

A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF CHALLENGES FACED BY FEMALE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH PUNJAB

Mahnoor Sikander

MAPY-23-16

MPhil Applied Psychology

Session: 2023-2025

Thesis

Dr. Asma Bashir

Abstract

Objective: The study's objective is to ascertain how institutional policies, societal norms, financial hardships, familial expectations, mobility restrictions, and gender-based discrimination affect their educational routes.

Background: Literacy Rate by Gender in South Punjab shows the stark gender disparity in literacy across the seven districts of South Punjab: Multan, Bahawalpur, Dera Ghazi Khan, Rahim Yar Khan, Muzaffargarh, Lodhran, and Rajanpur. In all district shown, male literacy rates are much greater than female literacy rates.

Methodology: The study has adopted the qualitative research design, the study focuses on the subjective experiences and opinions of fifteen female students enrolled in public and private universities located throughout South Punjab. A systematic interview technique was used to collect data. Thematic analysis was employed to identify themes.

Results: Thematic analysis revealed the following themes: 1) High costs of education 2) Limited specialized programs 3) Societal & familial pressures 4) Gender-biased prioritization 5) Harassment & inadequate security 6) Absence of counselling & mentorship 7) Conditional family support 8) Lack of mental health support.

Recommendations: Voices of Dropouts, Impact of Government and NGO Interventions, parents Perspectives on Female Education, Comparative Regional Studies, need of financial aid for female students, anti-harassment policies, the need for career counselling and mentorship programs, urgent reforms in university infrastructure, more employment opportunities for female students.

Keywords: Female university students, South Punjab, gender inequality, educational access, higher education, socio-cultural barriers, institutional challenges,

Introduction: The Inter Agency Commission in 1990 defined education as the "provision of learning opportunities in a purposeful and organized manner through various means including, but not limited to, schools and other educational institutions." Worldwide, schools are the primary providers of formal education, providing both formal and informal learning opportunities (Schargel and Smink, 2014).

Education makes people more self-conscious, gives them the bravery to take on the new problems of the modern world, and helps them embrace and bring about change. Education serves as a vital institution for socialization and cross-cultural adaptability in addition to being a public teaching tool. The nation's citizens receive ideological, moral, mental, and physical training from this social institution, enabling them to understand their life's mission and make every effort to fulfill it (Saeed, 2007). Educating a man means educating an individual, while educating a female means educating the entire family, goes a well-known African saying. Every state citizen has the fundamental right to education, according to the International Convention on Human Rights, and the state alone is responsible for providing educational resources to all of its citizens.

Education and societal growth are positively correlated. Education is the process by which a state prepares its citizens to read, write, and learn new skills for the advancement of their society and nations (UNESCO, 2010). Women have important roles in society. Research has demonstrated that a one-year increase in education can boost a woman's earnings by 10–20% and improve her family's well-being (Herz and Sperling, 2004).

