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Impact of the War on Terror in Afghanistan on Combatants' Families from Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Dr. Tariq Amin*

Abstract

The paper explores the impact post-9/11 US-led War on Terror in Afghanistan on combatants' families belonging to Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The combatants from Dir had crossed over to Afghanistan under Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) to help the Taliban in their fight against NATO forces. The fall of the Taliban government resulted in the deaths of majority of TNSM while many went missing. Their families back home in Dir faced a host of challenges which included emotional trauma, social stigma, economic hardships, and inheritance disputes. Besides, the Jihadi organizations covertly operating in the area offered financial support to attract the young ones of these families to join their ranks. Moreover, it also brings to the fore the cultural barriers that prevented the widows of the combatants from re-marrying and denial of share to combatants children under the pretext of denial of inheritance to orphaned grandchildren, highlighting the vulnerability of combatants families to manipulation. By charting the adverse impact of the conflict on these families provides a deeper understanding of the conditions of the marginalized ones including children of the combatants, their aged parents, and widows. The tool used for collecting primary data was unstructured interview through which the lived experiences of affected families were recorded. A total of 25 respondents identified through snowball sampling technique were interviewed, including 20 affected families members and 5 local key informants. The study attempts to contribute to the broader discourse and deeper understanding of the impact of wars on the marginalized populations.

Keywords: War on Terror, Combatants' Families, Economic Hardship, Social Marginalization, Radicalization, Post-Conflict Trauma

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Introduction:

This study examines the impact of the post-9/11 War on Terror in Afghanistan on the families of combatants from District Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. The U.S-led NATO invasion of Afghanistan significantly impacted district Dir (both Lower and Upper) and the entire Malakand Division in KP. Mobilized by TNSM's leader Sufi Muhammad, local tribesmen organized a Lashkar (militia) of approximately 10,000 individuals who crossed into Afghanistan to fight alongside the Taliban against NATO forces (The Daily Dawn, 2001) (Sultan-i-Rome, 2012). The Taliban deployed these combatants to different war zones, where they suffered terrible losses including death, imprisonment by local war lords and many went missing (Struck, 2001).

The deaths of the combatants had profound impact on their families. As sole bread winners, the absence of combatants confronted their families with severe economic hardships, compelling the children to abandon their schools and involve in child labour. Similarly, social taboos and patriarchy prevented the young widows of the deceased combatants from re-marrying, keeping them financially dependent on their in-laws, parents or charities. Besides, the few combatants who had managed to return alive from Afghanistan, joined militant organizations, further augmenting the families' problems (Izharullah, 2015). The following table has demographic information regarding the combatants such as their age, level of education, profession, family size and political affiliation etc.

Demographic Profile of Combatants

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Age	18-30 years	6	24	24	24
	31-40 years	5	20	20	44
	41-50 years	3	12	12	56
	Above 50 Years	11	44	44	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Education	Under Matric	7	28	28	28
	Intermediate	1	4	4	32
	Illiterate	17	68	68	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Profession	Unemployed	15	60	60	60
	Foreign Employment	4	16	16	76
	Labourer	4	16	16	92
	Others	2	8	8	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Total Children	1-3 Children	3	12	12	12
	4-6 Children	10	40	40	52

	Above 6 Children	9	36	36	88
	Married but No Children	1	4	4	92
	Unmarried	2	8	8	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Madrasa Education	No	25	100	100	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Religious Sect	Deoband	22	88	88	88
	Ahli-Hadees	3	12	12	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Political Affiliation	JI	20	80	80	80
	ANP	3	12	12	92
	PPP	2	8	8	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Certainty Regarding Death of Relatives in Afghanistan	Yes	7	28	28	28
	No	18	72	72	100
	Total	25	100	100	

Source: the table is based on the primary data collected through interviews with relatives of combatants and local informants.

Socio-Economic Impacts:

The following analysis explores the adverse socio-economic effects of the War on Terror in Afghanistan on the families of combatants from Dir. While the war has influenced various aspects of their lives, this study focuses on the most significant aspects, including the education of combatants' children, their involvement in labor, and their social vulnerabilities etc.

Education

Education is a critical foundation for societal progress, but conflicts severely disrupt this process, particularly in regions targeted by militant groups. In areas like Dir, the War on Terror and the activities of groups such as the *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) destroyed schools and impeded access to education (Institute of Economic and Peace, 2016).

Between 2007 and 2009, the Taliban's campaign against schools in (KP) caused substantial damage, with over 800 schools destroyed, primarily in the Malakand Division (Khan T. , 2013). The TTP expanded its anti-education activities from Swat to the surrounding districts of Dir, Buner, and others, severely disrupting education in these areas (Seltzer, 2016).

The impact of the War on Terror on education extended beyond the activities of the Taliban. In Dir, combatants who crossed over to Afghanistan under TNSM for 'Jihad', left behind large families including children of various ages, ranging from infants to school-going adolescents. After their departure, the responsibility of raising and educating the children fell largely on their mothers, who in the conservative society of Dir are not encouraged to work outside the home. As a result, many children had to leave school and work to support their families (Majeedullah, 2019).

Of all the combatants' families studied only two children, one supported by a grandparent and another by a paternal uncle continued their education. The rest of the children, both male and female, dropped out of school. Many male children sought work in big cities or abroad. Although, in such cases, kinship networks traditionally provide support in tribal societies, however, many of the combatants' extended families were impoverished and unable to offer substantial help. Consequently, the orphans were forced to work to sustain their families (Haider, After jihad: Abandoned ..., 2014).

The analysis of the collected data revealed that 8% of combatants' children continued studying while the rest 92% dropped out of school. Thus, large number of children were deprived of education. The lack of education and proper skills, made them extremely vulnerable for extremist narratives and militant organizations to employ them for terrorist activities.

Child Labour

Child labour is defined as any work performed by a child that prevents or interferes with his/her right to education, or it may be harmful to their mental, physical, social or moral development. All such labours are illegal for children under the age of 15 years. Moreover, the employment of a child below 18 years in hazardous work is prohibited under international agreements and treaties. Likewise, the Constitution of Pakistan 1973, under article 11 (3) also prohibits the engagement of children in labour (Nagi, 2013: 281)(Fatima, 2018: 388). Child labour is considered as a serious social problem that needs to be eliminated (Malik, 2012). After the departure of the combatants to Afghanistan, their children back home had no other option but to involve in labour to support their families.

Since, majority of the combatants were the sole bread winners and had been the only source of income of their families, therefore, the worst financial conditions forced their children to work as labourers in local shops, hotels, vegetable markets or wherever they found any work who could pay wages. There are thousands of such families in Dir and in Malakand Division who due to financial constraints involved their children in child labour in order to acquire a livelihood (Haider, After jihad: Abandoned ..., 2014) (Majeedullah, 2019).

The following cases illustrate the prevalence and consequences of child labour among the families of combatants. One such case was that of Baligh Jan, a labourer from BarawalBandi, Upper Dir, whose family became economically vulnerable after he left for Afghanistan. Although his eldest son, Bin Yameen, was only four years old at the time of his father's departure, he eventually assumed the primary responsibility for financially supporting the household. Bin Yameen began working in the local vegetable market, and later his two younger brothers also joined him in supplementing the family income. With the combined efforts of Bin Yameen and his mother, the family managed to arrange the marriages of four out of five daughters. Bin Yameen remained the principal breadwinner, supporting an ailing mother and three younger siblings (Haider, 2014).

A similar situation was observed in the case of Badshah Zada, a labourer from QaderKalay, Upper Dir, who left for Afghanistan at the age of thirty, leaving behind a wife and two young sons. Initially, the household was supported by the grandmother, SafiaBibi, who worked as a domestic help in affluent households for a modest income. Over time, the two sons engaged in child labour, working in local hotels and teashops to sustain the family (Haider, 2014).

The difficulty of tasks and harsh working conditions for children result in premature aging, depression, malnutrition, and drug dependency among children. Without protection, the children work in demeaning condition, which is in violation of the fundamental rights. Moreover, bitter memories of the child labour leave negative imprints on the psyche of the individual. In addition, child labour prevents the children from getting formal education, undermining their possibility to become professionals and live a healthy social life. There are also higher chances of sexual exploitation as children working at young age are more exposed to be exploited (Humanium, 2010).

Housing Problem

The importance of proper housing is well recognized, and it is often said that housing is second only to food in basic necessities. Some scholars argue, however, that if people have a home, they can take care of the rest, including food (Igwe P.U, 2017). According to the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (2010), approximately 30% of the urban population worldwide lives in slum conditions, facing issues such as inadequate clean water, unsafe buildings, and overcrowding (Habitat, 2012).

For the families of combatants from Dir, housing remained a critical issue. Nearly all these families lived in joint family systems with their paternal relatives. Due to limited accommodation, couples often shared a single room with their children. As most of the combatants belonged to poor families, hence, the married combatants were living in a single room of a shared

house. Over time, as children grew, it became increasingly difficult for these families to continue living in a single room (Khan A. , 2019).

The data collected indicated that the combatants had left for Afghanistan in 2001, leaving behind large numbers of children, each of whom now required their own space. In addition, the growing number of extended family members (such as uncles) further strained the available living space, leading to overcrowding. In some cases, families were forced to live in dilapidated houses at risk of collapse. The shared ownership of the land and lack of financial resources to construct new or repair the old houses compounded the housing problem for the combatants families (Khan, 2019).

Social Vulnerability

Social vulnerability refers to the diminished capacity of the people, societies and organization to resist the negative impact from various challenges to which they are faced with. Certain characteristics inherent in the cultural values, social interactions and institutions of the prevailing system expose people to the adverse impact of any threatening phenomenon. Thus, social vulnerability can be defined as inability of the individual or a group of people to cope with, resist, and recover from adverse impact of man-made or natural hazard (Burton et al, 2018).

In light of the above definitions, combatants' wives, children and aged parents were left socially vulnerable and faced variety of problems. In the absence of parent and guardian, the combatants' children were exposed to many social evils prevalent in society, such as, drug addiction, substance abuse and other immoral activities. In Pakhtun social structure, father or male guardian plays the role of a protector, financial supporter, caregiver along with social and emotional role model. The unknown status of Combatants in Afghanistan, deprived combatants' children of all mentioned amenities. Consequently, they from a very small age had to perform responsibilities which their parent needed to do for them (Safi-ullah, 2019).

The children of the combatants were confronted with strange emotional and psychological problems and challenges. As in case of Sardar Naeem from Kot (Bala) Hayaseri, left for *Jihad* in Afghanistan when his only son was 4 months old. After some time, the widow was re-married to her brother-in-law, younger brother of the combatant (Muhammad, 2019).

The son of Sardar Naeem, Ayaz, when turned eighteen. He completed his matriculation with the support of his grandparents. However, a problem emerged when he attempted to obtain his Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC), which is a prerequisite for admission to any college in Pakistan. Ayaz insisted that his biological father's name, Sardar Naeem, be listed in the parent section. However, according to the National Database & Registration Authority (NADRA), his mother was officially recorded as

married to her brother-in-law. Consequently, Ayaz could not be officially documented as Sardar Naeem's son. Ayaz's refusal to accept his uncle as his father reflected a common psychological response observed in similar cases, highlighting the emotional and social complexities faced by children in such circumstances (Muhammad, 2019).

Owing to a strong patriarchal system in the area, the wives and daughters of the combatants were left at the mercy of the male members of the family i.e. father i-in-law, brothers in law etc. As family of a 'martyr', combatants' widows and daughters had to take special care of the honour which is deeply associated with women by staying within the four wall of home. In the presence of combatant, the wife had one male to determine her status and social interaction while after his departure to Afghanistan, she had many male guardians such as father-in-law, brother-in-laws and brothers, father etc., to instruct and direct her behaviour. Keeping in view family honour, daughters of the combatants had also had to quit schools and got betrothed at young age (Maula, 2019).

Thomson Reuters Foundation, in its experts' poll in 2011, ranked Pakistan as the 3rd worst place for female in the world (Bhattacharya, 2014). Unfortunately, in Pakistan patriarchy has deprived women to raise their voice against the physical or sexual violence, as those who speak up are looked at with contempt and viewed as the one who tarnish the image of family in society. Accordingly, to avoid being seen an ill reputed person, majority of women do not report their cases violence (Bhattacharya, 2014). The combatants' female dependents too could not raise their voice in case of suffering any violence.

However, only one such case of sexual violence surfaced. Khan Bahadur, a combatant from Hondak (Payan), Maidan, Dir (lower) had left a wife with four children, two sons and two daughters. The family was attacked at night by three men of the same locality who had the intention of molestation. The mother filed lawsuit against the offenders and after a long trial they were sentenced to six months imprisonment(Safi-ullah, 2019).

It is irony of fate that in Pukhtun society the victim of molestation is considered a stigma for the whole family. Instead of condemning the offender, victim specially girls in such cases are considered responsible for the situation. The females who dare to speak against such incidents are not only dubbed as immoral but also lose chances to be proposed for marriage (Arab Naz et al, 2012). A perfect example of such cases were the two daughters of combatant, Khan Bahadur, who were married off in far off areas likely due to the reason that people in locality were not proposing them for marriage because of the said incident (Safi-ullah, 2019).

