



Gender and Education: Exploring the Differences in Learning Experiences and Academic Achievements among Universities of Punjab's Students

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ABSTRACT

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The gender differences in relation to learning process and female academic performance in the Universities of Punjab province, Pakistan using a narrative inquiry methodology. While quantitative research describes the statistical gender disparities in higher education, it fails to examine the actual experience of students in the realities of sociocultural factors, economic factors, and institutional environments. The study, utilizing deep and semi-structured interviews with both male and female undergraduate and postgraduate students in both public and private universities, examines how gender influences academic responsibility, classroom involvement, motivation, self-belief, and how the construction of academic success is done between men and women. Results indicate that female students tend to focus on future expectations, fortitude, and perseverance, while male students focus on social and economic duties, confidence, and physical successes. There are also different experiences of classroom engagement, learning strategies, and psychosocial well-being that are also gendered. The research highlights the relational and context-dependent nature of gender by placing the narratives of students in advance, instead of singling them out as a fixed category. The research paper is added to the literature on gendered academic experiences in the Global South and provides implications for inclusive, context-sensitive policies and pedagogies in higher education.

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1.0 Introduction

In the context of higher education in Pakistan and the rest of the Global South, gender remains a potent social construction across the educational experiences, aspirations, and paths to students' learning and accomplishment. While global discourses sometimes imply how the gender gap is closed in terms of the numbers of university enrollees, when such numerical trends are presented, the reality of some students, whose learning experiences are situated in deeply gendered contexts of sociocultural, economic, and institutional realities, is obscured (Hadjar et al., 2014; Alfarhan & Dauletova, 2019). In the Pakistani society, like many Asian societies, gender norms still have an impact on access to academic resources, class participation, decisions regarding disciplinary behavior, and perceptions regarding academic competence, and in these ways their trajectories as students are impacted in subtle yet consequential ways (Naz et al., 2020).

Boyer, J., Saundras, C., Stark, S., & Bay, S. (1996). Gender differences in college student learning. *American Psychologist*, 61, 418-439. Research on gender differences in academic achievement and academic motivation that has been conducted within the context of higher education settings in Asia and the Global South. It has also uncovered gender differences between self-efficacy whereby female students have demonstrated their greater academic discipline and persistence, while usage has demonstrated has greater confidence and autonomy in learning-related decision-making by males (Dumanjug et al., 2024; Hsieh & Yu, 2023; Tzu-Ling, 2019). However, such findings, which were mostly obtained by means of quantitative analyses, provide limited knowledge of how students interpret these differences in the light of their everyday academic life. In Pakistan, given the multi-layered affordances and constraints that support educational experiences based on the intersectionality of the elements that are education, including family expectations, language hierarchies, socioeconomic constraints, and institutions cultures, in order to decode gendered educational experiences it is imperative that the personal narratives of students and their meaning-making capabilities be examined (Naz et al., 2020; Kao & Thompson, 2003).

From the point of view of narrative inquiry learning is not only recognized as a conclusion measured in terms of grades or test scores, rather as a lived experience built on the telling of stories of struggling for and aspiring to, of being resilient and negotiating. Narrative research puts the voices of student's front and center where they can tell us how gendered expectations influence their interaction with their learning spaces and with their faculty and their expectations of academic success or failure (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). According to previous research, the role of gender is found to be involved in the determination of learning strategies, study habits, and patterns of engagement among students and comprises distinct experiences in technology-mediated learning environments and language learning contexts (Senad et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2019; Kobayashi, 2002). However, these patterns acquire deeper infrastructural related to consideration mediated through narratives by students show how such strategies are adopted resisted or re-interpreted with specific cultural entailments.

In developing countries of South Asia, like Pakistan, further the gendered experiences of learning are affected by the structural and emotional conditions that surround learning lives in

particular universities. Narratives from the students often include expressions and issues to do with safety, mobility, family responsibilities, and mental well-being- all measures that have been shown to disproportionately affect the academic engagement and persistence of female students (Prowse et al., 2021; Cabras & Mondo, 2018). At the same time, the stories of male students do shed frequent light on pressures implied by economics (economic responsibility), performance expectations, and disciplinary factors, especially in competitive areas of the academic curriculum (Fischer & Luiz, 2024; Kamphorst et al., 2015).

