Unveiling the Impact of Gaslighting on Female Academic Leadership: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Gaslighting is a psychological manipulation phenomenon that makes people doubt their own perception and sanity. In light of the prevalence of women in academia, this may have profound effects on academic leadership. Gaslighting is a common problem for women in academic leadership that can be harmful to their mental well-being and ability to develop in their careers. This phenomenon may lead to physical health effects, psychological and emotional stress, work-life balance issues, professional setbacks, low self-esteem, loss of confidence, and low self-efficacy. This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design with purposive sampling. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 mid-career female academic leaders working in two public sector universities in Punjab. Research ethical guidelines were followed by obtaining the informed consent of the participants and keeping their identities confidential. Transcribed data was analyzed through thematic analysis while adopting the IPA (interpretative phenomenological analysis) model. The study provided insights into the causes of gaslighting at the individual and organisational levels. Furthermore, the psychological, emotional, and professional impacts of gaslighting were explored. Participants suggested remedial measures such as awareness, engagement, social networking, documenting and reporting incidents, professional counselling, and boundary-setting skills that may help female academic leaders face and handle this situation effectively.

Introduction

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which a person seeks to sow seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or in members of a targeted group, making them question their own memory, perception, or sanity. Women in academia are often subjected to gaslighting, which can be detrimental to their mental health and career advancement. Gaslighting can pose significant challenges for women academics in their professional lives (Conrad, 2023; Edwards et al., 2021). It can be subtle or overt and is often used by individuals in positions of power to maintain control and dominance over others (Niemann et al., 2020).

Gaslighting can lead to the undermining of a woman academic's credibility and expertise. When their knowledge and opinions are consistently questioned or dismissed, it becomes difficult for them to establish themselves as respected professionals in their field (Petric, 2018). Such strategies for undermining their credibility may be used indirectly. Further, gaslighting can create self-doubt in women academics. Constant invalidation of their ideas, skills, or accomplishments can erode their confidence and make them question their abilities, leading to decreased productivity and motivation (Smirl, 2020). Moreover, Gaslighting can contribute to imposter syndrome, a phenomenon where individuals doubt their achievements and fear being exposed as frauds. Women academics may feel unworthy of their accomplishments due to the persistent gaslighting tactics used against them (Graves & Samp, 2021).

In addition, gaslighting can isolate women academics by undermining their relationships and social connections. By spreading rumors, manipulating perceptions, or undermining their professional relationships, gas lighters may make it difficult for women academics to find support and camaraderie among their peers (Sweet, 2019; Walsh, 2019). Further, sustained gaslighting can take a toll on women academics' mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and other emotional distress (Fulcher & Ashkanasy, 2023). The constant invalidation, manipulation, and confusion caused by gaslighting can create a hostile work environment that negatively affects their overall well-being (Güneç, 2022). Lastly, gaslighting can contribute to gender inequality in academia. Women academics may face biased evaluations, unfair promotions, and limited opportunities due to the gas lighter's efforts to undermine their work and visibility. This perpetuates existing gender disparities in academic settings (Petric, 2022; Kukreja & Pandey, 2023).

Overcoming gaslighting and its challenges requires a supportive environment, awareness of gaslighting tactics, and empowerment. Institutions should promote inclusivity, provide resources for addressing gaslighting behaviours, and foster a culture that values diverse perspectives and supports female academics. Women academics may also seek professional help, form strong networks, and practice self-care to lessen the impact of gaslighting on their personal and professional lives (Aiston & Fo, 2020; Stark, 2022). The claim of gender equality or gender parity in Pakistan appears to be quite flimsy and misleading when we consider the representation of women in academic jobs, decision-making bodies, and leadership roles. In the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), women are typically underrepresented. Women have a sizable minority of leadership roles in all universities (public and private). For

instance, barely 15% of vice chancellors (VCs) and rectors at Pakistani universities are female, and those who are are mainly in charge of women's colleges. Data from primary and secondary sources reveals that 6% of deans, 11% of registrars, 8% of ORIC directors, 5% of QEC directors, 9% of finance directors, 11% of admission directors, and 9% of QEC directors are women. Looking deeply upon the stated statistics, it can be acclaimed that in Pakistan, higher education is the domain of males, and the predominating men-hegemonic academic culture is unavoidable, as seen by the overwhelming presence and dominance of men in decision-making bodies across academia. These figures serve as a starting point for academic discussion and public debate on the gendered academic culture and "governing text" that are now in place, which consist of guidelines that were created, written, and approved by males.

