



Work Subjectivities and Employability Prospects in the Imagined Futures of Undergraduate First-Generation Students

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Abstract

This study examines how Undergraduate First-Generation Students (UFGS) from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive, negotiate, and construct their futures within Pakistan's higher education system and the prevailing uncertain job market. The article relies on in-depth qualitative interviews with 43 Undergraduate First-Generation Students (UFGS) across six public-sector universities in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan. The respondents were recruited with the help of purposive sampling techniques. Drawing on Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and Social Reproduction, and Markus and Nurius's concept of possible selves, it focuses on the nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by FGS navigating work during university education. The empirical data from interviews, interpreted and understood with the help of Bourdieu's and Markus and Nurius' theories, the study findings indicate that UFGS carry a mixed bag of feelings- hopes and anxiety about their higher education completion and careers in a hierarchical system. On the one hand, they hope that higher education will ensure their social mobility; on the other, they are afraid of marginalization and exclusion in the existing competitive and unequal job market.

Keywords

Work subjectivities; Possible Selves; First-generation students; labor market uncertainty

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Introduction

First-generation students (FGS) are students whose parents have not attained a university degree or have not attended a higher education institution (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Studies have unpacked that FGS in higher education, whether employed or not, neither follow a uniform educational trajectory nor envision futures in the same way (Abeyta & Du, 2025; Cuellar, Bencomo Garcia, & Saichaie, 2022; Thompson, 2021). In recent years, studies have identified multiple issues that can affect their experience in higher education and their job search during their studies (Abeyta & Du, 2025; López, Santelices & Taveras, 2023; Oxendine, 2025; Venegas-Muggli, 2022). Numerous studies have focused on FGS transition from high school/college to the university environment, their adjustment in higher education culture, and coping with academic and financial challenges (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021; Ko, Bartoszek, Peek, & Hurley, 2025; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). However, many of these studies have been carried out in the Global North (Abeyta & Du, 2025; Ko et al., 2025; Oxendine, 2025; Pascarella et al., 2004; Santelices & Taveras, 2023). Nevertheless, some studies in the Global South have also examined FGS experiences (Fernandes & Sheth, 2024; Gilani & Waheed, 2023; Meyer & Schreiber, 2024; Musawar & Zulfiqar, 2025; Nkansah, Khai, Rose & Asaduzzaman, 2025). However, the issue has not received due attention in the context of Pakistan. There is a notable lack of evidence on how FGS in Pakistan navigate their higher education and careers. This study, thus, aimed to fill that gap by examining lived experiences of UFGS in Pakistan with a focus on the hopes and uncertainties that UFGS have about their higher education completion and prospective careers.

Globally, the enrolment of first-generation students at universities is increasing (Hodge, 2026). However, their experience is not the same. Studies have concluded that FGS do not typically enter college with the forms of capital that would support a smooth transition and navigation of the academic system (Bergerson, 2007; Collier and Morgan, 2008). Their adjustment into higher education institutions becomes more challenging when they engage in part-time jobs. Consequently, female FGS face additional barriers when entering higher education, working part-time during higher education and planning their careers (Kersh, 2026; Mahani, 2022). Some UFGS engaged in paid work during higher education for financial reasons and because scholarships were unavailable, yet others envisioned their future post-graduation. A survey of US universities found that 43.2% of FGS worked between 20 and 40 hours per week (Soria et al., 2020). Many did so to gain professional experience and advance their careers (Hirudayaraj & McLean, 2018; Ion, 2023; Jehangir, Telles, & Deenanath, 2020). Contrary to the technologically developed countries, data on FGS (working and non-

working) is notably missing in Pakistan. There is no officially recorded data on enrolled undergraduate FGS. Consequently, a number of graduates are unemployed, while data on FGS graduates is still unavailable (Gulzar, Khalid, Yasin, & Raza, 2024). The evolving demands of students with a university education are changing, influenced by the four-year programme, with expectations of entering the employment sector after obtaining a Bachelor of Science (BS) degree (Ismat & Azeem, 2016; Yasin, Azim, & Lodhi, 2024), particularly shaping UFGS narratives in the present educational landscape. On the one hand, the institutional framework is still developing to enhance UFGS skills effectively. On the other hand, the government cannot provide jobs to hundreds and thousands of university graduates, including UFGS. This situation is compounded by a competitive job market in which securing a job, especially for UFGS, remains a persistent issue. For many UFGS juggling work during study is more of a survival strategy than a means of career development.

