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(A CHARTERED UNIVERSITY)

**Exploring the Experiences and Challenges of Gender Non-Conforming Individuals in FCCU,**

**Lahore**

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**Exploring the Experiences and Challenges of Gender Non-Conforming Individuals in FCCU,  
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**Abstract**

Scholarly research has revealed that individuals, especially young adults, who do not fit into the gender binary are exposed to all forms of violence. This study qualitatively explores the experiences and challenges faced by gender non-conforming individuals in FCCU, Lahore. The study includes in-depth interviews with 8 gender non-conforming students currently enrolled at the university. Narrative analysis of interviews revealed three important themes related to the experiences of these students related to gender variance. The three themes that emerged were exclusion on Campus, the effect on mental health from the said exclusion, and individuals coping with these circumstances. In conclusion, a connection was established between these main themes, and different methods were shown on how to improve the situation of gender non-conforming individuals in a university setting.

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## Introduction

During the last decade, there has been a rise in scholarly research addressing the topic of sexual and gender minority youth in educational settings, including in schools (Park, 2016) and higher education institutions (Gonzales et al., 2020). Gender and sexual minority youth include individuals who may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or other. The gender identities and expressions of such individuals do not fit into the traditional heterosexual binaries of male and female prevalent in heteronormative societies (Adams et al., 2016). In this study I will use the term gender minority students to refer to “individuals who identify as something other than heterosexual or cisgender” (Johns et al., 2019).

It has been well-documented in research that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) students experience health inequalities in sexual health, the risk for suicide, and substance use as stated by (Johns et al., 2019), the US 29.4% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual high school students attempted suicide in the year this study was published. Moreover, it was also stated that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth have 190% higher odds of using alcohol and other drugs compared to heterosexual youth. Lastly, the LGBTQ population continues to face high rates of HIV, sexually transmitted infections, and even unwanted pregnancies.

Educational settings are a primary social context where many gender minority students spend a significant portion of their time. However, traversing educational settings presents these students with significant challenges where they remain at risk of experiencing adversity (Johns et al., 2019). The primary drivers of adverse health outcomes among gender-minority students include stigma and minority stress processes. Payne, (2010) explains how LGBTQ youth face stigma in their schools and how their social relations are very sensitive. While the minority stress model explains that because of the stigma LGBTQ youth experience more stress compared to heterosexuals and this stress can lead to mental and physical disorders. (Meyer et al., 2013)

However, research around the world has also suggested that educational institutions can be important providers of support and resources necessary for improving the potential and quality of life of gender minority students (Ellis, 2009). As a result of the prevalence of health adversities experienced by LGBTQ youth, there is a need to foster resilience in these individuals. Research has emphasized the need for the cultivation of protective factors that can impede stigma related to sexual orientation and gender (Beck, 2020). Resilience is defined as positive functioning by individuals who experience hardship (Robinson et al., 2021).

The importance of addressing adversities faced by gender minority students is important in Pakistan. Research suggests that gender minority individuals in Pakistan are subjected to systemic discrimination, marginalization, and violence (Khan & Alam, 2021). Despite, the recognition of the third gender as citizens of Pakistan, the resistance against Transgender Protection Bill and mounting violence against gender minority populations has gained new momentum, especially on social media platforms. For this reason, this study will aim to investigate.

### **Research Objectives**

1. Examine the experiences and challenges resulting from non-normative expression of gender in a variety of social contexts in university settings.
2. To understand the impact of these experiences and challenges on the mental health of gender nonconforming students.
3. To investigate the coping strategies used by gender nonconforming students in the university setting.

The following are the research questions in this study:

1. What are the experiences and challenges of gender non-conforming individuals in a university setting?
2. What is the impact of these challenges and experiences on the mental health of these gender non-conforming individuals?

