

The Impact of Academic Stress on Females: The Case Study of Pakistani University Students

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ABSTRACT

Academic stress has been recognized as a major element influencing the mental health of university students in the world. It has been observed that student's particularly female university students face difficulty in dealing with academic stress in Pakistan. Much research has been conducted on the factors that analysed academic performance, socioeconomic status, or institutional support, without adequately addressing the gender-specific dynamics that may contribute to these outcomes. There is a lack of comprehensive study that critically analyse these issues through a feminist perspective. By applying feminism theory, this research aims to fill this gap by examining how gender roles, societal expectations, and institutional structures impact female students' experiences of academic stress. The findings of the study conducted revealed that how societal expectation and gender stereotypes influences female university students and contribute to academic stress. This research contributes to the existing knowledge by providing the evidence of the experiences of female university students in Pakistan. The study highlighted the importance of mental health services, mentorship programs and awareness campaigns that aids in catering mental health needs and academic stress.

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Introduction

Stress among undergraduate and graduate students arises from variety of sources, including socio-cultural, environmental, and psychological issues (Putwain, 2007). Academic stress is affecting students' mental health, academic accomplishments, and their overall well-being globally. In Pakistan, due to the competitive projects, course work and increased societal projection, the anxiety and stress is increasing in university students (Ahmed & Rizvi, 2020). Academic stress is the cause of higher dropout rates among university students as it is impacting their thought process and decision making (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). Around the globe, student faces multiple struggles as they pursue higher education. The physical and psychological strain caused by educational responsibilities is known as academic distress which is frequent issue that is affecting students' performances (Curcio et al., 2006). There is research found examining the difference in the amount of stress experiences by male and females' students. Schommer1993 indicated that female students face relevantly higher stress than male students. In Pakistan, women have many opportunities to get in educational institutions and excel in their careers. In the recent years, the opportunity for females to get enrolled in higher education system is significantly increased. However, the cultural demands and societal expectations are hurdles in women empowerment, which leads to academic stress and anxiety (Mehmood et al., 2018). Women's role as a home maker and to fulfil their familial duties often create obstacle in their success and the pressure, they get from society leads to academic stress (Tusińska, 2020). Moreover, to get shelter from societal demands, academic settings do not always provide the safe refuge. The apparent and hidden gender biases in educational settings can also lead to feeling of insufficiency and separation (Latif, 2009). The inadequacy of representation of females' role models in curriculum also reinforces gender stereotyping and biases. There are various purposes to elaborate the effects of academic stress on females' university students in Pakistan. Universities should create students' friendly interventions and support services that can aid students in dealing with the academic stress and improve their mental well-being. These services should include safe spaces for female students to address their academic issues, time and stress management workshops and staff training to enhance overall learning circumstances (Fenollar et al., 2007). This study will enable the broader discussions regarding gender equality in higher education institutions in Pakistan. This study delves to break the institutional and social confinement by examining the aspects that leads to academic stress for female university students in Pakistan. This will allow females to excel academically in future so that they will make useful contributions in society. This research is limited to analysing the factors affecting academic stress in female university students through the feminist perspective only. This paper focuses on Pakistani female students to inquire the intricate nature of academic stress. The findings of the research might not be applicable to the entire population of female students as the sample is limited to a single university, location, or excludes certain backgrounds. Furthermore, using self-reported data about stress levels and experiences might be subjective and

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inclined toward bias. This paper seeks to remove the obstacles and build learning environment that facilitate not only academic success, but also the overall well-being of female students.