Widowhood in Pakhtun Society

As a result of combatants' death in Afghanistan scores of women got widowed in Dir and in Malakand Division. These widows of the combatants had been facing all the hardship and problems that are associated with widowhood in Pakhtun society. In Pakhtun society there is no formal tradition for widow's remarriage. The traditional Pakhtun social structure, for a variety of reasons often discourages the remarriage of a widow (Naz et al, 2012). One reason (being many in the background) for discouragement of re-marriage is that of *peghor* (Satire) and *Tor* (stigma) from the agnatic rivals (*Tarboor*) which can cause a life-long enmity. Even if she is allowed for remarriage it would be in the immediate family members, brother-in-law (*lewar*). As in the case of Ahmad Khan whose widow was remarried to his brother. Unlike the normal women, widows are treated differently and a kind of sympathy exists for them in Pakhtun society. However, the sympathy decreases with the passage of time and the situation gets worst for widows to live (Naz et al, 2012).

In Dir, other than cultural problem, local people have developed and associated different superstitious beliefs with widowhood. As locally a widow is considered unlucky (*Badqismata*) due to which her husband died and the superstitious belief that if the widow is remarried her next husband would also die. Therefore, this superstitious belief deprives her of remarriage. Besides, the above reasons, if a widow renounces the idea of remarriage and sacrifice her entire life for the sake of her children, she is praised in Pakhtun society in general and in Dir in Particular (Mirza, 2012). Considering the aforementioned cultural and superstitious beliefs, only one out of the 25 combatants' widows remarried, and that too within the immediate family, to her brother-in-law. They sacrificed their lives for the sake of their children. Being widows, they single handedly parented their children which is a formidable task in Pakhtun society. However, constant struggle and challenges made them extremely vulnerable, resultantly majority of them have been suffering from a variety of psychological problems (Begum, 2019).

Psychological Impact on Bereaved Families

Due to the huge social, economic and psychological burden and death of their kith and kin, different diseases were noticed in the families of the combatants particularly the widows and old parents. Hypertension, diabetes, but most importantly mental disorders such as Chronic stress, anxiety, and depression were common among grieving widows (Menhas, 2019). The associated loneliness with widowhood create fear of being alone which results in loss of self-esteem as a woman. Moreover, the widows also feel the loss of human association thus try to remain alone and become unresponsive

(Trevidi et al, 2009).

The emotional problem in case of death of a close relative remains a serious one. In Pakhtun society, the widow feels the loss even if her experience with husband is not a pleasant one. For a widow, everything changes with the death of her husband, as she loses the role of the spouse, her social life also changes from long association with a single man to dependency on many people. Similarly, parents also suffer and feel the loss of the deceased son. Recent studies in field conclude that death of a family member causes depressive episodes among the survivors. The possibility of depression increases in cases when the widow is young (Trevidi et al, 2009).

Majority of the combatants' widows and mothers were suffering from such psychological diseases. However, due to lack of awareness, instead of proper psychological therapy and treatment the changed behaviour due to depression and anxiety among the family members of the combatant were seen as bereavement which is culturally considered as normal (Khan A. , 2019).

Militant Tendencies among Combatants' Children

The participation of a large number of combatants from Dir in the post-9/11 'Afghan Jihad' and their deaths there left serious repercussions on their families. Many of the families could not confirm for a long time whether their relative was deceased or alive. Among the 25 identified families, only a few reported that only the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement provided limited assistance by inviting them to Islamabad to identify their missing relatives through photographs of deceased combatants. However, for an extended period the families continued their search independently (Hussain, 2019).

Some of the families informed the researcher of the support provided by certain *Jihadi* organizations operating in the area. The support items included food, clothing and other necessary supplies particularly on special occasions such *Ramadhan* and *Eids* (Hussain, 2019). The lack of financial resources, illiteracy and social marginalization coupled with assistance from militant organizations, left the youths of these families extremely vulnerable for recruitment in such organizations. The concerns of recruitment from the same areas were further reinforced with continued return of the dead bodies of militants in Afghanistan to Dir (Dawn, 2015).

As nine dead bodies who were killed in a U.S. drone strike in Babrak Thana in province of Khost Afghanistan, were returned to Upper Dir in November 2015. In the same month, five dead bodies were brought back to lower Dir, and nine to District Swat from Afghanistan (Dawn, 2015).

Worst Economic Conditions:

After the departure of the combatants for *Jihad* and their subsequent

killing in Afghanistan, confronted their families with worst economic conditions. A few families who were financially stable, sold their properties both movable and immovable such as landed properties, vehicles, and gold etc., in order to meet the daily requirement of the family. But the poor families, with no immediate help neither from the government side nor from any Non-Governmental Organization(NGO), overtime plunged into worst financial conditions. Since majority of the combatants belonged to poor family, therefore, the grandparents and uncles could not provide any help to the widow and orphans. Only a few of these families were supported by the uncles and grandparents, however, they were also not satisfied. They expressed a lot of reproaches and complaints against the ill-treatment and shenanigans of uncles, cousins and grandparents (Reman, 2019). Thus, with no one to support them, majority of the combatants' children and widows had to depend on charities (Ahmad F. , 2019).

Denial of Share in Property to Orphaned Grandchildren

Apart from social problems and emotional pain due to loss of parent in Afghanistan, the combatants' children who had some shared property, had to suffer another financial setback from their uncles. Some of the respondents revealed that their uncles were denying them their share in property under the denial of share to orphaned grandchild in property in Islamic *Sharia*(Ayatullah, 2019). However, many Islamic scholars disagree with the interpretation and opines that a grandson is like a son, therefore, in case of the death of a son, the grandson should be given the share of his father (Saleem, 2016).

Thus, under this law many of the combatants' children were denied their share in property. As in case of the Children of combatant, from village Reidgi, District Dir (lower), the paternal uncles openly denied them share in property (Majeedullah, 2019). While some of the respondents revealed that although they had not been openly told regarding the denial of share but the delaying tactics showed their intention of not granting their share in the property. Most of the combatants' children were feeling nervous to ask for their share in property due to fear of this law (Bakht, 2019).

Fraudsters' Deceit of Affected Families

None of the 25 respondent families could confirm the status of their family member that whether he was dead or alive in Afghanistan. The lack of authentic information provided an opportunity for the fraudsters to play with emotion of the aggrieved people. Thus, arrival of fake news regarding the missing combatants continued for years. Fraudsters from Afghanistan and Pakistan, used to call the affected families and would narrate different stories about combatants that either he was in jail or in the custody of forces of

Northern Alliance or of warlords. They used to demand huge ransom money for the release of combatants from jails or from the private captivity of different warlords in Afghanistan. Though, majority of the combatants' families could not pay huge sums of demanded money but many of them fell victim to the fabricated stories of the fraudsters (Muhammad, 2019).

Umer Hussain son of a combatant from Hayaseri, MaidanDir (Lower), informed the researcher that many fraudsters from Pakistan and Afghanistan gave them false information about the whereabouts of his father in Afghanistan. He added that they asked for rupees 1.2 million for the release of his father, the amount were provided by selling a piece of land in village. The person who took the money was an Afghan, he went with promise of bringing his father but never came back (Hussain, 2019).

Similarly, the family of Muhammad Mukhtiar, a young combatant from village Takatak, was deceived by another man namely Bahram from Afghanistan who took 1.5 lac rupees from the father of Mukhtiar and disappeared (Menhas, 2019).

Many of such combatants' families had been deceived by fraudsters who took large sums of money from the affected families with the promise that they would bring their family member back from Afghanistan. Although, initially some of the combatants had returned from Afghanistan on their own but none of the families who paid money for the release of their members came back. Hence, on the one hand the deceit on the part of fraudster increased the financial problems of families and on the other hand prolonged the grief of the families by narrating false stories of them being alive (Jamil, 2019).

Conclusion

This study examines the deep and lasting impact on the families of the combatants who had participated in post-9/11 Afghan war. The deaths of the majority of of combatants in Afghanistan faced their families in Dir and in the entire Malakand Division with challenges of social stigma, economic deprivation and psychological issues. The research highlights how the young children dropped out of schools and got involved in child labour, the widows could not remarry due cultural barriers, and the fraudulent schemes worsened their financial conditions. These problems show the profound impact and enduring consequences of the wars on the affected communities. The study is an attempt to contribute to the understanding of the challenges experienced by the families along with addressing the social and cultural aspects of the crises. By documenting the struggles of the families, will ensure the recognition of their harsh experiences and will inform the future discourse and research on the impact of wars on vulnerable communities.

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OriginalArticle

**Socialization of Gender Roles
Attitude: A Study on Adolescents
and their Parents of
Lahore, Pakistan**

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Abstract

Parenting is an effective socialization institute and parents are critical in shaping their children's belief on gender roles. In the present study an attempt has been made to analyze the gender difference in parenting practices and its impact on the attitude of socializing the gender roles among children. Applying the approach of positivist, this study is quantitative and cross-sectional surveys were conducted. A sample of parents N=500 and their children N= 500 were taken from a stratified random sampling in multi-stage technique among the families residing in Lahore, the most populous city and district of Punjab, Pakistan. Gender Roles Attitude Scale (GRAS), with the author's prior authorization and a self-created Gender Socialization Parenting Scale (GSPS) were used to collect data. Data was analyzed using the statistical procedures of ANOVA, MANOVA and frequencies/percentages. The results showed that the girls were more attitudinal about egalitarian gender roles than girls. Parenting practice 'role model' was also found to influence the socialization of attitude traditional gender roles among the children. A comprehensive strategy for gender sensitive parenting in cooperation with social organizations such as civil society, teachers, religious scholars, media, parents and children is suggested.

Keywords: gender, gender socialization, parenting practices, gender roles attitude, egalitarian, traditional

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Introduction

The socialization of attitudes towards gender roles is a crucial step for teenagers as they grasp society's expectations regarding gender. Gender is learned in early childhood and comes from various "socializing agents" including family, friends, school and, yes, media (Kimmel & Davis, 2019). Parenting is considered the most crucial factor that can encourage children to develop pro-social behaviors (Maccoby, 2002), although there are many components that influence children's interests, behavior and decision making. Thus, the family context is considered to be a critical one in forming early experiences about gender that constitute adolescents' knowledge of gender (Bem, 1981). Besides, the parenting practices involve a number of essential perspectives namely parents' skills and perceptions (Jeynes, 2010). The changes in physical, mental and sexual development that occur during adolescence can also fuel attitudes about gender roles, affecting their life for years to come (Kågesten et al., 2016). The influence of the parent and family on gender socialization in early childhood has been studied as it relates to children's involvement in sport (Farkas & Leaper, 2014), family chores (McCabe, 2015), media, social media norms (McCabe, 2015), gender stereotypes (Rhodes, 2015), and other social and cultural factors (Leaper & Farkas, 2014). Parents can be said to be role models and they pass on values and beliefs, which means that their social behavior will affect the perception of the children on gender roles (Leaper, 2002). Parents may express their values in indirect ways through their thoughts and actions, which might have an impact on a child's development and sense of gender identity (Yale Acev, 2012). Furthermore, pro-social skills include sharing and cooperation as well as constructive behaviors like being empathetic and caring, parents and family influence the development of these abilities, which are related to children's performance in school and other areas (Durlak et al., 2011). This illustrates the connection between parents' attitude towards gender and their children's attitude towards their gender (Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002). The views about being male or female that children develop are largely influenced by their parents and are unlikely to change in adulthood (Howard, 2000). It was found that educated mothers, working mothers and mothers and fathers sharing the same responsibilities in the house and decision-making are important in creating equal gender roles (Kulik, 2005). Based on the social learning theories, it is logical to assume that a child who sees a non-traditional relationship may have lower gender stereotypes (neutral gender attitudes), and a child from a traditional relationship may have more traditional gender attitudes. Furthermore, equality in the way home duties, care work, jobs, decision making and gender attitudes are delivered is likely to result in more egalitarian behaviour

among children (Mchale et al., 2003). The purpose of the study is to find out what are the parenting practices which influence the attitude of gender roles (traditional vs. egalitarian) of children (adolescents) of Lahore in Pakistan.