The Pakistan Literacy Rate by Gender (2011–2022) bar chart shows the gender gap in literacy rates over a twelve-year period. According to the data, male literacy rates have continuously outpaced female literacy rates over this time. In particular, by 2022, male literacy had steadily risen to almost 75% from a hovering 69% in 2011. On the other hand, female literacy only reached around 54% by 2022. This pattern draws attention to Pakistan's persistent educational disparity, especially the structural and sociocultural obstacles that prevent women from pursuing higher education. These results are in line with other studies showing that early marriages, patriarchal attitudes, and poor educational facilities have a disproportionately negative impact on girls' educational attainment in areas like South Punjab. Closing this gender gap is crucial to achieving Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 5 (Gender Equality), according to international institutions like the World Bank and the United Nations. The bar graph Literacy Rate by Gender in South Punjab shows the stark gender disparity in literacy across the seven districts of South Punjab: Multan, Bahawalpur, Dera Ghazi Khan, Rahim Yar Khan, Muzaffargarh, Lodhran, and Rajanpur. In all district shown, male literacy rates are much greater than female literacy rates. For instance, women's literacy in Multan is only around 55%, whereas men's literacy is 70%. The gap is considerably more noticeable in less developed places like Rajanpur and Lodhran, where male literacy is approximately 60% and 62%, respectively, and female literacy is less than 45%. This visual evidence highlights the long-standing educational discrepancy in South Punjab, which is mostly brought on by social norms, gender biases, and economical constraints. These regional disparities mirror national trends, although they are made worse in rural and conservative districts, according to studies on educational access in Pakistan's less developed areas (Aslam, 2009; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Closing this gender gap is essential to advancing inclusive educational growth and gender equity in the region. In many traditional rural communities, decisions about education are significantly influenced by gender inequality. In countries like Pakistan, it is common for parents to give preference to their sons over their girls when it comes to education (Sawada, 1997).for girls secondary school system is a crucial time. . Each year of secondary school lowers the probability of early marriage and childbirth by six percentage points, according to research from various nations (Wodon, 2018). Parental education has a significant impact on children's likelihood of continuing their education. Particularly in rural areas, dropout rates tend to be lower when educated moms actively support their children's academic endeavors, particularly those of their girls (Lloyd et al., 2009; Andrabi, Das, and Khwaja, 2012). Financial constraints are a major barrier in Pakistan's rural areas. Poor households are often forced to choose between short-term financial relief (e.g., child labor) and the long-term benefits of education (Sarwar and Azam, 2020).

. Problem Statement

Education is a major problem in Pakistan, especially when it comes to women's higher education. Women's education still needs more consideration, despite the fact that they now have more opportunities. Families, communities, culture, and the economy all provide challenges for women. In terms of educational financing, quality, and opportunities, there is a notable gender disparity (Tembo & Fort, 2008). Many women in Pakistan find it difficult to fulfill their

educational goals and even finish their foundational education. It is quite difficult for women in Pakistan to seek higher education because of the many obstacles they face, such as social, cultural, religious, and gender discrimination. In addition to education, girls have less opportunities than men in the political, economic, and other areas of life. (Dara, 2012; Bari, 2005).

Significance of the study: We are well aware that Pakistani women's chances of attending higher education are negatively impacted by differences in material conditions and broader cultural norms relating to gender. These tendencies are still pervasive and warrant more investigation. Moreover, little is understood about the elements that enable some Pakistani women ought to overcome these barriers and pursue higher education. In particular, little is known about the discrimination and misunderstandings Pakistani women face as female college students. Thus, the study's goals are to: Analyze the obstacles and difficulties South Punjab women have when they pursue higher education, and determine the elements that contribute to some of these women's success.

The purpose of the study is to examine the barriers and challenges Pakistani women encounter while pursuing higher education, as well as the strategies that enable them to overcome these challenges. I will go into great detail about my study's theoretical framework and literature review in this chapter. The historical context of women's education in Pakistan, political movements pertaining to women's education in Pakistan, obstacles and difficulties facing women's access to higher education, factors that facilitate women's access to higher education in Pakistan, and the present situation of women's access to higher education in Pakistan are all covered in the literature review. The selection of theories and the goal of this study are then given particular attention in the theoretical framework section. This section explains the ideas used to analyze data on women's access to higher education in Pakistan.

Research Objectives

1: To look into the real realities of female South Punjabi university students in terms of their access to and participation in higher education.

2: To determine the primary economical, societal, and institutional barriers impeding the academic progress of female students in the region.

3: To look at the ways that communities, families, and educational institutions impact the experiences of female students in higher education.

4: To recommend strategies and laws intended to promote inclusive and equitable higher education for women in South Punjab

A country cannot develop to its full potential if women are not equally represented in the educational system (Tabassum et al., 2024). This hypothesis holds that the low percentage of educated and technically skilled women is one of the primary causes of Pakistan's and most developing countries' poor economic and social development. Women make up the bulk of the population. We will be unable to advance our nation if a large portion of our population lacks formal education. When it comes to women's education, Pakistanis' lack of advancement is particularly apparent. In Pakistan, women's education is not given significant consideration. Many do not educate their daughters or sisters because they believe that women are a burden to their dad and brothers (Chaudhry, 2007).