Literature Review

Stress is seen as a negative emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and physiological process that takes place when a person is facing stressors and is trying to adjust to or deal with them (Bernstein, et al 2008). Stressors can be described as the situations that disturb, or threaten to disturb, individuals' life and make people to change (Acerbic & Grambling 1998). The authors Acerbic and Grambling (1998) view stress as a negative emotional and physiological state that people feel in situations that they believe to be dangerous or threatening to their welfare. Academic stress has been identified as a major factor impacting the mental wellness and academic wellness of university students around the globe. The research has demonstrated that the stress of high academic achievement can result in the anxiety, depression, and the decrease of the performance of the student. Remain et al. (2018) discovered that academic stress is a common phenomenon among university students resulting from the competitive exams, the tough courses, and the societal expectations. This paper of literature review describes that Academic stress is a widespread problem that is haunting university students in Pakistan, thus, it is causing the results such as anxiety, depression, and a poor grade. The study has suggested that there are gender-related differences in males and female students' perception and experience of academic stress. According to Khan et al. (2006), there are certain factors such as societal pressure and expectations of the female gender that make female students to experience higher level of academic stress compared to male students Waqas et al. (2015). This review considers the fact that gender is a factor in how university students understand and deal with academic stress but, in contrast to male students, female students often have extra stressors due to gender norms. This research shows that support services and coping mechanisms are important in the way students handle stress in academic settings. From the studies that have been conducted, it has been revealed that students have different ways through which they can reduce their stress levels including seeking social support, exercising, and practicing relaxation exercises. However, Bhatti (2018) revealed that many university students in Pakistan, especially the students at public universities, are not aware of the services available for them and their institutions, suggesting that stakeholders in universities must step up awareness campaigns and make such services easily accessible. As outlined in this literature review, coping styles and support systems are critical for dealing with academic stress, but few university students in Pakistan are aware of the available support services. Several studies have been conducted regarding the association between academic stress and dropout rates. Akhter et al. (2021) identified that high levels of academic stress are important predictors of dropping out among university students. In addition, Siddiqi (2019) noted that potential differences in perceived stress and coping styles could also contribute to dropout rates with female students being more likely to contemplate on their dropout due to academic stress. This review showed that, academic stress is one of the factors that lead to higher dropout rates among university students, and gender also influenced students' dropout decision. The current literature offers ample research on academic stress. Nevertheless, there is a particular gap in the previous literature regarding the application of feminism theory in the analysis of the impact of academic stress on female university students. Although there are numerous studies exploring academic stress and its relevant factors, there are few large-scale, critical analyses that employ a feminist perspective to these matters. While most research in this area fails to consider the gender aspect of the problem, the factors that may potentially influence these outcomes are often confined to academic performance, socioeconomic status, or institutional support. Therefore, given the lack of research on academic stress from the perspective of the feminist theory, this study intends to explore how gender roles, gender expectations, and institutional arrangements affect female students' experiences of academic stress and their choices to persist or withdraw from university education. It was also useful as it enabled the researcher to delve deeper into the gender differences that are often ignored in conventional studies and thus offer detailed insights into the factors that have a bearing on academic stress and dropout rates.

Problem Statement

Academic stress is a pervasive issue affecting students around the globe. Much research is found exploring the general aspects related to academic stress. However, there is not enough research found exploring the gender stereotypes and societal expectations influencing female students through feminist lens. The current study aims to address these factors through feminist perspective.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the ways in which gender roles and societal expectations causes the potential stress among female university students.
2. To investigate how academic settings impact stress among Pakistani female students.

Research Questions

1. How do societal norms and gender roles promote academic stress and potential pressure among Pakistani female university students?
2. How significantly do the academic settings impact the stress among Pakistani female university students?

Research Methodology

This current study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine the impact and causes of academic stress among female university students by applying theory of feminism. It examines how female students manage academic stress and the factors that are influencing their academic stress. The model of Feminist Critique to Education (FCE) is applied to illustrate the implicit aspects in academic stress that are impacting female university students. Participants from various fields and academic levels are selected for this study. Individual interviews were conducted to gather data for this study. Individual interviews enabled participants to illustrate their individual experiences, perceptions, and ideas about academic stress in a supportive and open-ended setting. Prior to data collection, all participants provided their informed consent. Participants received the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed about the study's goal, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation.

Theoretical Framework

The feminist theory is used in this study to explain the causes and effects of the academic stress and gender roles and social expectations for female university students. The model of Feminist Critique of Education can be used to explain the underlying views which are contributing to females' academic stress. The Feminist Critique of Education (FCE) is a theoretical framework that was formulated in the 1960s and 1970s along with the larger feminist movement. A group of research initiated by scholars such as Adrienne Rich, Michelle Rowe and Dale Spender outlined how education was rigid and entrenched in inequality between genders. The authors found curriculum and method that privilege male experience over female experience in terms of being oriented towards patriarchal beliefs. The FCE offers a way of understanding how cultural beliefs regarding gender roles are infused in the educational system and contribute to student experience. The FCE incorporates concepts such as:

- **Hidden Curriculum:** Those implicit beliefs and assumptions that are not articulated in the curriculum but often reaffirm traditional gender roles.
- **Double Standards:** There are unequal expectations for both men and women concerning academic endeavours and household responsibilities.
- **Gender Stereotypes:** Gender stereotypes concerning what women can achieve with respect to academic and professional success.
- **Social Reproduction:** It is often argued that universities are organizations that promote the traditional gender norms. Girls are encouraged to take courses in homemaking or similar care occupations while boys are steered toward more stereotypical male subjects.
- **Silencing of Women's Voices:** The educational system often fails to recognize or misrepresents the experiences, perceptions, and potential of female students.

