

## **Motivation, Challenges and Strategies in Pursuing Higher Education by Pakistani Women: A Qualitative Study**

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Higher education could be an important source of empowering an individual. Economic independence, high self-confidence and esteem, increased self-efficacy, reduced dependency, and more career opportunities are some other positive results for highly educated individuals. Considering the importance of higher education, Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan has been taking initiatives for educational reforms in Pakistan and promote higher level of education at national level. Despite of the initiatives taken by Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, women's ratio in higher education is still low as compared to males that might be due to numerous factors. However there are females who despite of challenges, continue with their higher education and understanding of their experiences could help researchers, counselors, educationists and policy makers to identify ways to encourage women participation in higher education. Interestingly there is no study that could report the experiences of such Pakistani women. To the best of the knowledge our study is the first to report their experiences. Therefore, the aim of current qualitative study was to explore experiences of Pakistani women attaining higher education and to explore/examine their motivation for higher studies, difficulties they might be facing and their strategies for dealing with their challenges and continuing their education. In depth interviews were conducted with 25 women enrolled in MPhil leading to PhD program in University of Karachi. Data obtained via interviews were analyzed through content analysis. Themes were identified and reported under the categories of motivations, challenges and strategies. Analysis revealed need for personal development, inspiring teacher as role model and careers demands were the motivating factors while lack of family support, negative stereotypes, lack of financial support and discouraging attitude of teachers were key challenges. They used initiating open communication with the family and their problem solving skills as strategies to overcome challenges and continuing with their education.

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Education is considered as a significant factor in the development of any country. It not only plays a vital role in enhancing individuals' knowledge, awareness and information but also plays a crucial role in economic and social development of a country. The realization of this fact has stressed the importance and need to start and establish educational programs not only for economic development but also for social stability and well-being of a society (Noureen & Awan, 2011).

Attainment of higher education gives substantial benefits to an individual. Higher level of education has significant effect on one's capacity to make decisions, for example, it increases his/her awareness towards vote participation and commitment towards society (Dee, 2004). It enhances individual's responsibility towards social work. People with higher level of education realize their social responsibility and more likely to join charitable organizations and work voluntarily for social causes (Brand, 2010). Moreover, higher education also lead to the change in people's attitude which result in having positive feelings and acceptance towards people from different backgrounds (Bynner et al., 2003). Lower rates of crime are also an important effect of education on individual. It has been noticed that people with high level education are less likely to commit crime then people with low level of education (Feinstein & Sabates, 2005). Along with this, individuals with higher education show better parenting in terms of dealing with educational difficulties of their children as compared to individuals with lower level of education. It has a profound affirmative effect on their children by creating positive and constructive environment for their education (Azhar, Nadeem, Naz, Perveen & Sameen, 2013; Bynner & Egerton, 2001).

In addition to this, there are various health related effects of attaining higher education (Bynner et al, 2003; Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006; De Walque, 2004; Mokdad, Marks, Stroup & Gerberding, 2004) that include better psychological health and cognitive capabilities (Bynner et al., 2003; Mandemakers & Monden, 2010). Additionally, higher education is not only beneficial for an individual but also has a profound impact on the

society by creating unity, acceptance and trust among its members (Borgonovi, 2012).

Higher education has been defined as level of education that caters undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes (Batool, Sajid & Shaheen, 2013) that also include research degrees i.e. MPhil and PhD (Saeed, 2007) and access to higher education is the right of every individual irrespective of their gender (United Nations, 2017).

Societies make efforts to utilize their human capital to achieve social and economic prosperity and provision of higher level of education equally to both genders is an important source for this (Fatima, 2010). Moreover, it is believed that women engagement in attaining higher education could not only results in greater labor force but also improve quality of life. Also highly educated mothers can contribute in giving healthier and better nourished population (Jejeebhoy, 1995). But despite numerous efforts to minimize gender inequality in education, it still prevails internationally and nationally (Education for All National Review Report, 2015). Moreover, number of enrollments at the university level decreases with the increase of level of degree as the proportion of enrolment of male students is higher than female students which remain consistent from undergraduate to postgraduate level (Higher Education Commission; Pakistan Education Statistics 2015-16).

Considering the existing facts, it seems plausible to explore the reasons for low enrolment of women at higher education level. Review of the existing international and national literature indicates number of factors that motivate them to go for higher education but there are also challenges during the attainment of higher education that create problems for them. However researches also indicate that women do find ways to overcome the barriers. A study conducted on British Muslim women revealed that parents' support and their self- motivation were important factors (Ahmad, 2001).