Literature review

Both local and international studies were reviewed to know the parenting practices and its influence on attitude towards gender roles among children. A survey of Lahore, the second largest city of Pakistan was conducted, where there are various educational institutions with varying socio-economic status. There were 816 young students in the study. The findings indicated that 40.3% of the differences in aggressive behaviour between students could be accounted for by the extent to which parents were not open, and 48.2% of the differences in how secure students felt could be explained by the extent to which parents were warm and could guide. The study points to the need to develop positive parenting practices, which involves raising awareness among parents, strengthening their understanding and perspectives. Parent communication and parental beliefs can enhance the current parenting style and decrease the risk of developmental problems in children (Raza et al., 2020). Hussain et al., (2015) investigated how families transmit gender stereotypes in Pakistani culture and how these families define gender roles. Gender stereotypes and roles were interwoven and shaped by social and cultural contexts that emerged in structured situations and relations, mainly within the family. The research revealed that the socialisation of boys and girls, as well as the differences in the home environment, father and mother engagement with their children, current parenting practices and reducing risk are all important factors in the development of gender roles. In a similar research, 358 white families from working and middle-class backgrounds in the U.S. took part, which included mothers, fathers, and their first two kids. Families were divided into three categories according to their attitudes towards gender: traditional, equal and those who were traditional yet had children with equal attitudes. The ANOVA results revealed that these family types are related to the socioeconomic status of the family, the time spent by both mother and father in household duties and the time they gave to their children. Marks et al (2009) said that conflicts in the family were worse in traditional families. Kilsby (2014) discovered that girls and boys were socialised to conform to the roles of feminine and masculine, and that there was a narrow definition of culture expectations. Men were considered as the leaders and carers, to provide protection and take decisions while women were regarded as wives and mothers and in charge of the home management. They were not very social. In a few situations, mothers were perceived to care for only their sons,

but not daughters and mothers and fathers were both perceived to take responsibility when the children reached the age of early teens. Another study examined the impact of parents' backgrounds on gender roles and work differences. It included 134 parents and 134 teenagers from Israel. Mothers were discovered to be more likely to communicate with their children, fathers were found to be more likely to act in the more traditional roles. Parents' and mothers' levels of education significantly influenced their attitudes towards gender roles as well as their children's attitudes and the mothers' working status. Full-time working mothers and higher educated fathers were more likely to be found in more progressive families. Parents' attitudes towards these issues were also influenced by their country of origin, their religious outlook and the number of children in the family (Kulik, 2002). The socioeconomic involvement study revealed that the views on gender roles of girls and boys are very different, with the girls' equal views turning out to be 58% compared to the boys' 19%. A multivariate linear probability model indicated that the probability of equal beliefs of gender roles was 31% higher for girls who were at least 10th grade and 15% higher for boys who were at least 10th grade than for boys and girls who completed only primary education. Further, girls who were in a social group had a 5% greater probability of having an egalitarian attitude and boys who did not attend had a 6% greater probability of having an egalitarian attitude. Girls' egalitarian feelings were affected by television but not those of the boys. In order to achieve equality in society, both men and women should adopt progressive gender roles (Streatfield et al., 2023). Cordero-Coma, Esping-Andersen (2018) propose that children can develop egalitarian beliefs and behavior by observing and learning from their parents' beliefs and behaviors on equality. An even stronger effect is found for boys whose mothers have more education. It is recommended that more equitable parenting styles and attitudes be encouraged to reduce the gender disparity in domestic chores particularly among younger children. The findings of studies on parents' gender role socialization of their sons and daughters have been mixed regarding the ambivalent parental attitudes toward gender and their children. Given this mixed picture, further careful research is needed on the impact of parents' divergent perspectives of gender on their children's socialization. The literature examined shows that there are conflicting perspectives on whether traditional or equal parenting practices impact children and teens' attitudes towards gender roles. Parenting plays a significant role in child development and thus, the present study was conducted to determine the effect of parenting practices on the gender roles attitude of children in the culture of Pakistan.

Operational definitions of variables

Egalitarian gender roles:Equal gender roles include actions and views that encourage equal men and women's participation in all aspects of life.

Gender roles attitude:The attitude and thought regarding the acts and behaviours that society relates to girls and boys belong to the beliefs on gender roles.

Gender roles: Gender socialization helps children to identify actions, behaviors, and roles that are distinctively their gender's. These are socially constructed roles, which are associated with gender.

Parenting socialization practices:Parenting socialization practices refer to the specific strategies and approach used by parents in raising their children..

Traditional gender roles:Conventional gender roles in a traditional culture lead to traditional roles that are socially constructed and accepted by the people.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical underpinning of the present study is based on the following theories:

Social learning theory: Children's gender identity can be influenced by outside factors, mainly by observing and reacting to influences from their parents and environment. Parents demonstrate gender roles by their occupations, hobbies and everyday actions, which give children good role models of what might be appropriate for their gender. Although there has been progress towards gender equality, the traditional concept of the mother as the career and the father as the provider is still apparent in many families. Positive and negative children learn by modelling, direct instruction and reinforcement which behaviours are socially acceptable for their gender (Bussey& Bandura, 1999; Burn, 1996; Wharton, 2005). In the course of time, they internalize and embody these gender norms within their attitudes and behaviors. **Gender schema theory:** The concept of the gender schema theory is important in understanding children's attitudes towards gender roles. It examines not only when children start to form their concepts about gender but also how their gender identities change in relation to these mental schemas to impact their perceptions and understanding of social norms, events and behaviours in different contexts (Bem 1981). Bem's theory states that people act on the gender schemas that they have learned. For example, parents often feel that their sons are the breadwinners and their daughters are the caregivers. Depending on whether their children are boys or girls, mothers, and fathers can urge them to behave in specific ways (Eckes T, Trautner H, M 2012). To promote gender equality, parents attempt to provide

an environment that does not pass on gender stereotypes (Bem 1983). Equal minded parents are more likely to be more equal in their treatment of children, to divide up household tasks more equally than are traditional parents (Updegraff et al. 1996). From the above theories, it was found that the social values adopted by children and what they see influence the way children learn about gender. It is important to recognize these factors; this present study focuses on parenthood practices that created attitude of gender roles traditional vs. egalitarian among children.

Significance of the Study

The importance of this study is to recognize the important dynamics of attitude towards gender roles that affect children's gender self-perceptions and interpersonal relationships in society. This study explores the impact of parents on their children's gender role attitudes and the changes that occur in gender role attitudes of the children during adolescence, which has implications for the reinforcement or challenge of traditional gender roles. This knowledge can be used to inform education and policy initiatives for gender equality and to challenge the perpetuation of limiting stereotypes among youth. In addition, it demonstrates the importance of targeted parenting behaviors to assist parents in fostering more positive and equal gender perspectives and, in turn, a more accepting and nurturing environment for future generations.

Objectives of the Study

The following were the objectives of the present research:

- To analyze difference in socialization parenting practices between fathers and mothers;
- To explore gender roles attitude among high school students;
- To investigate the effect of parenting practices to shape attitude of adolescents towards gender roles.

Hypothesis of the Study

The following were the hypotheses of the present study:

- H₁:** There is a significant gender difference in parenting practices of parents to socialize their children;
- H₂:** Parenting practices are expected to indoctrinate attitudes toward gender roles in boys and girls whereas girls are expected to hold stronger attitudes than boys;
- H₃:** There is a significant difference in traditional and egalitarian gender roles attitude of children with parenting practices related to role model; social concerns; gender equality.

Method

In current study, positivist approach and quantitative nature was adopted. It was grounded in a cross-sectional survey which compares the impacts of different parenting styles on a child's adherence to gender role attitudes at a specific time.

Population and Sample: There were families from Lahore, the second most populated city and provincial capital of Pakistan. Sample size for this study was estimated using the Yamane formula (1973) and comprised of N=250 families, each with N=500 parents (250 mothers, 250 fathers) and N=500 children (250 daughters, 250 sons) from the same family. Multistage stratified random sampling was used to select the participants.

Sampling Procedure: Lahore city was divided into six strata and 24 schools were selected (2 from each Stratum, 1 girls high school and 1 boys high school) from the list of public high schools for girls and boys of Lahore city. They could be found in Lahore's Directorate of Secondary Education. Randomly, based on the criteria of inclusion in the study, school children (girls & boys) aged 14-18 years and parents (mothers & fathers) of school children aged 14-18 years, parents of those who have siblings (aged 14-18) and school children (sisters & brothers aged 14-18) were selected as study participants.

Data collection instruments: A self-designed Gender Socialization Parenting Scale (GSPS) was used for data collection. Items are split into three sub scales: societal concerns (7 items), role model (7 items) and gender equality (7 items) for a total of 21 items. Parents responded to each item on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree) for both sons and daughters, ages 14–18 years. The internal consistency or mean dependability of the GSPS scale is shown by Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$. In this research, the Gender Role Attitude Scale (Zeynelo Älu & Terzio Älu, 2011) was used with the permission of the authors. High school students filled up two aspects of the scale: egalitarian [A] and traditional [D] gender roles (Maj = 15.87, SD = 0.06). Every statement of both the preceding two sub scales was translated in Urdu and rechecked by an English-Urdu translator who had experience in gender studies. The internal consistency of the egalitarian gender role subscale (Cronbach alpha = 0.78) and traditional gender role (Cronbach alpha = 0.78) were moderate and the overall internal consistency was high (Cronbach alpha = 0.92).

Procedure: Data are collected from teachers and students with permission

from the high school authorities. Confidentiality of the information they would be providing in the questionnaire was also assured and it was stated that the information would only be utilized in an educational perspective. Ethical issues were also taken into consideration in the daily questionnaire collection and the respondents were commended for their prompt participation and patience in providing family information. Public secondary school teachers from Lahore, both male and female, were selected and a questionnaire was sent to them for their children in the age group of 14 to 18 years old. Similarly, children attending high schools for girls, boys picked and requested to fill questionnaires from both parents, and one sibling (14-18 years old). The questionnaires were administered by daily visits to the schools and households of the participants.

Data Analysis: A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to test the differences in the mean of the four dependent variables, which was followed by a univariate ANOVA analysis. Other data analysis techniques involved one-way and three-way ANOVA, simple percentage and frequency analyses.

Descriptive of Demographics

Selected demographic parameters of parents included gender, age, family system, and household income. Parents' ages were set at 45-60 years. Family structure is incorporated in this study as a variable for it influences the way of socialization of the parents. This entails 26.2% of nuclear households and 23.8% of joint families. For study reasons, extended family was not included in this group. The sample was divided into three income categories, of which the majority (48.8%) was in the 50,000 Pakistani rupee or more per month category, 22.8% in 25,000 to 50,000 Pakistani rupee per month, and 28.4% in 76,000 to 100,000 Pakistani rupee per month. Thus, it is definitely a representative of the working and middle class of Pakistan. Also, it was noted that 46% of the mothers who took this survey were employed and 54% were housewives. Similarly, 50% males and 50% girls aged 14 to 18 participated in the study.

Results

Table I: Two-way Mixed Factorial ANOVA for Role and its Interaction with Gender

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	P	Partial η^2
Within-Subject Effects						
Role	19456.92	1	19456.92	495.65	.00	.50
Role $\times$ Gender	90916.23	1	90916.23	2316.00	.00	.82
Error	19549.35	498	39.26			
Between-Subject Effect						
Gender	108139.20	1	108139.20	2546.01	.00	.84
Error	21152.05	498	42.47			

* $p < .05$

A significant main effect of gender was consistent with gender roles, $F(1, 498) = 2546.01$, $p < .00$, $\beta^2 = .84$, demonstrating that girls' ($M = 43.21$, $SD = 16.02$) attitudes were much better than boys' ($M = 22.41$, $SD = 6.78$). Gender roles had a significant main impact, $F(1, 498) = 495.65$, $p < .000$, $\beta^2 = .50$, with attitudes towards traditional gender roles ($M = 37.22$, $SD = 21.62$) being greater than attitudes toward egalitarian gender roles ($M = 28.40$, $SD = 3.62$). Gender and gender roles showed a significant interaction, $F(1, 498) = 2315.99$, $p < .00$, $\beta^2 = .82$. Post-hoc Tukey analyses showed that girls ($M = 29.26$, $SD = 3.31$) attitudes toward egalitarian gender roles were significantly ($p < 0.001$) higher than boys' ($M = 27.53$, $SD = 3.72$), and girls' children's attitude toward traditional gender roles were significantly ($p < 0.001$) higher than boys' ($M = 17.28$, $SD = 5.06$).

Table 1

Two subscales of Gender Roles Attitude Scale in Urdu

Gender Roles Attitude Scale		جنسی کرداروں کے بارے میں رویوں کا پیمانہ
Statement	رد	مساوی جنسی کردار
Egalitarian Gender Roles		
Decision to have a child should be made by both spouses in a marriage. [Modified: A man and woman should decide on their own to get married].	A1	شادی کا فیصلہ دونوں لڑکے لڑکی کو خود کرنا چاہیے۔
Equal fee should be paid to the women and men in professional life.	A2	پیشہ ورانہ زندگی میں خواتین اور مردوں کو مساوی تنخواہ دی جانی چاہیے۔
Widowed woman should be able to live by herself.	A3	بیوہ عورت خود سے زندگی گزارنے کے قابل ہو سکتی ہے۔
Assets should be shared equally when spouses divorce.	A4	میاں بیوی میں طلاق دیتے وقت اثاثوں کو یکساں طور پر بانٹنا چاہیے۔
Equal chances should be enabled to women and men for professional development.	A5	پیشہ ورانہ کے خواتین اور مردوں کو یکساں مواقع فراہم کرنے چاہئیں۔
Domestic work should be shared equally between spouses in the family.	A6	گھر کیلے کام کو گھر میں شریک حیات کے مابین برابر بانٹنا چاہیے۔
Daughters and sons should be benefited equally from the family's economical means.	A7	بیٹیوں اور بیٹوں کو خاندان کے معاشی ذرائع سے یکساں طور پر فائدہ اٹھانا چاہیے۔
Spouses should decide together in the family.	A8	میاں بیوی کو گھر کے فیصلے مل کر کرنے چاہیے۔
Traditional Gender Roles		روایتی جنسی کردار
The head of the household is man.	D1	گھر کا سربراہ آدمی ہوتا ہے۔
A man's main task in the house is breadwinning.	D2	گھر میں آدمی کا سب سے بڑا کام کمانا ہوتا ہے۔
Woman should not work if the economical situation of the man is adequate.	D3	مرد کی معاشی صورتحال مناسب ہو تو عورت کو کام نہیں کرنا چاہیے۔
Profession implemented by woman and man should be different.	D4	عورت اور مرد کا پیشہ مختلف ہونا چاہیے۔
Men should be preferred in employment applications because of women's fertility.	D5	ملازمت کی درخواستوں میں مردوں کو ترجیح دی جانی چاہیے۔
A girl should obey his father's wishes until she is married.	D6	جب تک شادی نہیں ہوتی لڑکی کو اپنے والد کے احکامات کی تعمیل کرنی چاہیے۔
Man should deal with tasks away from home such as shopping and paying the bills.	D7	مرد کو گھر سے دور کاموں سے نمٹنا چاہیے، جیسے خریداری اور بلوں کی ادائیگی۔
Girls should be dressed in pink while boys should be dressed in blue.	D8	لڑکیاں گلابی پگھٹیں جبکہ لڑکوں کو نیلے رنگ کا لباس پہننا چاہیے۔

Table II: MANOVA for Gender Difference in Parenting Socialization

Practices (N=500)

Variables	Gender	Mean	SD	df
<i>p</i>				
Role model	Fathers	28.41	4.68	3.02
	Mothers	29.48	4.37	

MANOVA Wilks' Lambda = .97, $F(3, 497) = 5.04, p < .00$ * $p < .05$

To examine gender differences in parenting practices, a one-way multivariate MANOVA analysis between groups was conducted. Dependent variables included "social concern," "role model," and "gender equality." The independent variable was gender. There was a statistically significant difference in scores between fathers and mothers for the group dependent variable $F(5,491)=3.10$, $p=0.009$; Wilks' $\lambda=0.97$; partial $\eta^2=0.031$. When the dependent variable's results were considered separately, the "role model" difference was statistically significant ($p=0.012$). Analysis of the mean score difference showed that mothers ($M=37.8$, $SD=6.85$) were more concerned about role model than fathers ($M=16.52$, $SD=2.88$).

