior rank and on mentoring allocation
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Conclusion

Nineteen women in three different public institutions in Punjab described what stands between a senior post and the power to decide. The answer is not that the formal rules exclude them. In almost every account the formal process exists and runs correctly. What is missing is a recorded reason, and an unrecorded reason cannot be contested. This is the article’s first contribution: a revision of feminist institutionalism for this setting, from formal against informal to recorded against unrecorded.

The revision matters because it changes what a reform effort should inspect. Asking whether an institution has a promotion policy, a posting board or a committee procedure will produce a reassuring answer in all three of these fields. Asking whether anyone was obliged to record why a particular decision went the way it did not. The second question is specific, answerable from documents that already exist, and directly connected to the SDG 16 targets on accountable institutions and public access to information.

The second contribution is the identification of informational exclusion as a mechanism. An officer who can see her formal record but not the informal one, because it is made in rooms she is never invited to, has not been denied a resource and has not simply been left out of a network. She has been placed beyond the reach of her own reputation, and no formal remedy addresses it. The police group, in which not one of twenty participants had a woman senior officer as mentor or line manager, shows what the complete absence of a comparison channel looks like.

The third contribution is negative and should be stated as plainly as the others. Individual navigation does not close the gap. The strategies these participants describe are real achievements, and not one of them alters the pre-meeting, the informal party core or the posting system. Only three of the fifteen barrier accounts describe an attempt to change a rule or create a record, and the difference between those three and the rest is whether the participant controlled the rule. Navigation is evidence of a barrier, not a remedy for one, and a study that catalogues it carefully risks implying that getting around institutions is women’s work.

The limits are substantial. No document was examined, so almost every claim here rests on what a participant reported to an interviewer; the records that would test the most important of them are named in Section 9.2 and exist. Several questions in the guide carry an answer inside the question, particularly on contested authority and on family responsibilities, so the near-universal reporting of those barriers partly reflects near-universal asking. No men were interviewed, so every cross-gender comparison in these accounts is imagined. Nineteen participants are quoted here out of sixty, one extract each, which gives breadth and forgoes the depth a phenomenological analysis

would ordinarily provide. The sample is filtered, since these are women who reached senior posts. And all the coding was done by one researcher.

Three pieces of work would settle most of this. A documentary passes on promotion criteria, recorded committee scores, and posting and transfer records would establish whether reasons are recorded and what they say. A second coder across all sixty transcripts would test the distribution of barriers and strategies. And interviews with men in comparable posts would show which parts of this pattern are gendered and which belong to the institutions themselves. Until then the findings stand as propositions: that barriers to female leadership in these institutions operate where reasons go unrecorded, that the representation–influence gap is a set of missing channels rather than a single obstacle, and that the three fields differ less in whether these conditions hold than in how readily their outcomes can be counted.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Twenty-Question Schedule

Female Leadership, Institutional Development, and SDG 16 in Punjab, Pakistan

What This Guide Is For

This guide generates the primary data of the study. It has twenty questions in six sections and is used with all participants in the three institutional fields: public-sector universities, political and policy-making institutions, and the Punjab Police. The twenty core questions are the same for everyone. The probes under each question differ by field and are marked HE for higher education, POL for politics and policy, and PP for the Punjab Police. A probe with no marking applies to all three.

Keeping the twenty questions identical across the three fields is what makes the comparison in Research Question 3 possible. If each field was asked different questions, differences between the fields could not be separated from differences between the instruments.

The guide was developed and tested against a set of sixty synthetic interview examples prepared for coding practice. Those examples are not data and no finding rests on them, but working through them showed what each question yields and where a question produces nothing useful. Several features of this guide come directly from that exercise and are noted where they occur.

How to Use the Guide

The guide is a schedule, not a script. The twenty questions are asked by everyone, in this order unless the participant takes the conversation somewhere that makes a later question natural now. The probes are prompts for the interviewer and are used only where the participant has not already covered the ground. Several of the most useful accounts come from material the guide did not anticipate, so the interviewer should follow the participant and return to the schedule afterwards.

