

Journey Through Struggles and Strengths: A Qualitative Inquiry into Female Doctoral Students' Academic Experiences

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Abstract

The present research examines the multifold lived experiences of female doctoral students who took more than five years to complete their degrees at public sector universities in Punjab. It focused on prior life conditions, the motivation behind enrolment, and the academic experience, including departmental support, university policies, and supervisory practices. Along with this, the multifaceted phenomenon of the doctoral journey of females living in a traditional society with multiple gendered roles, social norms, expectations, and stereotypes also unfolded. It reflects the disruptions and barriers inherent in individual nature that affect the entire lived experience. A qualitative, transcendental phenomenological approach was employed as the study design; data were collected from 22 females who had completed their PhDs from public sector universities in Punjab within the last year. The findings of the present study reveal a higher tendency among high achievers to enrol in doctoral degrees; furthermore, it suggests that most females who pursued PhD degrees also experienced marriage, pregnancy, motherhood, and jobs along with their PhD degrees. The academic experience of public sector universities highlights the dire need for well-equipped labs, a sufficient number of faculty, and policy implementations for a better academic and supervisory experience. The study also unfolds the individual and dynamic nature of challenges of females as they cope with multiple roles, surrounded by social expectations and stereotypes of gender biases. It suggests the need for policy reforms in structure and implementation, as well as orientations before enrolment, campus facilities for mothers, provision of study leave for working professionals, funding, and promotion of a positive culture of research and innovation.

Keywords: Disruptions, Barriers, Academic Experience, PD Supervisory Practices.

Introduction

Doctoral degrees are regarded as multifaceted phenomena shaped by various factors worldwide (Tinto, 2012). According to the National Centre for Education Statistics (2013), the attrition rate for PhD candidates rises dramatically with each additional year of study. Only around 50% of students who begin doctoral programs can complete their dissertations and earn a PhD. (Carter et al., 2013; McAlpine & Norton, 2006). Some studies reveal that women are less likely than men to complete their PhDs (Carter et al., 2013; Matthews, 2017). The underlying reason for this

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phenomenon is that women's personal, professional, and educational decisions are often shaped by familial influences, societal norms, and the experiences of female role models (Tajili, 2014). A report on PhD completion from Canada indicates that 53% of PhD graduates were women, with 43% completing their degrees within seven years and 57% within ten years (Council of Graduate Schools Canada, 2008).

While women across the globe face various challenges in balancing familial, academic, and professional roles, these challenges are particularly complex in traditional and patriarchal societies, such as Pakistan (Mernissi, 1987; Syed, 2010). This effort is made more difficult by the phenomenon known as the "feminisation of poverty," which occurs when female PhD scholars face emotional and financial difficulties without sufficient institutional support (Moyer et al., 1999). Their academic progression is further hindered by ineffective supervision, unsupportive university cultures, and constant societal pressure (Carter et al., 2013; Monroe et al., 2008). In Pakistan, the typical age for doctoral enrollment coincides with the average age of marriage for women, especially in rural areas, forcing many to choose between academic progress and familial expectations (DHS, 2012). These challenges are magnified with added pressure from traditional gender roles that expect them to marry, care for family, and stay within certain boundaries. They may clash with their academic goals (Mason et al., 2013). As a result, the doctoral journey for women becomes one of constant negotiation, often marked by delays, mental stress, and a fragile balance between personal identity and career goals (Carter et al., 2013; Castello et al., 2017). Literature suggests shocking findings of an increase in female enrollment in doctoral degree programs, alongside a decline in the completion rate of the degree (HEC Pakistan, 2021). Research on the doctoral experience in the Pakistani context is limited; few studies have focused on supervisory practices and expectations, as well as economic and academic barriers faced by scholars pursuing postgraduate degrees in English (Batoool et al., 2021; Waheed et al., 2021). Few studies have been conducted on the experiences of doctoral students abroad, but the voices of female students studying in a Pakistani context remain largely missing. The present study has tried to fill the gap by exploring the lived experiences of female doctoral students in public sector universities in the province of Punjab. It has underscored the prior life, motivations behind enrollment, academic experiences, disruptions, and barriers they have faced over the period in the presence of multiple roles and social expectations. It has reflected upon the coping mechanism and how they have persisted in completing their degree. These findings of the study contributed to the sociology of education and gender by documenting the unheard voices, suggesting strategies for making the experience of this journey more conducive and meaningful.

