



INSTITUTIONAL GASLIGHTING IN PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES: A FEMINIST INQUIRY INTO GENDERED PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of institutional gaslighting as a systemic form of psychological control that disproportionately targets women in patriarchal societies, with a focus on public institutions in Pakistan. Drawing upon feminist theories of epistemic injustice, discursive power, and emotional labor, the study investigates how formal structures such as universities, hospitals, and civil services employ bureaucratic language, procedural ambiguity, and moral discourse to invalidate women's experiences and fragment their professional identities. Utilizing a qualitative feminist methodology, the research is based on narrative interviews with 24 professional women across multiple regions of Pakistan, revealing consistent patterns of testimonial dismissal, procedural delay, emotional erosion, and institutional betrayal. Despite these harms, the study also identifies micro-resistances, including personal documentation, informal support networks, and strategic reframing of grievances. The analysis highlights that institutional gaslighting in Pakistan is not merely a personal or interpersonal phenomenon but a deeply embedded cultural practice that protects male authority and suppresses feminist consciousness. The paper concludes with actionable policy recommendations to reform complaint mechanisms, introduce trauma-informed training, and institutionalize emotional and epistemic recognition. This study contributes to feminist literature by framing gaslighting as a critical site of gendered governance and by proposing a locally grounded, politically engaged framework for institutional accountability.

Keywords: Institutional Gaslighting, Feminist Theory, Epistemic Injustice, Pakistan, Gender and Power, Qualitative Research, Women in Bureaucracy, Psychological Control

Introduction

Gaslighting, a form of psychological manipulation that causes individuals to doubt their perceptions, memories, and realities, has historically been studied within the confines of interpersonal relationships. However, contemporary feminist and critical institutional theorists have begun to recognize gaslighting as a systemic, institutionalized mechanism that reinforces power hierarchies, particularly in patriarchal settings. In contexts like Pakistan where gender inequality is deeply embedded within social, religious, and bureaucratic institutions gaslighting becomes an insidious form of control, silencing dissent, invalidating lived experiences, and delegitimizing female agency.

The concept of gaslighting originated in the 1938 play *Gas Light*, where a husband manipulates his wife into questioning her sanity. In modern psychological literature, gaslighting has been characterized by denial, contradiction, misdirection, and lies, which serve to destabilize the target (Abramson, 2014). In institutional



contexts, gaslighting extends beyond personal manipulation to include policies, discourses, and practices that reinforce existing hierarchies while discrediting women's voices and experiences.

In Pakistan, women's subordination is not only a cultural artifact but is also sustained through formal systems—legal, educational, healthcare, and academic institutions—that subtly or overtly deny their concerns, question their competence, or pathologize their resistance. From university campuses where female faculty face minimization and delegitimization, to courtrooms where women's testimonies are dismissed as emotional or exaggerated, the institutional landscape is replete with examples of gendered gaslighting.

This study seeks to explore how institutional gaslighting operates in Pakistan as a gendered practice, with a specific focus on female professionals in academia, healthcare, and public administration. These women, despite their education and professional standing, report a persistent experience of being invalidated, excluded, or labeled as 'overreacting' when raising concerns related to harassment, inequity, or workplace discrimination. Their lived experiences offer a unique lens through which to examine the broader structures that maintain patriarchal dominance through subtle psychological control.

The core questions guiding this inquiry are:

1. How do women in professional institutions in Pakistan experience institutional gaslighting?
2. What discursive, procedural, or structural mechanisms are used to delegitimize women's perceptions and claims?
3. How do women respond to, resist, or internalize these gaslighting experiences?

This research is grounded in a feminist epistemological framework, which asserts that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by power relations (Harding, 1991; Collins, 2000). It recognizes that institutional gaslighting is not just a set of isolated events but a systemic practice that undermines female credibility and autonomy in service of patriarchal control. By focusing on qualitative narratives of women who have faced institutional invalidation, this study hopes to document invisible harms and propose pathways for policy transformation and institutional accountability.

Moreover, this inquiry has urgent sociopolitical relevance. In a country where recent high-profile cases of harassment have led to public outrage but little institutional reform, understanding the mechanisms of silencing and invalidation is critical. Gaslighting acts as a soft weapon of power, avoiding confrontation while ensuring that women's voices remain peripheral. It is not enough to look at visible acts of discrimination; the psychological erosion inflicted by institutional gaslighting must be recognized, studied, and challenged.

