



Degrees without Direction: Graduate Unemployment, Family Pressure, Identity, and Mental Wellbeing in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

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Graduate unemployment is more than a labor-market outcome in contexts where education is closely tied to mobility, adulthood, marriage, family reciprocity, and respectability. This qualitative article examines how unemployed university graduates in Pakistan interpret prolonged job searching and its effects on identity, family relationships, gendered expectations, and mental wellbeing. The study is designed around 26 semi-structured interviews and uses NVivo-assisted reflexive thematic analysis. Five themes organize the findings: the degree as a broken promise; dependent adulthood without economic autonomy; gendered deadlines and social comparison; mental wellbeing under prolonged uncertainty; and rebuilding a future. The analysis treats unemployment as a socially organized period of waithood shaped by family interdependence, stigma, class, and gender. It shows how material support can coexist with pressure and how graduates respond through reskilling, examination preparation, freelancing, faith, peer support, and migration planning. The manuscript uses synthetic composite interview excerpts as a reporting model.

1.0 Introduction

In Pakistan, a college degree implies something greater than just education for many families. There should be a pathway to securing a job, financial freedom, marriage, respectability, and mobility in life. When there isn't a job opportunity for the graduate, then the issue is being experienced at multiple levels at once. Not only do they lack the means to make money, but they may also believe that their transition into adulthood hasn't been realized, the money spent by their family on their education is still unpaid back, and the value of the degree is lost.

The broader environment of the labor market makes it hard to consider this phenomenon a personal failing. The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics reports an unemployment rate of 7.1% and labor force participation of 46.3% for the 2024-25 Labour Force Survey, with notable disparities by age, gender, education, and geographical region (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2026). On the other hand, the rise in educational attainment among the youth leads to an increase in the number of people who aspire to be professionals but whose opportunities are not accommodated by the labor market at the anticipated pace or scale. The disparity between educational investments and occupational opportunities is even more significant in a scenario where families have to fund education and make critical decisions regarding one's career, marriage, and movement.

Pakistani literature in recent times has paved a way forward to explore such experiences from a sociological perspective. For instance, Shah et al. (2020) have found that educated unemployed young men in rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were experiencing naming, blaming, and shaming and that the responses of the family and the community contributed to their psychological distress. Moreover, Shah et al. (2025), through the notion of waithood, extend the scope of the problem as the process of negotiation of education-to-work and marriage transition in Pakistan through family interdependencies and in the context of gender, class, and space. The more recent qualitative studies about the experiences of unemployed university graduates in Pakistan reveal disrupted daily practices, financial dependency, difficulties in accommodation, and reduced status and respect (Ullah & Ullah, 2026).

This is where mental well-being becomes essential, but this well-being needs to be considered in the context of society. Uncertainty, rejection, dependency, and social comparisons are some factors that contribute to anxiety, shame, withdrawal, disturbance in sleep patterns, and lower self-confidence. These factors are sometimes aggravated by gendered role expectations. A study of Pakistani women students indicates the influence of academic stress, family reputation, gendered expectations, and stigma on distress and help-seeking behavior (Shabbir, Niazi, & Tongxue, 2026). Similarly, studies on males who have non-conformist provider roles indicate that unemployment and deviation from breadwinner expectations put men at risk of stigmatization and social isolation (Shah, 2023). In simple words, distress is not just inside the person. It is constructed and defined in social roles.

This paper explores how university graduates who are unemployed in Pakistan understand their transition from being an educated person to becoming employed, while exploring how familial pressure, gender, social comparisons, and financial dependence influence identity and psychological well-being in times of unemployment. This is explored through a framework that

focuses on the sociology of waithood, connected lives, stigma, and gendered adulthood. Through these lenses, unemployment becomes a socially constructed time period wherein the meaning of education, adulthood, and the future becomes renegotiated.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Graduate unemployment as a disrupted transition

Moving from education to work is seen as a personal problem for career development; however, life-course sociology focuses on the fact that transitions take place within institutions and relations. Work becomes the point at which people receive income, gain independence, and move to another phase of their social life, becoming adults through this process. In case when work is delayed, the other transitions are put on hold. The concept of waithood helps us understand the transitional stage of life during which people have gained some aspects of being adults but cannot gain others. Shah et al. (2025) demonstrate that waithood in Pakistan is a relation, and the life course of young people is influenced by their education, career, marriage, and socioeconomic background.