Objectives

The following objectives guide this study:

1. To analyse the motivation factors behind the enrollment of female doctoral students
2. To explore the role of university policies, departmental support, and supervisory practices in shaping the experiences of female doctoral students
3. To examine the gendered experiences of disruptions and barriers in the presence of social and cultural norms that challenge them and their coping mechanisms that enabled them to persist in completing their degree.

Literature Review

Literature on experiences of the doctoral journey is of a diverse nature; more specifically, it suggests that doctoral experiences of individuals are determined by two factors: i.e., individual characteristics and institutional factors (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Personal attributes of individuals

include demographics, economic status, living situations, and family support, whereas institutional factors depend on university policies, infrastructure, supervisory practices, culture, and departmental role (Ali & Kohun, 2006).

Cultural and social expectations impose significant barriers on women's doctoral journeys in traditional societies. In Pakistan, women are expected to prioritise domestic roles over academic and professional aspirations (Syed, 2010; Mernissi, 1987). The overlapping timelines of marriage, childbirth, and doctoral studies intensify this tension (DHS, 2012; Mason et al., 2013), often resulting in disrupted progress and heightened stress. Balancing household duties, childcare, and research responsibilities leads many women to experience emotional burnout and guilt (Jones & McEwen, 2000; McEwen, 2000). Nonetheless, the personal lives of PhD students, including their physical and mental health, as well as family relationships, have been shown to impact their progress and well-being significantly. Sverdluk et al. (2018) emphasise that disruptions in personal domains often lead to academic imbalance, while Longfield (2006) observed that female students, especially mothers, face higher risks of social isolation and reduced leisure time. The cumulative pressures often result in elevated depression and diminished academic engagement. Financial constraints are another common barrier, particularly for female doctoral students.

Gendered pressures push them to prioritise caregiving over scholarship, leading many to suppress their family roles in academic settings (Choi et al., 2021; Drago et al., 2006). The writing process itself is emotionally demanding. Castello et al. (2017) observed that many students, especially women, feel disconnected or emotionally burdened by academic writing. Female scholars often attach personal meaning to their research, viewing it as a core part of their emerging scholar identity. However, misalignment between student expectations and supervisory feedback can trigger anxiety and reduced confidence.

Students frequently report dissatisfaction when their supervisor lacks subject-matter expertise or fails to provide intellectual investment (McAlpine & McKinnon, 2013). Supervisory neglect often results in feelings of abandonment and isolation. Moreover, power asymmetries in supervision, especially in gendered contexts, can inhibit students from voicing concerns or seeking clarification (De Welde & Laursen, 2008; Hein et al., 2013). The institutional culture and departmental climate also influence student persistence. Lovitts (2001) noted that students who feel socially and intellectually integrated within their departments are more likely to succeed. Workshops, conferences, employment opportunities, and access to resources enhance student engagement and satisfaction. O'Meara et al. (2014) stressed the importance of structured departmental socialisation for skill development and career planning. Despite the importance of institutional support, many students remain unaware of the financial demands and structural limitations of PhD study.