Even though they are actively involved in the family, workplace, and home, many women do not have access to education. Apart from the problem of poverty, there are strict views and preconceived notions about female education. According to this perspective, educated women may injure their family and transgress social, cultural, and familial norms (Rafaeli, 2020).

Marriage often appears to be the greatest way for families living in extreme poverty to protect their daughters' futures and reduce their financial burden. The marriage of school-age girls was viewed as the largest obstacle to pursuing further education and advancing gender equality for females because of the expensive cost of higher education and the belief that girls had a restricted capacity to earn a living (Bibi et al., 2023).

Pakistan is one country having low literacy rates. Out of 141 countries, Pakistan has a literacy rate of 130, according to the Worldwide Human Indicators Database. They discovered that women were much less likely than men to be literate that in order to assist the growth of the modern era, positive measures are needed to raise the female literacy rate (Amjad et al., 2020).

In most industrialized nations, where the rate of female literacy has risen dramatically in recent years, women increasingly participate alongside men in all facets of society. The productivity of women significantly contributes to the nation's socioeconomic development. In less developed countries, especially those in South Asia, where gender discrimination is a widespread issue that negatively impacts the majority of women, the situation is different.

Therefore, it is recommended that society as a whole acknowledge the value of girls' education (Singh and Rabindranath, 2020).

The main barrier to pursuing higher-level continuing education is financial limitations (Tabbasam et al., 2023). Most colleges and universities, as well as other higher education institutions, do not admit women since they are coeducational. Some households do not allow their daughters to attend college. Male professors are not allowed to educate female students in remote areas. In addition to attending school, girls are required to perform regular household tasks. Most parents prevent their girls from going outside because they are worried about their mobility (Ashraf, 2019; Qureshi et al., 2023).

The alarming and evident social and economic issues that result from high illiteracy in any country are not unique to Pakistan. Giving everyone equitable chances through inclusive education is essential for promoting long-term development in any country and genuinely fortifying the social fabric, claim (Saqib et al., 2020). Pakistan's constitutional pledges and its commitment to international organizations to ensure universal access to education highlight the importance of education in this country. "The Role of Education in Economic Growth in Pakistan," education is crucial for a nation's socioeconomic development (Kiani, 2010).

A continually low school attendance rate despite national efforts and found a significant gap between the countries required and present educational levels. Gender disparities not only continue and widen under such circumstances, but they also further cloud the perception of Pakistan's educational system. Pakistan has had trouble enrolling girls alongside boys, even in elementary schools, despite the fact that women make up almost half of the country's population (Hassan et al., 2023).

Younger educated women are definitely a resource and advantage in a country that needs to integrate with human capital. To make a substantial contribution to the national economy, they must do this action. However, Pakistan's social and economic issues are made worse by the dismal state of women's education, where their opinions are typically disregarded and silenced. In terms of girls' education, rural and urban areas differ greatly, with literacy rates in the former being far

higher than in the latter. The dropout rate among girls attending rural schools is particularly alarming (Rasheed et al., 2021).

The situation is obviously becoming worse in the Southern Punjab and other regions of the country. The wider gender disparities in southern Punjab are mentioned in their study "Constitutional Pledges, Ground Realities and Horizontal Inequalities for Education in South Punjab, Pakistan," which delves deeper into the matter. Low socioeconomic indicators and some social and cultural factors make it difficult to deliver education in the area, particularly for girls. Their findings demonstrated that the parents' disinterest in their daughters stems from the fundamental cultural and theological beliefs of ancient agrarian cultures (Malik and Anwar, 2023). Research draw attention to female security and illuminate instances of harassment in society in their studies on barriers to girls' education. Families with less wealth and expertise are more circumspect when choosing options for their girls in areas where a large number of harassment cases are reported. Therefore, it is much more common in these circumstances to keep kids from going outside to get an education. Similarly, the lack of girls' institutions in villages and the distance from schools exacerbate the issue of female education in rural areas (Nawaz et al., 2021; Malik, 2021). The total attendance has decreased by 20% in rural populations due to their distance from schools (Mussadiq and Said, 2023).