The current study framed the two often overlooked but interconnected dimensions: academic engagement during work, particularly how UFGS navigate dual responsibilities, and how their possible professional selves envision their future. Central to this exploration is how UFGS navigate their academic and career journey with or without interconnected support systems. These support systems include family, peer networks, mentors, and institutional support, and revealed that FGS lack such a social support system. Existing studies claim that these invisible helpers are crucial for academic and career decisions, first-generation students' perceptions, and engagement with work (Fruith & Chan, 2018; Garriott & Nisle, 2018; Le Bouef & Dworkin, 2021).

The Study Context: The research was conducted by employing the FGS, first in their family to enter higher education, a unique population group characterized by a lack of parental education and guidance (Abeyta & Du, 2025; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018; Patfield, Gore, & Fray, 2021). Along with the academic challenges in higher education, FGS encounter career decisions due to limited professional networks and limited social and cultural capital (De Schepper, Kyndt, & Clycq, 2024). Higher education is on the rise in Pakistan, and there is a promise of equity, economic stability and social and upward mobility (Fatima, Ashraf, & Zehra, 2020). Nevertheless, it does not ensure equitable experiences for all individuals. Notably, students from disadvantaged backgrounds and FGS engage in paid work during their undergraduate studies, a powerful means of financing their education and supporting their familial responsibilities; this work receives no scholarly attention within the context of Pakistan. Generally, FGS work experience during university education has gained attention worldwide, particularly in

the Global North, where it is viewed as professional experience (Carkit, 2026; Fiore & Ardoin, 2026; Jehangir et al., 2020; Ma, Huang, & Autin, 2021). Some studies in the Global South (Carkit, 2026; Nkansah et al., 2025), however, empirical evidence remains largely absent from this contemporary debate in Pakistan. Nonetheless, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to non-working FGS, to the absence of their future planning, or simply to their envisioned future in Pakistan. To date, no study in Pakistan has addressed the current issue of working FGS and their subjectivities. Given these gaps, the current study explores the work experiences of FGS, for whom employment is assumed to be a survival strategy, and their views on future labor markets, envisioned opportunities, and self-perceptions in higher education scenarios among non-working FGS at six public-sector universities, aiming to provide important insight into the issue. Bourdieu's coherent framework of structure and practices helps us shift the focus from the deficiencies of FGS to the economic, structural and cultural hierarchies of everyday practices in HEIs. Concurrently, the focus persists on Markus and Nurius's (1986) theoretical lens of "possible selves" as a means of agency for FGS, particularly being first in higher education, preparing for future employment, experiencing a combination of fear and hope, amidst structural constraints and expecting upward social mobility in an uncertain labor market. Therefore, the study examines first-generation students' perceptions and engagement with work, including working FGS subjectivities, non-working FGS views of future labor markets, their envisioned opportunities, and their self-perceptions through higher education.

Literature Review

First-generation students (FGS), being first or freshmen/fresh women who are the first in their families to attend higher education, are a distinct group occupying a unique social and educational position (Cuellar et al., 2022; Landeros, Proctor, & Lopez Fraire, 2025; Patfield, Gore, & Fray, 2022). Many factors contribute to their uniqueness, including familial habitus shaping their entry into higher education and their objectives as first-generation entrants facing adjustment issues, social class and low-income background, and the pressure to fit in or stand out at university, all under constant sociopsychological pressure and the ever-present fear of being kicked out of the university at any moment (Cuellar et al., 2022; Gigi & Malka, 2026; T. L. Jones & Saucier, 2023; Patfield et al., 2021; Patfield et al., 2022; Santelices, Bravo, & Jose Lopez, 2026; Vilkova, Maiukova, Shcheglova, & Dremova, 2026; Williams & Martin, 2022). Beyond these individual issues, FGS encounter structural inequalities, including financial disparities, limited cultural and social capital, cultural mismatches, and

familial expectations that restrict their opportunities in higher education and future career prospects, resulting in a conflict between habitus and structure (T. L. Jones & Saucier, 2023; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Rockwell & Kimel, 2025; Whiteside, 2026). These structural disadvantages impact FGS's higher education experiences and influence their decisions regarding future career prospects and their need to engage in paid employment to address the disparities between habitus and structure (Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, & Powell, 2017; (Fiore & Ardoin, 2026).

Nonetheless, FGS dominantly engage in low-wage positions or engage in part-time employment to support themselves and their families. Their expectations are not fulfilled; they are concurrently earning and learning, acquiring skills (Hirudayaraj & McLean, 2018; Nuñez & Sansone, 2016). In Pakistan, literature on their motivation to work while studying is absent. Aside from this, FGS are experiencing difficulties maintaining work-life balance as they work to escape poverty. They emphasized experiencing difficulties due to academic pressures, employment commitments, limited participation in extracurricular activities, a sense of alienation within the university community, and an ongoing fear of expulsion (Martinez, Bilges, Shabazz, Miller, & Morote, 2012; Tetteh & Attiogbe, 2019).