Methodology

This qualitative study employs a transcendental phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of female doctoral students who have recently completed their degrees at public sector universities in Punjab. A phenomenological research design was employed to understand the lived experiences of individuals who were purposefully selected as females who had completed their doctoral degrees more than five years before the study in public sector universities. Furthermore, they needed to complete their degree within the last year. In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide that reflected on prior life experiences, motivations behind enrollment, academic experiences in university and department, supervisory experiences, and disruptions and barriers encountered during their PhD, as well as how they coped with these challenges. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and was audio-recorded with the

participants' consent; a few were conducted using shorthand writing, as the participants did not permit recording. The interviews were transcribed from Urdu to English verbatim for data analysis. An inductive method of thematic analysis was adopted. Firstly, the transcripts were read multiple times to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon, followed by the coding of the data that reflected significant and recurring patterns. The codes were then clustered into categories that aligned with the research objectives of the present study. Themes that emerged include prior life experiences, motivational factors, academic experiences at the university and within the department, and supervisory experience. Furthermore, it reflects on disruptions and barriers in the presence of social and cultural norms and stereotypes and how females have coped with all these challenges during their doctoral journey. To secure the anonymity of the data, pseudonyms were assigned to every participant, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and final reporting.

Table 1: Respondents profile

Respondent	Age at Enrollment	Marital Status	Year of Admission	Discipline	Children Before Enrollment	Children During PhD	Working Before Enrollment	Working After Enrollment	Study Leave
1	44	Widow	2014	Pharmacy	3	Nil	Yes	—	—
2	28	Single	2015	Eclectic Engineering	Nil	Nil	Yes	—	—
3	45	Married	2014	English Literature	4	Nil	Yes	—	—
4	30	Married	2018	Material Engineering	2	1	Yes	—	—
5	25	Married	2018	Education	1	2	Yes	—	—
6	27	Divorced	2014	Business Administration	Nil	1	—	Yes	Two years
7	24	Married	2017	Zoology	Nil	Nil	—	Four years	—
8	24	Married	2019	Botany	Nil	2	—	Four years	—
9	25	Married	2016	Environmental Science	Nil	2	Yes	—	—
10	26	Married	2017	Micro Genetics	Nil	3	Yes	—	—
11	26	Married	2017	Biochemistry	Nil	2	—	Not working	—
12	29	Married	2017	Iqbaliyat	Nil	2	—	4 months	—
13	41	Married	2018	Statistics	Nil	Nil	Yes	—	—
14	23	Married	2018	Sociology	Nil	1	—	Two years	—
15	28	Single	2018	Urdu	Nil	Nil	Yes	—	—
16	28	Married	2016	Political Science	2	Nil	—	Four years	—
17	29	Married	2017	Islamic Studies	Nil	3	Yes	—	—
18	27	Married	2018	Information Technology	Nil	3	Yes	—	—
19	28	Separated	2018	Psychology	Nil	2	Yes	—	—
20	32	Married	2018	Physics	2	Nil	Yes	—	—
21	33	Widow	2017	Engineering	Nil	1	Yes	—	Yes
22	36	Married	2018	Law	3	Nil	Yes	—	—

The data was collected from in-depth interviews with 22 participants who have unfolded multilayered experiences of their doctoral journey of their enrollment in public sector universities of the province of Punjab. The findings of research highlight the interconnected socio-economic, personal, academic, and professional aspects of the journey and the interaction of these multiple factors in the presence of social pressures and cultural expectations and stereotypes. The themes that emerged from the data include motivations and early experiences, academic and supervisory experiences, disruptions and barriers during the doctoral journey, and coping strategies for disruptions and barriers.

Prior Life and Motivation for Enrollment in PhD

The prior lives of females who later on pursued PhDs reflect their footsteps of creativity, passion for knowledge, and innovation. There was only one participant in the present study who was not working; other than that, all of the participants were working professionals. The participants were asked about their educational paths, their personal relationships, and their social interactions, family responsibilities, and dynamics. With all these aspects, which were the factors that motivated them to get enrolled in a doctoral degree? The majority of the participants were determined and motivated to get a higher degree, a PhD, since their childhood. The motivations behind enrollment in doctoral degrees were diverse. Family expectations and generational legacy were some of the most prominent factors that contributed to enrollment in PhD programs. One of the participants said that

My father was a PhD; I have received the passion for knowledge from him. My elder sister is also a PhD, and in the presence of these family members, I always wanted to do a PhD as an ultimate goal. I wanted to do a PhD as a family tradition.