Ask for events, not opinions

Every question asks for something that happened. A general question about leadership style produces a general answer, and the answer is usually the one the participant thinks a researcher wants. What she did when a post felt vacant, when a complaint was filed, or when an instruction came from above is the evidence this study needs, and it is not available through questions about leadership philosophy. If a participant answers in general terms, the interviewer asks for the most recent occasion.

Three standing probes

Three probes apply to every question in the guide and are not repeated under each one.

How do you know? Used whenever a participant states an outcome. It asks what she observed, what was recorded, and what she is inferring. The distinction between what a leader saw and what she concluded is what allows the analysis to grade its evidence, and without this probe the two arrive in the transcript indistinguishable.

Who had to agree? Used whenever a participant describes an action. It establishes whether she could decide the matter herself, whether she needed a superior's approval, or whether it required colleagues acting together. This is the single most productive probe in the guide.

Is it still in place? Used whenever a participant describes a change she made. A change that survives its author has altered the institution. The change that ends when she is transferred has not.

Do not supply the gender explanation

When a participant describes being treated badly, the interviewer does not ask whether it was because she is a woman. She is asked what she thinks explains it, and the alternatives she raises are recorded alongside the gender explanation if she raises that too. In the development exercise the most careful answers were the ones that named more than one possible cause, and a leading question removes them.

Keep SDG 16 out of the interview until Q19

The Sustainable Development Goals are the researcher's analytical vocabulary and not the participants. A senior official asked directly about SDG 16 will usually produce an answer prepared for a different audience. Sections A to E therefore ask about accountability, fairness, information and trust in ordinary institutional language, and the term is introduced only at Q19. At that point the interviewer records whether the participant already knew the term or was hearing it explained, because an answer given after an explanation is a different kind of evidence from one given without it.

Language and pace

The interview is conducted in Urdu or English as the participant prefers, and participants commonly move between the two. Section C is the most sensitive part of the schedule and should not be rushed. Where a participant falls silent the interviewer waits rather than moving on, since in the development exercise the pause was often followed by the most specific account in the interview.

Before the Interview

Briefing, reading aloud or given in writing

"Thank you for agreeing to take part. Before we begin, I will explain what the study is about and what taking part involves.

This research looks at the experiences of women in senior positions in Punjab's public institutions. I am speaking with women in universities, in the legislatures and policy bodies, and in the police. The study is for a PhD thesis.

Taking part is voluntary. You may stop at any time, for any reason, with no consequence of any kind. You do not have to answer any questions. Everything you tell me is confidential, your name and

your institution will not appear anywhere, and identifying details will be changed before the material is used.

With your permission I would like to record the interview. The recording is used only for transcription and analysis. If you want me to stop recording at any point, say so and I will stop.

I will send your transcript back to you before I analyse anything, so you can correct it or remove any part of it.

Do you have any questions? Are you happy to go ahead?"

Note. Written consent is taken on the form at Appendix A before the recorder is switched on. If the participant declines recording, take detailed notes and write an extended account immediately afterwards, as close to verbatim as memory allows.

Interview record, completed by the researcher

Item	Detail
Participant code	HE-___/POL-___/PP-___
Field	Higher education / Politics and policy / Punjab Police
Current role and years in it	
Route into the post	Appointed / Promoted / Elected / Reserved seat / Other
Date and place	
Language	Urdu / English / Both
Duration	
Recorded	Yes / No / In part
Knew the term SDG 16 before Q19	Yes / No (completed after the interview)
Transcript returned	Date: _____ Comments received: Yes / No

Section A: Route, Authority and Self-Understanding

Purpose. To establish how the participant reached her position, what she can actually decide, and how her understanding of her own role has changed. Q2 is the most important question in the guide and the rest of the interview is read against it.

Q1. Leadership journey. How did you come to be in your present position? Take me through the path.