Moreover, interactions among academic spaces, including student-faculty pairs, peer collaboration, and engagement in extracurricular and learning support activities, are lived and narrated in distinct ways in the case of male and female students in Pakistani universities (Sax et al., 2005; Kim & Sax, 2009; Shamsudin et al., 2014). These narratives highlight the impact of policy-level institutional practices on women students and cast new light on how institutional practices blindly pretend to recreate the caprices of morals or, on the contrary, violate institutional practices that may contain room for empowering the girl child for growth in their environment. By attending to these stories, researchers may get a better understanding of the processes by which gendered educational inequalities are reproduced or challenged in day-to-day university life.

Despite the increasing literature in the region of gender and academic success in Asia, there is a major dearth of qualitative and narrative-based work that puts the voice of university students in Pakistan in the center. Addressing this gap, in the present study, the approach has been narrative inquiry investigating the way that both male and female university students construct and tell their learning experiences and their academic achievement. By situating the narratives of students in the grand sociocultural and institutional framework of higher education in the Global South, this study seeks to arrive at a sensitive understanding that offers more than statistical comparisons and adds to enhanced and inclusive educational practices that are also contextually responsive.

2.0 Literature Review

Achievement at the University level (which invariably reflect differences in performance patterns across disciplines at different parts of the world, in different cultural contexts). Early and fundamental research highlights the fact that the problem of gender differences in educational attainment can be attributed not only to individual aspects (e.g. motivation, self-concept, personality characteristics) but also to structural aspects that are situated in educational systems (Cassidy, 2012; Hadjar et al., 2014). Large-scale and cross-cultural research shows that females tend to perform better than males in general academic efforts and that males may show relative advantages in particular areas of endeavor, especially in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) (Eddy & Brownell, 2016; Jungert et al., 2019; Mejia-Rodriguez et al., 2021).

Studies carried out in Pakistan and contexts that have similar characteristics show great gender disparities in school motivation and achievement, which can be influenced by the family, the economic burden, and the availability of education resources (Naz et al., 2020). Research from Jordan, Malaysia, and other developing higher education system further proves that academic performance is affected by an intricate interaction of gender, and institutional support, and learning environments (Shamsudin et al., 2014; Al-Okaily et. al, 2024).

2.1 Psychological and Motivational Factors to Gendered Learning

Scholars have begun to place much greater emphasis on psychological constructs such as self-efficacy, achievement motivation and attribution styles in attempts to explain gendered academic outcomes. These empirical evidences suggest the female students tend to regularly report greater levels of academic diligence and persistence in comparison with the male students tend towards exhibiting greater academic self-confidence although the outcomes (performance) may not differ notably (Dumanjug et al., 2024; Clifton et al., 2008). Motivation and engagement has also been found to work differently in both genders, particularly in both the STEM and professional degree programs (Hsieh and Yu, 2023; Kamphorst, et al., 2015).

In Asian contexts, gendered variations of motivation and self-efficacy have been closely related to initial educational experience as well as to the expectations of the society. Research on Taiwanese and Japanese students, for example, tells us that gendered beliefs about competence and career aspirations has a significant impact on learning behaviour and life-long academic involvement (Tzu-Ling, 2019; Kobayashi, 2002). While these different types of studies have provided valuable information and understanding, there is still not much to understand what the students themselves tell about and interpret these motivational experiences over time through a more qualitative survey design.

2.2 Learning Experiences, Strategies and Learning Environments

Beyond achievement measures, the gender differences in the learning experiences have been documented widely in the learning style, study habits, and engagement with instructional approaches. Research shows that male and female students tend to use different strategies in learning, in this case language learning, flipped classroom and technology-mediated learning (Senad et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2019; Ariastuti & Wahyudin, 2022). Gender differences have also been reported in terms of acceptance and use of educational technologies by students, such as mobile learning platforms and e-learning platforms (Liu & Guo, 2017; Rodriguez-Ardura & Meseguer-Artola, 2021).