Extensive research has examined the work experiences of FGS; however, the possible selves of FGS are equally important to those not in jobs but concerned about their future orientations through higher education (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2021; S. Jones, Hordósy, Mittelmeier, Quyoum, & McCaldin, 2022). In developing countries, higher education promises a bright future and unlimited opportunities for students (Attema, 2022; (Guzmán-Valenzuela, Darwin, Flanagan, Aguilera-Muñoz, & Geldres, 2022b). Nonetheless, non-working FGS imagined their futures through higher education (Attema, 2022). However, these opportunities remain limited for FGS due to structural disadvantages stemming from limited social and cultural capital, lack of guidance and poor educational choices (De Schepper et al., 2024; Rubio, Mireles, Jones, & Mayse, 2017); Tate et al., 2015): a partial understanding of working FGS experiences. Extensive literature is available on how future career aspirations shape present educational choices (Olson, 2014; Schoonover, Nicholson, Williams, Carlock, & Allen, 2026). However, in FGS studies, the influence of educational choices on future career aspirations and the imagined future of FGS remains unclear, a major gap in South Asian literature, particularly in Pakistan.

This study is an important contribution to gaining a complete picture of UFGS academic experiences while working, and, vice versa, of their higher education choices and future career prospects for non-working FGS. Additionally, this study addresses a conceptual and empirical gap by

providing first-hand accounts of the lived experiences of working and non-working UFGS amid structural disadvantages and personal deficits.

Theoretical Framework

Given the two-fold orientation of the current study, a single theory cannot provide a holistic understanding of the working and academic subjectivities of working FGS and of the possible selves of non-working FGS. Combining structural inequality, the educational and career choices of FGS, and their self-perceptions of future identity, Markus and Nurius's (1986) concept of possible selves, and Bourdieu's Theory of Practice is central to understanding how non-working FGS envision their future. Additionally, it explains why work is a necessity for some FGS during studies. It explains how they manage academic responsibilities alongside work in a particular social structure (Grenfell & James, 2003; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Nash, 1990). Markus and Nurius (1986) explained that what individuals (UFGS) think (hope, expect, fear) about becoming and their imagination of future selves influences their current behavior, motivation and decision-making. This behavior is ultimately based on their cognitive processes, despite social and economic conditions. Integrating it with Bourdieu's practices (habitus, capital and field) and structure, he focuses on individuals' (UFGS) economic and social conditions and the necessity of working to escape poverty and meet their family expectations. Therefore, through the interaction of practices, habitus, capital and field, UFGS make academic and career decisions informed by their economic, social and cultural capital. At the same time, economic necessity and poverty shape UFGS' employment choices, pushing them into low-paid jobs. In higher education, such working conditions (part-time work) are considered a primary factor contributing to lower engagement in extracurricular activities, resulting in institutional exclusion and a challenging work-life balance. Thus, this integrated framework enables us to examine the intersection of the UFGS academic journey and anticipate career development by placing it within the broader framework of structure (Bourdieu) and possible selves (Markus and Nurius).

Methods

This study draws on original qualitative interviews with UFGS at six public-sector universities in the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Employing a purposive sampling technique, we interviewed 43 UFGS (26 female and 17 male). Because data on FGS in Pakistan were unavailable, we used purposive sampling and interviewed those who met the inclusion criteria, namely being the first in their families to pursue higher education. We obtained permission from the selected universities to approach students in classrooms to identify FGS. We followed all ethical protocols, including

obtaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity, maintaining data security, and obtaining ethical approval for the research, from entering universities to interviewing the respondents. We explained the inclusion criteria in classes and selected FGS. We asked whether they were willing to participate in interviews. We interviewed them in Urdu, a national language understood by all, and each interview lasted 40 minutes to an hour. The interviews based on their availability and consent (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001; Racines, 2024). Using a semi-structured interview guide, we reached data saturation after interviewing 43 respondents (Roberts, 2020). Nine UFGS participants represented Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi; four female FGS students from Rawalpindi Women University; fourteen from the International Islamic University, Islamabad; five from the National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad; six from the Federal Urdu University of Arts, Sciences & Technology, Islamabad; and five from Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. The data set consisted of 24 working and 19 non-working UFGS. Data collection spanned six months due to examination schedules, respondent availability, access difficulties, and participants' confidentiality concerns. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent (Orb et al., 2001). We applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis: familiarization, coding, theme review, theme definition and naming, and final analysis, followed by a theoretical interpretation of Bourdieu's habitus, capital and field and Markus and Nurius's possible selves. To familiarize ourselves with the data, we transcribed the interviews and listened to the recordings multiple times to ensure we captured all responses accurately. We transcribed the data from each university separately, then combined it to maintain precision and consistency. We then transcribed them verbatim in the original language and then translated them into English for analysis and reporting. Next, we noted significant statements aligned with emerging themes to better understand the data. After completing the inductive coding process, the final themes were identified and subsequently analyzed, a widely used method for analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Result and discussion