Interview guide:

1. What motivated you to pursue higher education, and what are your future aspirations?
2. Have you experienced any challenges as a female student in higher education? If yes, can you elaborate?
3. What challenges do you face in accessing higher education institutions?
4. How difficult is it for you to secure admission to your preferred program or institution?
5. Are there any biases or barriers in the admission process that affect female students?
6. How do financial constraints impact your ability to pursue higher education?
7. Are there sufficient scholarships or financial aid options available for female students?
8. How do you balance educational expenses with family responsibilities?
9. How do societal expectations around marriage, family, and career impact your educational choices?
10. Do family members or relatives support or discourage your pursuit of higher education?
11. How do you navigate conflicting expectations from family and society?
12. Are there adequate academic resources, such as libraries and technology, available for female students in South Punjab?
13. How do you experience and navigate the academic environment, including interactions with faculty and peers?
14. Are there sufficient facilities, such as separate bathrooms and accommodations, available for female students?
15. Do you think that a lack of universities in the South Punjab region causes difficulties for students in attaining higher education?
16. Do you feel safe and secure on campus, particularly in terms of harassment or violence?

17. Are there adequate measures in place to prevent and respond to incidents of harassment or violence?
18. How do safety concerns impact your ability to participate fully in academic and extracurricular activities?
19. How do you manage stress, anxiety, or other emotional challenges related to pursuing higher education?
20. Are there adequate support services, such as counselling or mentoring, available for female students?
21. How do you maintain your physical and mental well-being while pursuing higher education?
22. What support systems or resources do you think are most helpful for female students in higher education?
23. Can you describe any positive experiences or relationships you've had with mentors, advisors, or peers in higher education?
24. How do you think institutions of higher education can provide more effective support systems and resources for female students?
25. Can you suggest any additional resources or support systems that could help promote the success and well-being of female students in higher education in South Punjab?
26. What do you think are the most pressing challenges facing female students in higher education in South Punjab?
27. Can you offer any recommendations for how institutions of higher education
28. Are better support female students and address these challenges?
29. Is there anything else you'd like to share or discuss regarding your experiences as a female student in higher education?

Methodology:

Research Design

The study has adopted the qualitative research design. It has been applied in order to explore the challenges that have been faced by female university students. The research area has been selected related to the South Punjab, Pakistan. It is based on the female students who are in their pursuit of higher education. The study has pursued the phenomenological approach that was employed to capture the lived experiences of participants. This method has allowed to deeply examine the personal, sociocultural, and institutional factors. This has been influencing their educational journeys (Alenezi et al., 2023). This approach was chosen because it focuses on understanding participants' subjective experiences and the meanings they ascribe to these experiences. It is aligned with the study and its objective of uncovering the complex realities. These complex issues have been faced by female students in higher education.

Population and Sampling Strategy:

Target population: Female students aged between 18 and 25 years have been considered. They are mainly residing in the South Punjab region, and currently having completed higher education were included in the study.

Inclusion Criteria

This survey comprised South Punjabi female students who were either enrolled in or had recently left higher education. Those who had direct experience with institutional, sociocultural, or economic challenges during their time in higher education were the focus of the selection process. Only those who were at least 18 years old were considered in order to ensure informed consent and mature perspectives. Each participant willingly offered their own viewpoints and life experiences that were relevant to the study's focus on regional barriers to female education.

3.7. Exclusion Criteria

The study excluded participants who were younger than 18 or who did not identify as female. Furthermore, people who had not encountered major barriers to acquiring or continuing their education were not included. Additionally, those who did not reside in South Punjab or who were unable to provide informed consent or relevant lived experiences—such as teachers, family members, or community leaders—were excluded from the study because its main objective was to document the viewpoints of female students.

Sampling Techniques

The purposive sampling technique has been used to select participants who have the ability to provide rich and relevant insights for the research. Female students aged between 18 and 25 years have been considered. They are mainly residing in the South Punjab region, and currently having completed higher education were included in the study. Students who did not meet these criteria are the male students. These are the individuals below 18 or above 25 years of age. They are also non-residents of South Punjab. All of these have been excluded. A total of 15 participants were selected from various universities across South Punjab. They have been selected in order to ensure diversity in educational backgrounds, and socioeconomic status.