The concept is particularly useful for graduates because the diploma creates certain expectations. Higher education increases the possibility that one expects some kind of stable white collar or professional job to come. If the jobs available are uncertain, low paying, have nothing to do with one's field of study or seem beneath one's social status, then there arises a dilemma of whether to wait or accept one's downward mobility or try acquiring further education or training or preparation for exams or becoming a freelancer or migrating. It is not just the lack of a job but the gap between expectation created by education and reality after graduation.

2.2 Family interdependence and linked lives

In Pakistan, becoming an adult is often negotiated amid intense family interdependencies. Parents provide education, finance housing, mobilize networks, and help with unemployment among their children, expecting reciprocal benefits and involvement in family responsibilities. While such involvement is protective, it might become problematic if the dependence continues for a long time. Financial help might come across as a reminder of delayed adulthood, and common inquiries regarding employment become surveillance and criticism. As shown by Shah et al. (2025), the relationships between different generations are the essence of waithood, making the family both a source of resources and a locus of transition problems.

The idea of linked lives shows why one's unemployment can have effects on the whole family. The failure of a son to bring income may affect family budgeting and the plans concerning marriage. The failure of a daughter to gain employment may redirect family discussions concerning moving, studying, or getting married. Parents may be forced to change their plans for retirement or support their grown-up children longer than planned. Thus, such relational approach does not see the family intervention either oppressive or protective, as the family can be a source of both.

2.3 Stigma, respectability, and social identity

Unemployment may also take on the dimensions of a morality issue. Shah et al. (2020) argue that educated youths without jobs in rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa had to contend with being

labeled, discriminated against, and with changed social support. This is important from a sociological perspective since joblessness becomes associated with character, hard work, masculinity, or skill and not just a labor force condition. Educated individuals might then find themselves having to control information, keep away from gatherings, minimize interactions with employed peers, or revalue available jobs in order to preserve their identities.

The stakes involved may be higher where education has been publicly praised before. Families and communities may have considered going to university and graduating as successes and the subsequent unemployment brings into relief an incongruity between previous celebration and current doubts. Unemployed graduates in Pakistan are similarly described by Ullah and Ullah (2026) in terms of the challenges around identity and respect. This implies that unemployment carries with it a social as well as a psychological cost.

2.4 Gendered adulthood and employment

Gender plays a crucial role in youth transitions. For males, there is an overwhelming pressure on being a provider. The literature on stay-at-home fathers in Pakistan provides the example of how men who do not meet their breadwinner status are socially isolated and stigmatized (Shah, 2023). Similarly, the literature on female breadwinners also shows that deviating from the expected provider role brings social reactions and need for management of perceptions by couples (Shah, 2024). Therefore, unemployment is a threat not only to one's career but to socially constructed masculinity for male graduates.

Women's experiences are quite different. On the one hand, women have freedom and professional identity because of employment, but, on the other hand, mobility constraints, respectability at workplace, family approval, and care work and marriage deadlines are factors to consider. Shabbir et al. (2026) explain how Pakistani women students face mental health issues due to cultural and reputational pressures. This indicates that graduate unemployment cannot be studied in terms of male and female comparison. Gender is connected to class, family structure, location, and types of work.

2.5 Mental wellbeing as a socially situated outcome

Joblessness and low wellbeing have always gone hand-in-hand, however, in qualitative sociology one key issue has emerged – how do these experiences of distress feel to the individual? A young adult may be distressed about lack of income, age of his or her parents, success of peers, delayed marriage, or rejection, which is taken as evidence of own inadequacy. The same situation in the labor market can thus provoke various reactions based on individuals' background. Qualitative methodology enables the mechanisms of such reactions to be explored without putting a label on the respondents.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Study design

The methodology for the proposed study entails an interpretive approach to qualitative research through semi-structured interviews of university graduates who have been unemployed. The method is well suited for dealing with biographical accounts, family relations, social comparisons, identity formation, and emotional experience. The unit of analysis be the life

narrative of the graduate during the period of unemployment in relation to institutions like the family, university, labor market, marriage system, and migration regime.