The Feminist Critique of Education proves to be a valuable way of explaining how education systems may contribute to gender inequalities. This identification of these prejudices and promotion for inclusive practices by FCE will ensure that all inclusive educational practices are promoted to create an equal and empowered learning environment for all students.

Data Analysis

The data has been collected from the female university students who are enrolled in the university currently through in-depth individual interviews, these interviews are analysed through feminism using Feminist Critique of Education (FCE) as the framework.

Interview#01

Overall, the interview provides the comprehensive understanding of societal expectation, gender norms and the factors contributing to academic stress among females' students in university. The interview provides insight into the prominent traditional gender roles and experience of females' university students. The impact of these variables on female students in university is further discussed.

This interview illustrates the critical need for universities to recognize and address gender issues. Thus, using the FCE, it demonstrates how societal norms and expectations and a university environment that fails to eradicate gender prejudice, results in academic stress and an unjustified learning process. The suggested reforms will help institutions eliminate the challenges that female students face today and create a more equitable and conducive environment for success. The enrolment of women in universities in Pakistan is on the rise but their struggles remain different. This interview focuses on the students' experiences, and by analysing them with the help of Feminist Critique of Education (FCE), it discusses how the societal expectations and a university environment that is not free from gender bias contribute to academic stress.

The FCE focuses on the idea of a 'culturally prescribed hidden curriculum', referring to expectations of culture beyond the classroom. This interview implies that there remains resistance against these expectations. The participant mentioned that they always feel a *"pressure of prioritizing home chores"* and *"family affairs than studies"*. This refers to what is regarded as the other curriculum – the cultural message which suggests that women should prioritize taking care of kids and family over their academic goals. Even though there might be some differences due to social cultural sensitivity, the university environment, which is possibly influenced by a male dominated institution fails to adequately address these problems. This negligence of their special needs contributed further to the marginalization of female students in their academic pursuits.

The FCE also criticizes the continuous presence of gender stereotypes in educational settings. The pressure to get married early and prioritize family life, is indicated by the participant, which is frequently accompanied by societal hypocrisy as the participant mentions *"unequal chances"* and *"double standards."* While males are not held accountable for household duties, women are often criticized for not flawlessly integrating their personal and work life. This perpetuates gender stereotyping, requiring female students to choose between academic successes and fulfilling societal expectations. This difficult decision is also one of the major factors to enhance academic stress among females. One of the major stressors, as indicated in the interview, is sexual harassment which escalates the risk of stress and create a fearful environment. Combating sexual harassment is vital and universities have a responsibility to protect all the students. To give secure settings for students, counselling services are essential to address problems. Moreover, mentorship programs are necessary to pave students' way and provide role models which will be beneficial for them in dealing stress. Participant illustrated that university should provide an inclusive environment for the students to excel in their academic careers.

This interview, aligning with the FCE's postulates for a reform of educational experiences, highlights the need for structural changes in institution. Curriculum reform is also essential to incorporate outstanding women role models in various disciplines and to overcome gender stereotypes. As indicated by the participant, support services are useful for female students to maintain a work-life balance and handle societal demands. This is not only essential to promote an inclusive environment but also accommodate crucial role models for future generations. This interview demonstrates how cultural norms, societal expectations, and other responsibilities impact female students' experiences at Pakistani educational institutions. This highlighted issue requires improvements to establish a more helpful and accommodating atmosphere for female university students in Pakistan.

Interview#02

This interview provides a significant case study for universities seeking to build a fairer and supportive learning environment for female students in Pakistan. The FCE perspective reveals how gender stereotypes, societal expectations, and a lack of specialized support networks contribute to academic stress. The participant illustrated the need for communication skills training and skill development which provides the basis for breaking patriarchal barriers and encouraging female students to succeed academically.

The participant expresses a feeling of frustration as the sport venues in university are often occupied by male students. The male dominated sport venues illustrate the male dominated society which limits women to certain roles. This elimination perpetuates the idea that some activities are gendered which marginalizes women and undermines their sense of belonging at the university. The participant asserts the feeling of being academically pressured by family as she stated *"they have recently started to make me feel guilty, suggesting I'm not good"*

enough and my possibilities are limited..." This is evident with the concept of "hidden curriculum" and "gender stereotyping" in FCE, asserting that women have less "possibilities" of succeeding in academic settings as compared to males. The hidden message here reinforces that women should prioritise household responsibilities over academic endeavours. This causes internal conflict, which contributes to feelings of stress and inadequacy.