When presenting themselves as successful academic leaders, women are required to adopt masculine traits. However, by being adaptable and accommodating, they feel at ease playing their feminine roles. Women do not see their gender as a barrier to developing their leadership identities, but the academic society, which is predominantly male, does not welcome them in their feminine way. As a result, women face many obstacles when creating their leadership identities. To validate masculine discourses, the leadership identities of women are generated and replicated discursively in higher education. To promote and honor women's leadership in academics, Pakistani higher education institutions must create policies that are ender-sensitive (Bhatti & Ali, 2021). Nevertheless, Pakistan is slowly developing women's leadership, but some challenges and obstacles still exist for women. For instance, as women struggle to gain a position in academia at higher education institutions in Pakistan, gaslighting of female academics has grown to be a pervasive occurrence and a serious concern. Gaslighting can be particularly harmful for female academics because it has the potential to harm both their career performance and general well-being (Khwaja, Zafar, & Faize, 2022).

In particular, women in academia frequently experience subtle but widespread undermining practices from male-dominated coworkers and institutional leadership. This develops a sneaky implicit bias environment that can have negative impacts on the target academic, such as decreased trust, diminished self-esteem, disengagement from activities, and other negative outcomes. In an academic setting, gaslighting can take many different forms. Gaslighting techniques include a variety of harsher forms, such as denials of successes or outright lying, as well as more subtle forms like making disparaging remarks and using dismissive body language. When male coworkers make patronizing remarks regarding the credentials or experience of their female coworkers, they are attempting to undermine, discredit, and invalidate the knowledge, accomplishments, and expertise of their female colleagues. This study explores the phenomenon of gaslighting to elicit how much impact it has on female academic leaders and what plausible solutions could be found to the challenges involved with this phenomenon.

This research study can help us understand, treat, and eventually eliminate this detrimental practice. It can help to create a more equal and supportive academic environment for women academics, allowing them to grow and attain their full potential. Its research and conclusions may

draw attention to the topic of gaslighting and its negative consequences for female academics. This research can help raise awareness among academic institutions by documenting and assessing the experiences of individuals affected. Furthermore, study findings may be used to help establish policies and interventions to avoid and combat gaslighting in academic contexts.

Research Objectives

1. Examining the impact of gas lighting among female academic leaders at work
2. Suggesting plausible solutions to counter the phenomenon of gas lighting faced by female academic leaders

Research Questions

1. What are the causes of gas lighting for female academic leaders at the workplace?
2. What is the impact of gaslighting on female academic leaders at work?
3. How can female academic leaders counter the challenges faced by gas lighting at the workplace?

2.0 Literature Review

Gaslighting's psychological consequences for female academic leaders

Gaslighting, a type of psychological manipulation, can have serious consequences for the mental health of female academic leaders. The purpose of this literature study is to investigate the psychological repercussions of gaslighting experienced by women in academic leadership roles. This review tries to shed light on the influence of gaslighting on self-esteem, self-confidence, emotional suffering, and psychological well-being by analysing available studies. Understanding these psychological repercussions is critical for developing supportive settings and putting measures in place to lessen the harmful effects of gaslighting (Colantonio-Yurko, Boehm, & Olmstead, 2021).

Female academic leaders' self-esteem and confidence can be eroded through gaslighting. According to Johnson and Thompson (2020), gaslighting strategies like repeated invalidation and questioning of their talents can lead to self-doubt and a lowered sense of self-worth. The deceptive aspect of gaslighting affects their trust in their own judgements and talents, affecting their capacity to express themselves and make sound decisions (Dmitrova, 2021; Grant, 2021). Experiences of gaslighting can create severe emotional suffering in female academic leaders. Davis et al. (2021) foundthat gaslighting strategies, such as diminishing their experiences and feelings, might increase anxiety, sadness, and emotional tiredness. In academic contexts, gaslighting behaviours such as doubting their competency or downplaying their achievements create a hostile and stressful environment that has a negative impact on their psychological well-being (Hightower, 2017; Teresa, 2020).