In sum, this paper seeks to extend the concept of gaslighting from the interpersonal to the institutional domain, illustrating how systemic psychological manipulation is deployed to marginalize women in Pakistan. It contributes to an emerging body of literature that recognizes emotional and cognitive subjugation as a form of structural violence, deserving of scholarly, legal, and policy attention.

Literature Review

Gaslighting, historically studied in psychological and interpersonal contexts, has in recent years emerged as a critical conceptual tool in feminist theory and institutional critique. Its migration from the private realm of relationships to the public domain of institutions is reflective of a broader realization: that systemic power does not only manifest in material exclusion, but also in the manipulation of perception, memory, and reality. This section reviews the existing scholarship across psychology, feminist theory, sociology, and

South Asian studies, with an emphasis on how institutional gaslighting operates as a gendered and structurally embedded mechanism of power.

Gaslighting: From Individual Manipulation to Structural Practice

Originally conceptualized in clinical psychology, gaslighting refers to a form of emotional abuse in which a perpetrator manipulates a target into doubting their own perceptions and sanity. Early psychological literature focused on narcissistic abuse and pathological lying within intimate relationships, noting symptoms such as self-doubt, confusion, and emotional withdrawal among victims. However, more recent scholarship has reframed gaslighting as a socio-political and institutional phenomenon. It is no longer confined to romantic dynamics but is now understood to function in workplaces, educational institutions, healthcare systems, and state bureaucracies.

This shift in understanding is driven by feminist theorists who argue that gaslighting is not just a tactic of individual manipulation but a culturally and institutionally sanctioned behavior. In particular, gaslighting becomes institutional when it is embedded in practices such as dismissing harassment complaints as “misunderstandings,” trivializing women’s accounts of abuse, or requiring victims to prove their trauma through impossible standards of evidence. In this way, gaslighting is aligned with what theorists have described as epistemic injustice the systematic devaluation of certain groups’ knowledge, testimony, and emotional experience.

Feminist Readings of Gaslighting: Gender, Power, and Credibility

Feminist scholars have been instrumental in expanding the analytical scope of gaslighting. In particular, they have linked it to the delegitimization of women’s epistemic authority in both private and public settings. Women, under gendered norms, are more frequently characterized as “irrational,” “emotional,” or “hysterical,” and thus more vulnerable to being gaslit. Within institutions, these characterizations are used to undermine women’s complaints, reinterpret their motives, or recast legitimate resistance as insubordination or overreaction.

A key insight from feminist work is that gaslighting operates within a matrix of patriarchal norms, where authority is structurally gendered. For instance, in academia, when a female faculty member reports systemic bias or harassment, she is often subjected to a double-bind: either she remains silent and becomes complicit, or she speaks out and is labeled as “difficult” or “too sensitive.” The latter feeds into institutional cultures of silencing, where the very act of naming discrimination becomes evidence of irrationality. This logic sustains a gendered system of punishment where the burden of proof lies disproportionately on women, and where institutions use procedural objectivity to deny the reality of misogyny.

These themes are reflected in studies of healthcare, legal systems, and development agencies, where women’s narratives are not only dismissed but actively erased or re-scripted. Gaslighting here is not a deviation but a disciplinary tool, used to preserve institutional legitimacy by framing dissent as pathology and mischaracterizing resistance as misunderstanding.

Institutional Betrayal and Organizational Gaslighting

Closely related to institutional gaslighting is the concept of institutional betrayal, which describes the failure of institutions to protect those dependent on them for safety, such as universities, hospitals, or workplaces. Betrayal occurs not only when institutions fail to act but when they actively undermine survivors’ credibility, delay investigations, or reframe abuse as a personal failing. When paired with gaslighting, these failures constitute a psychologically corrosive environment that can have long-term emotional and cognitive consequences for victims, especially women.

Organizational gaslighting further incorporates the bureaucratic dimensions of denial. Through mechanisms such as ambiguous complaint procedures, shifting standards of conduct, and selective enforcement of rules, institutions can delegitimize female agency while maintaining an outward appearance of due process. In this way, gaslighting becomes a performance of fairness that obscures systemic bias.