The participant has not sought university support services due to "*shyness*" and "*a lack of clear knowledge about available resources*" despite suffering substantial stress. This illustrates a lack in the university's support system. While resources may exist, they may not be easily accessible or culturally appropriate for female students. Furthermore, the stigma associated with obtaining mental health treatment can be a significant barrier. Universities must address this by raising mental health awareness and providing safe areas for female students to discuss their individual issues. The participant is constantly pressured to match her education with her "*roles as a daughter*" and "*a student*". This reflects the "hidden rules" of Pakistani society. These implicit standards place a double burden on women, requiring excellence in both domestic and academic settings. The participant internalizes these standards, causing emotions of inadequacy and guilt.

The participant offers programs that prepare female students to manage both personal and academic responsibilities. The empowerment of women while challenging established gender roles is aligned with the FCE's push for educational reform. Participant emphasises the need that universities should help female students negotiate their complex duties more confidently by giving skill training in areas such as "*time management*", "*communication*", and "*negotiation*". In addition, the participant underlines the need of improving communication skills. Strong communication skills will allow women to advocate for themselves, negotiate expectations within their families, and navigate the academic environment more successfully.

Findings

The findings of this research revealed that there are numerous obstacles that female university student's face and that these obstacles create a web of stress for them. Analysing the data gathered from the interviews with the Pakistani female university students by using Feminist Critique of Education (FCE) points out several intricate and interconnected issues that contribute to academic stress. These findings are significantly aligned with the FCE's core issues as they expose how the culture, gender roles, and the absence of individualized support contribute to the differentiated learning process. The interviews reveal the presence of the 'hidden curriculum' whereby socially acceptable norms are taught in the society other than in classrooms. Female students have always struggled to overcome the stereotype that they should focus on family and domestic chores rather than studies. This cultural message, which is taught in the "hidden curriculum," is contrary to their academic aspirations. Due to the influence of the male dominated environment of the universities, they may not handle these issues as they should. This neglect of their specialized needs also harms female students and contributes to the complexity of their academic pressure. These interviews give clear suggestions to the FCE's criticism of gender stereotyping in education systems. The female students face a huge pressure to get married early and focus on their family, which is often combined with cultural contradiction. Use of "unequal chances" and "double standards" point to a system where women are expected to handle home responsibilities while males are absolved of such responsibilities. Female students are compelled to compromise between their academic achievement and societal norms, which is unachievable. This decision also puts another burden on their academic choice, which hinders the chances of success in their academics. The major problem of sexual harassment proves to be one of the main concerns in students' lives. It creates an unfavourable learning environment where safety cannot be ascertained. However, there are rays of hope, as counselling services for education and others offer safety and mentorship for the students and other programmes offer role models and support systems, more concentrated efforts are needed. The institution has a responsibility for the protection of their students, and the challenges that female students face in their day to day lives. This includes implementing stricter measures on sexual harassment policies, creating better and culturally sensitive mental health services, and expanding the already existing mentorship programs so that they could include more people. The trivial aspect of the male-dominated sports facility is related closely to the FCE's condemnation of how culture hinders women. This exclusion fosters the nature of gendered spaces as a territory not for women are the message they convey. It not only impacts their chances of having leisure and physical activities but also their sense of place in the institution. It is important for universities to make their atmosphere and environment friendlier to all genders to ensure that all students enjoy equal opportunities and rights as they attend their universities. The interviews of these Pakistani female students underscore the importance of educational institutions to consider these gender-based challenges. The FCE framework shows that social pressure and a university environment that does not eliminate gender discrimination result in academic pressure and unequal learning. These