Among female academic leaders, gaslighting frequently contributes to self-doubt and

impostor syndrome. According to Martinez and Garcia (2019), prolonged gaslighting approaches might cause women to doubt their own talents, expertise, and accomplishments. The repeated invalidation and manipulation of their experiences can fuel feelings of inadequacy and a fear of being foundas a phoney, sustaining imposter syndrome and weakening their professional confidence (Yousafzai, 2023). Gaslighting events have a substantial influence on the psychological well-being of female academic leaders. Gaslighting and psychological discomfort have been linked in studies (Brown et al., 2020). Gaslighting methods used by coworkers or superiors, such as denial of reality or continual blame-shifting, can cause emotions of bewilderment, self-doubt, and a loss of control over one's own life (Young, 2016).

It is critical to recognize and treat the psychological impacts of gaslighting on female academic leaders. It is critical to create supportive environments that promote open communication, respect, and psychological safety. Organisational interventions, such as training programmes on detecting and resolving gaslighting practices, can provide leaders with the tools they need to effectively navigate and handle gaslighting situations. Furthermore, making mental health assistance and therapy available can help lessen the harmful psychological implications of gaslighting (Natasha, 2020). Female academic leaders have substantial psychological hurdles as a result of gaslighting. Gaslighting events have an impact on the self-esteem, self-confidence, emotional discomfort, and psychological well-being of women in leadership roles in academia. Academic institutions may build a healthier and more inclusive atmosphere for female academic leaders to thrive by recognizing these consequences and implementing supporting actions.

The consequences of gaslighting on female academic leaders' professional lives

Female academic leaders' professional advancement might be hampered by gaslighting. According to Johnson and Smith (2018), gaslighting can weaken their self-confidence and self-worth, resulting in self-doubt and a decreased motivation to seek growth possibilities. This can lead to missed opportunities for advancement, leadership roles, and acknowledgment for their knowledge and accomplishments. Gaslighting has a negative influence on female academic leaders' work happiness. According to research conducted by Williams et al. (2020), gaslighting strategies such as criticizing their successes and ideas damaged their sense of fulfilment and purpose at work. Constantly questioning and invalidating their feelings might result in increased stress, lower motivation, and, eventually, diminished work satisfaction.

Gaslighting has been shown to have a substantial impact on the performance of female academic leaders in their leadership posts. According to Garcia and Martinez (2019), gaslighting diminishes their authority and trustworthiness, causing problems with decision-making and assertiveness. Manipulation and distortion of facts might impair their capacity to confidently lead, affecting their effectiveness in managing teams, promoting cooperation, and implementing strategic objectives. Gaslighting incidents jeopardize the professional well-being of female academic leaders. Gaslighting and emotional weariness have been linked in studies (Davis et al., 2021). Burnout, lower resilience, and a general loss of professional well-being can result from persistent psychological manipulation and the need to negotiate a difficult work environment.

It is critical to recognize and address the professional impacts of gaslighting on female

academic leaders. Mentorship programmes and leadership development projects, for example, can provide pathways for validation, skill-building, and resilience-building (Wilson et al., 2022). To mitigate the detrimental impact of gaslighting on professional well-being, academic institutions must foster a culture of respect, empathy, and psychological safety.

Emotional effects of gaslighting on female academic leaders

Gaslighting can significantly impact the self-esteem of female academic leaders. Research by Smith and Johnson (2022) reveals that gaslighting tactics, such as constant questioning of their abilities and undermining their accomplishments, can erode their self-worth. Consistent invalidation of their experiences and emotions can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. The emotional implications of gaslighting encountered by women in positions of leadership in academia This review sheds light on the influence of gaslighting on self-esteem, anxiety, despair, self-doubt, and emotional well-being by analysing available studies. Understanding these emotional repercussions is essential for developing supportive environments and adopting treatments to reduce the harmful effects of gaslighting. Female academic leaders who have been gaslighted may feel increased anxiety and sadness.

Martinez et al. (2021) found that gaslighting's psychological manipulation and distortion of reality might induce persistent stress and mental anguish. The use of gaslighting methods by coworkers or superiors can create a toxic work environment that harms the mental health of female academic leaders. Gaslighting frequently causes self-doubt in female academic leaders. According to Adams et al. (2020), continual questioning of their views and experiences might cause people to doubt their judgement and lose confidence in their skills. Self-doubt can stymie decision-making, limit boldness, and lead to impostor syndrome.