The data analysis revealed six overarching themes: "Hopes and Uncertainty: FGS Perspective on Future Employment", "The Nexus between Higher Education and Social Mobility", "Absence of Concerted Cultivation and Career Aspirations", "Mismatched Decisions and Lost Opportunities", "Gendered Boundaries of Work and the Education–Employment Paradox for Female First-Generation Students", and "The Burden of Dual Responsibilities".

1. Hopes and uncertainty: FGS' perspective on Future Employment

This study affirms the purpose of higher education by examining first-generation students' views on employment prospects. The findings revealed a dual orientation: first, how undergraduate first-generation students view university education in relation to future employment prospects; and second, their experiences of higher education while concurrently engaged in employment. Participants expressed both hopes and fears about future employment. Higher education is seen as a means of upward mobility, secure and stable employment, and improved family conditions; however, the responses offer valuable insight into the uncertainty arising from structural and institutional barriers, as well as limited educational and career guidance, which in turn leads to uncertain economic returns.

A participant from one of the country top ranked University in Islamabad, enrolled in the 6th semester of the BS Mathematics, from Balochistan, shared that, "My whole family and community look at me to earn something."

The response shows that higher education is not solely a personal achievement; rather, success in higher education involves family and community, with expectations of economic improvement. Another participant stated, "I am hopeful to get a good job, so that I can support my family financially." Similarly, FGS, who was pursuing a BBA at Federal Urdu University of Arts, Sciences & Technology, Islamabad, shared his feelings and his family's expectations of him. He said, "My family have high hopes for me; my father reminds me of how much money he spends on my education, so I have to earn to improve our lifestyle and my siblings' circumstances."

Another statement about family expectations is that a university degree ensures stable employment. "When I came to university, I did not come alone; my whole family and tribe had expectations of me, and they are all waiting for my success. I am trying not to let their hopes down." These narratives offer significant insights into how familial and community expectations and responsibilities influence UFGS's aspirations and motivation for future employment.

Conversely, despite hopes for a better future, some participants worried about their future careers. A UFGS studying psychology in the 5th semester at Rawalpindi Women University said.

"I'm afraid about my future career. I don't know which career path is suitable for me."

Similarly, a female UFGS in the English Department at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, who was close to graduating, shared her experience.

"When I enrolled in BS, I believed I would get a job immediately after my graduation. Now, at the end of my education, I realized the university has not given me enough

skills to enter the labor market, and I am afraid I will not be able to get a good job.”

In the same way, one of the participants shared his experiences,

“Government opportunities are limited, and it's not easy to enter the private sector too because of language issues and, maybe, personality.”

The response extends beyond external labor market barriers UFGS perceived, such as competition and limited opportunities, and rather reflects insufficient preparation for employment and the practical competencies needed to enter a good job market. One participant, studying computer science at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML) in the 5th semester, shared his experience of struggling to finance his fees. He stated, “Others are getting jobs while I'm still searching.” Although this statement directly describes the comparable situation, it also reveals feelings of inadequacy and guilt among FGS. These responses reflect Bourdieu's social reproduction: FGS lack certain forms of capital, particularly social connections, which privilege others while leaving FGS in prolonged uncertainty. Interestingly, to cope with an unpredictable future, many UFGS believe in their Qismat (fate) to sustain hope. Most participants articulated employment prospects in terms of *rizaq* (livelihood) and stated that “رزق اللہ ہے باتھمنہ، وہی کوئی سبب بنائے گا” (livelihood is allocated by Allah, and He is responsible for those means). Their spiritual beliefs served as a protective and coping factor amid job uncertainty (Jessani, Ngo, & Lau, 2025) and having a limited sense of direction and future career goals (McCarron, 2022).

2. The Nexus between Higher Education and Social Mobility

In documenting UFGS experiences, we observed strong enthusiasm when they discussed their career aspirations. Overall, participants believed higher education was a pathway to upward social mobility, especially given their FGS status. They strongly believed in making the maximum of higher education opportunity. A summary of the excerpts indicates that higher education is regarded as a valuable opportunity. “To be at a university, in higher education, is the greatest opportunity, and I will make the most of it.” It revealed that FGS feel great about pursuing higher education, see it as a major opportunity in life, and believe that only through higher education will doors of opportunity open for them. These findings are supported by (Seay, Lifton, Wuensch, Bradshaw, & McDowelle, 2008) higher education facilitates social and economic mobility. A girl studying politics and International Relations in the 4th semester:

“My mother is a single parent who worked as a cleaner in other people's homes. I currently work part-time in a parlour and give

home tuition. It's an unbearable situation at home; we often have only one meal a day, but my mother is still trying to finance my education. She always says, 'I don't want my children to face the same hardships.'"