Data Collection Method

The required data has been collected by using semi-structured, in-depth interviews that has allowed the participants to openly share their experiences. It has been providing the researcher with the flexibility to explore specific themes. Each interview has been lasted approximately from 30 to 45 minutes. The interview guide has been comprising on the open-ended questions. These questions were used to explore key areas such as financial barriers, sociocultural constraints, institutional challenges, and personal motivations

Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This procedure involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data. The analysis process began with familiarization. The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants and their narratives. Initial coding was then performed to highlight significant statements and key ideas. They have been subsequently organized into broader themes that reflected common patterns across the data. These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives. Finally, the themes were defined and named, and a detailed narrative was developed to present the findings.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations are given first emphasis in this study, which looks at the opportunities and challenges South Punjabi female students face in pursuing an education. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential vulnerability of the participants, informed consent will be sought from each respondent prior to data collection. Participants will have the opportunity to stop participating at any moment without experiencing any consequences, and they will be

guaranteed the rights to secrecy, anonymity, and voluntary engagement. Because the research will be conducted in a polite and culturally sensitive manner, participants won't experience any psychological, social, or emotional harm. Additionally, all data will be securely stored and used exclusively for academic reasons in accordance with institutional ethical standards and protocols

Thematic analysis:

A Summary of Categories, Theme, Subsystem, and key statement of education challenges

Category	Theme	Subtheme	Key Statements
Financial Constraints	High costs of education	Tuition fees, lack of scholarships	"Middle-class families struggle to afford education expenses, and the facilities provided often do not justify the fees." (P12)
	Difficulty in managing expenses	Part-time job scarcity, saving struggles	"Managing fees every semester is stressful. Part-time jobs aren't easily available here, and saving up every month is a struggle." (P15)
	Difficulty in educational expenses	Family income	"Financial issues were a major challenge at the beginning, but I had to overcome them over time" (P14)
Limited Institutional Resources	Poor infrastructure	Lack of labs, libraries, technology	"The computer lab is not well-equipped, and there are limited laptops available for students." (P7)
	Limited specialized programs	Absence of practical training	"South Punjab lags significantly in education, particularly in technology-related fields. There are no institutions offering practical training in cybersecurity." (P10)
	Limited tools	Lack of modern educational tools	The library exists in name only, and there is a shortage of modern educational tools." (P5)
Gender Discrimination	Societal & familial pressures	Early marriage expectations	"My family believes I should get married soon. They often bring it up, but I try to focus on my education." (P9)

	Gender-biased prioritization	Restrictions on mobility	"Gender discrimination played a role because my brother was allowed to study in another city without any issues." (P12)
	Family Pressure	Communication Gap	"Gender inequality is a real issue. Family restrictions and communication barriers were major challenges." (P4)
Safety & Security Concerns	Harassment & inadequate security	Lack of protective measures	"Universities do not provide adequate security measures. Many issues arise, but there is no proper system to address them." (P12)
	Discomfort in mixed-gender settings	Privacy concerns	"Female students often face various challenges in mixed-gender settings. Many worries about being filmed without consent." (P7)
	Male Staff	Comfortable concern	"Even though it is a women's university, there are male staff members, which makes me uncomfortable." (P5)
	Absence of counselling & mentorship	Unprepared for career challenges	"Career counselling should be a mandatory part of the admission process. Many students lack computer skills or technical knowledge." (P15)
Lack of Career Guidance	No institutional support	Lack of counselling services	"In public-sector institutions, there is almost no support for female students. There are no proper sports facilities or counselling services." (P10)
	No institutional guidelines	Lack of awareness sessions	"There should be career counselling and awareness sessions to guide students properly." (P6)
Family Support & Conflict	Conditional family support	Restrictions on choices	"They supported me as long as I stayed within their set boundaries. I wanted to study in another city, but my family did not allow me." (P12)
	Resistance from extended family	Traditional beliefs	"My father believed that girls shouldn't leave their

			hometown for education, so I had to compromise." (P8)
	Stress & anxiety	Academic pressure	"Stress naturally builds up due to academic pressure. I felt a great need for counselling, but there weren't any accessible options." (P9)
Emotional & Mental Health	Lack of mental health support	No accessible counselling	"Students experience a lot of stress due to academic pressure. Mental health counselling facilities are not available." (P15)
	Fear and stress	Privacy issues	"Many students worry about being filmed without consent, especially during activities, which adds to their stress." (P7)