Cross-sectional analysis of child parenting practices and attitudes towards gender roles revealed both egalitarian and traditional approaches.

Table III: One-way ANOVA for Gender Roles Attitude of Children with Gender Socialization Parenting Practice of 'role model'.

* $p<.05$

Variables	Traditional	SS	df	MS	F	p
Role model	Between Groups	675.03	22	30.68	1.84	.02
	Within Groups	8568.96	477	17.96		
	Total	9244.00	499			

One way ANOVA was used for the attitude towards traditional and egalitarian gender role among children who perform gender specific socialization practices regarding "role model". There was a statistically significant difference between the parenting practices "role model" and attitude of the children to traditional gender roles; $F(22,477)=1.84$, $p=0.012$. The results indicated that parenting practice as "role model" significantly affected the traditional gender roles attitude of the children aged 14-18.

Discussion

This study confirmed the first hypothesis that there was significant difference in "role model" parenting practices between fathers and mothers, with more emphasis on role modeling among mothers. This is similar to earlier research that has long focused on the influence mothers have on their children's social and emotional development (Gottfried et al., 2021). Likewise, the present study's findings align with those which found that

mothers value role modeling and role facilitation more than fathers (Lamb et al., 2023). This difference in “role model” parenting practices may be attributed to the traditional view that mothers, as the primary caregivers in the home, and are responsible for socializing their children’s core values and attitudes. In addition, mothers have generally been found to give more emotional and social support to their children in the form of role models and fathers have been found to give more practical and activity-based support to their children (Martin & Colmar, 2022). Higher scores reflect more egalitarian gender role attitudes, and lower scores reflect more traditional gender role attitudes. The result of the second hypothesis of the study revealed that there is a significant difference in attitude towards gender roles of high school aged adolescents between boys and girls, with girls having higher scores than boys indicating that they have more egalitarian than traditional gender role attitudes. This is similar to prior studies that demonstrate that women and girls are more involved in gender equality negotiations than men (Cuddy et al., 2022). Moreover, the findings reveal that there is a significant interaction between gender and gender roles attitude; indicating that both traditional and egalitarian gender roles attitude significantly affect the response of girls, although they are also found to be more egalitarian in their attitude. This is in line with the study which revealed that girls and women are strong advocates for gender equality, with girls having generally egalitarian attitudes towards gender roles, although, in some cases, they hold traditional views (Leaper and Friedman, 2023). Meanwhile, to analyze the influence of parenting practices on the socialization of both traditional and egalitarian gender roles attitude, the results of this study showed that there were significant difference in role model parenting practice related to the formation of adolescents' traditional gender roles attitude. The parenting practices in the form of "role model" shows the traditional attitude of children to the role of each individual, which shows an important aspect of gender socialization. The results could be explained by social learning theory which assumes that the expressions of gender role of parents directly influence the attitude of children toward gender role. For instance, past research suggests that parents' gender models promote traditional gender norms among adolescents (Kimmel and Messner, 2023). Therefore, this finding can be used as supporting evidence to the influence of parenting practices in relation to role model on the socialization of traditional gender roles attitude in adolescents. Likewise, a recent longitudinal study examined the significant influence of parental role model on the longitudinal development of the attitude of gender roles among adolescence. The study also revealed that children are more likely to have traditional gender normative attitude if their parents are traditional parents

and children are more likely to have egalitarian gender normative attitude if their parents are egalitarian (Leaper and Smith, 2022). Moreover, another research corroborates this research, indicating the role modeling of parent has an impact on adolescent development at any time. Children learn attitudes toward gender norms and form their identity based on their parents' behaviors and attitudes, but these parental expressions can have a significant impact on the formation of children's attitude toward gender roles (Kamiol et al., 2021).

Conclusion and Suggestions

The study demonstrated important assumptions on the role of parenting practices in the development of adolescents' gender roles attitude. It revealed that mothers were more active as role model and they emphasized on emotional and social support indicating the difference in contribution of parents towards gender roles development. In addition, this research revealed that high school girls tended to possess egalitarian and traditional attitude towards gender roles than boys. Implication of social learning theory is significant in the effect of parental role modeling on traditional and egalitarian gender roles, particularly because over time parental behavior is known to have a significant effect on children's attitudes towards gender roles. These findings indicated the need for a balance in parenting practices and further promotion of equality education to develop a gender equal attitude in future generation. Based on the current research findings the following suggestions are offered: The need is to promote an active father's role in shaping children's gender roles attitude.

- It is recommended to formulate gender-equal family policies to promote gender equality socialization.
- There is a need to improve primary and secondary school curricula in a gender-equal manner.
- It is also recommended to promote gender-sensitive media to promote gender equality education by promoting parental role models.
- Support further longitudinal studies on the formation of children's gender roles attitude through socialization.

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Original Article

**Reporting from the Conflict
Zone: Case of Bannu and
Lakki Marwat**

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Abstract

This article explores the complex environment facing the journalists in the conflict prone districts of Bannu and Lakki Marwat, Pakistan. Based on a quantitative methodological approach that is based on the Spiral of Silence theory, the research evaluates the effectiveness of security threats, lack of access, and editorial limitations, and inadequate training in affecting the objectivity of journalism. The main method of analysis was SPSS, but the authors have performed a battery of statistical tests, such as descriptive statistics, regression analysis, ANOVA, and t tests to support the empirical research results. A questionnaire of 100 journalists working in local press clubs revealed that there were serious risks of being threatened by militant groups and political forces, pressure from government authorities, lack of access to information, and the overall culture of self-censorship. To make the media operations in war-torn regions safer and more independent, the report suggests immediately needed institutional reforms, including certain safety precautions, editorial independence, and training focused on conflict-sensitive journalism. Finally, the research is a contribution to the overarching discussion on war journalism and provides policy suggestions to protect press freedom and protect journalists in risky situations.

Keywords: Conflict Journalism, Press Freedom, Self-Censorship, Security Threats, Pakistan, Spiral of Silence, Editorial Pressure, Access to Information

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Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study: The journalism in Pakistan has been made more dangerous not only internationally but also nationally throughout the past 10 years (Goodhand, Hulme & Lewer, 2000). According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 2024 became one of the deadliest years when media personnel got killed in Pakistan, which is depicted in Figure 1. Pakistan is also ranked the second-deadliest country to work as a journalist, with three other countries recording six murdered journalists (SFCG Pakistan, 2023). This evidence shows that the threats to the reporters in the front line have increased significantly. The plotting of the press-freedom trends in Pakistan shows disturbing tendencies. On the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, Pakistan dropped by two places to come 152 out of 180, a drop of two places since 2023; the government and terrorism rank the situation as very serious, as the interference of the government and terrorism have been weakening independence of journalism. Local laws put more and more pressure (Khan, Khan and Ullah, 2022). In early 2024, Pakistan passed the Punjab Defamation Act that imposed harsh punishment namely hefty fines and special tribunals on the offenders of so-called fake news. These actions prompted protests across the country by unions of journalists that threatened an increased trend of self-censorship. Besides internet disconnection and social media censorship, at least seven other journalists were assassinated, hundreds others were arrested or assaulted, thus highlighting a diminishing space in which to conduct a critical report (Khan, Wazir& Khan, 2019). Whereas the national statistics demonstrate the general threat, sub-national settings, especially conflict-affected regions like Bannu and Lakki Marwat are poorly researched (Aleemi, 2015). The media personnel must research these districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, as they are historical areas of insurgency, militancy, and tribal warfare, which simultaneously increase the level of risk. In spite of their strategic value, the reporters to such locales work with little or no organisational support as well as training. It has been anecdotally claimed that most of them face threats, access restrictions, or editorial pressures on a regular basis, but there is no official data to follow intimidation, arrest, or local censorship (Youseaf et al., 2023). Coverage of conflicts in war zones is one of the most dangerous and vital types of journalism. Rural districts of Bannu and Lakki Marwat of the unstable province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have always proved to be the centers of violence, political turmoil and militant activities. These regions have been ravaged by cross border terrorism, military operations and insurgent attacks in the past. Those journalists who work there face life-threatening risks, surveillance, censorship, and ineptitude in institutions. Despite the fact that this type of profession is inevitable to enhance

democratic values and promote knowledge in the society, they are under systemic threats which undermine the basic purpose of objective media. In some regions, militants, political extremists and government extremists block the spread of information and punish those journalists who report or write about corruption, insurgency, or human rights abuses. These forces, combined with each other, have a strong negative effect on journalists and their ability to defend the common good (Imran Ahmed, 2024). As a result of this, these journalists are increasingly marginalised as a result of economic instability, poor media infrastructure, and limited international coverage and visibility, making them vulnerable and silent in the overall media sphere. This paper attempts to capture such threats, evaluate the effects they have on press freedom, and suggest ways of improving the journalism situation in such war-torn nations.

1.2 Overview of Bannu and Lakki Marwat

The area of study falls in the Bannu Basin, Pakistan that can be reached through the Peshawar through a major National Highway (N-55) that goes to Karachi. Chonai-01 and Isakhel 01 wells are located in Districts Lakki Marwat. . and Mianwali and is nearly 250 km away as Peshawar. The on-going study is implemented in the Bannu Basin, north of Pakistan (Shaza Al Muzayen, 2025). The Trans Indus Ranges are tectonically active fold and thrust belts that encompasses three geological entities that include the Marwat Ranges, Surghar Ranges and the Bannu Basin- Khisor Ranges (Fig. 1) (Abir et al. 2017). The Bannu basin is not as well investigated, by the earlier researchers, in order to explore hydrocarbons. The existence of salt and evidence of the main detachment surface can be shown in recent dated public domain 2D seismic lines and wells sample data in Bannu Basin. It is likely that the dominant detachment of the entire region would be Salt Range Formation (Khan, Khan and Asif Ullah, 2022).

The structural and stratigraphical similarities between the Bannu Basin and Potwar Plateau allow concluding that the Bannu Basin is the continuation of Potwar Plateau to the west. Structural geology reveals that the formation of potential traps occurs in major part of the bannu basin anticlines (I Alam, 2015). Bannu Basin has predominantly Oligocene anticlines as its hydrocarbon traps which are mainly structural. Besides, the transpression zones and salt diapirism together with other oil seeps along the side of the basin increases the potential of hydrocarbon accumulation and is extremely prospective and likely to be exploited and explored in the future (Abiret *al.*, 2017).

1.3 Research Problem

There are numerous complex issues that confront conflict reporters and endanger their personal safety, erode media integrity and suppress freedom of the press. Journalism is a profession full of danger to reporters in the Pakistani districts of Bannu and Lakki Marwat, where, historically, insurgency, military conflict, and tribal animosity have reigned. These dangerous situations include physical insecurity instigated by military groups, expression limitation by political and security organisations, and mental torture due to the incessant contact with violence (Afife, Salem and Aziz, 2018). Lack of institutional assistance to journalists such as lack of training programmes on conflict reporting, protective equipment and lack of legal protection of journalist's further compound on the misfortunes they face in the practice of journalism.

Although the media is supposed to play a central role in promoting transparency and accountability, the practitioners in these areas work under the pressure of fear and self-censorship, and in most cases, they have to omit or alter content to avoid consequences. The intimidation of the political group, religious institutions and owners of media are sources of pressure on the content and limit the exercise of objective journalism. These dynamics unwittingly endow a democratically privileged status on the media, so that the spread of plausible information may pass on, which is ostensibly available to the rest of the population (Khan, 2013). Despite the inalienable importance of the conflict journalism, the literature is scarce in the empirical studies that challenge the barriers to the functioning of local journalists in Bannu and Lakki Marwat. Current literature mainly concentrates on reporters on a national or international level, which creates the sensation of a gap in the understanding of regional and grassroots realities. This research undertaking attempts to fill this gap by determining the major security threats, editorial influence, access limitations and training shortages that journalists working in such conflict zones encounter.

