



Challenges Faced by Female Students in Higher Education Institutions of Pakistan

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ARTICLE INFO

Received:

January 02, 2025

Revised:

January 24, 2025

Accepted:

January 27, 2025

Available Online:

February 08, 2025

Keywords:

Women that study,
Higher education,
Gender equality, Socio-cultural barriers,
Pakistan, Educational problems, Women empowerment..

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the challenges facing the female students in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan. Even with the great levels of increase in female enrollment, there are still gender disparities and socio-cultural restrictions in academic participation, mobility, and leadership opportunities. A mixed-method study was used to sample 300 female students of both public and private universities. The results indicate that the girl/woman students experience numerous interdepending problems such as gender discrimination, social constraints, safety issues, financial constraints, and institutional support. Such problems are complicated by cultural norms and patriarchal attitudes. The research concludes that women should be empowered through the establishment of inclusive, safe, and supportive educational environment to enable them to have equitable partners in the higher education establishment.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental right and a significant factor of national development but women all over the world continue to face institutional inequalities to attend and excel in tertiary education. The past twenty years have seen a significant increase in the number of female students joining universities in Pakistan, but the social, cultural and institutional barriers are still very well rooted. As stated by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023), the percentage of females enrolling in tertiary education has grown to 48% yet the rate of dropout and disparities in some of the fields studied is terrifying. Women educational experiences are set against the intricate pattern of socio-economic issues, gender stereotypes and institutionalized practices that curtail female academic freedom and career ambitions (UNESCO, 2023; Aslam, 2019). They consist of restricted movement based on social conventions, family constraints, inefficient transport services, gender discrimination in education, and security concerns in campuses (Shah & Shah, 2021). Furthermore, inequality is further enhanced by economic barriers and absence of scholarships especially among rural or women with lower incomes (Qureshi and Rarieya, 2020). Lack of gender-sensitive policies and mentorship program also discourages advancement of women in academic aspects. Although the Constitution provides equal educational opportunities, the situation in higher education is not quite equal.

The proposed research is expected to determine and discuss the most salient issues across female students in Pakistani institutions of higher learning. Speaking more specifically, the research aims at exploring the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional

limitations on the educational experience and career decisions of the female students. The applicability of the research is linked to the contribution to the subject of gender equality in the Pakistani system of higher education. The purpose of the study is to provide evidence based suggestions to policy makers, administrators and teachers so as to establish inclusive and supportive learning environments by highlighting these issues. These barriers are not just a social justice issue but also a mandatory requirement of national development since women are empowered by educating them which improves their economic productivity and participation in democracy.