Career advancement and achieving a reputable position in academia and research were also factors for most participants. There were some of the participants who were married before their enrollment in the PhD program; others got married and went through motherhood, job, and family responsibilities along with their doctoral journey. The circumstances of adversity become the reason for enrollment for a few participants who were already working and humiliated and discriminated against for not having a PhD. The systematic inequalities and discrimination motivate individuals to expand their personal horizons and strive to cope with challenges with academic excellence (Baptiste, 2025; Eizadirad et al., 2024).

As another participant shared her experience,

When I came to come in professional life, I felt very early that I needed to upgrade my degree. Because your seniors, who had done doctorate degrees, treat those with no PhD as inferiors. They overburdened the non-PhD faculty with workload. Even whenever there is a task, they even say, It is obvious that this type of task will be assigned to non-PhDs. The whole experience as non-PhD faculty was a humiliation. This encouraged me to take admission in a PhD.

The journey of a PhD is not straight and smooth, especially for females who navigate their personal, family, academic, professional, and social challenges alone. For the success and better experience of the doctoral journey, the supportive role of family, other institutions, and overall society is necessary. The experiences of females highlight that resilience, support, and a sense of purpose in life have empowered them to successfully cope with their challenges and achieve their goals.

Impact of University Policies and Supervisory Practices on Experience of Doctoral Journey

The doctoral journey has personal, social, professional, and academic aspects. Academic experiences are considered the most important aspect, as they determine the experience of research work that is the main part of becoming an independent researcher and creativity. The academic experience includes departmental support, academic learning, university policies, and supervisory practices. Departmental roles and university policies and culture play a critical role in shaping the experience of doctoral scholars. University in shaping the academic experience and providing opportunities that offer mentoring, learning, and research facilities that convert a person into an independent researcher. The findings of research have highlighted the poor lab facilities with no or rare availability of materials that is the biggest challenge of academic experience for a doctoral student. The formal and difficult procedures of procuring least material further delay the experiments. As many of the participants said,

academic experience with teachers and classroom discussion was good, but there is no lab facility, and software that I need for my research was not available at the university. It took months for me to find that software on my own.

Another participant highlighted her experiences as the worst in these words:

I feel like all other fields of life are the same as education; we are just completing the rituals. Most of us want to do a PhD for the upgrading of our jobs. So the only thing they need is a piece of paper called a degree. But the worst is on the part of universities that even they have just lowered their standards to a minimal level. They lack resources, faculty, innovation, interest, and passion for research. What they're offering is only a piece of paper. I said it's worse for universities because there are scholars who want to get PhDs not only for careers or jobs but also for their passion for innovation and discipline.

There is no funding that doctoral students can utilize for their lab experiments; the majority of the participants of the present study have conducted their experiments in private labs that cost them further expenses for traveling. The experience of public sector university doctoral scholars reveals that there is a culture of delays in procedural processes of defense, advance board of studies, submission, and extension; furthermore, the delayed communication of these offices with scholars disrupts the experience. Better and timely implementation of milestones can enhance the academic experience of the female doctoral students. The academic experience, due to the lack of lab equipment, funding, and material, was poor for the disciplines of medicine, biology, and engineering. The academic socialization opportunities abounded for scholars, but due to personal and professional engagements, mostly female scholars were not attending workshops, seminars, and conferences during their doctoral journey. Supervisory experience is crucial in the academic journey of a PhD, as the relationship between supervisee and supervisor is the most important determinant of the type of experience. Findings of the present study reveal that directive, facilitative, collaborative, adaptive, unresponsive, and poor supervisory styles were present. There was a blend of practices that varied from highly supportive and unresponsive to threatening and even harmful for female doctoral students. The most experienced challenges in supervision were unreal expectations, communication issues, discrimination, exploitation, harassment, and change of supervisor. As one of the participants expressed her experience in the following words,