1.4 Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to analyse the challenges journalists face while reporting from Bannu and Lakki Marwat. The research aims at reviewing the challenges that hinder the professional role of journalists. The objectives of this research are as follows:

- RO1:** To determine the security issues that journalists who have to work in conflict zones encounter.
- RO2:** To investigate the restrictions to journalistic freedom of information in conflict areas.

- RO3:** To explore the difficulties journalists, encounter in accessing incident sites within conflict zones.
- RO 4:** To analyze the editorial guidelines imposed on journalists covering conflict zones.
- RO5:** To assess the adequacy of training journalists, receive for conflict reporting

1.5 Research question

The ultimate research question of the study is:

- RQ1:** Do journalists reporting from conflict zones receive sufficient security?
- RQ2:** What are the primary threats to journalists' freedom of information in conflict zones?
- RQ3:** What are the key obstacles preventing journalists from accessing incident sites in conflict zones?
- RQ4:** To what extent are journalists required to follow organizational editorial guidelines while reporting from conflict zones?
- RQ5:** Are journalists adequately trained to report from conflict zones?

1.6 Significance of Research

This research is significant because it fills a critical gap in the comprehension of the real-time challenges faced by journalists who operate in high-conflict regions, such as Bannu and Lakki Marwat. Although the general decline in press freedom in Pakistan is frequently the subject of national and international discussions, there are few empirical studies that offer a glimpse into the localised, lived experiences of media professionals in volatile tribal and insurgency-affected areas. This paper explains the systemic and structural barriers to objective reporting by putting emphasis on the merging of safety issues, editorial pressures, lack of information accessibility, and insufficient training.

In addition to the contribution to the scientific literature on conflict journalism through the theoretical framework of the Spiral of Silence, the results also educate policymakers, media houses, and human rights activists about the urgent need to change institutional frameworks. These reforms include the infrastructural support, the enhancement of legal protection and conflict sensitive training that is aimed at ensuring the security of journalists, as well as safeguarding the freedom of the press in the most problematic areas of Pakistan.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

The current article is rooted in the theoretical construct of Elisabeth Noelle -Neumann (1984) that argues that the spiral of silence forces human beings to conform to what they see the majority side to be due to a perceived risk of being alone or persecuted. Media organisations can also engage in self-censorship or intentional misrepresentation of stories when these changes are politically or militantly. This framework can help develop a subtle insight into the effect of perceived threats on reporting behaviour and silence opposing voices in conflict zones like Bannu and Lakki Marwat (Ishaq et al., 2021). The theory is divided into three situational components: (1) Fear of Isolation-journalists expect to be punished at work by publishing content that does not conform to dominant narratives; (2) Perceived Majority Opinion-media professionals evaluate the available dominant discourse and self-censure in this situation; and (3) Self-Censorship-journalists can avoid punishment at work by omitting or underreporting controversial information. The forces of emotion and professionalism that shape the work of journalism can be found proper contextualisation in the Bannu and Lakki Marwat framework.

2.2 Empirical Review

Against the backdrop of the global affairs including the World Wars, the Cold War, and the Global War on Terror, conflict journalism has changed significantly in the last 100 years. Scholars such as Harrison, Maynard and Torsner, (2020) have observed the growing difficulty modern war areas provide for reporters. Press freedom is consistently threatened in Pakistan by militant violence, government persecution, and political intervention. Specifically, Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., (2023) contend that changes in media ownership, market-driven rivalry, and technology advancements have changed the essence of journalism, hence increasing its susceptibility to outside control. According to Pettigrew and Reber, (2010) reporters working in unstable conditions can find themselves caught between the competing agendas of rebel groups and state authorities. Particularly in areas of conflict, studies by Palmer, (2022) show how political pressures and fear of reprisals often lead to self-censorship. Particularly in KP and Balochistan, the Pakistan Press Foundation and the Committee to Protect Journalists have documented many assaults, detentions, and deaths involving reporters. With almost 70% of these cases remaining unprosecuted Harrison and Pukallus, (2021) 12 journalists were killed and more than 60 attacked or arrested just in 2023 alone across Pakistan. Macnamara, (2014) also contend that internal strife has seriously threatened media professionals, particularly

in nations where legislative protections for reporters are either weak or underused. UNESCO (2023) emphasises the seriousness of the situation by stating that more than half of the murdered journalists worldwide in 2023 were covering war areas.

Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A quantitative survey of journalists registered with press clubs or working with different print and electronic media outlets in Bannu and Lakki Marwat was conducted. The survey exclusively focused on identifying the challenges faced by journalists while performing their professional responsibilities in Bannu and Lakki Marwat. This chapter explains the data collection process, the population of the study, the sampling technique and sample size, the implementation procedures adopted for the survey, the scale and survey instrument, the variables and their operationalisation, the data analysis and interpretation, and finally, the limitations of the study.

3.2 Population:

The journalists registered with press clubs in Bannu and Lakki Marwat and working with various international, national, and local print and electronic media organisations were the population for the current study. The Bannu Press Club and Lakki Marwat Press Club have a combined membership of journalists, including sub-editors, news editors, editors, bureau chiefs, reporters, photojournalists, and columnists working with media outlets of national and international repute. Data collection was successfully conducted from a total of 100 respondents, with 65 journalists from the Bannu Press Club and 35 journalists from the Lakki Marwat Press Club.

3.3 Sampling:

The sample for the study was selected from the population of permanent registered members of the **Bannu Press Club** and **Lakki Marwat Press Club**. Using the **purposive sampling** technique, also called judgmental sampling, the researcher specifically targeted reporters registered with these press clubs and working with various print and electronic media organizations in **Bannu and Lakki Marwat**. The usable sample size for this study is **100**.

3.4 Selection Criteria of Journalist:

The sample size that can be used in this study is 100.

- Bannu and Lakki Marwat district employed journalists.
- One year experience in journalism.
- Admission of journalists representing a wide range of media enterprises, including both print and broadcast media, online media, as well as Press Club members.
- News reporters with a range of beats such as politics, conflict, human rights, local concerns and others that are relevant.
- To be willing and have the informed consent to participate in the study.

3.5 Data Collection:

To conduct this study a questionnaire was sent to permanent members of both Bannu Press Club and the Lakki Marwat Press Club who works as reporters with different print and electronic media organizations to get information about the challenges they faced when they were reporting in Bannu and Lakki Marwat.

3.7 Data Analysis

The data collected was systematically analyzed in order to make it precise and reliable. In its analysis, the researcher used descriptive methods of statistics, such as mean and standard deviation, to make sense out of answers collected via a questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. The SPSS software was used to analyze the data which was given in tabular and graphical form to make it easy to understand. The analysis discussed the research questions of the study by looking at the security threats, access difficulties, information liberty, editorial requirements, and training loopholes faced by the journalists in the Bannu and Lakki Marwat.

The researcher used Google Forms to conduct the survey, however, he also went to the Bannu Press Club and Lakki Marwat Press Club to maximize the understanding and participation of the participants in the research. Both press clubs held a presentation of the aims, objectives and questionnaire itself. In order to achieve a targeted sample, the researcher was able to get a list of all the registered members of both press clubs and this had the details of their organisations, address and contact number. Only the permanent members reporting news regularly were chosen out of this list. The visits were made personally as the researcher met the members and indicated the objective of the research in detail and urged them to take part by filling out the online survey. This method assisted in enhancing the response rate, as well as clarity in the research objectives.

3.8 Operational Definitions

Term	Definition
Security Concerns	Refers to perceived threats, risks, or challenges faced by journalists, including physical violence, intimidation, harassment, censorship, and surveillance.
Journalists	Individuals involved in gathering, verifying, and disseminating news through print, broadcast, or digital media, including both employed and freelance journalists.
Conflict Zones	Conflict Zones Geographical regions that are marked by armed conflict, an instance of instability or unrest. The Bannu and Lakki Marwat. . districts are determined to be conflict zones in the given study due to the historical occurrence of violence and continuous military action in these areas.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

The study will be conducted according to strict ethical principles, with the focus made on the confidentiality of the participants and the informed consent obtained.

3.9 Variables in the Study

The current study took a quantitative approach to examine how security issues and pressure groups influence the objectivity of journalism and its decision-making. The use of a structured questionnaire served to distribute it to the journalists working in the Bannu and Lakki Marwat districts, thereby facilitating the gathering of empirical data.

Variables

1. Independent Variable: Security Challenges

Security issues included all the threats that journalists faced in the process of reporting in conflict areas. These included

- **Physical Threats:** Direct assaults, kidnapping or assault on reporters.
- **Digital Surveillance:** Tracking of the online behavior of journalists (such as email checking or social-media investigations by the state or other non-state actors).
- **Censorship and Lawlessness:** Government limitations on media, such as prohibition on coverage of certain issues and threats in the law on defamation or anti-terrorism.

Measurement:

The frequency (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always) and severity of security threats were measured using Likert scale questionnaire. These questions included individual experience of harassment, censorship, surveillance and physical threats. The respondents have responded whether they have changed or omitted information because of security risks.

2. Independent Variable:

The pressure groups were the political parties, militant groups, business organisations, and religious groups that tried to influence journalistic materials. Influence occurred through:

- **Coercion:** Open threats to journalists or their relations.
- **Bribes and incentives:** bribing to cover favourably.
- **Editorial Interference:** This is when the editors or the owners of the media are pressurizing the journalists to report in a biased way.

Measurement:

The extent to which journalists were put under pressure by various groups was measured using survey questions. The respondents reported on whether they were coerced, incentivized or editorial interfered and outlined the nature of the occurrence.

3. Dependent Variable:**Journalistic Objectivity:**

Journalistic objectivity is a concept that defines how the journalists can report true, objective and independent news under the influence of external pressures. Factors that influenced objectivity were:

Self-censorship: The inclination to keep confidential information or not to discuss the controversial issues.

Framing of the story and language: the manipulation of news tone or presentation so as to fit into mainstream discourses.

Rode to the Rescue: Reusing not investigating journalism in favour of government or business press releases

Measurement:

A self-reporting scale was used to determine the frequency of self-censorship amongst journalists. The respondents were asked to rate how much the external factors impacted their news framing and source selection.

4. Control Variables

In order to come up with accurate findings, the study has taken into account the control variables that can affect the decisions made by journalists:

- **Level of Experience:** More experienced journalists used superior risk-management arrangements.
- **Media Affiliation:** Journalists of foreign media outlets had varied pressure over those of local reporters.
- **Gender:** Female journalists also faced gender-related security threats.
- **Availability of Safety Training:** Threat resiliency was higher in the case of journalists who had formal experience in conflict-reporting training.

Results/Findings

4.1 Demographic Information

The demographic factors of the respondents present a background insight into the population of the study and they are journalists in Bannu and Lakki Marwat. The following characteristics are provided to have a context to the findings based on gender, age, and years of professional experience.

Table 1: Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Male	98	98%
Female	2	2%
Total	100	100%

Table 1 shows the gender distribution of the respondents. The figures show that the number of male respondents is overwhelming (98 %), which can be explained by the significant gender gap that the profession of a journalist has in these regions of conflict. The demographic data of the respondents in terms of gender is table 1. The statistics confirm that the overwhelming majority of the respondents are men (98/100/percent) as there is a considerable gender gap in the journalism industry in these war-torn countries.

Table 2: Age Distribution

Age Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
20–30 years	30	30%
31–40 years	40	40%
41 years and above	30	30%
Total	100	100%

Table 2 demonstrates the age distribution of the respondents. Most journalists are middle-aged with the age group ranging 3140 years (40) as the greatest proportion (40) followed by younger journalists age 2030 years (30) and older journalists age 41 years and above (41) with equal proportions of 30 and 41 years respectively.

Table 3: Years of Professional Experience

Years of Experience	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Less than 5 years	25	25%
6–10 years	47	47%
More than 10 years	28	28%
Total	100	100%

Table 3 defines the professional experience of the respondents. Nearly fifty percent of respondents (47%), have tenure of 6-10 years, which is a pointer of deep field experience. Furthermore, 28 percent of the respondents have a professional experience of more than a decade long and 25 percent of them have less than five years of experience which is a relatively new experience in the profession.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

In order to interpret the Mean scores, the following ranges were chosen as they would allow having a consistent framework according to which the responses would be understood:

Table 4.3.1: Mean Score Interpretation

Values	Interpretation	Range
1	Very Low extent	1.00-1.80
2	Low extent	1.81-2.60
3	Moderate extent	2.61-3.40
4	High extent	3.41-4.20
5	Very High extent	4.21-5.00

Source: Moidunny (2009).