The responses revealed that UFGS are working hard to meet their families' expectations of upward social mobility (Patfield et al., 2021). However, limited networking, guidance, financial constraints, and unfulfilled career expectations hinder upward mobility (P.-W. W. Ma & Shea, 2021). In documenting the experiences of UFGS, it has been found that some students were in the field primarily to uplift their family status (Watson & Azmitia, 2025), to gain expertise and to practically implement it in their future careers. For example, one participant in the 6th semester of BBA said:

"I am studying business administration (enrolled in Bachelor of Business Administration BBA), which I believe is good for my future. My father has businesses, and all my elder brothers work with him, but my father believes the business has not expanded. So, he really wants me to study business to expand it".

Additionally, one female participant studying BBA at International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) shared her journey, offering inspiration and motivation:

"I would be a businesswoman, support my family through business, and break existing sexist business norms and practices prevailing in my family and wider society."

The findings revealed that working hard is a sign of promising bright future opportunities, to gain respect and independence, as described by (Wright, Roscigno, & Quadlin, 2023). In this context, one participant illustrated,

"With determination and motivation, I believe I can achieve much from the opportunity of higher education, committed to pushing forward regardless of all obstacles I am facing".

A girl studying Anthropology at Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University - PMAS AAUR, from Sindh, said,

"We are 7 siblings, and I am the youngest. I observed that they are all working, but nothing has changed at home; there is no improvement in my financial condition, so I decided to pursue higher education to get a better job and improve my family's and home's condition."

In sum, the study shows that it's not only about FGS's own future; they also ensure a better future for all of them (the upcoming generation of the family and community). In doing so, they are trying to become change agents and

role models for future generations (Cuellar et al., 2022). Undergraduate FGS believe that higher education gave them the opportunity to learn skills crucial for future opportunities and the needs of the time, such as freelancing and content writing, and it would not have been possible without it (Alt & Raichel, 2022). However, they still feel different from their peers (financially deprived) (Engle & Tinto, 2008) and believe they have worked hard to reach their goals, hoping for a better future than their peers (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

3. Absence of concerted cultivation and career aspirations

Connecting education and employment, FGS face the unique challenges of undergraduate students in higher education and may further exacerbate difficulties with career navigation due to the lack of family guidance (T. L. Jones & Saucier, 2023). A UFGS enrolled in the Department of Software Engineering in the 6th semester shared his experience.

“My parents never discussed career planning with me; I have to sort everything out on my own from admission until today. I am in higher education without a clear strategy or proper planning, and now I have no structured plan for the future.”

Another UFGS claims, “As the first in my family, I receive only emotional support and a bit of financial help, and my parents never advise me on employment prospects”. Unlike other students whose parents are educated, UFGS fulfil academic demands and navigate career paths independently. Their families are supportive emotionally and financially but lack higher-education-specific capital. Another UFGS studying educational sciences in the 7th semester reflects with a hint of regret about the chosen subject and consequences,

“My parents just want me to earn a degree, no matter what, and what does it have in terms of scope... (pause)...., if I knew already and if there would be anyone to guide me at the time of admission, I would not be in this subject. When I am in the middle of a degree, I feel it has less scope than computer science and engineering; it makes me confused”

This statement captures the participants' feeling of disadvantage and belief that they lacked certain resources, such as habitus and social capital, to navigate the field of higher education and the job market, and that these feelings of inferiority would be a hurdle to their future goals, as supported by (De La Garza, 2026; Nichols & Islas, 2016). They and their parents were focused solely on obtaining a university degree and lacked awareness of the scope and trends in specific fields. One participant shared a poignant

reflection:

“Even though some (other students) are working at reputable places and in highly paid roles with referrals, I don’t have any referrals or connections. My parents just told me to work hard, but what do I do with that hard work when others attain their goals without working hard? I feel referrals and connections drive occupational advancement more than hard work”

The experiences of UFGS highlight a common frustration that many believe that their peers got internships at reputable places, including paid ones, because they had networks; conversely, FGS didn’t know anyone and couldn’t network, and their parents had no connections, so they ended up with a low-paying internship, believing that their peers have access to opportunities that seem just out of reach for them. What’s even more interesting is that UFGS perceive their journey into higher education as something that later shapes career outcomes. They often believe and attribute it to their fate in education and employment, arguing that “Qismat (fate) brings them into higher education without even thinking about it... a by-chance opportunity.” Higher education was a dream, but they never expected to end up there, which shaped how they entered employment. Generally, they believe they don’t have any particular future goals, simply trusting fate, which is indeed a hallmark of the unfamiliarity they bring to higher education (Santelices et al., 2026) and sustain until employment. In this context, the challenges are clearly limited familial guidance and networks, as well as socialization, which create obstacles.