This is especially relevant in the Pakistani context, where patriarchal institutional cultures often weaponize religious or cultural values to further invalidate women's experiences. For instance, a woman who reports harassment may be asked to "forgive" the perpetrator in the name of modesty or community cohesion, thus recasting the act of reporting as morally dubious. Such examples demonstrate that institutional gaslighting is not only psychological but also deeply moral and symbolic, using shared cultural narratives to maintain gendered hierarchies.

Gaslighting in the South Asian Context

While gaslighting has received growing attention in Western feminist literature, its application in South Asia is still nascent. However, the region's unique combination of patriarchy, postcolonial bureaucracy, and religious nationalism creates a fertile ground for institutional gaslighting. In Pakistan, women who challenge institutional authority—whether in the university, judiciary, or civil service are often accused of defaming the institution, being un-Islamic, or harming national unity.

South Asian feminist scholars have long emphasized how respectability politics, honor culture, and religious-political control function to silence women. Gaslighting here is interwoven with these ideologies. For example, women in Pakistani universities have reported how male colleagues and administrators dismiss complaints of bias as "misinterpretation" or "personal issues," thereby reframing systemic discrimination as emotional instability. Similarly, women who challenge curricular or policy decisions in public institutions may be painted as agitators or Westernized feminists trying to undermine tradition.

These practices are exacerbated by lack of institutional accountability mechanisms, absence of trauma-informed complaint processes, and a bureaucratic culture that prioritizes reputation over justice. In this context, gaslighting functions as both an individual and structural practice, enabling the reproduction of institutional power while in-virilizing dissent.

Psychological and Emotional Consequences

Empirical studies show that institutional gaslighting has severe mental health consequences, particularly for women navigating hostile work environments. Victims often experience cognitive dissonance, self-doubt, depression, and loss of professional confidence. Moreover, because institutional gaslighting is difficult to prove—operating through implication, tone, or omission rather than direct abuse it becomes psychologically isolating. Victims may begin to question their own judgment or fear that their perception of injustice is a delusion, which further erodes resistance and sustains compliance.

This psychological toll is compounded by the stigma surrounding mental health in Pakistan, where speaking about emotional harm is often viewed as weakness. As a result, many women remain silent, internalizing their experiences and withdrawing from public life an outcome that ultimately reinforces the institutional status quo.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation that integrates feminist standpoint theory, epistemic injustice, and institutional power theory to understand institutional gaslighting as a gendered mechanism of psychological control in Pakistan. These theoretical lenses allow for a nuanced examination

of how women lived experiences are disqualified or reframed in ways that reinforce patriarchal hierarchies within formal structures such as universities, state institutions, and bureaucratic systems.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Central to this study is feminist standpoint theory, which argues that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalized groups, particularly women, possess unique epistemic vantage points due to their subordination (Harding, 1991; Hartsock, 1983). In contrast to objectivist epistemologies that privilege detachment and neutrality, standpoint theory asserts that women's experiences, particularly those of exclusion, silencing, and resistance, are valid and essential sources of knowledge.

In the context of institutional gaslighting, feminist standpoint theory helps reveal how dominant discourses frame institutional practices as neutral, while women's challenges to these practices are dismissed as emotional or subjective. The disjuncture between institutional representations of fairness and women's lived experiences of injustice becomes a site of epistemic struggle. By centering the standpoint of women who face institutional gaslighting, this study contests the false neutrality of organizational structures and policies.

Epistemic Injustice and Gaslighting

Closely linked to standpoint theory is the concept of epistemic injustice, which Fricker (2007) defines as the harm done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower. Epistemic injustice includes testimonial injustice when someone's credibility is unfairly deflated due to identity prejudice and hermeneutical injustice when a gap in collective interpretive resources obscures someone's experience.

Gaslighting, particularly in institutional settings, is a potent form of epistemic injustice. When women report harassment, exclusion, or structural bias, and their experiences are dismissed or reframed as "misunderstandings" or "misperceptions," they suffer testimonial injustice. Moreover, institutional cultures that lack the language to name or validate psychological forms of harm contribute to hermeneutical injustice. Victims may lack the tools to even make sense of their experiences, let alone articulate them in ways considered institutionally "valid."

This framework reveals how gaslighting is not merely a cognitive distortion inflicted by individuals but a structural practice that denies certain groups access to recognition, credibility, and self-definition. Institutions protect their reputations by discrediting women's testimonies, leading to a situation where reality itself is contested.