3.2 Sampling and participant characteristics

Selection of the participants is based on the purposeful selection to ensure variation in gender, field, location, socioeconomic status, and period of unemployment. The criteria for inclusion include having an undergraduate degree or more advanced degree, ages 22-32 years old, and six months or more of lack of steady employment post-university. Part-time jobs, internships, and working with one's family do not necessarily disqualify a participant if he/she still sees himself/herself as actively job searching (Malterud et al., 2016).

Table 1. Synthetic participant profile used for the reporting template

Characteristic	Draft distribution
Total participants	26
Gender	14 men; 12 women
Age range	22–32 years
Duration without stable full-time work	6–30 months
Degree fields	STEM 7; business/management 6; social sciences 6; humanities/education 4; health/allied fields 3
Locations	Lahore 7; Islamabad-Rawalpindi 6; Peshawar/nearby KP 6; Karachi 5; other Punjab 2
Family setting	15 joint/extended households; 11 nuclear households
Interview language	Urdu, English, or mixed Urdu-English

3.3 Interview procedure and ethics

The interview is expected to run for between 50 and 80 minutes, starting off with education and work experience of the respondent. Subsequent questions will include expectations regarding the degree and job search experience; discussions with family members, financial dependency, peer comparison, marriage and mobility issues, everyday activities, emotions, coping mechanisms, and future expectations. The interviewer avoided questioning the respondents concerning self-diagnosis of psychological problems. Instead, the questions should be centered on sleep, self-confidence, worrying, moods, reclusiveness, routines and interpretations of the respondents' experiences.

In order to ensure confidentiality in discussions of financially dependent situations and family matters, the interview should take place privately with reminders that the respondent has the right not to answer any particular question. Instead of names, participant pseudonyms or codes should be used to refer to the interviewees, while identifying information about employers, families or failed job applications should be left out of transcripts.

3.4 NVivo and reflexive thematic analysis

Interview audio recordings transcribed verbatim, with Urdu portions translated carefully following the preservation of the original transcript. Transcripts, fieldnotes, and reflexive memos would be entered into NVivo software. The participant cases would be coded according to gender, discipline, region, family environment, and duration of unemployment. This way, matrix queries can be performed to allow the researcher to look at trends—like how the breadwinner burden is

narrated in a different way by men and women—without transforming a qualitative research project into a numbers game.

The analysis proceeded following Braun & Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019). Initial coding would remain close to the participants' voices, including codes like 'ask your parents for money,' 'avoiding weddings,' 'wasted degree,' 'marriage pressure,' 'staying up late,' 'studying for civil service examination,' and many others of this sort. These codes would be expanded upon through the use of memos and comparison to become themes of mobility disillusionment, dependent adulthood, gender timelines, uncertain wellbeing, and future reconstruction.

Table 2. NVivo thematic architecture used in the draft analysis

Final theme	Examples of focused NVivo nodes	Synthetic case coverage
1. The degree as a broken promise	education investment; skills mismatch; rejected expectations; status of work; merit and contacts	23/26
2. Dependent again: adulthood without economic autonomy	asking for money; household scrutiny; delayed independence; return home; respect	22/26
3. Gendered deadlines and social comparison	breadwinner masculinity; marriage timing; mobility; peer comparison; family reputation	21/26
4. Mental wellbeing under prolonged uncertainty	worry; disrupted sleep; withdrawal; loss of routine; confidence; repeated rejection	24/26
5. Rebuilding a future	faith; reskilling; freelancing; competitive exams; migration; redefining success	20/26

3.5 Trustworthiness and reflexivity

The report is abide by the COREQ guidelines regarding positioning, recruiting participants, data gathering, and analysis (Tong et al., 2007). The trustworthiness will be improved by means of memoing, focusing on those cases which deviate from the general trend, and by tracing from codes to themes. Reflexivity becomes especially crucial here due to the fact that the topic of unemployment is quite susceptible to moralization. The researchers themselves might have some stereotypes about ambition, 'good' jobs, family support, or gender role division.

3.6 NVivo visual outputs

Two visual representations are provided to aid in the visualization of the coding hierarchy. The word frequency distribution has been created using the transcript excerpts from the interviews used for the manuscript, while the treemap shows the density of coding themes and sub-themes. Since the present data is artificial and a composition, these two visuals are only sample outputs that need to be regenerated from the completed NVivo project and transcripts.