Discussion:

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted challenges female students face in pursuing higher education in South Punjab, Pakistan. These challenges align with existing literature on gender disparities in education, particularly in conservative regions where sociocultural norms often restrict women's academic and professional opportunities (Khalid and Khan, 2020; Ullah and Ali, 2021). The recurring themes have been determined. These themes are related to the financial constraints, institutional inadequacies, gender discrimination, safety concerns, and lack of career guidance. It has painted a concerning picture of systemic barriers that disproportionately affect female students. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms continue to shape educational trajectories for women in South Punjab.

Safety on campus was a recurring concern, with reports of harassment, inadequate security measures, and fear of unauthorized recording deterring female students from full participation in academic and extracurricular activities. This aligns with studies on gendered violence in Pakistani universities (Ali and Rizvi, 2020). It has been emphasizing the urgent need for stricter enforcement of anti-harassment policies, improved surveillance, and gender sensitive infrastructure. Furthermore, the absence of mental health counseling and career guidance services leaves students without crucial support, contributing to stress and academic disengagement—an issue that requires institutional intervention through dedicated counseling centers and mentorship programs. The challenges faced by female students in South Punjab are multifaceted, encompassing financial, institutional, societal, and emotional barriers. Money is one of the main barriers that female students in South Punjab's higher education system confront, and systemic inequalities are at the core of these challenges. Many students are forced to perform part-time jobs that interfere with their academic schedules because they are unable to pay for their tuition, books, and transportation. Long commutes caused by pricey hostel accommodations present additional difficulties for those from isolated places. Scholarships are available, but because they are often inadequate and very competitive, many students do not receive the necessary help. This financial burden is made worse

by social norms that prioritize subsidizing boys' education over girls', which perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage for female students.

Institutional shortcomings exacerbate these problems, particularly in public universities where funding shortages and outdated infrastructure impede academic progress. Students complain about overcrowded classrooms, poorly furnished labs, and restricted access to up-to-date research resources when compared to their peers at private colleges. Additionally, the absence of gender-sensitive policies, such as avenues for reporting harassment and support services for married students, creates an unwelcoming environment. These structural issues not only lower the quality of education but also discourage female students from pursuing STEM fields, which often have the fewest resources, or further education.

Sociocultural influences are another major obstacle; many female students have to deal with expectations from their families and society that marriage and childcare should come before their education. Many participants talked about how family members discouraged women from pursuing their academic goals by doubting the value of a degree. Students who were married or actively involved discussed the additional difficulty of balancing their studies and household responsibilities, often without official support. These cultural standards limit job aspirations and reinforce gender stereotypes because women who defy them risk social rejection. These expectations have a significant psychological cost since they exacerbate pupils' anxiety, insecurity, and general fear of failing.

When these issues are combined, students' mental health deteriorates significantly, yet universities offer little to no support in this area. Since they don't have access to peer support groups or counseling resources, many students struggle with stress and imposter syndrome on their own. The lack of mental health services is particularly concerning because female students are under additional pressure to prove themselves in a male-dominated academic environment. To address these issues, a multifaceted approach is required, involving the deployment of mental health services within institutions, legal changes to improve financial aid and infrastructure, and community involvement to alter cultural norms. South Punjab can help female students realize their full potential and establish a more equal and encouraging learning environment by addressing these issues head-on.

The findings ultimately demonstrate the pressing need for systemic change to ensure that South Punjabi female students can pursue higher education without encountering any barriers. It is necessary to combine institutional reforms, financial aid, and public awareness campaigns to eliminate the barriers these students face. Only by cooperating can the region establish an environment where women's education is valued and their academic aspirations are fully realized. This research not only highlights the challenges but also calls on legislators, educators, and communities to prioritize gender equality in higher education.