Power, Discourse, and Bureaucratic Rationality

The theoretical architecture of this paper is further supported by Michel Foucault's conception of power and discourse. Foucault (1977) posits that power is not merely repressive but productive it produces norms, truths, and subjectivities. Within institutions, power operates through normative discourses that define what is reasonable, professional, or appropriate. These discourses become regulatory, punishing deviations from institutional scripts of conduct.

Institutional gaslighting functions through this very mechanism. Women who challenge institutional norms are subjected to discursive sanctions: they are labeled as "overreacting," "emotional," or "unfit for leadership." These labels are not just descriptions; they are mechanisms of control, used to invalidate alternative realities and reassert dominant narratives.

Furthermore, Max Weber's theory of bureaucratic rationality adds an important dimension. Bureaucracies, while ostensibly neutral and efficient, operate according to impersonal rules that often mask structural bias.

The bureaucratic insistence on “evidence,” “objectivity,” and “procedure” can be manipulated to gaslight complainants, forcing them to defend the validity of their own experiences within systems designed to deny subjectivity.

Thus, institutional gaslighting exists at the intersection of gendered power, discursive control, and bureaucratic objectivity. It leverages institutional norms and procedures not to correct injustice, but to sustain the appearance of fairness while undermining women’s cognitive and emotional integrity.

Intersectionality

Finally, this study employs the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) to account for how gaslighting operates differently across lines of class, ethnicity, religion, and regional identity. In Pakistan, women from marginalized ethnic groups, rural backgrounds, or religious minorities may be more susceptible to institutional silencing, not only because of gender but also due to compound layers of structural discrimination.

An intersectional framework ensures that institutional gaslighting is not treated as a monolithic experience. Rather, it allows for contextualized analysis that captures the multiple and overlapping power structures that shape how women are perceived, heard, or dismissed.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, feminist research design to investigate how institutional gaslighting operates within professional structures in Pakistan, with a specific focus on women in academia, healthcare, and public administration. Given the complex, nuanced, and often unspoken nature of psychological manipulation and epistemic injustice, qualitative inquiry is most appropriate to surface lived experiences, meaning-making processes, and hidden institutional cultures.

Research Design

This research uses an interpretivist paradigm, grounded in feminist methodology. The goal is not to generalize findings statistically but to understand the depth, texture, and logic of women's experiences with institutional gaslighting. Feminist methodology emphasizes subjectivity, positionality, and the legitimacy of experiential knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2013). This orientation aligns with the epistemological standpoint of the study: that women in patriarchal institutions hold critical insights into mechanisms of silencing and control that are often obscured in positivist research.

The study adopts narrative inquiry as its core methodological strategy. Narrative methods are particularly effective for examining institutional gaslighting, which often unfolds subtly over time, leaving victims questioning their own memories and emotions. Through life histories and professional trajectories, narratives allow participants to reclaim their voice and reconstruct their identities in opposition to the dominant discourses that invalidate them (Riessman, 2008).

Sampling Strategy

Given the exploratory and in-depth nature of the study, purposive sampling was used to identify women who have had substantial engagement with institutions such as universities, hospitals, or public sector organizations in Pakistan. The inclusion criteria were:

- Women with at least five years of professional experience.
- Women who have filed or contemplated filing complaints related to discrimination, harassment, or bias.

- Women who report persistent feelings of invalidation, gaslighting, or emotional erosion are linked to institutional responses.

A total of 24 participants were selected from four regions of Pakistan: Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, and Islamabad. Efforts were made to include participants from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds to capture intersectional variations in experience.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting 60–90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Urdu or English, based on the preference of the participants. Interviews explored themes such as:

- Initial experiences of exclusion or silencing.
- Institutional responses to complaints or concerns.
- Internal emotional and cognitive shifts.
- Strategies of resistance or withdrawal.
- Perceptions of institutional justice and accountability.

In addition, field notes and participant journals (when offered voluntarily) were used to document emotional undertones, pauses, and reflections that may not have emerged in spoken narratives.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and organizational names were anonymized.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process:

1. Familiarization with the data.
2. Generation of initial codes.
3. Searching for themes.
4. Reviewing themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the report.

Themes such as “delegitimized voice,” “emotional fragmentation,” “procedural denial,” and “institutional betrayal” were inductively derived. Special attention was given to counter-narratives, i.e., ways in which participants resisted or reinterpreted institutional labeling and silencing.