In higher education institutions in the Global South, such experiences are compounded by unequal access to digital resources and differences in instructional quality. Studies in library engagement, extracurricular activities, and school-student faculty facilitate, gender's impact on student satisfaction extended beyond academic performance, which can affect students with respect to sense of belonging and sense of academic identity (Adetayo et al., 2024; Sax et al., 2005; Kim & Sax, 2009). Such findings indicate the importance of considering learning as an experiential and relationship process instead of just outcome-based.

2.3 Gender, Well-Being, and Sociocultural Contexts

Recent research has attracted interest to the emotional and psychosocial side of gendered learning experiences, specifically in relation to stress, coping strategies, and mental health. Evidence indicates that it is more likely that female students report a higher level of stress and emotional burden, while male students could feel pressure related to a need for performance and their future occupational expectation of economic qualifications (Prowse et al., 2021; Cabras & Mondo, 2018). These gender forces become particularly important in a collectivist and patriarchal

society like Pakistan, where the student's academic life is closely linked with the family obligations and societal norms.

Furthermore, sociological perspectives focus too strongly on the intersections of gender with other forms of stratification, including socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and level of institutional hierarchy, which act to make certain genders more or less positively benefited by their access to academic capital and opportunities (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Karatas-Ozkan & Chell, 2015). While these kinds of studies add important layers of knowledge about the structural inequality, it is often the case that they fail to fully investigate the ways in which students experience and narrate these intersecting influences in their daily lives as students in an academic setting.

2.4 Literature Gap

Despite much of the research on gender and academic achievement in higher education, some important gaps exist. First of all, most of the existing studies (that is, mostly the Asian and Global South context) are quantitative in nature, based on surveys, standardized measures, and statistical comparisons (Dumanjug et al., 2024; Naz et al., 2020; Kusnierz et al., 2020). While these approaches identify patterns and correlations, they provide little information on the lived experiences and subjective meanings that students place on their learning and their learning success.

Second, the research conducted in Punjab has been limited to variables related to outcomes such as grades, motivation scores, and self-efficacy level, with little attention paid to the manner in which students narrate their educational journey over time and contexts. There is a notable absence of studies that discuss experiences of gender through the personal story of challenge, resilience, and aspiration of university students themselves. Third, while international scholarship has recognized the importance of sociocultural and institutional factors in influencing gendered experiences in education, these influences are often viewed as background factors instead of as integral parts of the story of what student's experience. Few studies have taken an approach to situate the academic experiences of students in the cultural, family, and institutional contexts of the entire Global South. Finally, there is a deficit in research, which creates a synthesis of narrative inquiry as a method to examine gender and education in higher education. Narrative inquiry provides a powerful lens to comprehend the way students construe meaning pertaining to gender, learning, and achievement over a period of time, though it has lesser utilization in this context, especially in the Punjabi university context.

Addressing these gaps, the present work uses the narrative inquiry approach to explore the differences between the genders relating to learning experiences and academic performance in university students in Punjab. Creating a framework that places the narrative of students as key subjects at the core of the present study, and that situates them within their sociocultural contexts, aims to advance existing literature beyond statistical generalizations and to make productive contributions to the rich, contextually sensitive understandings of gender and HE in the Global South.

3.0 Methodology

This study follows a qualitative approach of narrative inquiry in accordance with methodological expectations of gender and education, which is grounded in a social constructionist ontology and an interpretivist, feminist epistemology (epistemological view of the nature of knowing) in which gender, learning, and academic accomplishment are socially produced, relational, and contextual. Reality is understood as manifold and co-constructed through students' interactions with institutional, cultural, and interpersonal forces. In contrast, knowledge is produced through dialogic interaction between the researcher and the participants. Data are collected through in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews with selected male and female undergraduate/postgraduate students from public and private universities in Punjab, using a nonprobability sample. Participants can narrate and reflect on their lived learning experiences and academic journey over time. Analysis takes a narrative-analytic approach, maintaining the coherence of the participants' stories while paying attention to issues of temporality, sociality, and place; thus, foregrounding the process of constructing, negotiating, and reinterpreting gendered meanings in the context of higher education. Reflexivity is built into every stage of the research process, with the researcher critically reflecting on positionality and choice within the interpretation of their subject matter, and methodological rigor is maintained through thick description, ethical transparency, and careful representation of the voices of participants, following the standards of qualitative research such as Gender and Education.

