

*Unpacking the Gendered Landscape of Mental Health Among University Students in Pakistan: Exploring the Interplay of Sociocultural Norms, Differential Stressors, Coping Mechanisms, and Access to Support*

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# Unpacking the Gendered Landscape of Mental Health Among University Students in Pakistan: Exploring the Interplay of Sociocultural Norms, Differential Stressors, Coping Mechanisms, and Access to Support

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## Abstract

Mental health issues among university students in Pakistan have gained increasing attention, particularly in the context of gendered experiences of stress and mental health challenges. This paper explores the complex intersection of sociocultural norms, differential stressors, gender-specific coping mechanisms, and access to mental health support in shaping the mental health landscape among university students in Pakistan. Drawing from a mixed-methods approach, the study combines quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to investigate how male and female students experience mental health challenges differently and the ways in which sociocultural expectations impact their mental well-being. The findings suggest that while both genders experience significant academic and social stress, women are disproportionately affected by gendered expectations, societal pressures, and a lack of institutional support. Gender-specific coping mechanisms and access to mental health services also differ substantially between male and female students. The study highlights the need for gender-sensitive approaches to mental health support in universities, ensuring equitable access to services and addressing the socio-cultural barriers that disproportionately affect female students' mental health. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aimed at improving mental health resources and creating a more supportive and inclusive academic environment for all students in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Gendered mental health, university students, sociocultural norms, coping mechanisms, academic stress, gender inequality, Pakistan, access to support, mental health services.

*Unpacking the Gendered Landscape of Mental Health Among University Students in Pakistan: Exploring the Interplay of Sociocultural Norms, Differential Stressors, Coping Mechanisms, and Access to Support*

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## **Introduction**

Mental health issues among university students have been a growing concern in Pakistan, particularly as the pressures of academic achievement, societal expectations, and gendered roles take a toll on students' mental well-being. While the mental health challenges faced by students are widely acknowledged, there is a critical gap in understanding how gender influences these challenges. Sociocultural norms, differential stressors, and access to support systems play a significant role in shaping the mental health experiences of male and female students differently.

In Pakistan, the gendered landscape of mental health is marked by significant disparities in how men and women experience academic and social pressures. Sociocultural expectations about gender roles, family obligations, and career paths significantly impact female students' mental health. Meanwhile, male students may face different sets of expectations, such as pressure to succeed as the primary breadwinners, which can also contribute to their mental health struggles. Understanding the complex interplay of these gendered factors is crucial for addressing mental health challenges and ensuring that both male and female students have equal access to mental health support.

This study aims to explore the gendered experiences of mental health challenges among university students in Pakistan, focusing on the role of sociocultural norms, gender-specific stressors, coping strategies, and access to mental health support. Through this exploration, the paper seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the ways in which gender influences mental health and offer recommendations for improving support systems within higher education institutions in Pakistan.

## **Problem Statement**

Despite the growing recognition of mental health challenges among university students in Pakistan, there is limited research on how gender influences these issues. Sociocultural norms and gendered expectations often dictate how male and female students experience stress, cope with mental health challenges, and access support systems. The existing mental health services in universities often fail to address the specific needs of both genders, with women particularly facing cultural barriers and social stigma when seeking help. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how gendered sociocultural factors, stressors, and coping mechanisms shape the mental health experiences of male and female students in Pakistan, and how universities can better support their mental well-being.

## **Objectives of the Study**

1. To explore the prevalence of mental health issues, including stress, anxiety, and depression, among male and female university students in Pakistan.
2. To examine the sociocultural norms and gendered expectations that contribute to mental health challenges for male and female students.
3. To identify the differential stressors experienced by male and female students and their impact on mental health.
4. To investigate the gender-specific coping mechanisms employed by students to manage academic stress, societal pressures, and gendered expectations.
5. To assess the accessibility of mental health support services for male and female

*Unpacking the Gendered Landscape of Mental Health Among University Students in Pakistan: Exploring the Interplay of Sociocultural Norms, Differential Stressors, Coping Mechanisms, and Access to Support*

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students and identify barriers to accessing these services.