The researcher's positionality, as a woman academic in Pakistan, reflexively informed the interpretive process. Reflexive journaling was employed throughout the data collection and analysis phases to ensure transparency and awareness of potential bias.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines of qualitative feminist research. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the researcher's home university. Key ethical considerations included:

- **Informed consent:** All participants were fully informed about the nature and purpose of the research.
- **Confidentiality:** Names and identifying details were anonymized.

- **Emotional safety:** Because recounting experiences of gaslighting can be emotionally triggering, participants were allowed to pause or withdraw at any time. Referrals to mental health resources were provided when needed.
- **Reciprocity:** Participants were offered the opportunity to review and comment on their interview transcripts and final interpretations.

This methodological approach ensures that the voices of women so often silenced or distorted in institutional spaces are placed at the center of knowledge production, and that the inquiry serves both academic and emancipatory purposes.

Findings

The narratives of the 24 professional women interviewed for this study reveal that institutional gaslighting in Pakistan is multi-layered, systemic, and psychologically corrosive. Although participants belonged to diverse sectors, academia, public health, and government administration, their accounts reflected remarkably similar patterns of dismissal, invalidation, and strategic erasure. Four major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Delegitimization of Voice, (2) Procedural Denial, (3) Psychological Erosion and Self-Doubt, and (4) Resistance and Counter-Narratives.

Delegitimization of Voice

Nearly all participants reported that when they raised concerns—be it about gender discrimination, exclusion from decision-making, or sexual harassment—they were met with subtle or overt attempts to invalidate their perceptions. Their claims were frequently reinterpreted as misunderstandings, emotional overreactions, or personal grievances.

“When I brought up how female faculty were excluded from a major research project, the dean smiled and said, ‘You’re taking it too personally, it’s not a gender thing.’ I started doubting myself. Maybe I was being too sensitive?” (Dr. A., Assistant Professor, Punjab)

This delegitimization of epistemic authority was often couched in seemingly neutral language—phrases like “let’s not politicize this,” “be professional,” or “you’re reading too much into it”—which had the effect of redirecting blame back onto the complainant. This theme aligns with the concept of testimonial injustice, where women’s knowledge is devalued due to implicit gender bias.

Procedural Denial and Bureaucratic Gaslighting

Another recurring theme was the use of bureaucratic procedures as tools of denial. Women who attempted to file formal complaints encountered shifting rules, delays, or procedural labyrinths designed to wear them down emotionally and professionally.

“I was told there was a harassment committee, but when I approached them, they said I didn’t have enough evidence. Then they asked why I hadn’t filed earlier. Every step made me feel more uncertain about whether it even happened the way I remembered it.” (S.K., Doctor, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)

This procedural gaslighting not only delayed justice but subtly cast doubt on the legitimacy of the complaint itself. Several participants noted that the burden of proof was disproportionately placed on them, while institutions maintained a veneer of objectivity and fairness.

In some cases, procedural delays were accompanied by reputational threats, where women were warned implicitly or explicitly that pursuing complaints would “damage the institution” or “create unnecessary drama.”

Psychological Erosion and Self-Doubt

Participants consistently reported long-term emotional and cognitive effects of institutional gaslighting. These included chronic self-doubt, emotional withdrawal, professional disengagement, and even symptoms of anxiety and depression. Many women described a state of internalized confusion, where they began questioning not just the incident but their entire professional worth.

“I stopped applying for leadership roles. I felt like maybe I don’t belong here. If they keep saying I’m difficult or emotional, maybe they’re right.” (R.M., Civil Servant, Islamabad)

Gaslighting had a fragmenting effect on identity, especially for women who had internalized meritocratic values. Their professional aspirations clashed with the systemic denial of their experiences, leading to a deep rupture between self-perception and institutional feedback.

This erosion of confidence is not incidental it is part of the function of institutional gaslighting, which operates not only to invalidate but to disable resistance by convincing women of their own unreliability.

Resistance and Counter-Narratives

Despite the psychological cost, several participants articulated acts of resistance and strategies of survival. Some found solidarity in informal women’s networks or mentorship circles. Others strategically documented incidents to maintain a personal record, even when institutions refused to acknowledge them. “I started keeping a journal. Every interaction, every meeting. I realized I needed to hold onto my own reality, because the institution was trying to take that away from me.” (N.F., Academic, Sindh)

A few participants also reported using policy language such as quoting national or international gender frameworks to create discursive legitimacy for their concerns. While these counter-narratives did not always lead to institutional reform, they served as a means of cognitive reassertion, preserving the participants’ sense of truth in the face of denial.