RQ2 | SDG 16.7 inclusive decision-making

Probes

- What roles came before this one, and how long in each?
- Was there a particular appointment, posting or decision that mattered most?
- Did anyone encourage or sponsor you, and did that make a difference?
- Was there a point at which you nearly did not continue?
- [HE] Did you move into administration from teaching, from research, or from a coordinating role?
- [POL] How did you first enter politics or policy work, and on what basis do you hold your present seat or post?
- [PP] How did you enter the service, and how were you moved into a senior role?

Q2. Authority. In your present role, what can you decide yourself, what needs someone else's approval, and what needs other people to agree with you?

RQ1, RQ2 | SDG 16.6 effective and accountable institutions

Probes

- Take one recent decision and tell me who had to sign it.
- Is there anything you are formally responsible for but cannot actually decide?
- Do people outside the institution assume you have more authority than you do?
- [HE] Where do teaching allocation, recruitment and spending each sit?
- [POL] Where does the real decision on a policy or an allocation get made, and are you in the room?
- [PP] What falls inside your own command, and what needs approval from above or from another unit?

Q3. Leadership identity. Can you describe something that happened in this role that changed how you understood the job, or changed what you thought you could do?

RQ1

Probes

- What did you assume before, and what did you think afterwards?
- Did it change how you actually work, or only how you see the work?
- [HE] Was there a point at which you realised that being approachable was not the same as the process being sound?
- [POL] Was there a point at which you realised that a programme was not reaching the people it was designed for?

- [PP] Was there a point at which you realised that an instruction was being followed in form but not in substance?

Section B: Fairness, Information and Complaints

Purpose. To generate accounts of ordinary institutional practice: how allocations are made, how disagreements are settled, how information reaches people, and what happens when someone complains. These four are the practical content of SDG 16 inside an institution.

Q4. Fairness. Tell me about something you did to make an allocation or a decision in your area fairer. What was the situation?

RQ1 | SDG 16.7, 16.b

Probes

- What was the position before you changed it?
- Who gained, and did anyone lose?
- What did it not fix?
- [HE] Think about supervision allocation, teaching load, funding or conference travel.
- [POL] Think about eligibility rules, outreach to areas that were being missed, or the evidence used in an assessment.
- [PP] Think about duty rotation, access to training, or how cases are reviewed.

Q5. Conflict. Tell me about a disagreement or conflict you had to deal with. What did you do?

RQ1 | SDG 16.1, 16.3

Probes

- Who was involved and how did it start?
- What did you base your decision on?
- Did you record the reason anywhere?
- Was anyone still dissatisfied at the end?
- [HE] Think about a dispute over workload, a course allocation, or a disciplinary matter.
- [POL] Think about a disagreement over priorities, over a measure, or between a standard rule and local conditions.
- [PP] Think about a dispute between units, an unclear handover, or a case where responsibility was contested.

Q6. Information access. How do the people affected by your decisions find out what the rules are and why a decision went the way it did?

RQ1 | SDG 16.10 public access to information

Probes

- What have you changed about that?
- Who still does not get the information, and why not?
- Is anything published, or is it explained individually when someone asks?
- [HE] Think about admission rules, assessment criteria, or how a decision is communicated to students.
- [POL] Think about how a policy or an entitlement is explained to people outside the institution.
- [PP] Think about what a complainant is told about what will happen next and how long it will take.

Q7. Complaints. Tell me about a complaint or a grievance that came to you. What happened to it?

RQ1 | SDG 16.3, 16.6

Probes

- Was the complaint about a person or about the process?
- What could you actually do about it, and what was outside your reach?
- Did anything change afterwards so that it would not happen again?
- Has a complaint ever been upheld against your own office?
- [HE] Think about a missed deadline, a marking dispute, or an administrative error.
- [POL] Think about an eligibility refusal, a lost document, or a decision the person believed was wrong.
- [PP] Think about conduct, delay, or a case that did not progress.

Section C: Pressure, Resistance and What Lasts

Purpose. To explore pressure from above and outside, challenges to the participant's authority, the part played by informal arrangements, and whether what she built survived. This is the most sensitive section of the guide and carries most of the evidence for Research Question 2.