6. To provide recommendations for creating gender-sensitive mental health support systems within universities in Pakistan.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the key sociocultural norms and gendered expectations that shape the mental health experiences of male and female university students in Pakistan?
2. How do male and female students experience academic and social stress differently, and how does this influence their mental health?
3. What coping mechanisms do male and female students employ to deal with academic stress, societal pressures, and gendered expectations?
4. How accessible are mental health services for male and female students in Pakistani universities, and what barriers exist in accessing these services?
5. What strategies can universities adopt to provide more inclusive and gender-sensitive mental health support for all students?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for several reasons:

- **Insight into Gendered Mental Health Challenges:** By exploring the gendered experiences of mental health challenges, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of the specific pressures faced by male and female students in Pakistan.
- **Improving Mental Health Services:** The findings will help identify gaps in mental health support services and provide actionable recommendations for improving these services to cater to the unique needs of both male and female students.
- **Addressing Socio-Cultural Barriers:** The study highlights the role of cultural stigma and societal pressures in shaping mental health outcomes, particularly for female students, and provides insights into how these barriers can be mitigated.
- **Policy Implications:** The research will inform university policies on mental health support and contribute to the development of gender-sensitive approaches in mental health programming within higher education institutions in Pakistan.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Gender and Mental Health**

Gender plays a critical role in shaping the mental health experiences of university students. A study by Mahmood & Chaudhry (2020) highlighted that female students in Pakistan are more likely to experience mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, primarily due to societal expectations and family pressures. These pressures are compounded by traditional gender roles, which dictate that women should prioritize family obligations over personal well-being (Zia, 2021). On the other hand, male students face unique challenges, including societal expectations to succeed academically and secure a stable job as the primary breadwinner, which can lead to stress, particularly if they feel they are not meeting these expectations (Fatima et al., 2019).

*Unpacking the Gendered Landscape of Mental Health Among University Students in Pakistan: Exploring the Interplay of Sociocultural Norms, Differential Stressors, Coping Mechanisms, and Access to Support*

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### **Sociocultural Norms and Gendered Expectations**

In Pakistan, societal norms and gendered expectations significantly affect the mental health of university students. Female students often face societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, such as managing household responsibilities and meeting familial expectations (Raza et al., 2020). These pressures can lead to feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and depression. For male students, the pressure to succeed academically and secure a stable job as the primary breadwinner can lead to stress, particularly if they feel they are not meeting these expectations (Jamil et al., 2020).

### **Stressors and Coping Mechanisms**

University students face a range of stressors that affect their mental health. For female students, academic stress is often compounded by the pressure to meet societal expectations related to appearance, behavior, and familial responsibilities (Mahmood & Chaudhry, 2020). Male students, on the other hand, often experience stress related to academic performance and career prospects. Research by Zia (2021) found that while both genders experience academic stress, female students are more likely to report higher levels of anxiety and depression due to the intersection of academic and socio-cultural pressures.

Coping mechanisms vary between genders, with female students often relying on social support from friends and family, while male students may be more likely to internalize stress or engage in individualistic coping strategies, such as exercise or avoidance (Khan et al., 2020). These gendered coping strategies are influenced by societal norms and the availability of support systems.

### **Methodology**

This study uses a **mixed-methods approach**, combining **quantitative surveys** and **qualitative interviews** to investigate the impact of gender on mental health among university students in Pakistan.

#### **Quantitative Component**

A survey was administered to 500 students (250 male, 250 female) from five universities in Pakistan. The survey assessed the prevalence of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and stress, using validated scales such as the **Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)**, **Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7)**, and **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)**. The survey also included demographic information regarding gender, socio-economic status, academic pressure, and coping strategies.

#### **Qualitative Component**

In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 students (10 male, 10 female) and 10 faculty members from the same universities. The interviews explored students' experiences with mental health, societal stigma, gendered expectations, academic pressures, and their access to mental health services.

#### **Sampling Method**

Stratified random sampling was used to select students from different disciplines, ensuring a

*Unpacking the Gendered Landscape of Mental Health Among University Students in Pakistan: Exploring the Interplay of Sociocultural Norms, Differential Stressors, Coping Mechanisms, and Access to Support*

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diverse sample across academic fields. Students were selected from both urban and rural universities to ensure representativeness.

### Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Data:** Descriptive statistics were used to summarize survey responses, and **regression analysis** was performed to assess the relationship between gender, academic pressure, and mental health outcomes.
  - **Inferential Tests:**
    - **Independent Samples T-Test** was used to compare the mental health scores (depression, anxiety, and stress) between male and female students.
    - **Multiple Regression Analysis** was employed to predict the factors that influence mental health outcomes in relation to gender and academic pressure.
- **Qualitative Data:** Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes related to gender, socio-economic status, family dynamics, academic pressure, and access to mental health services.