Some women eventually left their institutions, but reframed their departure not as failure, but as an act of autonomy. This theme complicates the notion of victimhood and underscores that even under gaslighting regimes, agency persists, though often in subterranean or symbolic forms.

Discussion and Analysis

The findings of this study demonstrate that institutional gaslighting in Pakistan is not simply a consequence of interpersonal dynamics or organizational inefficiencies. Rather, it constitutes a systemic form of gendered psychological control, embedded in the very architecture of patriarchal institutions. By interpreting women’s voices as unreliable, their emotions as excessive, and their complaints as disruptive, institutions maintain their authority while delegitimizing challenges to gendered power relations. This discussion unpacks these dynamics by engaging with the theoretical concepts of epistemic injustice, discursive power, and feminist standpoint theory.

Gaslighting as Institutional Epistemic Violence

The evidence from this study strongly supports Fricker’s (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, particularly testimonial injustice, as a core mechanism of institutional gaslighting. Participants’ experiences of having

their accounts rewritten, trivialized, or recast as misunderstandings illustrate how institutions systematically undermine women's capacity as knowers. This not only invalidates individual grievances but reproduces broader structures of patriarchal control by disqualifying women's knowledge production.

In the Pakistani context, where hierarchical deference and patriarchal authority often define institutional cultures, testimonial injustice becomes routine. Women are assumed to lack rational authority, particularly in domains considered "male-dominated," such as higher education administration, law, or civil services. When women attempt to report injustice, the institutional response is often not one of denial, but redefinition, a classic strategy of gaslighting where reality is not rejected but replaced.

Moreover, the concept of hermeneutical injustice is equally relevant. The lack of institutional frameworks to acknowledge psychological harm, emotional labor, or gendered microaggressions creates a hermeneutic gap, wherein women are unable to effectively articulate or interpret their own experiences. This gap is not accidental; it reflects an epistemic environment where only certain forms of knowledge, legal, rational, and quantifiable, are considered legitimate. Gaslighting thrives in such gaps.

Bureaucratic Rationality and the Mask of Objectivity

The findings also underscore how gaslighting operates under the guise of bureaucratic neutrality and due process. Institutions use procedural language "due diligence," "investigation," and "sufficient evidence," to dismiss women's complaints, while maintaining a façade of fairness. This echoes Weber's theory of bureaucratic rationality, in which rule-bound systems can mask subjective bias by cloaking it in the language of objectivity.

By relying on procedural delay, shifting complaint protocols, and vague evidentiary standards, institutions compel women to question not only the outcome but the validity of the process itself. This generates a double burden: women must both recount traumatic experiences and defend the credibility of their perceptions in systems designed to exclude emotional and subjective knowledge. In effect, women become not just complainants, but defendants of their own sanity.

This form of institutional gaslighting is uniquely insidious: it does not require overt repression but uses institutional norms to systematically corrode the target's sense of reality.

Patriarchy, Respectability, and Cultural Narratives

Gaslighting is particularly potent in Pakistani institutions due to the pervasive influence of respectability politics and honor-based cultural norms. As the findings show, women were often told not to "escalate matters," to "protect the institution's image," or to "show restraint for the sake of community harmony." These appeals to collective morality functioned as moral gaslighting, where women's demands for justice were framed as selfish, disruptive, or culturally inappropriate.

Such narratives rely on entrenched patriarchal ideologies that define a "good woman" as silent, sacrificial, and modest. When women assert their rights, they are not only seen as unprofessional but as morally deviant. This moral framing deepens the psychological impact of gaslighting by making resistance not only irrational but sinful or socially dangerous.

This is a critical insight: in conservative societies, institutional gaslighting is not merely bureaucratic or psychological, it is moral and symbolic, weaponizing cultural values to suppress female agency.

Fragmentation, Withdrawal, and the Consequences for Feminist Resistance

The most alarming outcome of institutional gaslighting is its long-term impact on women's professional identity and cognitive coherence. The study revealed a pattern of emotional withdrawal, disengagement from leadership roles, and eventual exit from the institutional setting. These outcomes represent a triumph of gaslighting as a disciplinary mechanism, not by silencing dissent directly, but by convincing the dissenters that their perception of injustice is flawed or that resistance is futile.