4.21 Security-related challenges faced by journalists in conflict zones

S: No	Statement	M	SD
1.	Journalists have free access to information in conflict zones.	1.75	0.978
2.	State agencies/forces restrict journalists' access to conflict zones.	4.24	1.016
3.	Militant groups are the major barrier to journalists accessing zones.	4.07	1.297
4.	Militant groups in conflict zones threaten journalists.	4.18	1.167
Overall Facet Mean		3.56	1.1145

The findings in relation to Facet 1 Security demonstrate a significant number of challenges faced by reporters when operating in conflictive environments. The overall mean score of the participants equals 3.56, which indicates that there is a large level of concordance in the issues of security concerns. The data that show a decisive opposition (Mean = 1.75) to the premise that journalists are free to access the information available in such regions, thus, implies limited working environments. The respondents greatly conform (Mean = 4.24) to the fact that there are strict restrictions on journalistic access by government bodies and forces which emphasize the issue of state control as one of the significant obstacles. Moreover, armed groups are recognized as one of the biggest hindrances (Mean = 4.07) and a direct threat to the wellbeing of journalists (Mean = 4.18). The standard deviation of the facet (1.1145) illustrates the moderate fluctuation of the responses, but the general agreement indicates the complexity of the problems faced by journalists because of the interference by both the state and militant organisations. Such consequences highlight the poor conditions in which journalists work and thus recommend measures of protection and changes in policies to provide protection on their health and access to information in the warring regions.

4.2.2 Journalistic freedom of information in conflict zones

S: No	Statement	M	SD
1.	Journalists have free access to information in conflict zones.	1.75	0.978
2.	State agencies/forces restrict journalists' access to conflict zones.	4.24	1.016
3.	Political parties restrict journalists from publishing real facts and figures.	4.15	0.989
4.	Journalists receive adequate training to handle conflict zone reporting.	1.82	0.947
5.	The government restricts journalists from gathering information freely.	4.12	1.122
6.	Journalists are free to publish real facts and figures.	2.11	1.127
Overall Facet Mean		3.03	1.02983

The review of the Journalistic Freedom of Information in Conflict Zones aspect suggests that there are significant obstacles that keep the journalists at bay on their way to receiving and sharing information without limitation. Having a facet mean of 3.03 and standard deviation of 1.02983, respondents do agree that journalists work in a confined environment although the opinions are not even. The data reflect a serious resistance (Mean = 1.75) to the idea of free information access to journalists, which is a factor indicating

the challenges faced by journalists. In addition, it is also strongly accepted that the state agencies (Mean=4.24) and political parties (Mean=4.15) also strongly restrict the freedom of the press. Governments are also seen to further hinder the information accumulation of journalists (Mean=4.12), which worsens the predicament. Another issue that is crucial and lacks enough preparation is conflict zone reporting (Mean = 1.82) as it puts journalists in poorly prepared states to handle tricky cases. Moreover, the lack of agreement with the statement that journalists are free to publish facts (Mean =2.11) implies that the information environment is very restricted and censored. All in all, it can be concluded that the freedom of journalism in conflict zone is gravely undermined by political, governmental and institutional barriers, which leave the journalists with limited access, insufficient support and threat of significant harm to the journalists trying to carry out their activities successfully.

4.2.3 Journalists' ability to access incident sites in conflict zones

S: No	Statement	M	SD
1.	Local tribes/lords restrict journalists from gathering or publishing information freely.	3.92	1.116
2.	Militant groups are the major barrier to journalists accessing conflict zones.	4.07	1.297
3.	Their organization provides journalists with safety equipment (e.g., bullet-proof jackets, helmets, and first aid).	1.87	0.960
4.	Journalists have full access to conflict zones.	2.11	1.014
5.	Religious groups in conflict zones threaten journalists.	4.04	1.072
6.	State forces/agencies restrict journalists from gathering information.	4.14	1.005
Overall Facet Mean		3.35	1.007

Findings related to Facet 3-Access show that there are significant barriers that journalists face when attempting to obtain information and report on the conflict-ridden regions. Having a facet mean of 3.35, the respondents show either moderate or a strong view that information was restricted in such regions. The standard deviation of 1.077 implies a medium degree of distribution of responses. The data demonstrates strong agreement (Mean=4.07) that militant organisations are a significant impediment to journalists, but religious groups (Mean = 4.04) and government forces/agencies (Mean = 4.14) are also significant impediments. Furthermore, it is seen that local tribes and leaders are considered serious impediments (Mean = 3.92) to free collection and sharing of information freely. On the other hand, respondents greatly differ with (Mean=1.87)

agreement that their employers do not have any adequate protective equipment, including bulletproof vests and helmets, to allow them to safely enter into war zones. The conflict (Mean = 2.11) with the idea that journalists can freely access the conflict areas is another indication of the limited nature of their working environment. These consequences draw attention to the complexity of the situation facing journalists because of restrictions which are imposed by various groups such as militant factions, religious movements, local governments and poor organisational support. This is the case, which requires even stronger efforts to increase the access of journalists to the information and their security in the conflict-ridden areas.

4.2.4 Editorial guidelines provided to journalists for reporting from conflict zones

S: No	Statement	M	SD
1.	Journalists ignore stereotypes while reporting from conflict zones.	3.82	1.149
2.	Political parties restrict journalists from publishing real facts and figures.	4.15	0.989
3.	Editorial policies prevent journalists from publishing real facts and figures.	4.05	0.978
4.	Journalists ignore their worldviews while reporting facts from conflict zones.	3.89	1.136
5.	Political parties in conflict zones threaten journalists.	4.06	1.118
Overall Facet Mean		3.99	1.074

The findings indicate that journalists are faced with significant limitations of covering war-torn regions not only by external forces but also by internal editorial policies. The facet mean of 3.99 shows that there is a high amount of consensus between the participants that these guidelines are limiting but the standard deviation of 1.074 shows that there is a moderate difference in opinions. Subjects are also in full agreement (Mean = 4.15) with the fact that political parties do not allow journalists to report accurate facts and figures and there is also a similar sentiment (Mean = 4.05) regarding the influence of editorial policies in censoring the release of authentic information. Besides, the political parties in war zones have been a major threat as indicated by the high agreement (Mean = 4.06) among the participants. Even though there is a certain tendency of journalists to ignore stereotypes (Mean=3.82) and personal views (Mean=3.89) when reporting, this fact creates a necessity of unbiased and objective reporting principles. Overall, it can be concluded that the results presented indicate that journalists are facing a twofold task of not only having to balance the burden of political and editorial limitations but

also endeavour to maintain professional integrity in their statements. This explains why the editorial rules need to be restructured and journalism practices must be devoid of unnecessary political interference to encourage proper and objective reporting in trouble-prone areas.

4.2.4 Training received by journalists for covering conflicts

S: No	Statement	Me	SD
1.	Journalists receive adequate training to handle conflict zone reporting.	1.82	0.947
2.	Journalists report facts from conflict zones honestly.	2.62	1.237
3.	Local communities support journalists in conflict zones.	2.02	0.853
4.	Political parties in conflict zones threaten journalists.	4.06	1.118
Overall Facet Mean		2.63	1.039

Facet 5 Training scores show a lot of deficiency in the training and support provided to journalists working in conflict zones. The facet mean 2.63 with a moderate response is an indication that there is an unrest with the available training and resources. The standard deviation of 1.039 indicates a moderate level of views by the respondents who participated in the survey. The respondents were in great disagreement (Mean:1.82) that journalists are adequately trained to cover the conflict zone areas and cite a high level of unpreparedness. It was also found that there was disagreement (Mean = 2.02) on the support of the local communities which denotes that there was a deficiency of collaborative networks that could improve the reporting situations. Although the degree of agreement was at least somewhat (Mean=2.62) when it came to honesty in reporting, it shows that it is possible to do more to maintain the journalistic integrity. In addition, the high consensus (Mean = 4.06) that political parties are a threat to journalists in conflict zones highlights the dangers and external forces that they face, which further undermines their capacity to deliver the news adequately. Overall, the findings highlight that there should be urgent specialised training programmes and support systems that would provide the journalists with skills, knowledge, and resources required to engage in conflict zone reporting. These gaps need to be addressed in order to encourage safer and more effective reporting practices.

Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion

This study investigated the problems of journalists in two war-torn regions in Pakistan, Bannu and Lakki Marwat. The findings ratify that journalists work in very challenging conditions, such as threats, limited access to materials, editorial interference and insufficient training in the profession (Herrero-Gutiérrez et al., 2017). The effects of these forces are massive self-censorship, which cripples press freedom and the access of citizens to credible information. The spiral of quiet theory is a good explanation of how fear and social isolation have a role in creating journalistic silence and acquiescence in hostile settings.

5.2 Recommendation

- Safety equipment, life insurance and safety measures should be offered to the journalists who work in this dangerous area.
- Conduct regular conflict sensitive reporting, trauma coverage, and digital security training.
- The media houses must put internal controls in place to avoid being influenced by political or commercial players in reporting.

Journalism organisations ought to provide psychological support to counter trauma and burning among reporters.

- Implement legal actions against violence against journalists and their persecution.

5.3 Implications for Research

The present research also adds to the paucity of empirical research in the area of regional conflict journalism in Pakistan, particularly in the least covered districts of Bannu and Lakki Marwat. The findings highlight how the priority of the day is the creation of provincial and national policy setting in media that would guarantee safety, autonomy, and legal security of the journalists working in conflict-affected regions. The study also highlights why media houses are required to invest in war preparedness and journalistic integrity as well as the psychological capability of frontline journalists.

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Teachers' Perceptions of Educational Change in an NGO- Adopted Public School in Pakistan: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

Teachers' professional lives can be significantly influenced by changes in education, particularly when public schools are run by outside entities. Even though the Adopt-a-School model is becoming more popular in Pakistan, this study examines how teachers interpret educational improvement in a public school managed by a non-governmental organization (NGO). Eight instructors with three to thirty-five years of experience, including those who served at the school both before and after the NGO took control, were chosen for the study's qualitative case study. Semi-structured, open-ended, paper-based interviews were utilized to gather data on professional demands, NGO management, curricular revisions, and classroom practices. Conventional method was used to make it easier for participants to express their opinions. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was employed to examine the data, and five major themes were discovered. The findings are mixed: instructors typically noted advances in classroom instruction, particularly the transition to student-centered, activity-based learning, and appraised the enhanced school environment. They welcomed curricular improvements for promoting deeper comprehension, but they also strained to complete the material within the same academic year. Teachers documented increased professional stress as a result of rigorous oversight, heavy paperwork, confrontations with NGO coordinators, and a lack of recognition, all of which affected their mental well-being. The report suggests that NGO administrators should work more closely with teachers, make administrative procedures easier, and set evaluation standards that match the needs of activity-based education.

Keywords: educational change; NGO-adopted schools; teacher perceptions;

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qualitative case study; Pakistan

1. Introduction

Education reforms around the world are now aimed at upgrading classroom learning instead of only increasing the number of students in schools. Many countries are moving away from Rote learning and teacher-centered teaching and are encouraging students to think critically, use their knowledge in practical ways, and take part in their own learning. However, transforming these ideas into real changes in classrooms is still a major challenge for many educational institutions.

Pakistan's public education system clearly demonstrates these persistent issues. Despite significant policy discussion, government schools continue to lack resources, use outdated teaching techniques, and have minimal accountability. Teaching is usually teachers lecturing and students copying from the board and learning is mostly measured by memorization. Real structural change has proved difficult to achieve.

The government is working more closely with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to improve struggling public schools by bringing in better management, more resources, and new teaching methods. The Adopt-a-School model is one way to do this. Under this model, NGOs manage government schools, make changes to the syllabus, introduce activity-based learning, and regularly monitor teachers' work.

This study explores how the changes made by NGO management are viewed by teachers in a public school. Most studies in Pakistan have focused on school buildings and student enrollment rather than teachers' opinions and experiences. This study seeks to address this gap by presenting the views of eight teachers from an NGO-managed public school.

1.1 Background of the Study

Pakistan's public education system has encountered significant obstacles for many years. Many government schools do not have enough resources, proper teacher training, or strong accountability systems, which make it difficult to improve classroom learning. As a result, teachers often employ chalkboards, dictation, and memorization. These methods are not used because teachers do not want to change, but because they often receive little support, training, or encouragement to try new approaches.

The Adopt-a-School initiative was introduced to deal with these issues. Unlike earlier donor-funded programs that worked through government

channels, this approach allows NGOs to take charge in managing schools. They can revise the curriculum, promote activity-based learning, and create systems to regularly assess teachers' work. As a result, schools following this model are expected to bring about a transformative shift in their teaching methods and overall practices, often within a short period.

The key challenge in this amendment is not the policy itself, but how it impacts the people involved. Teachers have worked in the same way for many years, sometimes throughout their entire careers. For experienced teachers, being asked to use new teaching methods and being monitored more closely can be difficult and stressful. New teachers may also feel pressure because of the higher expectations. Ultimately, teachers have to turn the overarching objectives of these reforms into practical activities in their everyday classrooms.

Despite these changes are momentous for teachers, most research on NGO-led school management in Pakistan has not considered their perspectives. The greater part of research look at buildings, enrollment, and test scores. There has been much less focus on how teachers comprehend these changes and the impediments they confront. This study aims to narrow that gap.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

Evaluations of NGO-led school reform are generally based on tangible metrics such as improved facilities, increased enrollment, and standardized curricula. These metrics are worthwhile for accountability, but there is more to it than meets the eye. They say very little about the people who must carry out a policy on a daily basis, or how they are doing.