Coding Hierarchy Treemap: Graduate Unemployment Themes

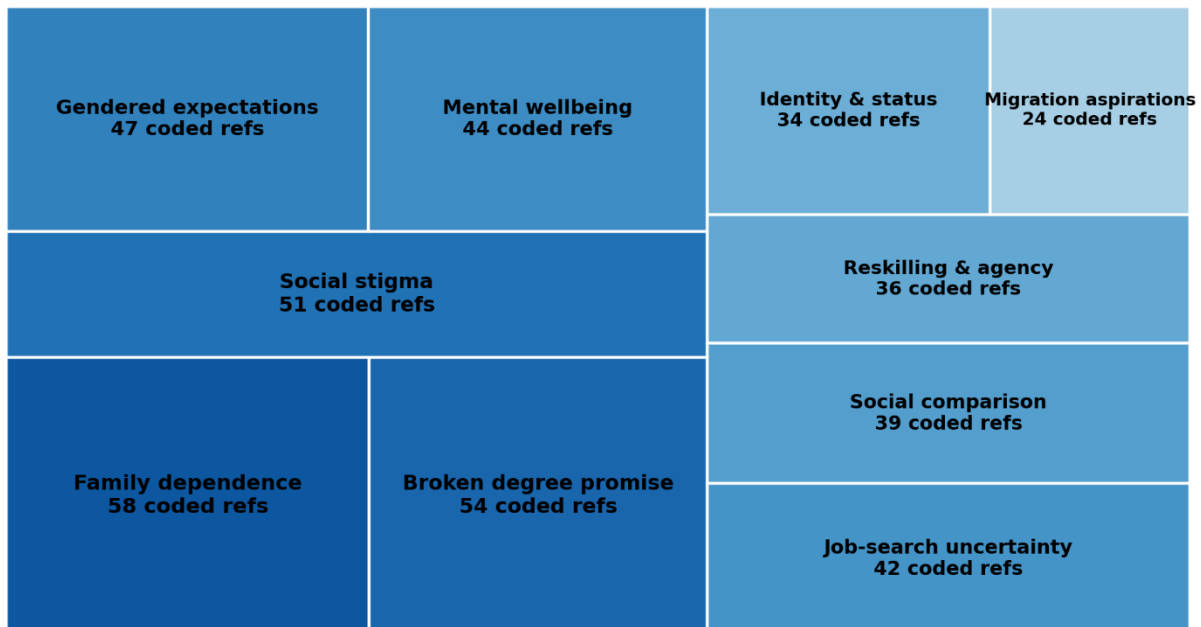


Figure 1. NVivo-style coding treemap showing the relative concentration of coded

Word Frequency Cloud: Graduate Unemployment Interviews



Figure 1. NVivo-style word-frequency visualization

4.0 Findings and Results

Five themes inform the NVivo-based synthesis. Collectively, they represent unemployment as a time when the uncertainty surrounding economic affairs is woven together with the issue of identity, family ties, gender role norms, and maturity.

4.1 Theme 1: The degree as a broken promise

For many participants, the level was described in terms of expectations. The university education system had been sold as an investment with a definite career payoff. Failure and/or low salary offers, however, did not only leave one feeling disappointed; they disrupted the narrative that the participant had created around their motivations for studying. Some people made a distinction between being ready to work and having to accept a job that negated years of study.

“From school onward everyone said, ‘Get a degree and your life will be set.’ After graduation I realized the degree opens the door only halfway; there are many people standing at the same door.” (P02, male, business graduate, Lahore)

“I do not think education was useless, but the promise was exaggerated. I studied four years for a professional role and most calls I receive are for salaries I could have earned before university.” (P06, female, social sciences graduate, Islamabad)

“Every rejection makes you question whether the problem is your skills, your university, your English, your connections, or simply that there are not enough jobs. You never get a clear answer.” (P09, male, STEM graduate, Peshawar)

“My family celebrated my graduation like I had already succeeded. Now when relatives ask where I am working, I feel I have to explain why that celebration has not turned into a job.” (P14, female, education graduate, Rawalpindi)

“I applied for positions related to my field for a year. Then I started applying everywhere. The difficult part was accepting that the career I imagined may not arrive in the same form.” (P24, male, health-allied graduate, Karachi)

It is important to note that the theme did not imply any negation of the importance of education. University was still viewed as an institute that provided students with knowledge, exposure and growth opportunities. It was the failure of the process whereby education led to steady employment and upward social mobility that brought about the crisis of hierarchy.