Table 01: Demographic Profile of Respondents

| Respondent ID | Gender | Age | Degree Level | Discipline | University Type | Residence |
|---------------|--------|-----|---------------|-------------------------|-----------------|------------|
| R1 | Female | 20 | Undergraduate | Education | Public | Lahore |
| R2 | Male | 22 | Undergraduate | Engineering | Public | Faisalabad |
| R3 | Female | 23 | Undergraduate | Social Sciences | Private | Gujranwala |
| R4 | Male | 25 | Postgraduate | Business Administration | Private | Lahore |
| R5 | Female | 21 | Undergraduate | English | Public | Multan |
| R6 | Male | 24 | Postgraduate | Computer Science | Public | Rawalpindi |
| R7 | Female | 22 | Undergraduate | Psychology | Private | Sialkot |
| R8 | Male | 26 | Postgraduate | Education | Public | Bahawalpur |
| R9 | Female | 23 | Undergraduate | Economics | Public | Sargodha |
| R10 | Male | 21 | Undergraduate | Information Technology | Private | Lahore |
| R11 | Female | 27 | Postgraduate | Sociology | Public | Jhang |
| R12 | Male | 24 | Undergraduate | Management Sciences | Public | Sheikhpura |
| R13 | Female | 25 | Postgraduate | Linguistics | Private | Okara |

4.0 Findings and Results

Analysis of the narrative interviews emerged four interrelated themes, which reveal the role of gender in the learning experience of and constructions of academic achievement among university students in the Punjab context: (1) gendered expectations and academic responsibility, (2) difference in classroom participation and voice, (3) negotiation of motivation and self-belief, and (4) narrated meanings of academic success.

4.1 Gendered Expectations: Academic Responsibility

Participants' narratives were consistent with the impact of gender-based expectations, which originated within family and society, and affected how the students came to approach their academic roles. Frequently, female students described a heightened sense of responsibility toward academic success in the form of proving competence and acquiring future independence. One female undergraduate, a girl from Lahore, explained:

“To me, studying is not all about grades. It feels like I have to show that girls can do this seriously, otherwise it is believed that education for us is an option.”

In contrast, male students tended to tell the story of academic responsibility as it was related to future economic provision and social position. As one male postgraduate student from Faisalabad noted:

“There is pressure that I have to do well because in the future I will be responsible for my family.” Failure is not really an option for me.”

These stories reflect gendered burden - not a rule for one group but a different story for its dynamics, with respect to academic responsibility for men and women students.

4.2 Participating in the Classroom and the Gendered Voice

Differences in participation in the classroom were a significant theme, specifically in mixed-gender learning environments. Female participants often described discomfort when taking the discussion floor during lectures, explaining the reason to be fear of judgment and cultural norms on visibility. An example from a female psychology student was:

“A very familiar mannerism might be, “even when I know the answer, I hesitate.” I feel like everyone will notice me more because I am a girl, and that makes me uncomfortable.”

Male students, by contrast, frequently described greater ease in participating in the classroom, although some of them recognized that such confidence was expected of them socially, rather than innately. One male IT student remarked:

“Teachers expect boys to participate by speaking more.” Sometimes I speak even if I don't know all too well, because silence seems like weakness.”

These stories point to the power of gendered norms in determining their welcome in students' ability to engage in the classroom and to decide whose voices are heard and valued.

4.3 Motivation & Self-Belief

Participants' stories showed motivation and beliefs about themselves as dynamic and deeply embedded in personal and social experiences. Female students used to talk about the ups and downs of the feeling of self-esteem, influenced by other people's approval and evaluation of their academic performance. One postgraduate of sociology commented:

“When I do well, I am confident, but one negative comment can make me believe I am not good at anything. I always question whether I really belong here.”