Teachers working in the Adopt-a-School model often encounter pedagogical hurdles. They have to follow government rules besides adjusting to the NGO's approach to school management, teaching methods, and monitoring systems. This means their responsibilities go beyond adjusting the way they teach. They also have to manage several tasks that can sometimes conflict with each other. Changes to the curriculum, paperwork, digital records, and performance checks may all happen at the same time, while the stress and pressure teachers experience are often overlooked.

This study is rooted in the belief that teachers' perspectives are integral to educational reform. Even with a well-designed program, it can be challenging to successfully bring about reforms when teachers feel weighed down, excluded, or underappreciated. Planning and enhancing educational reforms can benefit from examining how educators in NGO-adopted schools perceive and react to these changes. However, in wider conversations about

education reform, the experiences of teachers are frequently glossed over.

1.3 Objectives

General Objective: To explore teachers' perceptions of educational change in an NGO-adopted public school in Pakistan.

Specific Objectives:

- (i) To examine teachers' perceptions of changes in classroom practices.
- (ii) To explore teachers' views on curriculum reforms introduced by the NGO.
- (iii) To analyze teachers' perceptions of the NGO's role in school functioning.
- (iv) To identify challenges and conflicts arising between teachers and NGO management.
- (v) To explore factors that generates pressure or resistance among teachers in response to educational change.

1.4 Research Questions

General Research Question: How do teachers perceive educational change in an NGO-adopted public school in Pakistan?

Specific Research Questions:

- (i) How do teachers perceive changes in their classroom practices?
- (ii) What are teachers' views on curriculum reforms introduced by the NGO?
- (iii) How do teachers perceive the role of the NGO in school functioning?
- (iv) What challenges or conflicts exist between teachers and NGO management?
- (v) What factors generate pressure or resistance among teachers in response to educational change?

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

In response to ongoing problems in public education, NGO-managed schools have become increasingly common in Pakistan, especially through the Adopt-a-School model. The success of this model is usually appraised by things like better administration, improved facilities, and noticeable changes

in schools. Nonetheless, teachers are the ones who put these changes into practice every day in their classrooms. Better facilities alone cannot bring paradigm shift. This section looks at what teachers think and experience, how they cope with changes in education, and what is still missing from existing research.

2.1 Structural Shifts and the Adopt-a-School Model

The transition from state-governed to NGO-managed schools represents a fundamental shift in the institutional tapestry of public education. Bano (2008) characterizes NGOs as stabilizing 'anchors' for reform in Pakistan entities capable of providing the resources and organizational continuity that the public sector has historically struggled to sustain. These changes have markedly improved school facilities, student enrollment, and the way schools are managed under NGO supervision.

However, Ullah et al. (2020) warn that even benevolent infrastructural improvements can tuck away a crucial human aspect that is often ignored in educational reform. Their research shows that NGO-led reforms in Pakistan typically brush aside the needs and perspectives of the people involved. Hence, teachers often feel like 'silent implementers' rather than active partners in the process. The expertise and knowledge of experienced teachers, which could help improve education reforms, are often not considered when formulating policies and plans.

These studies differ crucially from one another. Ullah et al. (2020) underscore a significant issue: decisions are frequently made from the top without appropriately taking teachers' opinions into consideration. Bano (2008) emphasizes the NGO model as a helpful way to bring stability and improvement to schools. Conceivably both concepts can be true simultaneously. Although the model may clearly improve schools, it may also cause teachers to feel disregarded, alienated, or undervalued.

Studies on public-private partnerships in education demonstrate that this problem is not restricted to Pakistan. Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2011) explain that, in many countries, outside partners often have more control over decision-making. This can reduce teachers' freedom to make professional decisions. In Pakistan, this problem can become even more challenging because teachers may have to answer to both the government and the NGO. This issue in the Adopt-a-School model has been sidelined.

2.2 The Emotional Dimension of Change and Monitoring

Changing rules or systems are only half the battle. Educational reform demands both structural update as well as the realization of the teachers' feelings and their sense of who they are as professionals. Schmidt and Datnow (2005) found that teachers may not be very affected by general administrative changes, but they can feel stressed and worried when these changes affect their daily classroom work. This should not be misconstrued as teachers are unwilling or unable to change. It reflects that their classroom work is inextricably linked to their professional identity.

This emotional pressure intensifies when teachers are closely monitored. Aldridge and McLure (2024) found that strict monitoring and limited time to introduce changes are common challenges for teachers in many countries. When teachers feel that monitoring is about checking or controlling them rather than supporting them, they may lose trust and motivation. Accordingly, they may only pursue the new changes on the surface instead of leveraging their expertise in their teaching.

Most research uniformly supports one central takeaway: changes that directly affect teachers' classroom work creates impassioned responses than changes that only affect school administration. However, researchers have different opinions about why teachers resist these changes. Aldridge and McLure (2024) focus on practical problems such as not having enough time, resources, or proper training. Schmidt and Datnow (2005) focus more on teachers' feelings, especially when they feel that their professional freedom or ability as teachers is being questioned. Both explanations can be valid as practical problems and personal concerns of the teachers compound their difficulties.

Hargreaves (2005) also spotlights an important point. Sustaining medical changes need doctors' sense of involvement and commitment. Simply making teachers abide by the rules cannot create this commitment. Respect for teachers as professionals and recognition of their experience can boost their involvement. When teachers feel marginalized or unappreciated, their motivation can decline. Conversely, monitoring systems often underestimate this important factor.

2.3 Professional Identity and Barriers to Sustainable Reform

Reform prolongs itself when teachers are personally invested in its goals. When that sense of ownership is deficient, when teachers feel rules as

unwanted restrictions rather than as progress to their work, they may simply work on the surface level execution instead of restructuring their core teaching.

Aldridge and McLure (2024) elucidate that too much paperwork and close scrutiny can make things harder for teachers. Instead of viewing reform as a way to improve their teaching, teachers may view it as an added strain placed on their existing work.

In Pakistan, Ullah et al. (2020) depicts a situation where teachers adhere to the required rules mainly to satisfy school management, even though they harbor doubts regarding the goal of the reform. This gap between what teachers show and what they actually believe can create a flaw in reform programs. A program may be a statistical success, but it may not be truly successful in practice.

Fuller and Rivarola (1998) present a parallel argument. Teachers are more open to new teaching strategies when they are respected and given a voice in decision. However, when changes are imposed without discussion, teachers are less willing to accept them. This has been demonstrated in many countries over the years, but NGO-led programs still do not fully follow this approach.

There is still an important gap in the research. Studies have looked at the overall results of the Adopt-a-School model in Pakistan (Bano, 2008; Ullah et al., 2020) and at teachers' feelings about educational reforms in Western countries (Schmidt & Datnow, 2005; Hargreaves, 2005). However, there is little research on how teachers in NGO-managed schools in Pakistan deal with pressure from two sides—following government rules while also meeting the demands of NGO management. This study aims to explore this issue through teachers' real experiences.

There is still an important gap in the research. Studies have scanned at the overall results of the Adopt-a-School model in Pakistan (Bano, 2008; Ullah et al., 2020) and at teachers' feelings about educational reforms in Western countries (Schmidt & Datnow, 2005; Hargreaves, 2005). However, there is little research on how teachers in NGO-managed schools in Pakistan deal with pressure from two sides—following government rules while also meeting the demands of NGO management. This study aspires to delve into this issue through teachers' real experiences.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach based on the idea that people understand and experience things differently. The central aim of this investigation is teachers' opinions, professional identity, and their personal experiences of changes in the school. These things cannot be fully comprehend through numbers or statistics. Metrics can track their performance, but they cannot quantify how teachers feel about it, what they think about it, or how the changes affect them. Thus, the study center deeply on one NGO-managed public school rather than studying many schools.

3.1 Research Design

The **interpretive paradigm** means that people understand and experience reality in different ways. Their understanding is shaped by their own experiences and the meaning they give to those experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This conception is important for this study because **teachers may undergo the same educational changes differently**. Their reactions can rest on their past teaching experiences, professional identity, and relationships with colleagues and school management.

A **case study design** aids the researcher understand these experiences in the teachers' real school environment. It also facilitates capture the details and different experiences that might be missed if the study only used numbers or basic information.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Eight teachers were selected using **purposive sampling**. The study selected them because they could provide useful and relevant information. The teachers were divided into **two groups**. The first group comprised experienced teachers who were already working at the school before the NGO took over its management. They had personally experienced the changes brought by the NGO. The second group embraced teachers who joined the school after the changes had already been introduced. They had **three to four years of experience** working under the new system.

On the whole,, the teachers had between **3 and 35 years of teaching experience**. This difference was critical because teachers may see and feel the same school environment differently depending on their previous

experience and knowledge. Including both groups helped the study apprehend these different views.

Purposive sampling was a fit because the purpose was not to represent everyone statistically, but to get detailed and useful information (Patton, 2002). The participants were chosen because they had direct and relevant experience of the matter being considered and of working in an NGO-managed school.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were gathered via paper-based, semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. The questions focused on four main areas related to the question addressed: classroom practices, changes in the curriculum, NGO management, and pedagogical strain. The open-ended questions allowed teachers to share their experiences and opinions in their own words, rather than choosing from preset options.

The written, take-home format was chosen instead of face-to-face or recorded interviews with intent.. Teachers may feel uncomfortable speaking openly, especially when reviewing school management or their relationships with school leaders. The paper-based format gave them privacy, time, and cognitive liberty about their answers without feeling pressured. This approach helped teachers give more truthful replies and respected their right to share their views freely.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were evaluated using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. First, all the interview responses were meticulously reviewed several times to understand the teachers' views and experiences. Attention was given not only to what teachers said, but also to the feelings, emphasis, and unspoken implications. After this, important ideas and patterns were identified and assign simple codes. Some of the codes encompassed "too much paperwork," "student engagement," "pressure from monitoring," and "assessment problems."

The codes were reviewed and improved as the investigation unfolded. Related codes were aggregated to form five main themes, based on the study's research questions: 1) Teachers' views about changes in classroom practices; 2) Teachers' views about changes in the curriculum; 3) Teachers' views about the NGO's role in running the school; 4) Challenges and

disagreements between teachers and NGO management ; and 5) Factors that created pressure and resistance among teachers. Linking the themes to the research questions helped keep the analysis clear, organized, and targeted on the information shared by the teachers.

Trustworthiness was assured through member checking and detailed descriptions. Two participants were demonstrated the main findings to check whether they matched their actual experiences. Comprehensive accounts were also provided so that readers could decide whether the findings could apply to similar situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. Findings

The analysis of the interviews showed that teachers' professional identities were swayed by the changes brought by NGO management. ***Table 1 shows the five main themes and their sub-themes that were classified during the analysis.***

Table 1.

Thematic Analysis of Teacher Perceptions: Key Themes and Sub-Themes

Main Theme	Core Sub-Themes
1.Changes in Classroom Practices	Student-Centeredness; Interactive Engagement; Facilitation over Lecturing
2. Curriculum Reforms	Practicality; Conceptual Learning; Syllabus Coverage Pressure
3.NGO Initiatives in School Functioning	Infrastructure Modernization; Enriched Learning Environment; Discipline
4. Management–Teacher Dynamics	Senior–Junior Hierarchy; Assessment Mismatch; Communication Gaps
5. Pressure and Resistance	Documentation Burnout; Strict Monitoring; Emotional Well-being Impact

4.1 Perceptions of Changes in Classroom Practices

The significant transformation reported by teachers was the move from ***traditional teacher-led teaching to more student-centered teaching***. Most teachers noticed this change as a **positive improvement in their teaching**, rather than something they were forced to accept. One teacher explained, ***“Since the NGO involvement, my teaching methodology improved. I***

started doing simple experiments with daily materials” (Participant 01). This shows that the change was not only about new ideas but also about *practical support, teaching methods, and materials* that helped teachers diversify teaching styles.

Both experienced and beginning instructors agreed that *traditional lecture-based teaching was being replaced by more participatory teaching strategies*. Teachers were motivating students to take part through **discussions, group work, and creative activities**. One teacher said, *“I focus on engaging students through discussions, group work, and creative tasks”* (Participant 04). This highlights that teachers were not simply following orders; they were **using their personal innovations and professional judgment**. Although the new methods mandated more time and effort, most teachers sensed that they **helped improve teaching and learning**.

4.2 Teachers' Views on Curriculum Reforms

Teachers generally looked favorably upon the new curriculum. They described it as more practical, child-friendly, and captivating than the old curriculum. Many teachers appreciated a drop in standard memorization. One teacher said, “The curriculum reduced rote learning and added stories for English” (Participant 01). This reflects that teachers liked contextualized learning material instead of asking them to simply memorize information.

Nonetheless, the new curriculum also created some challenges. Several teachers preferred **teaching concepts comprehensibly instead of simply completing the syllabus**. One teacher said, *“I focus on conceptual learning rather than just finishing content”* (Participant 05). Yet, teachers still had to follow the **government syllabus and academic schedule**. Activity-based teaching also consumes more time. As Participant 01 said, *“Activities take time, so syllabus coverage needs careful planning.”*

This reveals that the problem was **not with the teachers themselves**. The curriculum had changed, but **the time and examination requirements had not modified**. So, teachers had to manage the pressure of using better teaching methods while also meeting the curriculum deadlines.