4.2 Theme 2: Dependent again—adulthood without economic autonomy

Financial dependency formed one of the most emotional aspects of unemployment. Most of the participants were living with their parents or had to go back to their homes after completing university. Though family provided shelter from any material stress, requesting financial assistance for travel costs, phone bills, application forms or socialization caused feelings of embarrassment. Financial dependency also impacted the manner of interaction within the household.

“At university I lived in a hostel and managed my own routine. After graduating I came home and now I have to ask my father even for petrol. It feels like moving backward in age.” (P03, male, social sciences graduate, Peshawar)

“My parents are supportive, but support has a weight. When they pay for another test fee, I remember that they expected me to be contributing by now.” (P08, female, business graduate, Lahore)

“The hardest question is not ‘Did you apply?’ It is hearing it every evening. They mean well, but after many months the question sounds like a report card.” (P12, male, STEM graduate,

Islamabad)

“I stopped going out with friends because asking for money for coffee felt childish. Staying home saves money, but then staying home also makes unemployment feel bigger.” (P17, female, humanities graduate, Karachi)

“My younger brother started earning before me. Nobody insults me, but I notice small things—who pays the bill, whose opinion is taken seriously. Income changes your position inside the family.” (P25, male, management graduate, Rawalpindi)

The above cases highlight why dependence on the family cannot be classified into either of two types – either support or conflict. Dependence is a mixture of both. Provision of material protection eases hardship, but dependence causes a delay in attaining the feeling of maturity. The emotional burden comes from the fact that there is reciprocity, and that the family expects something in return.

4.3 Theme 3: Gendered deadlines and social comparison

Unemployment had different social connotations in regard to gender. Men saw employment as an essential requirement for marriage, self-respect, and adult decision making. Women were equally interested in financial independence, although their stories frequently included bargaining about commute time, good places to work, the reputation of the family, and whether job searching is more important than marriage. For both men and women, peer comparison via social media and during family meetings was intensified by career advancement of peers.

“For a man, people do not ask only what you studied; they ask what you earn. Until you have an income, marriage and even your own decisions are treated as things for later.” (P01, male, STEM graduate, Lahore)

“I got an offer in another city, but my family was not comfortable with me living alone. Then relatives say, ‘She is not serious about her career.’ The choices are not as simple as they look from outside.” (P07, female, business graduate, Peshawar)

“Two of my university friends are already in good companies. I am happy for them, but after seeing their LinkedIn posts I sometimes avoid the app for days.” (P10, male, management graduate, Islamabad)

“When I graduated, everyone asked about jobs. After a year, the same aunties stopped asking about jobs and started asking about marriage. It feels like my professional deadline has been replaced by another deadline.” (P15, female, social sciences graduate, Lahore)

“My sister earns and I do not. I respect her, but some relatives joke that she is the son of the house. The joke tells you what they think a son is supposed to do.” (P22, male, humanities graduate, Karachi)

The gender pressure, therefore, could not simply be understood as one group finding things ‘harder.’ Men and women experienced different clocks of expectations. For men, breadwinner ideals meant adulthood was linked to earning capacity; for women, going into work involved negotiating against expectations around mobility, security, marriage, and propriety. This pressure was mediated by class because wealthier families could afford a longer search.

4.4 Theme 4: Mental wellbeing under prolonged uncertainty

The participants identified anxiety, embarrassment, lack of confidence, insomnia, disruption of routine, and withdrawal from social situations. This was frequently linked with recurring uncertainty, not a single instance. The not knowing of when the next interview was due, whether the test results in employment, or when the support of their families would last rendered time hard to structure. Some of the participants claimed that unemployment made their weekdays indistinguishable from their weekends since there was no more external structure offered by the university.