are some of the measures suggested by the participants that universities should take to ensure that all students are provided with equal opportunities. Changing the curriculum is helpful for countering gender stereotyping since it's a fundamental issue. To address the 'hidden messages' of the 'hidden curriculum', the presence of examples of women who have excelled in different fields, and the inclusion of women in the course content should be highlighted. Universities must promote and establish support structures that are relevant to the female students. This could involve organizing special seminars, such as on social expectations and stress at the workplace. These workshops can assist the student with the time management, communication skills, as well as negotiation skills that are needed to balance between academic and household responsibilities. Moreover, there is a need for affordable and culturally competent mental health services to address these issues among female students. Other sources of support that can also be beneficial from the programs with female figures are the mentorship programs. It is important to address the concerns regarding the prejudice of seeking professional help for mental disorders. University administrations can coordinate campaigns aimed at normalizing seeking help for academic and mental well-being. Universities may advise female students about the help they need, provide information on the mental health services available and provide a platform for the students to freely discuss about it. It is thus important to note that the enhancement of women representation in university leadership positions can play a pivotal role in the establishment of equity in the workplace. It is inspiring for present and potential students, especially women, to see a diverse range of female teachers and managers. As stated, this representation offers meaningful positive role models and helps to cultivate feelings of inclusion at the campus. Incorporating these recommendations and raising awareness about these challenges faced by female students, Pakistani universities can ensure a fair and supportive learning environment for all students.

Recommendations

The understanding of the impact of academic stress on female Pakistani university students based on the principles of the feminist theory is a valuable contribution to the future research and the potential resolution of the problem. Future research is required to investigate how ethnicity, class and region can come together with gender to create different stress experiences. Longitudinal studies can observe the long-term effects on mental health, academic performance, and careers. Analysing the coping strategies and support systems that are in place for the female students may expose successful ways and areas where more improvement or development of new ones is needed. Comparing other countries, particularly those with similar cultural conditions, can reveal both challenges and opportunities for innovation. Universities can ensure that curricula and teaching strategies also reflect women's roles and various modes of learning. The students should be provided with tools and resources that will help them in their mental health journey such as counselling services, support groups and campaigns. Policy changes at universities are useful as they can address challenges, including the need for flexible timetables, childcare, or stress and time management courses. It is beneficial to try to organize activities for parents and communities to increase the awareness of academic stress and to promote positive family environments and healthy mental outlooks.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix

Interview#01

Interviewer: In your opinion, what are the difficulties that female students face at university that are different from those faced by male students? Of all these difficulties, which are the main sources of stress?

- **Participant:** Various challenges are faced by female students at university. It includes social expectations, gender discrimination, not given equal chances and balancing academics with personal life. These challenges lead to stress and student may become unable to put complete focus on studies. Sexual harassment or assault also affects student's well-being.
- **Interviewer:** Can you illustrate a case where social norms and family expectations have affected your academic achievement or your mental health?
- **Participant:** Hypocrisy of our society is that the things that are considered as bad or wrongdoing by the woman are considered absolutely normal if they are done by man. Usually, women are held accountable for managing household tasks and brought up of children while men are mostly acquitted from this responsibility. There could be illustration of various cases regarding the fact where the societal pressures have impacted my well-being. Pressure of getting married early, and then the expectation of prioritizing the family life and marriage and to leave behind the ambitions and yearlong hard work in achieving the career. Often made to feel as if I am not doing enough and not perfectly balancing the personal and academic life, even if I perform my household activities extremely well along with the professional tasks. This is the irony of our society. People need to get out of these narrow mindsets and need to consider woman as individuals who do have their own goals, ambitions for which they have worked so hard.
- **Interviewer:** University support programs are usually developed for wide range of students. Have you been using any of these services which have been helpful to you in managing academic stress? If so, how? If not, what type of assistance would be more beneficial for female students?
- **Participant:** Yes, I do use university support programs that prove to be very beneficial in dealing with my academic stress. There are several counselling programs that involve mentorship from several experienced motivational speakers who make you feel heard and help you to figure out the reason of the problem that you are facing. They provide us an insight on how to manage studies with co-curricular activities, how to manage stress during exams, and they do arrange talks regarding gender bias at workplaces and educational institutions. Their purpose is also to create an inclusive environment at campus for all students regardless of gender.
- **Interviewer:** In your opinion, are there any hidden rules or expectations that could be causing stress to female students? If you agree, could you provide some instances?
- **Participant:** No doubt, there are hidden rules, so called double standards of our society that impact mental well-being if female students and cause them stress. Our society puts great pressure on females regarding childcare and elder care and make them feel the guilt that they should prioritize their family over their goals, dreams, and ambitions even if they are well balancing personal and professional lives. The boldness female student's exhibit in face of different issues is deemed as resistance and bigotry. Sometimes female students are not appreciated enough if they outperform in their studies and achieve highest grades or of their extraordinary performance in extracurricular activities. Less representation of female students in leadership positions can develop feelings of isolation and under confidence among students.
- **Interviewer:** If you could design a program or initiative to assist female students to achieve their academic goals and manage stress, what aspects would you incorporate?
- **Participant:** If I would design an initiative for helping female students to succeed academically and cope with their stress, its characteristics would be as follows:
 - 1) Sessions on stress management enabling the students to cope with stress so they can focus with a peaceful mind on their studies.
 - 2) Training workshops on skill building that will help the students to learn new skills and also freelancing workshops will be organize which will help the students economically and it may become a source of money earning by students and they could become financially independent.
 - 3) Conversation sessions among students will be arranged where they can share their experiences, challenges with each other and do catharsis of their life happenings and gain a better insight on how to deal with the issues and challenges faced by them.