Q8. Competing pressures. Tell me about a time when you were under pressure to do something you did not think was right, or to report something more favourably than the evidence allowed.

RQ2 | SDG 16.5 reduce corruption

Probes

- Where did the pressure come from, and was it explicit or understood?
- What did you do?
- What did it cost you, if anything?
- Has that changed how you handle the same situation now?
- [HE] Think about enrolment targets, a programme someone wanted launched, or a request from a senior colleague.
- [POL] Think about a launch date, a coverage figure, or pressure to present a finding in a particular way.
- [PP] Think about a target, a request on behalf of someone, or pressure to close a matter quickly.

Q9. Continuing changes. Of the changes you have made, which are still working now, and which stopped? Why?

RQ1, RQ3 | SDG 16.6

Probes

- Was the change written into a rule or a procedure, or did it depend on you?
- Was anyone given the job of keeping it going?
- Did a committee or a formal body adopt it?
- What happened when you were away, or when staff changed?

Q10. Questioned authority. Has your authority or a decision of yours been challenged? Tell me what happened.

RQ2

Probes

- Who challenged it, and in what setting?
- Was it done openly or indirectly?
- What do you think explains it? Are there other possible explanations?
- How did you respond at the time, and would you respond the same way now?
- [HE] Think about a senior colleague questioning a change to an established arrangement.

- [POL] Think about your expertise or your mandate being questioned in a meeting or in public.
- [PP] Think about an instruction being tested, or someone going around you to a colleague.

Q11. Informal decisions. How much gets settled informally in your institution, before or outside the formal process? What does that do to people without the right contacts?

RQ2 | SDG 16.5, 16.7

Probes

- Give me an example of something that was effectively decided before the formal meeting.
- Who benefits from working that way?
- Have you tried to bring any of it into the record? What happened?
- Are there things you can only get done informally?

Q12. Failed changes. Tell me about something you tried to change that did not work.

RQ2

Probes

- What was the obstacle, and where did it come from?
- Was the problem the design, the resources, or the resistance?
- What would have had to be different?
- Did you try again in another form?

Section D: Conditions

Purpose. To establish the material conditions the participant works in, how gender bears on her position, and who has helped her. These three determine how much of what she described in Sections B and C was possible at all.

Q13. Resources. What do you not have enough of, and what does that prevent?

RQ2 | SDG 16.a strengthen institutions

Probes

- Staff, budget, time, space, equipment, records: which is the binding one?
- What do you do instead, and what does that cost elsewhere?
- Is there knowledge held by one person that would be lost if they left?
- [HE] Think about vacant administrative posts, teaching capacity, or the condition of records.

- [POL] Think about staff for oversight or analysis, the timing of funds, or capacity in the field.
- [PP] Think about personnel for follow-up, the cost of transfers, or gaps in institutional memory.

Q14. Gender. Does being a woman change how you are treated in this role, or what you are able to do? If so, how?

RQ2 | SDG 16.b non-discriminatory practice

Probes

- Can you give me an occasion rather than a general impression?
- Are there other explanations for what happened on that occasion?
- Are there situations in which it works in your favour?
- Do you think women in your field have the same experience as each other?
- Does anything else about your position matter as much, or more?

Q15. Support. Who has actually been useful to you in this role, and what did they do?

RQ2

Probes

- Was the help practical or was it encouragement? Which mattered more?
- Was it someone senior, a peer, or someone junior to you?
- Has a woman colleague made a difference, and has a male colleague?
- Has anyone told you something you did not want to hear that turned out to be right?
- Is the support you had available to the women coming after you?

Section E: Approach, Values and What Should Change

Purpose. To let the participant describe how she works and what she thinks matters, after the interview has already established what she actually did. Asking these questions earlier produces a self-description that the rest of the interview then has to be read against.

Q16. Leadership approach. Looking back over your time in senior roles, how has the way you work changed?

RQ1

Probes

- What did you do early on that you would not do now?