“The first two months felt like a break. After six months, waking up without a fixed place to go started affecting me. You can apply for jobs in two hours and then there is a whole day left.” (P04, male, STEM graduate, Rawalpindi)

“I sleep late because at night nobody asks me about applications. In the morning I feel guilty for waking late, so the routine itself becomes another reason to feel bad.” (P11, female, social sciences graduate, Karachi)

“After several interviews with no response, I stopped telling people when I had an interview. I did not want to answer another round of questions if nothing happened.” (P13, male, business graduate, Lahore)

“Some days I am confident and studying for tests. Other days one rejection email makes me think I am wasting time. The uncertainty is more tiring than a clear no.” (P18, female, health-allied graduate, Islamabad)

“I started avoiding weddings because every conversation becomes ‘What are you doing these days?’ It sounds like a normal question, but when you are unemployed you hear judgment inside it.” (P23, male, social sciences graduate, Peshawar)

Theme is not supposed to be interpreted as proof that all jobless graduates have psychological problem. Rather, participants' experiences revealed socially generated distress. Being emotionally troubled was associated with lack of certainty about time, public scrutiny, break in routine, and the difference between ideal and real adulthood. Social isolation at times acted as a buffer for participants who avoided being compared yet deprived them of social interaction necessary for wellbeing.

4.5 Theme 5: Rebuilding a future

While feeling frustrated, participants were not passive in their waiting. Many attempted to revive their lost momentum through acquiring digital skills, preparing for civil service exams, freelancing, tutoring, volunteering, migrating, and/or reconceptualizing success in the workplace. Faith and support from family members were also presented as coping mechanisms that allowed participants to make sense of delays without seeing them as failures. Therefore, coping involved both actions and narratives; participants were modifying their practices and rethinking the possibilities of success in the future.

“I stopped saying, ‘I am waiting for a job.’ Now I say I am building options—data skills, government tests, and freelance work. The situation is the same, but I feel less passive.” (P05, male, business graduate, Islamabad)

“Faith helps me separate delay from failure. I still have to apply and learn, but I do not want one year of unemployment to define my whole life.” (P16, female, education graduate, Lahore)

“I originally wanted only a bank job. Now I am learning e-commerce and helping my cousin’s business online. Maybe the career will be a combination instead of one permanent office job.” (P19, male, management graduate, Karachi)

“I am considering a master’s abroad, but I am trying not to use migration as an escape fantasy. I want a plan that makes sense even if I stay in Pakistan.” (P20, female, STEM graduate, Rawalpindi)

“My friends and I made a small study group for tests. Before that we were all sitting at home separately thinking we were the only ones stuck. Meeting weekly changed the feeling.” (P26, female, social sciences graduate, Peshawar)

Reconstruction did not remove structural constraints, yet it helped regain a sense of control. Individuals who found more than one way out were unlikely to perceive their lives as on hold because of one particular application. In addition, re-skilling and migration plans could themselves be forms of waiting if market dynamics were not to change. The theme helps retain hope without making unemployment into an issue of motivation.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The results frame graduate unemployment in Pakistan as a socially structured phase of waithood rather than merely an interruption in employment experience. In the five themes, unemployment is conceptualized via broken sequence where education is meant to precede employment, employment should allow for economic reciprocity and adulthood decisions, while income should allow for marriage and independence. In line with this approach, Shah et al. (2025) prove that waithood is experienced by Pakistani youth in terms of interdependence within families, gender norms and postponed life transitions. This analysis focuses on graduates and explores the symbolic value of an academic degree in relation to a suspended life transition.

The 'broken promise' theme is consistent with the results of Ullah and Ullah's (2026) qualitative study of unemployed graduates who face difficulties in survival, daily routines, dependence, and gaining respect. This analysis ties those experiences to the expectations associated with education. Graduates do not often describe university as meaningless. Instead, there was a discrepancy between what was expected from them and what they received once they graduated. It explains why graduates sometimes refused low-paid jobs because their professional status was part of the return on the investment of the family and personal efforts.

This dependence was an ambivalent institution. Help ensured that people were not exposed to hardship, but dependency threatened the sense of self-respect and respect by others, privacy, and status. This is in line with Shah et al.'s (2025) relational theory of waithood as well as research indicating that unemployment deprives people of the visible and latent functions of the employment relationship (Creed & Macintyre, 2001). Supportive families can create pressure on the individual by asking questions, making comparisons, or pointing to investment made in the person.