4. Mismatched decisions and Lost opportunities

Educational decisions are not made in isolation; they are closely linked to habitus and the field of higher education, and later influence employment prospects. To illustrate this connection, one participant at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, who was studying law, shared his experience:

“I was struggling with uncertainty about which field would be beneficial for me (at the time of admission), and now, at the end of this degree, I feel I have already missed opportunities due to wrong choices, and I don’t have interest in this subject which I linked to that time period.”

The statement encapsulates the tension between selecting an academic discipline and a university, highlighting a lack of guidance and familiarity. During the decision-making process, no mentor or advisor was available, making it difficult to engage with the community and access necessary information. Consequently, the individual made incompatible choices and

showed little motivation to put in effort. In this regard, one more participant claimed:

“At the time of admission, I did not have a mobile; I did not know how many universities had open admissions, available subjects, and which would be beneficial for me; I was even unaware which ones I was interested in.”

A striking point is FGS’ strong inclination toward STEM subjects to avoid future employment risks, yet many ended up in social sciences or other subjects for various reasons, feeling these subjects have no scope. A female UFGS in the 6th semester from Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University - PMAS AAUR stated that she was in a financial crisis and unable to pay the higher fees, and shared:

“I was interested in computer science but opted for sociology because computer-related courses have higher fees and I was unable to afford them. Now, I have no interest in this subject. I’m just passing the time, will get a degree, and don’t know what will happen next.”

The findings show that most of the participants, particularly females, were enrolled in social sciences during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this was also influenced by the perception of their families that STEM is a male-dominated field (Wilson & Kittleson, 2013). Their responses to job uncertainty were evident, as the pandemic reshaped academic and career choices (Bassett, 2026), and they believe their subjects may have no scope (extract from responses).

“My family wants me to become a doctor, but we did not have the resources (fees) to pursue this path. I chose the field because I did not know of other options. My friends who are in their desired fields are already achieving much more than me.”

Educational decisions carry such consequences. Opportunities for career decision-making were limited. Overall, the study's findings articulated that participants believe they have already missed opportunities due to a lack of guidance and limited resources (Phillips et al., 2020). Their primary objective is to obtain a degree, and they are already disappointed and have no definitive plans for the future (Rubio et al., 2017).

Additionally, the responses shed light on the important role of networking in creating employment opportunities. Most of the participants shared that “they don’t have confidence and resources to engage in extracurricular activities. For example, one UFGS at PirMehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture

University - PMAS AAUR, comparing with others, said that

“Other students attend support days, conferences and seminars organized by the university, where we have a lot of people to connect with. I don’t go because I don’t have clothes to wear. Once I did, others made fun of me for my outdated style, and my clothes were not up to date. After that, I decided never to go to such places again”

Paul Grayson (2011) supports this, finding that FGS were hesitant and less likely to engage in networking opportunities, such as extracurricular activities, resulting in missed career development opportunities. They also fluctuate without deliberate career planning and regard interviews and resumes as more significant than networking and job-search strategies (Parks-Yancy & Cooley, 2018). In this regard, one said that “I did not know about how to make a CV and what it is.” They are often engaged in comparative behavior; they contended that they benchmarked themselves against friends and acquaintances already enrolled in their desired fields and universities, believing that achieving superior results would be advantageous for their future prospects (Holden, Wright, Herring, & Sims, 2024; Yang, Xu, Karatas, Glass, & Maeda, 2026). Several factors influence their mismatched decisions, including affordability, gender-based restrictions, and a lack of guidance (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfeld, 2019; Rubio et al., 2017). It draws attention to institutional barriers that numerous UFGS enrolled at the university lack interest in, particularly in specific courses. Due to financial constraints, they choose to enroll in such universities and courses for their lower fees (Guzmán-Valenzuela, Darwin, Flanagan, Aguilera-Muñoz, & Geldres, 2022a). Focusing on gender-based restrictions, many female undergraduate students shared that “their parents never allowed them to stay in hostels or at far-flung universities, so they enrolled in universities closer to home and are already losing interest, believing they only need to get the degree without proper career planning (Kim, Miller, Hwang, & Olson, 2021). The thematic pattern also highlights that FGS are trying to make responsible choices in the future, as they already regret their subject choices, which have negatively affected their employment opportunities (Dewsbury, Taylor, Reid, & Viamonte, 2019; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Consequently, the evolving experiences of FGS pondering raise questions about how the government manages numerous graduates with limited knowledge and skills in their fields, who face limited career options and an uncertain future.