4.3 NGO Initiatives and School Functioning

The betterment in the school’s physical environment was one of the most favorable outcomes in all eight interviews. Teachers remarked that the

classrooms had become better and more beneficial for learning. One teacher stated, ***“Classrooms are print-rich, students’ work is displayed. It feels like a learning space”*** (Participants 01 and 02). ***Libraries, art rooms, and other co-curricular facilities*** were also incorporated. Teachers felt that these changes created a better, more engaging and more meaningful learning environment for students.

These changes were critical for more than just making the school look better. A clean, well-maintained, and well-equipped school can uplift teachers to think that their work is valued. Participant 05 mentioned improvements in ***“cleanliness, discipline, and co-curricular activities,”*** and other teachers shared similar views. Additionally, several teachers indicated that ***these changes helped improve student attendance and confidence***. This conveys that improving the school environment had a positive effect on students’ learning and overall school experience.

4.4 Challenges and Conflicts between Teachers and NGO Management

Coupled with the positive changes, teachers also confronted professional conflicts, especially about authority and experience. A prevalent challenge was the relationship between experienced government teachers and younger NGO-appointed coordinators. Participant 06 voiced an apprehension that was also mentioned by other teachers: ***“The NGO management forces senior teachers to follow instructions and methodology by their junior teachers.”*** This goes beyond just who was senior or junior. Experienced teachers felt that their professional teaching history was not being respected. They believed that younger coordinators were given more authority because of their positions in the NGO system. This provokes discontent and tension among teachers.

Additional concern was the difference between the NGO’s teaching methods and the examination system. The NGO encouraged teachers to focus on understanding concepts over memorizing information. However, government board exams still necessitated students to prepare in a different way. Participant 01 expressed that the new approach ***“helped with conceptual learning” but “didn’t prepare for board exam readiness.”*** This put teachers in a tight spot. They had to apply the NGO’s teaching methods while also preparing students for their board exams. Sometimes, these two goals did not match due to misaligned priorities.

4.5 Factors Creating Pressure and Resistance

The final theme concentrates on the emotional and professional pressure teachers experienced during the reform process. The core challenge was a document heavy workflow. Teachers had to maintain consistent records about classroom activities. Participant 05 characterized this work as *“excessive” and “irritating.”* Teachers were amenable to the accountability, but they felt that *too much paperwork took time and became a burden instead of helping to improve teaching.*

The teachers also perceived that the monitoring system was more about **checking whether they followed rules** than helping them improve. When teachers feel that they are being scrutinized instead of supported, they may become defensive and disinclined to participate. The pressure of keeping records and meeting monitoring requirements also affected some teacher’s **mental health**. Participant 05 explained that *it is difficult when teachers’ hard work and dedication are unrecognized or unappreciated.* Taken together, the evidence suggests that the system focused heavily on **monitoring and paperwork**, while teachers’ actual efforts were often not acknowledged. When people strive but do not receive appreciation, they can gradually **lose momentum and become disengaged.**

5. Discussion

The findings of this study do not indicate that the Adopt-a-School model is completely good or bad. Rather, the study shows both progress and problems. There has been tangible progress in teaching methods and the school environment. However, teachers also face systematic constraints that can make it difficult for them to continue these improvements.

5.1 The Shift toward Student-Centered Pedagogy

Teachers in this study welcomed the move toward student-centered teaching rather than following it only because they were instructed to. Participant 01 described using everyday materials to conduct experiments, showing a marked transformation in the way teachers approach their work. Both experienced and novice teachers saw the shift from traditional lectures to activity-based learning as a constructive upgrade. Most notably, they felt that this approach helped them teach better, rather than seeing it as just another layer of compliance.

This outcome is similar to Bano (2008), who found that NGOs can help make education reforms function more effectively by *providing teachers*

with useful materials and sustained support Teachers were not simply told to alter their teaching methods. They were also given the *tools and resources* required to use adaptive approaches.. This support made the changes *easier and more productive for teachers*.

Nonetheless, this progress was affected by what teachers called “*syllabus pressure*.” Activity-based teaching demands a longer timeline than traditional teaching methods, but teachers still had to cover the curriculum according to the government’s schedule. This gives teachers a hard time. They wanted to use teaching methods they believed were more fruitful, but they also had to make sure students completed the required syllabus for important exams. This problem was common among several participants and supports Aldridge and McLure’s (2024) finding that lack of time is a major problem in educational reform. It also shows that changing teaching methods without changing the school’s time and syllabus requirements puts too much pressure on teachers.

5.2 Curriculum Reforms and the Implementation Gap

Teachers had a positive reflex to the new curriculum. They often narrated it as “**practical**” and “**child-friendly**,” and they welcomed the reduced focus on cramming and parroting. Participant 05 preferred helping students fathom ideas instead of simply covering more content, while Participant 01 favored using stories in English lessons. These views depict that the new curriculum matched teachers’ own ideas about effective teaching. This is crucial because teachers are more likely to embrace and implement changes when those modifications support their professional values.

The main issue was not the new curriculum itself, but the discrepancy between the curriculum and the examination system. Government board exams still focused on the skills that the new curriculum was seeking to mitigate, such as rote learning. Teachers appreciated the new content and teaching methods, but they grew frustrated to use them fully because the examination system had not changed. This underscores a more pervasive problem: between what students are taught and what they are tested on. The NGO cannot tackle this problem on its own because it involves the wider education system. Preceding analyses on NGO-managed schools in Pakistan has not focused much on this issue. This study highlights the need that this issue requires a systemic solution rather than expecting individual workarounds.

5.3 Infrastructure and the School Environment

The improvement in the school's physical learning space was the most valued transition. All participants spoke positively about the NGO's efforts facilities upgrade. This reinforces Bano's (2008) finding that better infrastructure can improve teacher morale and community trust. Teachers also opine that a well maintained and resource rich school validated that their work was valued and helped increase students' interest in learning.

5.4 Hierarchy and the Assumptions of Top-Down Reform

The conflict between veteran government teachers and novice NGO coordinators was one of the main detections of the study. It also challenges the general notion that educational change should come mainly from management. In top-down models, managers are seen as the resident experts who determine how changes should be made. However, Ullah et al. (2020) expressed concerned that this approach often dismisses the views of teachers who have the greater classroom background. This study establishes the factual accuracy that this problem also exists in the schools studied.

Participant 06's exasperation with being constantly over sighted and interfered by coordinators who had fewer classrooms experience indicates a flaw that general reform studies often miss. The problem is not just about teachers feeling disquieted; it is also about not valuing their experience and knowledge. When seasoned educators feel that their opinions are neglected instead of being consulted, they are more likely to holding back their knowledge and skills to drive the reform.

The disparity in assessment methods aggravated the problem. Teachers were still obligated for preparing students for government board exams, but the NGO's teaching approach exempted from focusing on these exams. This presented a significant dilemma for the teachers. If they juggled NGO's teaching goals, it became challenging to prepare students for government exams. There was no framework available to help teachers manage or solve this problem.

5.5 Emotional Well-being and the Cost of Dual Management

The emotional side of this study may be its novel observations. Teachers endured paperwork stress, pressure from monitoring, and a fear of unrecognized efforts. These problems were connected and were not just isolated incidents. Participant 05 reviewed that when teachers' dedication is

not recognized, it can affect their mental well-being. This corroborates Schmidt and Datnow's (2005) finding that educational reforms can create strong emotional reactions when they interfere with teachers' daily workflow. This study complements their finding by showing how these emotions are linked to the weight of accountability to both the NGO and the government.

What makes these teachers' experience different is that they have to satisfy two parallel sets of requirements. They must meet government rules as well as NGO expectations, which sometimes run counter to one another. However, there is no reliable system in place to recognize or support teachers cope with stress. As Ullah et al. (2020) elucidate, this can lead to "imposed compliance," where teachers treat the work as strict requirement rather than a personal choice. This gap can also create frustration and weigh on teachers' mental well-being.

Hargreaves (2005) explains that successful and long-lasting reforms need teachers to truly advocate this transition. This endorsement cannot be forced. It can be developed by respecting teachers, consulting them in decisions, and acknowledging their contributions. However, teachers in this school felt that the monitoring system fixated more on finding mistakes and checking compliance than on stimulating and supporting them. Therefore, the emotional stress found in this study was the direct reflection of this approach.

6. Limitations of the Study

Every research design has certain constraints. The choices made in this study also have boundaries that should be accounted before applying these takeaways. Four primary limitations warrant specific attention.

Initially, the study was carried out in only one school. This provides a comprehensive overview of that particular school, but the findings are inapplicable to all schools using the Adopt-a-School model. Diverse NGOs, schools, and areas may have varying teacher experiences. So, these findings are unique for understanding this school, but they cannot be representative of all schools.

Second, only eight teachers participated in the study. Although this was suitable for qualitative research and the core themes were reiterated enough to ensure thematic saturation, however, a larger group of teachers could have yielded different views. For instance, younger or recently trained teachers might have encountered distinct experiences. Therefore, the study includes

key perspectives, but other viewpoints exist.

Third, the study leaves out the views of NGO administrators, coordinators, or management staff. This was a conscious choice because the study centers the focus on teachers' experiences and voices, which are rarely captured in existing reform analysis. Rather than recording the views of management staff, the study only shows the teachers' interpretation of the decisions made by the NGO. The administrators may have varied opinions or reasons that could provide an all-encompassing view of the variables at play.

Fourth, the findings are mainly beneficial for urban public schools in Pakistan that have identical governance framework managed by an NGO. Teachers in rural schools, schools utilizing distinct NGO operational frameworks, or schools at different stages of reform may have different experiences. So, these conclusions should be viewed through a critical lens and with attention to the school's specific situation.

7. Recommendations

The findings of this study determine that the reform is bringing real merits, but it is facing challenges in the professional and emotional well-being of the teachers who execute it. The following protocols are established for NGO managers, policymakers, and school administrators involved in Adopt-a-School programs.

7.1 Involve Experienced Teachers In Decision-Making

NGO management should institutionalize operations by creating regular meetings and discussion groups where experienced teachers can put forward their suggestions and take part in planning reforms. Their classroom experience is not a hurdle to adaptation; it is a valuable resource for ensuring the efficacy of the reforms. When teachers are consulted and involved in decisions, they are more likely to invest themselves fully in the system instead of just following a set of instructions.

7.2 Streamline Documentation Requirements

Reporting requirements should be reviewed to streamline the documentation process. Teachers should only complete reports that directly inform their instructions. Reducing administrative overhead will allow teachers to maximize their time and energy for instructions. This is important to drive educational excellence.

7.3 Reframe Monitoring as Professional Development

NGO management needs to foster a supportive environment for teachers

rather than relying solely on top-down direction and monitoring. Classroom observations should be followed by helpful feedback and discussions, not just one way evaluations. Monitoring should ask, “How can we help this teacher improve?” rather than “Did the teacher follow the rules?” Gaining early trust and loyalty from the beginning is much better than trying to restore the compromised credibility.

7.4 Address the Assessment Mismatch Directly

The divergence between the NGO’s teaching methods and government board exams is a significant complication that teachers cannot solve alone. NGO management should team up with the government to train teachers on how to develop students’ comprehension while aligning instruction with board exams requirements. Failure to address this problem only puts immense pressure on individual teachers.

7.5 Establish Formal Mechanisms for Recognizing Teacher Effort

Recognition should be a systematic, ongoing part of management. Teachers ought to be valued through formal appreciation, peer recognition, and regular praise during staff meetings. This can reduce stress and fuel teachers’ ambition. Teachers do not want less responsibility or accountability; they thrive best in an environment that respects and acknowledges their contribution. Implementing this small tweak can drive major improvements.

7.6 Align Pedagogical Expectations with Structural Realities

Modifying classroom instructions but not changing the academic calendar, exam schedule, and timetable cause the teachers to be strained. NGO management should partner with the government to create timetables that ensure adequate provision for activity-based learning. Educational reform success is contingent upon receiving sufficient time and resources.

8. Conclusion

The objective of this study is to examine how teachers live through evolving educational environment in an NGO-adopted public school in Pakistan. The findings show that the results were inconsistent, demonstrating strong performance in some sectors while underperformance in others, especially in teachers’ professional lives.

The NGO has exhibited marked improvements in the school’s physical environment and teaching methods. Teachers acknowledge and applauded these changes. The move toward activity-based and student-centered learning is a welcome departure from the old passive teaching style. The

enhanced academic environment is also helpful for both teachers and students. These are valuable and necessary environment.

At this juncture, the study shows that something important is being lost over the course of the reform process. Teachers have to answer to two distinct management streams, cope with a lot of administrative work, face pressure from veteran staff, and receive faint praise or professional support. This breeds emotional stress and exhaustion. The issue lay not in the reform idea, but by the way the reform is managed. If a reform makes teachers drained and unsupported, it may fail in the long run.

The main thrust of the study is that teachers' opinions and experiences are integral in educational reform. Teachers are not just people who comply with the new policies. They actively understand, respond to, and align their actions with the updated protocol in the classroom also. Their experience heavily influences the reform's success or failure. Teachers are the sole bridge connecting every new policy, curriculum, or teaching method to the students. If teachers are tired, unappreciated or not involved in decision-making, the reform is less likely to succeed and its primary driving force is lost.

The Adopt-a-School model has elevated the overall standard of the school studied in this research. However, its sustainable progress relies not only on the changes made in the classrooms but also on how well it backs the teachers and staff who work there every day. Teachers crave proper guidance, respect, and support to effectively implement new initiatives and the educational reform is more likely to yield positive results.

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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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