Male students, although appearing generally more self-confident, also told stories of internal struggles, which were less visible. One male education student said:

“People think about boys they are confident, but sometimes I feel lost. I just don't talk about it because it's not something that's expected.”

These narratives complicate modalities about gendered confidence because they open up the emotional labor that underlies confidence to spotlight student academic motivation.

4.4 Academic Achievement and Success

Academic achievement was not measured through grades or CGPA but was constructed by students through personal meanings in the context of gendered life circumstances. For many female students, persistence and overcoming barriers were associated with success. One undergraduate student in English explained:

“Even carrying on my degree is a success for me, because many girls like me never make it to university.”

Male students had more associations with achievements, such as employability and recognition, that were tangible results. One business postgraduate student commented:

“Good grades are important, but this for me is all about getting a job demonstrating that my degree was worth it.”

Across narratives, achievement manifested as a gendered and contextualized phenomenon, which portrayed the more general social realities, rather than only institutionalized benchmarks.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this research stress how gender still influences university pupils' learning and the way in which that is usually fabricated in their specific ways, building upon and expanding earlier investigations. Female student's narratives showed increased academic responsibility and motivation, sometimes in the context of overcoming sociocultural holdings, consistent with Dumanjug et al. (2024) and Naz et al. (2020), who found female students have higher self-efficacy and are more diligent in academic work. Similarly, these findings have implications for those works that reported gendered patterns of motivations in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics that affect persistence and engagement, as well as the interplay of social expectations and internalized self-belief that captivate Hsieh and Yu (2023) and Tzu-Ling (2019).

Male participants, on the other hand, referenced academic achievement in the context of economic provision and social status, consistent with a study by Kusnierz et al. (2020) and Pirmohamed et al. (2017), which indicated that the academic motivational orientation of male students was affected by societal and familial expectations. These opposing stories strengthen Cassidy's (2012) claim that individual differences (including gendered psychosocial dispositions) are important in determining academic trajectories, but Hadjar et al. (2014) and Alfarhan and Dauletova (2019) underline that cultural context mediates the outcomes of gendered patterns of achievement in various educational systems.

The theme of classroom participation and gendered voice reveals the structural and

relational limits on visibility of female students, in agreement with the work by Sax, Bryant, and Harper (2005), as well as Kim and Sax (2009), for example, who found that student-faculty interaction benefits men and women differentially. Female student's hesitation in speaking up an echoing Rodriguez-Ardura and Meseguer-Artola (2021) who documented that technological and personalized learning environments still reproduce subtle gendered differences in engagement and self-expression and Liu and Guo (2017) documenting similar differences based on gender. Male students' narratives of speaking out despite uncertainty are also consistent with Footnote 9's findings by Clifton et al. (2008) on gendered academic confidence and psychosocial dispositions.

Narratives related to motivation and belief in the self-show the deep interaction of wellbeing around the validation of external validity, feedback, and gendered expectations. Female students' fluctuating confidence is in tandem with the findings from Senad, Amna, and Edda (2021), Alzahrani et al. (2018), and Ariastuti and Wahyudin (2022), underlining that women tend to utilize more deliberate learning strategies towards academic success. Pressure felt inside by male students, despite at the same time more external-felt confidence, proves to be consistent with the findings of Fischer and Luiz (2024) and Kamphorst et al. (2015) and emphasize how male students also navigate with socially prescribed achievement expectations, even when less visible. These findings echo Jungert et al.'s (2019) and Mejia-Rodriguez et al.'s (2021) findings on the contextual mediation of gender gaps in self-concept and, more broadly, in perseverance, and how they are interlaced with processes related to socialization.

The study also illustrates that academic achievement is a sociocultural constructed narrative, rather than being seen as one of cold, objective achievements of grades or performance. Female students defined success as persistence and overcoming barriers, and were consistent with Hadjar et al. (2014) and Karatas-Ozkan and Chell (2015), accentuating that educational agency and opportunity are gendered. Male students had a stronger focus on employability and practical outcomes, which is in line with Eddy and Brownell (2016) and Kamphorst et al. (2015), who identified discipline-specific gendered differences in the definition of achievement, especially in STEM and professional degrees.