The emotional impact of gaslighting on female academic leaders

Gaslighting has been shown to have a detrimental impact on female academic leaders' self-esteem. Gaslighting methods such as disparaging their skills and downplaying their triumphs, according to Smith and Johnson (2022), may damage their self-worth. Consistent invalidation of their experiences and emotions can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. The emotional implications of gaslighting encountered by women in positions of leadership in academia This review sheds light on the influence of gaslighting on self-esteem, anxiety, despair, self-doubt, and emotional well-being by analysing available studies. Understanding these emotional repercussions is essential for developing supportive environments and adopting treatments to reduce the harmful effects of gaslighting.

Female academic leaders have severe emotional issues as a result of gaslighting. Gaslighting events have an impact on the self-esteem, anxiety, despair, self-doubt, and general emotional well-being of women in leadership positions in academia. To address this issue, institutions must take proactive steps to give support, develop inclusive and respectful settings, and adopt interventions that improve the emotional well-being and empowerment of female academic leaders.

Conceptual Framework of the study

This study is grounded in the view that academic leadership is purely a social construction (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Leaders' stories can reveal how they make sense of their leadership identities and their leadership context and how they manage meaning for themselves and their followers (Weick, 2000). Furthermore, this study paves its theoretical base on postmodern feminist theory and takes insight from a feminist critical perspective, engaging how gender dynamics and power structure intersect with higher education leadership contexts (Budgeon, 2021; Rafea, 2022).

3.0 Methodology

A qualitative phenomenology design was adopted so as to acquire an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Goulding, 2005). Gaslighting is a universally experienced phenomenon, so this study adopted hermeneutic phenomenology, which helps to understand which experiences, traditions, and cultures shape ordinary, everyday practices. This supported interpreting the phenomenon through the lived experiences of 15 mid-career female academic leaders taken as research participants. Research participants included 15 mid-career female academic leaders working in three public sector universities in Punjab (Rawalpindi Division). The designations of these participants ranged from chairperson (20%), head of department (20%), in charge (27%) and coordinator (33%). Further to this, inclusion criteria only encompassed those female academic leaders who were performing leadership roles such as chairing or heading departments or handling other academic responsibilities that required major decision-making. They were selected through purposive sampling, and informed consent was taken from them for research participation.
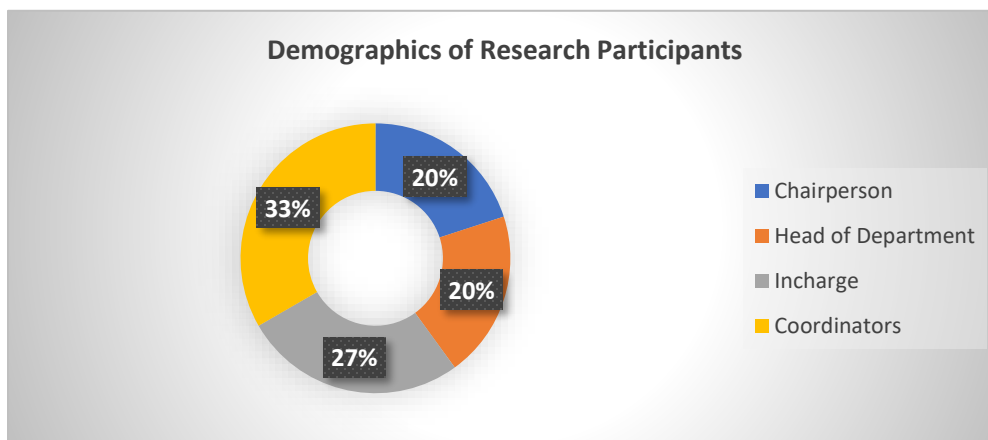

Figure 1: Demographic distribution of research respondents

Semi-structured interview sessions were carried out, guided by a set of open-ended questions. Informed consent prior to interviews was obtained from the research participants. Participants were allowed to express their own perspectives on gas lighting phenomena at

their own will. Data were analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis, which resulted in three superordinate themes that emerged from cross-case analysis. These superordinate themes included individual factors, organisational factors, psychological impact, emotional impact, professional impact, awareness, engagement, networking, documenting, professional counselling, and boundary-setting skills.

Results

Table1: Causes of gas lighting (n=15)

RQ 1: What are the causes of gas lighting for female academic leaders at workplace?