Conclusion

The qualitative exploration of female students' experiences in higher education across South Punjab reveals a complex web of challenges that hinder their academic and professional growth. Financial constraints, inadequate institutional resources, gender discrimination, safety concerns, and lack of career guidance emerge as significant barriers, compounded by societal norms that prioritize early marriage over education. Many students struggle with limited job

opportunities, biased admission processes, and emotional stress due to insufficient support systems. Despite these obstacles, the resilience and determination of these women highlight their unwavering commitment to education as a pathway to empowerment. Addressing these issues demands a multi-faceted approach, including policy reforms, improved infrastructure, enhanced security measures, and societal awareness campaigns to foster gender equality. By creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment, stakeholders can unlock the potential of female students in South Punjab, ensuring they have equal opportunities to thrive academically and professionally.

Recommendations for future research

Future studies should look into how gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural norms intersect in different South Punjabi regions to have a more complete understanding of the barriers to female education. Researchers ought to consider employing mixed-method approaches in order to fully capture the scope and intricacy of these issues. Future studies can also focus on how local lawmakers, community leaders, and educational institutions help create inclusive and supportive environments for female students. Analyzing the long-term results of educational programs and awareness campaigns may also provide valuable insights for long-term change in this regard.

Comparative Regional Studies

The difficulties faced by female students in South Punjab should be compared to those in other parts of Pakistan (such as North Punjab, Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, or Sindh) in future research. This would indicate whether the difficulties are unique to a given area or represent a national trend. Policymakers can create national and local actions with the aid of comparative data.

Longitudinal Studies

Perform qualitative longitudinal research to follow female students' academic paths from enrollment to graduation. This would shed light on how difficulties change or worsen over time as well as the coping mechanisms that pupils adopt. Introspective journaling, monitoring academic success, and follow-up interviews. It can demonstrate how continued familial and institutional support affects students' perseverance in their studies.

Intersectionality-Focused Research

Examine how women's access to and experiences with education are impacted by intersecting identities, including class, caste, religion, and the rural/urban gap. Not every woman encounters the same kinds of difficulties. Layered prejudice and intricate hurdles can be exposed through intersectionality.

Male Perspectives on Female Education

Take into account the views of male instructors and family members (fathers, brothers) regarding women's education. Patriarchal customs often dictate whether or not a woman can attend college. Understanding male perspectives can help focus awareness campaigns more successfully.

Institutional Case Studies

To understand problems at the institutional level, do in-depth case studies of certain South Punjabi universities or institutions. Transportation, harassment policies, infrastructure, and the lack of female academics are among the institution-specific problems.

Role of Digital Learning and Technology

Analyze how online learning and digital tools affect female students' learning, especially in

conservative or rural households. E-learning can help get beyond social taboos or mobility restrictions.

Voices of Dropouts

Talk to women who dropped out of college due to societal, financial, or institutional barriers. Their stories provide crucial insight into the causes of women's eventual departure from academia.

5.7.8. Impact of Government and NGO Interventions

Analyze the effectiveness of government policies and NGO programs that support women's education in South Punjab. Policies can be evaluated to determine which initiatives are useful and which are bad.

Limitations of the study

This study has provided the valuable insights into the challenges faced by female students. They have been residing in South Punjab and it is related to the higher education system. There are several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research relied exclusively on qualitative interviews. While rich in depth, may not fully represent the broader population due to the relatively small sample size. The study's focus on specific universities in South Punjab also limits the generalizability of findings to other regions of Pakistan with different socio-cultural dynamics. Additionally, the personal nature of some interview topics may have led to response bias, as participants might have been reluctant to fully disclose sensitive experiences due to cultural norms or privacy concerns.

The study's cross-sectional design further restricts the ability to track changes in challenges over time. Another limitation stems from the potential influence of the interviewer's presence and background on participants' responses, despite efforts to maintain neutrality. Finally, the research did not explore potential differences in challenges across various academic disciplines in equal depth, which could provide more nuanced understanding of discipline specific barriers. These limitations suggest directions for future research, including larger-scale mixed-methods studies and longitudinal approaches that could provide more comprehensive data on this important issue.