While numerous challenges are reported for females pursuing higher education and financial issue is one of them. This is noticed that low ratio of females' enrollment in higher education is mainly because of lack of enough finance to support higher studies (Khalid & Mujahid-Mukhtar, 2002), more preference to sons' education than daughters (Maqsood, Maqsood, & Raza, 2012), managing family responsibilities with studies (Forster & Offei-Ansah, 2012), and also the distance in commuting from home to institutions (Sathar, Lloyd, & Haque, 2000).

Along with the challenges, various strategies are also reported for women pursuing higher education goals. In case of conflict between study and household responsibilities, they work on their time management skills so that they could have a balance between family and their study. They put their efforts to have a successful family relationship along with good results in academics (Forster & Offei-Ansah, 2012).

Moreover, doing a part time job along with studies has been reported as a coping strategy for women to tackle financial problems (Chea, 2015) and reaching to others for social and emotional support (Ramya & Parthasarathy, 2009).

Interestingly very limited studies have been conducted in Pakistan and mostly are based on the experiences of undergraduate students. There is lack of evidence that could illustrate the experiences of women that are studying at postgraduate level including MPhil or PhD which the highest level of education. Developing an in depth understanding of the motivating factors that encourage them to go for higher education and the challenges such women face during the attainment of higher studies and the coping strategies they use to handle them, could not only be helpful in identifying existing barriers and the way they overcome such challenges but would also help career counselors/professionals and policy makers to consider such their experiences when addressing women's participation in higher education at postgraduate level.

Therefore, the aim of current qualitative study was to explore experiences of Pakistani women attaining higher education and to explore/examine their motivation for higher studies, difficulties they might be facing and their strategies for dealing with their challenges and continuing their education.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Data was collected from faculty of social sciences, University of Karachi. This university is one of the leading public sector higher education institutions in Pakistan that located in Karachi, a metropolitan city which cater students from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. All the departments from social sciences were approached and through purposive sampling technique, and students enrolled in M.Phil leading to Ph.D program were requested to participate voluntarily in this study. 25 female students, with age Mean (SD) = 29.64(3.47), from departments of Psychology, Economics and Public Administration who were enrolled in M.Phil leading to Ph.D program willingly participated in the study.

### **Measure**

Interview schedule comprised of five open ended questions. It was developed through a systematic process. First of all literature review was completed to see what kind of problems are faced by women in gaining higher education. This literature review helped in developing the direction about nature and sequence of the questions. After that, following questions were formulated:

1. What were the factors that motivated you to go for higher education?
2. What were the challenges you faced in taking the initiative for higher education?
3. What challenges are you facing now while attaining higher education?
4. What strategies are you using in dealing with your challenges?
5. What plans do you have after taking this degree?

All the developed questions were piloted on 4 people representing the sample to check if questions were relevant and easy to understand for them.

During piloting of questions it was observed that participants preferred to share their experiences in Urdu language and suggested us to maintain discussion in Urdu or bilingually (Urdu and English) with the reason that they were more comfortable and expressive in the national language. Therefore at the time of data collection, interviews were mainly conducted in Urdu but participants were allowed to share their experiences in English as well.

### **Procedure**

Written informed consent was obtained from the participants. All information including purpose of the study, nature of the questions, time required for the interview, and their right to withdraw was mentioned in written informed consent while communicated verbally as well. In addition, they were assured about the confidentiality of their responses. In depth individual interviews were conducted that lasted for 60 to 90 minutes. Essential probing was done to explore their experiences in detail.

### **Results**

Data obtained via interviews were analyzed through content analysis. Themes were identified and reported under the categories of motivations, challenges and strategies.

#### **Motivational Factors for Higher Education**

Personal growth, field requirement and social factors were the common themes identified after analysis of this question.

#### ***Personal Development***

Need for personal development was one of the factors which motivated women for higher studies. They believed that achieving higher degree would boost their level of confidence could also make them financially independent and self-sufficient. They were of the opinion that achieving higher education would

not only make them intellectually better but would also help to become an active and useful member of the society.

*One participant P4 reported: ...because it will make me intellectually better and will improve my confidence.*

*P3 said: 'I decided to go for higher education because I wanted to become independent'.*

### ***Demands for Careers***

Emerging career demands were identified as another motivating factor for them to go for higher studies. They believed that acceptance for teaching profession was increasing and to grow into that profession required higher degrees. Also it could increase their probability in having better job opportunities.

*P1 said: 'Masters' level is not enough and you cannot in your field unless you go for higher studies'.*

*P2 reported: 'I wanted to have a good job and for this I need higher degree'.*

### ***Inspiration and Social Pressure***

Women mentioned that they were inspired by their female teachers while few thought that being a part of a family with strong educational background created a pressure to opt for higher education.