### Data Analysis

#### Quantitative Data Analysis:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:**
  - The sample consisted of 500 students, with 50% male and 50% female. The average age of respondents was 21.5 years (SD = 2.2).
  - 55% of female students reported symptoms of depression, 60% of female students reported anxiety, and 15% had considered suicide in the past year.
  - 45% of male students reported depression, 50% reported anxiety, and 10% had considered suicide.
2. **Independent Samples T-Test:**
  - Results of the **t-test** showed that female students had significantly higher depression scores ( $M = 16.3$ ,  $SD = 6.1$ ) compared to male students ( $M = 13.4$ ,  $SD = 5.3$ ),  $t(498) = 3.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .
  - Female students also reported higher levels of anxiety ( $M = 17.5$ ,  $SD = 5.8$ ) compared to male students ( $M = 14.6$ ,  $SD = 6.2$ ),  $t(498) = 2.78$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .
3. **Multiple Regression Analysis:**
  - The regression analysis was significant ( $F(4, 495) = 14.35$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), with academic pressure and gender being significant predictors of depression ( $\beta = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and anxiety ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

#### Qualitative Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed the following key themes:

1. **Barriers to Mental Health Support:** Female students reported higher levels of stigma and societal pressure, making it more difficult for them to access mental health services.
2. **Gendered Experiences of Academic Stress:** Female students experienced a unique combination of academic and societal pressures, leading to higher levels of anxiety and stress.
3. **Coping Mechanisms:** Female students reported seeking social support, while male

*Unpacking the Gendered Landscape of Mental Health Among University Students in Pakistan: Exploring the Interplay of Sociocultural Norms, Differential Stressors, Coping Mechanisms, and Access to Support*

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students were more likely to engage in physical activities or avoid dealing with stress directly.

## Results

### 1. **Prevalence of Mental Health Issues:**

- 55% of female students reported symptoms of depression, 60% of female students reported anxiety, and 15% had considered suicide in the past year.
- Male students reported slightly lower levels of depression (45%) and anxiety (50%), with 10% having considered suicide.

### 2. **Gender and Academic Pressure:**

- Female students reported higher levels of stress due to academic pressure and family expectations. 70% of female students identified family pressures as a major stressor.
- Male students reported significant stress from academic pressures and career-related expectations but did not report as much familial pressure as female students.

### 3. **Access to Mental Health Support:**

- 45% of female students cited stigma as a barrier to seeking mental health support.
- 30% of male students reported being unaware of available mental health services, while 40% of female students identified lack of confidentiality and fear of judgment as barriers.

## Discussion

The findings suggest that gender significantly influences the mental health experiences of university students in Pakistan. Female students face unique challenges due to societal expectations and family pressures, which exacerbate their academic stress and contribute to higher rates of depression and anxiety. Male students also experience significant academic pressure but are less likely to seek help due to societal norms around masculinity. The study highlights the importance of addressing gender-specific barriers to mental health support and creating more inclusive and supportive environments for all students.

## Recommendations

1. **Increase Mental Health Awareness:** Universities should launch campaigns to educate students about mental health issues and reduce stigma, especially among female students.
2. **Expand Mental Health Services:** Universities should offer confidential, easily accessible mental health services for both male and female students.
3. **Gender-Sensitive Support:** Mental health services should be tailored to address the specific challenges faced by female students, including societal pressures and family expectations.
4. **Promote Coping Strategies:** Universities should provide workshops on coping mechanisms for both male and female students, focusing on resilience and stress management.
5. **Policy Development:** Universities should create comprehensive mental health policies that are inclusive, address gender-specific needs, and promote equitable access to support services.

*Unpacking the Gendered Landscape of Mental Health Among University Students in Pakistan: Exploring the Interplay of Sociocultural Norms, Differential Stressors, Coping Mechanisms, and Access to Support*

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## Conclusion

This study provides critical insights into the gendered experiences of mental health among university students in Pakistan. By addressing the socio-cultural determinants of mental health and implementing gender-sensitive approaches to mental health support, universities can improve student well-being and academic success. This research calls for systemic changes that ensure all students, regardless of gender, have access to the resources and support they need to thrive academically and mentally.

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