I was afraid of my supervisor, as I have asked one of the teachers that if he agrees, then I can put in an application for the change of supervisor. But he said, Don't do this. Your supervisor is head of the department, and things will get worse for you if you try to change supervisors. In such a situation, when people who can support always try to suppress, I couldn't gain that courage to open up about the problems.

Another participant mentioned her experience as,

This is more like a culture in our universities; everybody knows it is negative, but nobody will talk or do anything about it. Things got better in recent years when the higher education commission put a ban on some programs in many of the universities. But there is too much backlog pending in the universities.

There is a huge room for enhancement of supervisory practices; transparent evaluation and independent feedback systems can further highlight the issues and implementation. The review of university policies for research and supervision can enhance the doctoral experience of females. Further, universities should accommodate female-specific policies and assistive facilities for motherhood and pregnancy, as it will not only enable females to better perform in their academic milestones but also enhance their intellectual competence and likability of enrollment in PhD programs.

Navigating Social Norms and Disruptions: Gendered Experiences of Female PhD Journey

Social and personal aspects, along with the academic experience of the doctoral journey, provide a realistic picture of the doctoral experience for female doctoral students. The findings of the present research highlighted disruptions and barriers that delayed and disrupted their doctoral journey experience. The journey of females is shaped by multiple gendered roles, social norms, and inherently gendered expectations. Findings reflect that the most devastating and damaging disruption was personal loss in terms of the death of close loved ones. Death as an event results in immense emotional and psychological pain. The loss of a family member, especially the breadwinner, results in financial, caregiving, and social responsibilities for female doctoral students. The experiences of chronic illnesses and complicated pregnancies emerged as a disruption. Caregiving responsibilities for children and the elderly, often accompanied by family disruptions or conflicts, can complicate situations and deter females from pursuing their academic journey. Disruptions include personal, physical, academic, professional, and social events that distract females from their academic tasks. Professional and academic disruptions lead to prolonged delays due to the ongoing struggle with financial and psychological strains. Gender biases for females contribute as barriers for females that restrict them from availing funding, networking opportunities, and recognition of their work. The role of social norms, pressures, and expectations influences the doctoral journey of women in terms of the expectation of prioritising family responsibilities over academic ambitions, which results in guilt, stress, and self-doubt. In the face of these challenges, stereotypes hinder their ability to persist and complete a degree. The struggling journeys of females in traditional societies like Pakistan demand an extreme need for institutional reforms, flexible policies, and a vast cultural shift that can support gender equality for females in academia. The findings of the present study suggest that redefining and reestablishing priorities through planned goal setting support females in coping with their challenges. The enhancement of skills and knowledge, combined with spiritual strength, was adopted as a coping strategy by many of the participants. The journey of a PhD is not just earning a degree; it is a journey of transformation and growth. The experiences of females reveal that they have demonstrated strength, determination, and effective coping strategies for overcoming challenges during their doctoral journey. The journey of a PhD as a degree is life-changing and empowering, enabling scholars to grow in their personal, professional, and social spheres of life.

Discussion

The present study highlights the experiences of disruptions and barriers encountered during the academic journey of female doctoral students, which can be more effectively understood through the lens of intersectionality and Tinto's Model of Academic Persistence. This theoretical framework emphasises that the doctoral experiences of females are the result of multiple personal, academic, institutional, professional, and social factors.