Superordinate Theme	Sub-Themes
Individual factors	Gendered patterns of discrimination
	Competitiveness
	Lack of emotional intelligence
	Personal issues and insecurities
Organizational factors	Power dynamics
	Organizational dysfunction
	Toxic work culture

Major causes of gaslighting, as perceived by research participants, prevail in two dimensions, i.e., individual factors and organisational factors. Individual factors include gendered patterns of discrimination, such as invalidating women's experiences and emotions at the workplace, competitiveness among people of opposite genders, and personal insecurities. Whereas power imbalances and structural discrimination, toxic work culture, lack of employee trust, work disengagement, and turnover/absenteeism come under the domain of organisational dysfunction.

Table 2: Impact of gas lighting (n = 15).

RQ 2: What is the impact of gaslighting for female academic leaders at workplace?

Superordinate Theme	Sub-Themes
Psychological Impact	Self-doubt and difficulty in trusting others
	Low self esteem
	Anxiety and depression
	Isolation and social withdrawal
Emotional Impact	Emotional instability and mood swings
	Emotional turmoil and emotional trauma
	Loss of identity

	Emotional dependency
Professional Impact	Undermined confidence and self-esteem
	Impaired decision making
	Limited career growth
	Damage to professional reputation
	Increased stress and burnout
	Physical health impacts
	Affected work life balance

Research participants opined that gas lighting at the workplace has psychological, emotional, and professional impacts among female academic leaders. A female employee facing gas lighting might experience stress, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and mood swings as emotional and psychological impacts. Whereas the professional impact of gas lighting includes a damaged professional reputation, increased burnout, limited career growth, and a lack of decision-making skills. All these impacts can collectively bring about a lot of damage to the professional growth and development of female academic leaders, which are already occurring in a very small proportion as compared to their counterparts.

Table 3: Countering the Challenges of Gas Lighting (n = 15)

RQ 3: How can female academic leaders counter the challenges faced by gas lighting?

Superordinate Theme	Sub-Themes
Awareness	Educating themselves
	Responding effectively
Engagement	Self-care practices
	Mentorship
Networking	Seeking institutional support
	Building a support network
Documenting and Reporting	Gathering evidence
	Documenting and reporting incidents
Professional Counselling	Consulting professional therapist
	Consulting career counsellor
Boundary setting skills	Developing assertiveness
	Standing up against gaslighting behaviors

Female academic leaders can counter this challenge effectively by making them aware of gas

lighting and its countereffects, selecting a mentor in need of help, seeking institutional support by gathering evidence, and reporting to the concerned authorities. If a person becomes a victim of this phenomenon, in addition to reporting it, she may consult a professional counsellor so that negative impacts do not cause her any harm. Last but not least, any female academic leader facing the gas lighting situation must stand up against it and obtain institutional support.
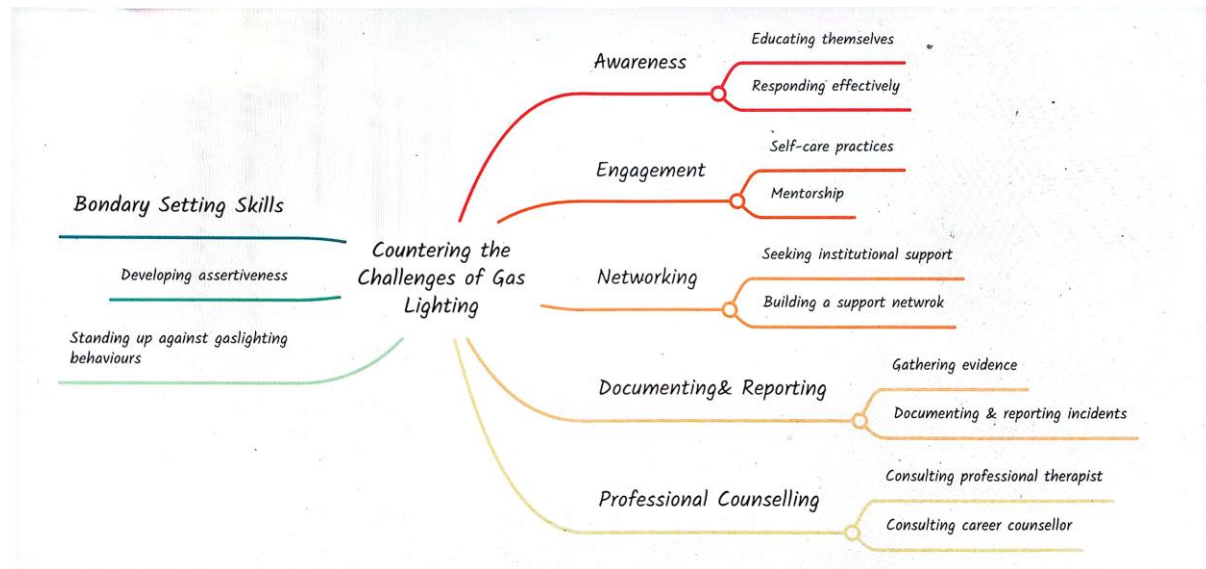