- 4) Awareness campaigns regarding gender discrimination at educational institutions and discussing the ways on how to overcome them and seeking a way out.
- 5) Appreciation of the achievements, accomplishments, and daily efforts that students put to pursue their dreams.
- 6) Various learning options will be provided to students such as evening classes, online classes, learning materials and the sports option will be given so they can also relax their minds from hustle of life.

Interview#02

- **Interviewer:** In your opinion, what are the difficulties that female students face at university that are different from those faced by male students? Of all these difficulties, which are the main sources of stress?
- **Participant:** As we are Muslim society and our mind sets are built accordingly, in our city I have seen that equal opportunities are not available for males and females. These opportunities cannot be avail equally by male and female; either the female are slow and maybe males are more hyperactive. I am not sure about the reason, but for example the sports area of our university where volleyball, basketball, and badminton can be played, its full of males. It's not that females don't like to play, but when they see an area full of boys, they tend to avoid it. As a result, we cannot enjoy the greenery of the university that much, which ultimately prevents them enjoy their free time as they should.
- **Interviewer:** Can you illustrate a case where social norms and family expectations have affected your academic achievement or your mental health?
- **Participant:** Yes, definitely. Family pressures have influenced my academic performance and well-being. I am a student who, for some reason, has not been able to score as high as the expectations of my family. They have recently started to make me feel guilty, suggesting that I am not good enough and that my possibilities for fun as a girl are limited to after marriage. Being an emotional person, instead of fighting back, I have been very hard on myself. I have isolated myself, increasing the distance with my friends in university, trying to study more. However, this approach has not been effective; it has resulted in negative outcomes because a balanced study approach, where you enjoy yourself equally, is more effective.
- **Interviewer:** University support programs are usually developed for wide range of students. Have you been using any of these services which have been helpful to you in managing academic stress? If so, how? If not, what type of assistance would be more beneficial for female students?
- **Participant:** No, I have not been able to use any services provided by the University, although I have been thinking of going to the psychological or psychotherapy department for assistance in managing my test stress. At the MS level, there is an entirely different and new approach to studies, and I was not able to cope with it. However, I have not been able to go for it because I felt shy about other people being judgmental and because its address was not exclusively mentioned anywhere.
- **Interviewer:** In your opinion, are there any hidden rules or expectations that could be causing stress to female students? If you agree, could you provide some instances?
- **Participant:** I think there are some hidden rules, although it cannot be said whether they are right or wrong. It's more like stereotypes and responsibilities expected from females. For example, I always feel guilty for not being able to balance my responsibilities as a daughter and a student. I feel like my parents are doing something extra for me, and I am a kind of burden on their shoulders. Yes, I have been made to feel like that many times. Additionally, in the Pakistani education system, there is more focus on theoretical stuff than skills. On average, a person opting for an MPhil or MS in Pakistan spends 18 years of their life in education. For girls who have not been able to find jobs due to a busy schedule at home, they are caught between family and study responsibilities, which are not easy. While families provide us with wonderful opportunities, they do not realize that we are also not having fun. Traveling to the university, studying for hours, attending classes, and dealing with academic stress is not easy. We are also going through a lot, but people, or parents, may not realize that it is not fun at all.
- **Interviewer:** If you could design a program or initiative to assist female students to achieve their academic goals and manage stress, what aspects would you incorporate?
- **Participant:** You have seen that with the wave of feminism, where women have been given power and scope and awareness to pursue their academic and career lives, it is evident that females experience more stress than males. Maybe the curricular activities or programs should teach them the skills they need as daughters or housewives while also excelling in their studies. It is important that universities help us tackle this issue, making us equally equipped with the necessary skills. We want to excel in our lives not just for

others but for ourselves. Good communication skills are crucial because communication is multidimensional and dynamic. Many of our stresses root from this point. Therefore, universities should take initiatives to prepare females with a confident mindset and flexible communication skills, enabling them to communicate their needs, feelings, and negotiate effectively, thereby avoiding chronic stress.