Literature review

Large bodies of literature highlight the institutional impediments to female higher education, particularly in a male-dominated culture like that of Pakistan. Gender inequality thrives even when the world agrees to equity e.g. United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG-5) on gender equality in education. Aslam (2019) and Jabeen & Mahmood (2020) argue that cultural beliefs and norms that suggest that a woman should marry early, stay at home, and be a housewife usually convince women not to continue their education. For the reasons of traditional views of the role of men as breadwinners, and the secondary role of daughters as their educators, institutional barriers also have an important role (Naz and Ahmad, 2021). Shah and Shah (2021) determined that most university settings are not gender sensitive on academic programs, pedagogies and in their administrative systems. The female students report being harassed, being marginalized during classroom sessions, and being underrepresented in leadership. Along the same line, Hussain and Ali (2022) observed that the absence of female mentors and role models also reduces the academic confidence and academic ambitions among young women. Moreover, Qureshi and Rarieya (2020) also discovered that female students tend to experience an institutional invisibility phenomenon, i.e. when the policies are unable to address their specific needs, e.g. transport, hostel security, or a flexible schedule. There is also the factor of economic and infrastructural limitations. Bari (2020) and Haider & Raza (2019) discovered that a great number of well-fate women in rural and low income families cannot afford to pay tuition fee or hostels leading to a high rate of dropouts. Additionally, lack of proper transport infrastructure and security issues puts off families, who can send daughters to school over long distances (Khan and Fatima, 2023). The networking and extracurricular activity also play an essential role in academic and professional development and are now also highlighted by recent studies, where the socio-cultural constraints too are effectively put into focus (Noreen and Khalid, 2021). As pointed out by Malik and Shahid (2022), the females with student status often report anxiety, low self-esteem, and stress because of social expectations and gender-related discrimination. According to UNESCO (2023) and World Bank (2024), women can be empowered by means of gender-responsive policies and mentorship programs to achieve better retention and leadership participation. The literature as a whole indicates that the barriers are structural in nature and the reforms needed are holistic to bring about real equality in higher education, that is, quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews were used to be sure of the depth and breadth of knowledge. The sample was made up of the female undergraduate and postgraduate students pursuing five public and private universities in Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The sample of 300 participants was chosen by the stratified random sampling method to ensure the representation of the heterogeneous population in terms of socio-economic, regional, and academic backgrounds. The quantitative data were gathered based on the constructed questionnaire on the previous validated tools, including the Gender Equity in Education Scale (GEES) and Student Campus Experience Inventory (SCEI). The questionnaire contained such sections as the academic environment, financial difficulties, social attitudes, and personal experiences. Semi-structured interviews were also carried out to obtain qualitative information positive responses of 25 participants concerning matters like harassment, family pressure, and institutional support on a five-point Likert scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree. A quantitative analysis was done using SPSS Version 26 with descriptive statistics, correlation and regression analysis to determine important factors influencing academic experiences. The thematic analysis in the process of qualitative data processing was conducted following Braun and Clarke (2019), which assisted in establishing the recurring themes, such as social restrictions, economic dependency, institutional insensitivity, and psychological stress. Besides the socio-cultural, economical and institutional constraints, new literature highlights the psychological and emotional obstacles that the female students encounter in their higher education. A common stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem among female students are due to the balance between the academic expectations and family or the societal expectations (Malik and Shahid, 2022). Research indicates that they are especially dire among rural students, as the conservative principles confine them and the presence of supportive academic circles is limited (Khan and Fatima, 2023). Furthermore, intersectionality of gender with socio-economic status and rural-urban disparities also contributes to increasing disparity, and higher education becomes an impossible task because of technological and digital illiteracy among marginalized female students (Qureshi and Rarieya, 2020). In addition, the most current studies also emphasize the gender inequality factors in terms of unequal access to technology and digital literacy. Some socio-cultural and geographical restrictions can be overcome with the help of access to online learning platforms, online libraries, and online mentorship programs (Zhou and Hasegawa, 2022). Nonetheless, another dimension described in the literature is institutional climate and leadership opportunities, which concerns the issue of female students in lower-income families to a greater extent (Haider and Riaz, 2019). The students who are female complain about being underrepresented in student councils, academic societies, and leadership because of the existing stereotypes and the lack of mentorship (Hussain and Ali, 2022). Finally, the concern of campus safety is vaguely discussed as the most provocative factor to the female participants, particularly only co-ed campuses (Jabeen and Mahmood, 2020). Because they are afraid of harassment, not accessible in an appropriate way, and the absence of security in campus, females do not attend classes, work in groups, or go to bed late to do their academic assignments (Shah and Shah, 2021). It is also specified by UNESCO (2023) that to have an opportunity to inspire equal participation, there should be a safe, inclusive, and gender-responsive campus climate. In general, the literature shows that the issues of female