*P1 reported: 'I took decision of higher education because I was inspired by my teacher'.*

*P2 said: 'I had to go for higher education because of strong educational background of my family'.*

### **Challenges Faced before Taking Initiative for Higher Education**

Lack of support from family and doubt in self-competence were identified as the most common themes.

### ***Lack of Support from Family***

Lack of family support in pursuing higher education was reported as one of the challenges for women. Their family discouraged higher studies and wanted them to get married as soon they found a suitable match. Also they reported experiencing extreme confusion in deciding whether to go for higher studies or to submit to families' wish.

*P1 said: 'There was confusion to decide whether this was a right time to get myself enrolled for higher studies or not, I knew that in case of having good marriage proposal it would be very difficult to convince my family to let me complete my studies'.*

### ***Negative Stereotypes towards Female Education***

Another challenge that women reported was negative stereotypes towards female education. Their families and relatives discouraged them by highlighting prevailing negative perception for highly educated females in the society such as that women would be considered as aged and dominating.

*P2 said: 'My family was not in favor of further studies because of those negative stereotypes which people use for educated women, such as these women will not get marriage proposals etc*

They also reported that their parents believed that sons should get higher education instead of daughter because eventually sons would be the bread earners.

### ***Doubt in Self-Competence***

Some reported that they were not sure if they had the competency to go for higher studies. They experienced immense fear of meeting the demands and requirements of higher studies.

*P1 reported: 'I was confused that whether I would be able to complete it successfully or not'.*



**Challenges Faced While Attaining Higher Education**

Women reported various challenges they experienced while attaining their higher education.

***Conflict among Studies, Family and Job***

Women reported struggling on different fronts related to family's demands and focusing on studies and dealing with work stressors and found them very challenging.

*P1 said: 'I am married therefore; it is very difficult to manage all the things like family, home and studies'.*

*P2 reported: 'I have children plus I am also studying therefore, life has become very tough, it becomes difficult to manage'.*

*P4 said: 'I am doing job and I have my family responsibilities plus I am studying as well, I don't know how to manage my time...'*

***Lack of Financial Support***

Experiencing lack of financial support was another challenge those women reported. They had to work alongside their studies because neither their family supported them financially nor there was any funding available from the institution to help them in achieving their academic goals.

*P3 said: 'I have to finance my studies on my own. I don't get any financial support from anywhere.'*

***Lack of Support from Teachers/Mentors***

Negative attitude of the teachers/mentors was also reported. Teachers were rude and discouraging. They reported having poor rapport with the teachers and avoided asking any question because of fear of being insulted and humiliated in front of other students.

*P10 said: 'My teachers are very demanding; all efforts are useless no matter how much you put in. They never appreciate. This is so discouraging'.*

*P11 said: 'My teachers are very non-supportive; they are very strict and controlling'.*

### **Strategies to Handle Their Challenges**

Self-reliance and taking support from significant others were the two common strategies used by women in dealing with their challenges.

#### ***Self-Reliance***

They reported that managing their problems on their own without having any support from others was helpful. They creatively used cost-benefit analysis technique in determining the benefit of attaining higher degree that helped them to tolerate the difficulties and enabled them to focus on their academic goal.

*P1 said: 'I do cost-benefit analysis and it helps me to realize that I have my goals which are very important for me, and to achieve that goal I have to strongly face these issues'.*

#### ***Effective Communication with Family***

Moreover, open dialogue with their parents was reported as beneficial strategy. They communicated the needs and importance of higher education to their parents consequently, they succeeded in gaining some relaxation and support from their families.

*P2 reported: 'There was serious tension in my house because of my studies, but I tolerated everything and communicated my parents the need and importance of higher studies for me, now I have little bit moral support from them.'*

#### ***Asking for Support from Significant Others***

Support from significant others including friends and teachers were reported as a strong source of support for women. Those who were facing issues of doubt in their abilities, unable to meet the demands of study and those who found themselves helpless with their problems relied on emotional support from their friends and teachers. They discussed their problems with them and in return helped them with solutions and moral support.

*P1 reported: 'I discussed my problems with my friends; they provided achievable solutions which helped me a lot'.*

*P2 reported: 'My friends and teachers all have very important role in helping me to overcome my problems,*

Moreover, few reported key role of fathers in supporting them in attaining higher education.

*P4 reported: 'My father was supportive but my mother was not convinced with the idea of higher education because people would think that I am old. But my father supported me a lot and convinced my mother'.*

### ***Future Plans of Female Students after Getting Their Degrees***

To get better job was the only future plan reported by female students after getting their degrees. They stated they would use their degrees for having a good job.