Moreover, multiple identities of women interact with each other, influencing their experiences of barriers, support, challenges, and progress. In the academic experience of the degree, females mainly struggled due to a lack of resources and lab facilities on campus, as university policies were ambiguous and not implemented correctly in the true spirit. The experiences of supervision were diverse; some participants shared their positive experiences with their supervisors, while others shared their worst experiences of exploitation that had ruined their experience. Addressing these issues requires better infrastructure in labs and resources, along with the promotion of a positive culture and the implementation of rules and policies that support scholars during their doctoral journey. Furthermore, providing study leave, day-care, and maternity leave for doctoral scholars can positively enhance their experience.

Mostly women were highly motivated to pursue their doctoral degrees due to their academic achievements, career goals, and their family support and legacy. However, after enrolment, they have struggled with multiple barriers and encountered disruptions that have negatively affected their ability to continue making progress. Multiple roles, including juggling caregiving and family responsibilities, cultural norms and expectations, and the overall social fabric of our society, make it challenging for a woman to pursue a PhD. Women remained in a continuous struggle to balance work, study, and family life. The whole rollercoaster is physically and emotionally exhausting, added to the role of social norms and stereotypes of gendered nature that remain present in personal, professional, and academic spheres. Females are often expected to prioritise family over everything; the pressure of having children immediately after marriage and the pressure of being a superwoman—all these social expectations and pressures can lead a person to feel guilty, stressed, and self-doubting. There is a clear gender bias in academia related to females being less intellectual and emotional and having fewer opportunities for networking, which further hardens the experience.

The experiences of females have revealed that the academic journey of females pursuing doctoral degrees in traditional societies is not just an academic challenge. However, a social experience is powerfully shaped by sociocultural and emotional factors that interact with one another. These issues are deep-rooted in the social structure of society. There is a dire need for a better understanding and development of support systems and policies, as well as inclusive academic environments, that can empower women to complete their degrees in a manner that is both prosperous and dignified.

Conclusion

The results of the present study describe the experiences of challenges faced by females who have completed their doctoral degrees from public sector universities in Punjab. The research employed a transcendental phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of female doctoral students. The research highlighted the prior life experiences that motivate enrolment in doctoral programs and the academic experiences determined by university policies, departmental support, and supervisory practices. The academic experiences emphasised the need for a comprehensive strategy, customised policy frameworks, family education, promotion of a supportive culture,

better Accountability and transparency, and the provision of funding and scholarships for doctoral students. The stereotypes of lacking intellectual competence compared with men, being unable to handle complex topics and research areas, and being considered emotionally sensitive in academia were negatively contributing to the academic experience of females. To address these barriers, the study recommends a multi-level strategy. At the institutional level, universities should provide flexible deadlines, well-equipped research environments, and gender-responsive academic policies. Study leave, mental health support, and professional development opportunities must be made accessible for all doctoral students. Furthermore, supervisory practices should be improved by ensuring fair allocation of supervisors, and open communication between supervisors and scholars should be encouraged, with clearly defined expectations and research plans. Universities must also establish proper systems for addressing problems early through official channels.

Families and communities must recognise and support women's academic goals, rather than viewing them as secondary to traditional roles at the cultural and societal levels, respectively. Promoting family awareness programs and mentorship models can foster a more supportive environment. In the social context of Pakistani society, females were coping with social expectations of family and motherhood. Most women had multiple, conflicting, and demanding roles that made those years feel like riding a rollercoaster. The caregiving responsibilities, motherhood, household responsibilities, and professional workload, along with the academic journey, all contributed to women's poor well-being, making them socially isolated. Particularly, cooperation between organisations, families, and government bodies is necessary to enhance the PhD experience for women in Pakistan. A culturally responsive and equity-based framework is essential to ensure that women not only enrol in but also complete higher education with dignity, support, and recognition. Investing in sociocultural awareness, inclusive academic structures, and ethical supervision will support academic excellence, gender equity, and resilience in female doctoral scholars. Finally, integrating mental health support and counselling during the doctoral journey will promote resilience and psychological well-being among female doctoral students.

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