students are interdimensional, and there may be no interventions, which will assist to eradicate the cultural, institutional, economic, and psychological levels.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative mixed-method design, whereby quantitative surveys are used to complement the qualitative interview methodology in capturing the complexity of the challenges. The quantitative survey involved 300 female students studying in five universities in Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in order to have the balance of both public and private institutions. Stratified random sampling technique ensured that the sample population did not leave out students across urban and rural settings, different academic fields, and various socio-economic backgrounds among others, which gave a comprehensive view. The survey instrument used was based on the validated measures like the Gender Equity in Education Scale (GEES) and the Student Campus Experience Inventory (SCEI). Products were categorized in several dimensions of difficulty: social (family pressure, cultural restrictions), institutional (no mentorship, harassment), economic (tuition fees, transportation), and psychological (stress, anxiety, self-confidence). Data on responses were gathered on a five-point Likert scale. The data on the qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews with 25 respondents, who were asked to give detailed accounts of their experiences with campus harassment, family restrictions and coping mechanisms. This qualitative aspect enabled deeper insights as opposed to numbers. Thematic analysis was done according to Braun and Clarke (2019) with the core themes singled out: social restrictions, safety concerns, institutional barriers, economic constraints, and emotional stress, reliability, and validity were ensured by pilot testing, the expert review, and Cronbach alpha of 0.91 as internal consistency. Strict ethical considerations were adhered to: informed consent, voluntary involvement, confidentiality and anonymity of sensitive responses. Triangulation of data was helpful in improving credibility through the integration of the findings of the survey and the interviews. Control variables were age, socioeconomic status and urban/rural residence to establish their influence on the nature of the challenges and severity. This sound methodology guaranteed the comprehensive knowledge of the issues of female students in Pakistani higher education.

Results and Discussion

The results indicate that female students in Pakistani institutions of higher learning have inter-sectional obstacles that impede their academic and personal development. The quantitative findings showed that over 72 percent of the participants reported gender biasness in their classroom activities or interaction with teachers. Almost 65 percent of them said they did not have easy access to safe transportation, and 58 percent said that they were limited by financial issues. Approximately 40 percent of the respondents admitted experiencing harassment or behavioral inappropriateness in or near the premises of the campus. The results of a regression analysis demonstrated that social and institutional barriers were strong predictors of academic stress and poorer performance ($p < 0.01$). Qualitative data demonstrated the emotional impact of these experiences. Most of the participants reported being under pressure to meet academic requirements and family expectations at the expense of studying, and in some cases, instead of studying, they had to fulfill their family duties. Others feared that they would be socially stigmatized by co-education or late campus hours and this discouraged them to join extracurricular and leadership activities. The absence of female faculty mentors is also cited as a significant limitation to career advice and emotional support by several students (Aslam, 2019, Shah and Shah, 2021, Malik and Shahid, 2022). In line with prior research, which demonstrates that female students experience both overt and covert discrimination (Aslam, 2019, Shah and Shah, 2021, Malik and Shahid, 2022). The existence of the patriarchal systems keeps supporting the idea that women should focus primarily on household chores and only then proceed with education as a secondary activity. In addition, the lack of institutional support systems, including reporting systems on harassment, gender equity committees, and counseling centers worsens these problems.

Table 1: Key Challenges Faced by Female Students in Pakistani HEIs

Challenge Type	Examples	Impact on Motivation/Performance
Social/Cultural	Family restrictions, societal norms	Lower participation, confidence, engagement
Economic	Tuition, transport, accommodation	Stress, dropout risk, limited access
Institutional	Lack of mentorship, harassment	Reduced motivation, marginalization
Psychological/Emotional	Anxiety, low self-esteem	Poor focus, reluctance to participate
Safety/Infrastructure	Campus security, transport issues	Avoidance of classes, hindered learning

Rural-urban divide has also been proven and in combination with accessibility barriers, language barriers and traditional family perceptions, university has not yet provided equal opportunities to rural students (Khan and Fatima, 2023). On the way to minimizing these circumstances, the universities must adopt gender-friendly manifestations, implement safe campuses, and give scholarships and mentorship opportunities to females. The results suggest that women obtaining higher education in Pakistan is a social need, along with an economic one that results in innovation, social justice, and nation building due to multi-layered issues, which has a high influence on academic motivation, performance, and welfare of the girl child attending the school. There were