*P1 said: 'First of all, I will search a good job because I was unable to get a good job after my masters'.*

*P2 said: 'Not getting good job was the main reason of going for higher education; therefore, I will look for a better job'.*

## **Discussion**

Current study was conducted to explore the experiences of Pakistani women attaining higher education at postgraduate level. It was intended to identify their motivation for higher studies, challenges they faced while pursuing their academic goals and the ways they used to overcome such challenges. Current study highlighted various themes to depict the experience and struggle of women studying at higher education level.

Availability of inspiring teachers as role models, need for personal development, and understanding the career demands were the key motivators for women to go for higher studies. It has been found that teachers plays an important role in motivating students to engage in learning process (Allen, Witt, & Wheelless, 2006). Women participants in the current mentioned their female teachers as a role model and a source of inspiration for their initiative to go for higher studies. Not a single female student reported male

teacher as a source of motivation. This might be because of gender similarity as this might be easy for them to relate their lives with female teachers as compared to males. A research conducted by Ensher and Murphy (1997) also revealed similar findings that perceiving high similarity with your mentor with respect to gender, increase liking, satisfaction and contact with mentor.

Numerous challenges that were personal and social in nature were reported by women. Parents' non-supportive attitude towards women higher education was a common themes. In a patriarchal society like Pakistan parents encourage sons to attain higher education because they could contribute financially in the family while women are expected to stay at home and not been given more opportunities to opt for higher education and develop their skills (King & Hill,1993). Studies have highlighted that Pakistani women face difficulties in attaining education from primary level to higher level of education because of societies' partial attitude towards their education (Fatima, 2010; Malik & Courtney, 2012).

In addition, facing difficulties for attaining higher education could also be deeply rooted with the stereotypes regarding women in the society. Females are trained to have passive role at home and in society as well (Malik & Courtney, 2012) and women with higher degrees are considered as dominating and appear to be challenging the male authority (Spark, 2011). Therefore families deject women to question existing stereotypes by discouraging them from further higher studies.

Attainment of higher education doesn't only influence by social support but it requires financial support as well. It has been reported that low ratio of females' enrollment in higher education is linked with financial problems (Khalid & Mukhtar, 2002). Participants in the current study reported lack of financial support as another challenge in continuing their education. Researches indicated that availability of financial resources have been found an important factor in successful completion of the degree program (Abedi & Benkin, 1987; Baird, 1997).

Lack of support and discouraging attitude of teachers and mentors was another challenge that women enrolled in postgraduate program faced. Research on young students revealed that teacher's harsh behavior influences the performance and personality development of student (Naz, Khan, Daraz, Hussain & Khan, 2012). While research on female doctoral students indicate that those who had a rapport and positive working relationship with their mentor were able to achieve their academic goal in time (Maher, Ford & Thompson, 2004).

Study further revealed that women were not only aware of the challenges they were facing but also were able to find a way out to continue with their higher studies. Initiating open communication with family, reaching out for support and logically analyzing a situation were important strategies they used to overcome challenges. It has been found that individuals' career's decision making process influences their achievement of their academic goals (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007).

Interestingly when participants were asked about their future goals after attainment of degree, getting a better job was an only response. Their response indicate that they might be considering having a better job as the primary goal after the attainment of higher degree while contributing and serving the society could be their secondary goal.

It is important to highlight that very few researches have been conducted on females' education and specifically on higher education of females in Pakistan (Ambreen & Mohyuddin, 2013; Batool et al., 2013; Fatima, 2010; Noureen & Awan, 2011; Malik & Courtney, 2012). Studies focused on women empowerment (Malik & Courtney, 2012), statistics about enrollment of both males and females in universities and representativeness of both genders in university management (Batool et. al., 2013), gender discriminatory behavior and strategies used by parents against females' education (Ambreen & Mohyuddin, 2013), female education and economic growth (Fatima, 2010) and socio-economic status and academic achievement (Azhar et al., 2013).

Interestingly not a single study has been conducted on identifying challenges faced by women. Also the sample used in most of the studies was on undergraduate and lacks the study that could report experiences of women studying at postgraduate level. To best of the knowledge current study is the first to report the detailed account of experiences of women enrolled in MPhil leading to PhD program. This highlights the struggle of women pursuing higher education. Study could contribute in understanding of challenges faced by these women and the ways they use to handle such challenges in order to continue with their higher education. Furthermore, this study was conducted only on women residing in Karachi, responses and experiences of females from other parts of Pakistan might be different.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study depicts the struggle of a Pakistani woman in attaining higher education and highlights need to increase awareness about importance of higher education in families so that they could understand its worth and allow and support their daughters for higher studies. Moreover, pro education awareness campaign should also be started at national level as well to rectify the negative stereotypes about females' education and highlight the role of highly educated females in the growth and development of a society. Not only this, institutions should also develop their policies to support females studying at higher education level through learning conducive environment and provision of more scholarship opportunities to the deserving students.

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