Furthermore, the findings contribute to the research literature on psychosocial well-being and coping, which is similar to the observation by Prowse et al. (2021), Cabras and Mondo (2018), and Heiman and Olenik-Shemesh (2015), who reported that female students experience higher stress levels. In contrast, male students cope with the pressure to perform internally. These gendered patterns are further due to sociocultural expectations in Pakistan as a reflection of krstion of gender, social class, institutional context as in the study by Kao and Thompson (2003), Karatas-Ozcan & Chell (2015), respectively. In line with the research proposed by Al-Okaily et al. (2024) and Cheng, Wang, and Liu (2019), this research suggests the mediation of learning experiences and the learning outcomes by contextual factors, including family expectations and institutional support.

Finally, the extent to which participants interact with learning strategies and technology and academic environments is congruent with global learning style and engagement evidence from gender issues. The conscientiousness of women students and their reflective strategies are similar

to Chen et al. (2019), Bin Eid et al. (2021), and Yeboah and Smith (2016), and the use of social and peer support for male students is similar to those in Liu and Guo (2017) and Zahedi et al. (2021). These results confirm that gendered differences in learning are both psychologically and socially situated and endorse the value of the narrative inquiry to capture lived, situated experiences in addition to typically quantitative key elements.

In a nutshell, not only does this study affirm and contextualize, but it also extends the literature that is available by showcasing the effect of gender on the academics of students in Punjab, not just in terms of the results of performance, but more meaning-making, motivation, engagement at classroom, and psychological maneuvering. The narrative inquiry approach allowed the voices of the participants to speak for the nuances of gendered educational experiences that validate the arguments of Cassidy (2012), Hsieh and Yu (2023), and Tzu-Ling (2019) for more contextually centered practices of qualitative research about gender in HE settings, especially in the Global South.

5.1 Conclusion

This research emphasizes on the significant impact of gender on the learning experiences, motivation, class room participation and construction of academic success of University students in the Punjab setup. The narratives of female students emphasized greater responsibility, careful planning and resilience to sociocultural and institutional limitations, while the male students placed more emphasis on the social expectations, outward confidence and achievement as the key to providing for the future. These findings are helpful in reinforcing the argument that gendered experiences are not simply captured in grades or performance measurements but experienced, interpreted, and socially negotiated, and hence sustaining the relevancy of using narrative inquiry in the discovery of complex educational realities. By situating such experiences towards their broader sociocultural, familial and institutional context in Pakistan, the study is also a given expansion of existing literature exploring gender and HE in the Global South (Dumanjug et al., 2024; Naz et al., 2020; Cassidy, 2012; Hsieh & Yu, 2023).

5.2 Recommendations

The results have important implications from policy as well as practice in Punjab. First, where they are, institutions of higher education should adopt gender-sensitive teaching practices, classroom participation strategies that promote equal participation, such as structured formats for discussions, mentorship programs, and interactive learning environments that address diverse learning styles (Chen et al., 2019; Zahedi et al., 2021). Second, academic support services should address psychosocial and motivational issues through counseling, confidence-building workshops, and stress management interventions, while ensuring sensitivity towards gendered pressures and cultural expectations (Prowse et al., 2021; Cabras & Mondo, 2018). Third, curriculum design and policy frameworks must take into account the issues of gendered barriers and enablers in STEM and in professional and social sciences programs and be conducive to inclusive pedagogical approaches that recognize the importance of persistence, resilience, and different definitions of academic success (Kamphorst et al., 2015; Karatas-Ozkan & Chell, 2015; Eddy & Brownell, 2016). Finally, this study brings to light and the importance of references and contextually

grounded narrative-based research for policy and practice in the higher education system in Pakistan. Policymakers and educators may find what students have to say useful in designing interventions not only to improve academic outcomes but also to develop youth's sense of agency, self-efficacy, and holistic development.

Muhammad Tahir: Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

Shazib Iqbal: Data Analysis, Supervision and Drafting

Komal Sawera: Methodology and Revision

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

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