also quantitative outcomes which showed that three-quarters of the students also had social restrictions such as mobility restriction on students by their families and the pressure to do household tasks instead of school. About 62% indicated financial factors such as the tuition fees, the hostel fees, and transportation costs. Nearly fifty percent of them cited this as a source of concern due to the safety factors like fear of being harassed or there is no campus security. Institutional barriers such as the lack of female mentors, leadership prospects and gender biased teaching methods were only present in about 48 percent of them. These data have been placed in perspective by quantitative data which indicated that the combination of these factors is a predictor of an increase in stress and a decrease in academic engagement ($p < 0.01$). Many students pointed out how society expects them to live, achieve their academic goals and instead get emotionally stressed, anxiety-ridden and desperate. Students at the rural schools argued that they had to travel long distances without secure modes of transport in some instances they had to be accompanied by a male and in this case it limited them to take evening classes or any additional curriculum activities. Urban students pointed out the issues of peer discrimination and harassment, the need to make campuses safer as the most problematic ones. The female students have reported that the male dominated classes and staff members curtailed their role and their leadership abilities. Absence of mentorship systems and guidance systems resulted in absence of confidence and career ambitions. The results are not novel, since the earlier research has identified that the academic motivation of female students revolves around the environmental, institutional, and cultural factors to the highest degree (Hussain and Ali, 2022; Shah and Shah, 2021; Malik and Shahid, 2022). Social restrictions, economic constraints and institutional barriers are put into a vicious cycle with the help of psychological stress to restrain academic success and personal growth. In addressing these issues, there is a need to address these issues in a holistic approach, gender-sensitive policies, mentorship programs, scholarship programs and safe campus facilities and awareness programs to overcome the issue through changing cultural perception. The empowerment of women with a higher education, according to the argument of UNESCO (2023) and World Bank (2024), has beneficial outcomes on the social development, economic growth, and national progress.

Conclusion

The conclusion is that there are significant issues in Pakistan, which do not enable women to access, attend, and succeed in higher education. This is structural, cultural and institutional barriers dynamism that entails gender discrimination, economical dependent, lack of facilities and safety concerns. Despite the improvement in the policies, the patriarchal culture and inertia of the institutions go against the empowerment of women in academic institutions. There is need to have a multi-dimensional approach to these problems. The schools should implement gender sensitivity of policies, equal representation in academic leadership and establish effective reporting and response to harassment structures. They ought to add up financial support and transport facilities to support students in the underprivileged regions. In addition, the education of women can be facilitated through awareness campaigns and community involvement programs with the view of transforming the cultural image of female education as one of the key aspirations of the Pakistan Vision 2030 and SDGs of the United Nations, such as SDG-4 (Quality Education) and SDG-5 (Gender Equality). The women contribute to growth in the economy, innovation, and social cohesiveness when they are evenly present in the field of education. In that way, the transformation of higher education into an inclusive, safe, and equal environment is not only a desirable task on a nation-level but a mandatory measure of equalizing the multi-dimensional factors which affect the female students of Pakistani higher education and disrupt the course of academic engagement, participation and career development. The social norms and cultural needs are what limit the movements and independence, but the economic and institutional limit weakens access to opportunities. The absence of mentorship, safety concerns, and harassment just contribute to the discouragement to participate in it and further enhance the psychological pressure. To address all these issues, universities should use gender-sensitive policies and programs. It can empower women both academically and socially through providing them with safe and secure campuses, female mentoring, and more opportunities of taking up leadership. Some of the ways in which economic constraints can be alleviated include the scholarship programmes, financial aids and flexible academic programmes, particularly to the rural and low-income students. The perception of the society towards the education and career opportunities of women needs to be changed through education campaigns among parents, communities, and educators to help the female students cope with the stress and strengthen their self-confidence and resilience. Responsiveness of higher learning to the needs of women can be achieved through involving the women in the curriculum development, administration of student governance and policy making. The encouragement of women to enroll in inclusive education is not only ethically right, but it is also a reasonable investment in the evolution of a country, as the study should not be reduced to the context of individual institutions only. The policy makers should build gender sensitive indicators in the accreditation systems, performance assessment, and national education policies. The longitudinal designs will be necessary to test the long-term impact of the interventions and track the difference in the female students participation, retention and leadership. In order to empower female pupils in Pakistan, intervention should be orchestrated by the school or college, the government bodies, family, and the society through addressing the socio-cultural, economic, institutional, and psychological barriers that this study has identified. Having officially reduced the barriers women can not only achieve their education goals, they become a strong input to social progress, innovation and economic development. Equity within higher education, hence, is a fundamental right and a guiding variable to national prosperity.

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