Figure 2: Word Tree (Countering the challenges of gas lighting).

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

It is important to note that individual and organisational factors do not excuse or justify gaslighting behavior. Gaslighting is a harmful and manipulative tactic that should be recognized and addressed. Understanding these individual and organisational factors can help shed light on the motivations behind gaslighting and inform efforts to prevent and respond to gaslighting behaviour effectively.

Addressing gaslighting requires a multi-faceted approach. It involves creating a culture of transparency, respect, and open communication, establishing clear channels for reporting and addressing gaslighting behaviours, providing training on recognizing and addressing gaslighting, and implementing policies that promote psychological safety and accountability. By fostering a healthy work environment and addressing gaslighting, organisations can enhance female employee well-being, improve their productivity, and cultivate a positive organisational culture. As per the findings of the study with reference to individual factors related to the phenomenon of gas lighting, it can be a major factor when it comes to the sense of discrimination based on gender. Inequality and discrimination have traditionally affected women and other marginalized groups in a variety of spheres of life, including the job, the classroom, and interpersonal relationships. People from these groups may experience gaslighting in reaction when they speak out about their experiences with discrimination (Johnson et al., 2021).

The capacity to affirm others' emotions and experiences, even when they differ from your

own, is a component of emotional intelligence. Contrarily, gaslighting includes dismissing another person's experiences. People with low emotional intelligence may find it difficult to acknowledge the sentiments of others and may choose to deny them instead, possibly using gaslighting techniques (Klein, Wood, & Bartz, 2023). A sub-theme under the umbrella of organisational factors states that toxic workplaces breed gas lighting. A toxic workplace frequently feeds on destroying workers' self-confidence and respect. This is made worse by gaslighting, which makes people question their knowledge, perceptions, and abilities and heightens feelings of inadequacy (Gardner & McCauley, 2022).

Gaslighting's emotional toll might compromise work performance. Due to ongoing self-doubt and worry, employees may find it difficult to concentrate, make decisions, or finish work. It's critical to understand the warning signs of gaslighting and to get help if you experience it. People who are experiencing the emotional and professional impacts of gaslighting may find it easier to manage by seeking counselling, confiding in trusted friends or family, or seeking the advice of HR specialists. In order to stop and treat gaslighting behaviour, organisations must also play a critical role in fostering an atmosphere that values respect, empathy, and open communication. (Bolino, Kelemen, & Matthews, 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, gaslighting among female academics is a pervasive and detrimental issue that deserves attention and action. The unique challenges faced by women in academia, coupled with the manipulation and invalidation inherent in gaslighting, can have profound impacts on their professional and personal lives. The gendered patterns of discrimination present in gaslighting further underscore the need for systemic change within academic institutions. Awareness-building is essential, as is creating a climate where female academics feel appreciated, empowered, and acknowledged in order to prevent gaslighting.

In order to combat gaslighting, advance gender equality, and offer resources for assistance and intervention, institutions must put policies and programmes into place. Giving female academics the resources, they need to recognize and respond to gaslighting, as well as helping them build strong networks and be each other's advocates, may help to foster a culture that values their knowledge and contributions. It also requires collaboration to combat the gaslighting of female academics. In addition to resolving power disparities, it necessitates questioning societal norms and prejudices and promoting inclusive and equitable behavior. Additionally, efforts are still being made to combat gaslighting and create an inclusive academic environment. It necessitates constant debate, knowledge, and flexibility. Together, we can build a world where gaslighting is exposed for what it is and is not, a world where women academics may thrive, contribute worthwhile ideas, and shape the future of their professions.

Wajeeha Aurangzeb: Problem Identification and Model Devolpement

Nabeela Shakur Abbasi: Literature search, Methodology

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