5. Gendered Boundaries of Work and the Education–Employment Paradox for Female First-Generation Students

The experiences of female undergraduate first-generation students add further complexity to the discussion, as family and societal expectations about financial independence are strongly ingrained. The responses provide valuable insights into how employment is constrained by gendered family expectations, family approval, acceptable career choices and cultural norms, with their career opportunities recognized as a socially gendered phenomenon.

One participant in the 5th semester of psychology shared her experience: “I will apply for a job if I can convince my parents and extended family.” Similarly, many participants stated that “their family and In-laws will not allow them to work, even if they pursue a PhD. Jobs are not allowed for girls in their families.” This highlights that work after earning a degree is not simple for everyone; however, female UFGSs' desire to be employed depends on family approval, even though many pursued higher education to escape poverty. The study's findings revealed that employment is never an individual choice for them; instead, the extended family and community strongly influence FGS career choices. Similarly, many participants noted that it's not solely the parents who grant permission to work; approval extends to the joint family and the entire community. As one of the participants in sociology in the 6th semester at Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University - PMAS AAUR illustrated,

“We live in a joint family, and we need permission from the extended family; if my parents allow me to work, my paternal uncle will not. I wish I would be a boy, not needed permission from anyone”

Consequently, it's not easy for them to readily accept employment opportunities; this is a consensus among all family members. One participant shared with exhaustion.

“I get really frustrated when my father tells me to ask my uncle and grandparents whether I should take a job or not. Even for something as small as an internship, I have to ask everyone first, as if I can't make any decision until everyone approves.”

Additionally, some of the participants wish to do a part-time job, but their future in-laws did not allow it (even though they are in higher education to escape early marriage), and in this regard, one female participant said,

“My father did my engagement without my consent. I already knew that if I refused this engagement, he would not even allow me to get an education, so I did so, and now my in-laws don't allow me to work.”

Also, some female UFGS are not permitted to study in co-educational institutions; many female undergraduate FGS at segregated female universities reported a common pattern: “their families did not allow them to attend co-educational institutions.” As a result, one participant said:

“If I am not allowed to attend co-educational institutions, my parents would not allow them to work in male-dominated fields.”

Additionally, a unique finding reveals regional and gender-based variations in employability prospects; for example, one of the female FGS reported that “she is not allowed to apply for banking or other jobs in private-sector organizations.” Aligning with this, one participant from International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) shared her experience: “I feel I have lost my confidence; I am unable to interact with the opposite gender. I don’t think I will be able to do a job with males.” Adding another dimension to their experiences, one participant shared a fear that “my paternal and maternal don’t know about my education and part-time work; if they knew, they would definitely force me to quit.” It reveals that their extended families don’t know about their university education; if they did, they would pressure them to quit, a huge gap in existing literature. They feared for their future employment, too; their extended families would not have allowed them to work either, leaving female FGS behind, and those who are engaged in employment, their extended families remain unaware of this activity due to the disapproval of employment.

6. The Burden of Dual Responsibilities

Reflecting on the educational journey of first-generation students in higher education and their early employment experiences reveals the workplace adaptation challenges they face while working during their transition from higher education to employment, as well as the mental health challenges they encounter (Rivas & Kim, 2025; Rockwell & Kimel, 2025). The demanding studies, along with work and family responsibilities and familial and societal expectations, pose a challenge for UFGS.

Unmasking the undergraduate FGS deficit, it is found that those who are working have employment experiences driven by financial necessity to fulfil their daily educational and familial needs. Their job-related expectations are not being met: every job requires experience, yet they are working low-paid jobs just to improve their homes and lifestyle. In this context, one of the UFGS students articulated:

“I have many responsibilities: managing household duties, working hard to achieve my goals, thinking about the future, and consistently fearing failure; if I fail, I may not get a good job in the future.”

Furthermore, the findings asserted that failures among male FGS are more conspicuous than those among females, and that individuals surrounding male FGS possess higher expectations of them, as they are supposed to be breadwinners of the family. For example, one male FGS explains that,

“As the eldest brother, I am expected to guide younger siblings, bear financial responsibilities, and support them financially. My community expects me to support the next generation, and I really want to pursue further higher education, but with these limited resources...pausa..., I can't (without financial support). I am clueless about where I am heading towards a job or further education.”

The study's responses also revealed that many UFGS are working in low-paid jobs, as one of the participants shared, “I am giving home tuitions, earning very low”; another shared:

“I am teaching Quran online through an academy and then only give me 150 PKR for one child; I am struggling to bear my daily expenses, especially transport. I don't remember if I have ever had lunch during university time.”