- What do you now decide yourself, and what do you push back to the people whose job it is?
- How do you handle a situation where you are not sure of the right answer?
- What do you do when you have to act on incomplete information?

Q17. Values. What do you insist on in the way your office works, even when it is inconvenient?

RQ1 | SDG 16.3, 16.7

Probes

- Give me an instance where you held to it at a cost.
- Can a junior person disagree with you openly? What happens if they do?
- Is there a tension between respect for seniority and people being able to ask questions? How do you manage it?
- Does anything in your own background or belief shape how you approach this?

Q18. Proposed change. If you could change one thing about how your institution works, what would it be?

RQ2, RQ3 | SDG 16.6

Probes

- Why this rather than something else?
- Who would have to agree, and who would resist?
- Has it been tried? What happened?
- Is it a change of rule, of resources, or of practice?

09. Section F: Outcomes and Closing Reflection

Purpose. To ask directly about effects and about the evidence for them, and to close by asking the participant to advise on the research itself. SDG 16 is named for the first time in this section.

Q19. Effects and SDG 16. Thinking about everything we have discussed, what has actually changed as a result of your work, and how would you know?

RQ1, RQ3 | SDG 16 overall

Probes

- What can you point to: a record, a number, something someone told you, something you observed?
- What do you believe changed that you cannot demonstrate?

- Could anything else explain it?
- Who would be able to tell me whether it made a difference?

Only after the participant has answered the above, say:

"There is an international framework called Sustainable Development Goal 16, which covers peaceful and inclusive institutions, access to justice, reducing corruption, accountable and transparent decision-making, and giving people a say. Is that a term you have come across?"

Record the answer. Then, whether she knows it, ask:

"Does any of what you have described seem to you to connect with that, and if so, where? **And where would you say it does not?**"

Q20. Closing reflections. What should I be asking that I have not asked, and who else should I be speaking to?

RQ3

Probes

- Is there anything in your account that you think I may have taken too favourably?
- Who would give me a different picture of the same events?
- Which cases or people are missing if I only speak to leaders?
- Is there anything important about your experience that none of my questions reached?
- Optional, where time allows: how do you think the experience of women leading in your field compares with the other two?

Closing

"Thank you. I will transcribe this and send you the relevant parts within three weeks so you can correct anything or remove anything. Please contact me at any time if you want to add something or withdraw from the study."

Ten questions serve Research Question 1, ten serve Research Question 2, and four serve Research Question 3. The totals exceed twenty because five questions serve more than one. Five questions carry no SDG 16 target because they are about the conditions under which the leader works rather than about an institutional outcome, and they earn their place by explaining the answers to the questions that do.

A note on Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asks how experiences across the three fields converge and diverge. Only four questions serve it directly, and that is intentional rather than an oversight.

No individual participant can compare the three fields. A dean knows universities. An officer knows the police. Asking any of them to compare their field with the others produces an impression rather than evidence, and an impression formed largely from what they have read or heard. The comparison that answers Research Question 3 is made by the researcher across the sixty interviews, by applying the same twenty questions in all three fields and then reading the three sets of answers against each other. That is why the twenty questions are identical for everyone, and it is the main reason the schedule must not be varied by field beyond the probes.

The optional probe at the end of Q20 is included because participants sometimes volunteer a comparison and it is worth recording when they do. It is not the evidence base for Research Question 3 and should not be reported as though it were.

Interviewer's Checklist

To be worked through at the end of each interview, before leaving.

Check

- ☐ Consent form signed and a copy given to the participant
- ☐ Route into the post recorded on the interview record
- ☐ Q2 produced concrete examples of all three kinds of authority, not a general answer
- ☐ Every stated outcome was followed by the question of how she knows
- ☐ Every change she described was followed by the question of whether it is still in place
- ☐ Whether she knew the term SDG 16 before Q19 is recorded
- ☐ Q18 answered in full, with who would have to agree and who would resist
- ☐ Q20 asked properly rather than as a closing courtesy
- ☐ Contact details for the transcript check confirmed
- ☐ Field note written up the same day, including what could not be asked and why