Further examples of gendered timelines show that unemployment cannot be separated from

social roles. Men's stories about stress from being a breadwinner fit in with the findings from Shah's (2023) study of stay-at-home fathers, where the men's failure to live up to the role of provider caused them shame, alienation, and anxiety. The observation that earnings from a sister can be mockingly seen as something 'male' relates to the cultural normativity noted in studies of couples where the wife earns more (Shah, 2024). Women's experiences of unemployment involved relationships with mobility, acceptability at work, family prestige, and marriage expectations. The same applies to the wellbeing of Pakistani female students discussed in the work of Shabbir et al. (2026), who relate their wellbeing and access to help to gender roles, family honor, and stigma.

The mental wellbeing theme underpins a sociological rather than clinical understanding. Participants associated fear, insomnia, low self-confidence, and withdrawing behavior with social comparison, continued rejection, disruption of routine, and uncertainty about adulthood. The evidence from meta-analysis and reviews suggests that unemployment correlates with negative psychological well-being (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012), and that in Pakistan the economic shock results in increased household distress (Baranov et al., 2022). In addition, the findings by Shah et al. (2020) and Ullah and Ullah (2026) indicate how the impact is amplified by stigma, disrupted routine, and loss of respect. Psychosocial intervention is helpful, but not a replacement of employment opportunities, fair recruitment, and career guidance.

Lastly, the rebuilding theme complicates the rhetoric of waiting. Participants reskilled, prepared for exams, freelanced, relied on faith, created peer groups, and thought about migration. That is similar to the negotiations of waithood described by Shah et al. (2025). Agency is real, but unequally distributed. A well-off graduate could afford additional training or prolonged search, while another has no choice other than accepting any job available. Class thus affects both the duration of waithood and its alternatives.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

A primary contribution of the article is in tying graduate-level unemployment to linked lives. Employment experience occurs jointly through shared household expectations, money exchange, timing of marriage, and family investment. It moves from an individual to a relational framework in terms of adult life organization.

Another key contribution is the notion of gendered social clocks. Both men and women are governed by the social clock, but the milestones are different. Income is highly related to provider identity and readiness to marry for men, while for women there are issues of mobility, security, respectability, and marriage.

5.2 Policy and Practice Implications

University institutions should include the transition from education to work in its scope of responsibility, rather than stopping its career counseling activities when students graduate. The career center would need accurate information about the labor market, connections with employers, mentoring by alumni, training of interviews, and opportunities for internship and project work which do not use graduates' cheap labor in the form of never-ending unpaid work. Universities should inform students about realistic career paths before the time comes to panic in

their last year.

The public policy could concentrate on transparent recruitment process, programs for transition from education to work, job creation in the region, and ways of reducing the costs of search for work. Counseling of mental health could be useful for graduates who are facing mental stress, but any actions should be culturally appropriate and should not interpret this structural problem in terms of lack of coping skills. Guidance on a family level might be helpful since families are key figures in waithood.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Qualitative sampling from 26 graduates cannot represent all unemployed graduates in Pakistan. Individual experiences will differ depending on rurality, provinces, disabilities, the prestige of the universities, castes or biradaris, and family incomes. It is important to note that this study relies on the graduates' stories and not the interpretations of their parents about their experiences. Further studies can involve interviewing pairs consisting of parents and young adults, tracking the graduates for two or three years, comparing graduates that become employed stably with those still facing precarity, and studying how migration and preparations for public service examinations prolong waithood. Comparative studies can explore whether the themes will be different in Pakistan compared to other societies in South Asia.

5.4 Conclusion

Unemployment amongst graduates in Pakistan is not a void phase. It is an intense process during which young adults redefine their ideas of education, dependency, gender, respectability, and the future. In this sense, the degree is a failed promise because no steady job comes with it; family support helps but serves to remind graduates that they have postponed their entry into the economic adulthood; and social comparison turns simple queries into judgments. However, graduates restore agency through learning, peer support, religion, alternative sources of income, and new career aspirations. A sociological understanding of such processes demands a sociology that links labor markets to linked lives and mental well-being. Employment policy makes a difference, but so do the social institutions which make unemployment a tale of becoming for a young adult.

Contribution

Chahat Kashan Raza: Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

Ayesha Abid: Data Analysis, Supervision and Drafting

Aqsa Atta: Methodology and Revision

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