Most participants were stressed by financial responsibilities. One participant said:

“I am working to financially support my father because my father has already spent everything on their education, which causes stress about how they will repay him and the debt he took for my studies.”

However, the most distinctive aspect of their experience is the difficulty of balancing their studies with part-time work responsibilities. One UFGS from Quaid-i-Azam University shared, “I failed some subjects in the 1st semester because I was working part-time as a salesman, and at that time I was hopeless, unable to find a good opportunity, struggling to balance my job and studies.”

Another student from Federal Urdu University of Arts, Sciences & Technology, Islamabad shared her experience with pain and getting emotional.

“I don't have much time. I struggle to maintain a work-life balance. I leave here, go to the salon, and then come home. By the time I have dinner and pray, it's around 7:30 or 8:00 PM. After that, I give tuitions, and I'm so exhausted that I can only briefly watch a lecture before falling asleep. I don't have time to spend extra on my studies, and I don't have the money for

additional classes. How can I understand advanced topics when I struggle with the basics? I try to do the lectures that the teacher gives me, but I'm still not in a strong position."

The study found that, because of work and study, UFGS students struggle to balance their responsibilities, mainly due to socio-economic circumstances. Their work is not a choice for them but a financial necessity. They cannot participate in extracurricular activities, which may help with networking and improving teacher-student relationships, resulting in less social capital. The challenge of maintaining work-life balance often extends beyond this, as it creates considerable difficulty in managing overlapping academic, economic, and familial expectations.

Discussion

This article makes an original contribution to the literature from Pakistan by examining how non-working FGS envision their future through higher education, along with the hopes and fears they cultivate during their studies. The study addresses a critical gap by exploring the lived experiences of employed FGS, including the challenges and opportunities they face while balancing work and undergraduate studies. In HEIs, FGS struggle with career trajectories. For a successful career, they must have access to certain factors, including guidance, mentorship, institutional support and financial resources to afford education and meet familial responsibilities (Carales, López, Li, & Garza, 2025; Eveland, 2020; Quiñones, 2025). The study findings also revealed a significant role for social and cultural capital, which is a persistent challenge for FGS during higher education and in securing a job (De Schepper et al., 2024). For example, FGS already know the gaps they face when entering higher education, particularly in choosing mismatched subjects and universities due to a lack of guidance and economic capital (Quiñones, 2025; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Mismatched decisions and limited social and economic capital limit their ability to fully engage in academic work, which predominantly affects their future career prospects.

Most importantly, the study demonstrated the dynamic interplay of capitals, predominantly economic capital that significantly influenced the choice of a particular field of interest (education and university). FGS struggle with cultural capital from the start of their undergraduate journey (Quiñones, 2025), striving to meet academic expectations directly associated with later career trajectories. Relatedly, we found that concerted cultivation led to mismatched subject-university choices, resulting in low academic engagement and motivation.

Consistent with Bourdieu, structural inequality creates a gap in which FGS remain marginalized, with unequal access to opportunities and limited

institutional support (O'Shea, 2016). Findings revealed that undergraduate FGS have limited access to funding (no scholarships, particularly for FGS), networking or career-guiding mentors. Further, institutional and structural barriers, along with family expectations, reinforce inequalities among female FGS, as they continue to be left behind by men in employment opportunities. Relatedly, drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, FGS mention that personal agency failed when they struggled with insufficient economic, cultural and social capital during higher education and in an uncertain labor market. Their dynamic interaction among capital, habitus and field is constantly in struggle, negotiating opportunities and constraints throughout the undergraduate degree (Hunsberger, 2020). They did not operate in isolation; instead, they worked paid jobs, struggled daily to maintain work-life balance, and tried to meet the demands of higher education and employment. Intersectionality shifts the focus from male FGS to female FGS, who experience academics and anticipated futures differently from males, creating an additional barrier shaped largely by family expectations (Begum Sadaquat & Sheikh, 2011). Taken together, possible selves help explain future orientation among non-working FGS, and structural conditions are reflected in their future selves (motivation, fear, and expectations).

Conclusion

The study concludes that structural and socio-cultural conditions influence undergraduate FGS educational and career trajectories. They don't think about their future careers before entering higher education but do so when they reach the middle of their undergraduate degree. To address these disparities, we recommend timely guidance, such as institutional support, mentorships, and financial aid to cover FGS's daily expenses. These initiatives will support and guide them before they enter university, help them complete their studies with quality, and help them secure a place in their prospective career. It indicates that every single choice during higher education is a leading factor in FGS's career choice.

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This research followed internationally recognized ethical standards and protocols, including ethical approval and established guidelines for human participants.

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