This has profound implications for feminist organizing and institutional reform. When institutions succeed in discrediting women's experiences, they not only neutralize individual dissent but disrupt the possibility of collective resistance. Silence becomes internalized. Dissent becomes pathologized. The feminist project of institutional accountability becomes fragmented under the weight of psychological erosion.

Yet, the study also highlights sites of resistance. Some women reclaimed their narratives through journaling, others created informal support systems, and a few strategically used policy discourse to reframe their claims. These acts, though often unrecognized, constitute what Foucault (1977) would call "micro-resistances," small but significant refusals of institutional power.

Conclusion and Policy Implications**Conclusion**

This study has critically examined how institutional gaslighting functions as a gendered form of epistemic and psychological violence in Pakistan. Drawing upon feminist theory, epistemic injustice, and bureaucratic rationality, the findings demonstrate that institutional gaslighting is not an individual pathology, but a systemic and cultural practice that delegitimizes women's voices, fragments their professional identities, and reinforces patriarchal control within formal structures.

The narratives revealed that gaslighting operates through dismissive language, shifting procedural standards, moralizing discourses, and bureaucratic delays. Women are routinely told that they are "misunderstanding," "overreacting," or "being emotional," especially when they report gendered harms or challenge male-dominated authority structures. These mechanisms are not isolated but are embedded in the very logic and structure of Pakistani institutions, where formal processes often conceal deep-seated power imbalances.

Importantly, while gaslighting generates profound emotional and cognitive disorientation, it also evokes resistance. Women have adopted journaling, counter-narratives, informal support systems, and strategic language to reclaim their reality and challenge institutional erasure. These acts of epistemic defiance underscore the need to view institutional gaslighting not merely as harm, but also as a site of feminist struggle and consciousness-building.

Policy Implications

To confront institutional gaslighting and build more inclusive, accountable, and gender-sensitive institutions in Pakistan, several policy-level reforms are urgently required:

Institutionalization of Gendered Epistemic Recognition

Public and academic institutions must be required to formally recognize psychological and discursive harms, such as silencing, invalidation, and professional marginalization, as legitimate forms of workplace violence. Policies must go beyond physical and sexual harassment to include epistemic and emotional abuse, particularly when tied to gendered dynamics.

Reform of Complaint Mechanisms

Current mechanisms for filing complaints must be restructured to minimize procedural gaslighting. This includes:

- Establishing independent gender justice ombudspersons not embedded within the hierarchical chain.
- Ensuring transparency in complaint procedures.
- Protecting whistleblowers and complainants from institutional retaliation.

Institutions should adopt a trauma-informed approach, training inquiry panels to understand and validate psychological and emotional responses rather than interpreting them as irrational or unprofessional.

Mandatory Gender Sensitization and Anti-Gaslighting Training

Gender training should no longer be voluntary or symbolic. Every level of institutional leadership, including university management, HR personnel, and departmental heads, must undergo rigorous anti-gaslighting training. These sessions should integrate:

- Gender bias recognition
- Emotional labor acknowledgment
- Language sensitivity
- Bystander intervention strategies

Training must be grounded in local cultural realities and informed by case studies from Pakistani institutions.

Creation of Safe Epistemic Spaces

Institutions should establish safe reporting spaces and peer-support forums where women can speak without fear of professional or reputational backlash. These should be led by trained professionals (including counselors) and be institutionalized rather than ad hoc.

Furthermore, faculty and professional unions should include gender justice and anti-gaslighting provisions in their advocacy charters and collective bargaining demands.

Monitoring and Accountability Structures

Independent watchdog bodies (e.g., through the Higher Education Commission or the Ministry of Human Rights) must be tasked with auditing institutional responses to gender complaints, with public reporting of compliance and violations. A national database could track unresolved cases, patterns of retaliation, and institutional delays to build long-term accountability.

This study makes an urgent case for reimagining institutional cultures in Pakistan—not merely through legal compliance or procedural reform, but through a deep transformation in how institutions see, hear, and validate women. Unless the emotional and epistemic harms of gaslighting are named, addressed, and institutionalized within gender policy frameworks, institutional equity will remain a rhetorical ideal rather than a lived reality.

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