3. What coping strategies are used by these gender non-conforming individuals in the university setting?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it would expand our understanding of gender nonconformity among university students in our local context. It is essential to get clarity on this topic because of how little the understanding of this issue is in the Pakistani Society. Haider, (2008) shows this in the form of statistics that were generated by interviewing university scholars. When they were asked about the causes of gender dysphoria, out of the sample size of 36, 18 stated that it was due to lack of proper guidance, 6 stated that it was due to rejection by parents, 5 stated that it was due to lack of parental religious guidance and lastly, 7 stated that it was due to less dominating father. Another statistic from the same study was about hesitation during interaction with Gender Dysphorics, in which 20 people stated that they were hesitant while 16 stated that they weren't. This study is one of many examples of why it is important to understand what gender dysphoria is.

This study also hopes to not only create awareness for gender nonconformity but also for the individuals who go through it, by examining the different challenges that are faced by them and their experiences. As stated earlier, the Khwaja Siras in Pakistan are not treated properly and even in the case of the term Khwaja Sira, it does not fully encompass the different gender identities and their experiences and considering how a recognized term like Khwaja Sira still has negative connotations to it, it can only be imagined how identities outside of this would be perceived by the society. By highlighting these issues, the goal would be to reduce the stigma that is faced by gender-nonconforming individuals.

Lastly, it will expand on the challenges that are faced by such individuals by drawing a focus on how this affects their mental health and how they cope with it. Considering the lack of literature on identities beyond transgenders in Pakistan, this study will fill that gap, while simultaneously raising awareness for all the issues that are faced by them.



## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that is to be used for this study will be based on the theory of multiple masculinities by the sociologist R.W. Connell, which was first introduced in his book “Masculinities” (2005). In this book, he talks about hegemonic masculinity, which is the most dominant and privileged form of masculinity typically associated with white heterosexual men. The common traits of this type of masculinity are emotional restraint, aggression, and competitiveness. Another side of this can be seen in the form of subordinated masculinity, which essentially, as the name suggests, refers to the masculinities that are marginalized and subordinated.

In the context of this study, I theorize gender nonconforming masculinities and femininities as “subordinate” where they don’t fit the construction of hegemonic masculinity and are treated as lower on the gender hierarchy. Therefore, young men who fail to meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity and young women who are unable to perform “emphasized femininity” are subjected to discrimination and marginalization within the heteronormative Pakistani society.

The experiences of gender nonconforming individuals would be analyzed to see the different ways they express their gender identities and how these individuals might embody subordinated masculinity or even complicit masculinity. It would also challenge the cultural norms surrounding hegemonic masculinity and contribute towards a society that would be more inclusive to individuals who do not adhere to the rules of hegemonic masculinity and are gender non-conforming.

The resilience theory also provides another perspective to the theoretical framework. The resilience theory explains that individuals possess the ability to adapt and cope with stress and adversity and that this ability develops over time to be stronger. (Robinson et al., 2021). This can be applied to the experiences of gender-nonconforming individuals to understand and explore the coping mechanisms and strategies used by these individuals to navigate through things like social stigma, violence, and discrimination.

Individuals could have social support, access to resources, or a strong sense of identity and this is what the resilience theory would potentially explore. Individuals might have a sense of internal strength or maybe that strength comes from external factors which would be explored under the light of resilience theory.

### **Literature Review**

The experiences of LGBTQ students in society are filled with various factors that contribute to many uncertain things happening in their lives. According to Tierney, (2017), every year over 400,000 LGBT youth end up encountering homelessness in one way or another. This statistic was related to how when the LGBT youth come out to their families, they end up being homeless. Being homeless can then lead to a very unstable living environment and an unstable living environment will most likely result in a terrible living experience in society. Another study by Gonzales et al., (2020), looked at LGBT students during the Covid-19 pandemic and they found some very interesting results. They conducted an online survey amongst 477 LGBT-identifying college students aged between 18-25 years and nearly half of them had family members who were not supportive of them or in some cases weren't even aware of their LGBT identity. This is a staggering number and sheds light on how unique and difficult it is for LGBTQ students to exist in the society around them, and even more so during a global pandemic.

The life of LGBTQ students in an educational environment is a reflection of what they experience in the outside world. A study conducted by Tang et al., (2018) on the challenges and problems faced by LGBT students in the Philippines confirms this. According to this study, these students face discrimination from the academic staff, where some professors would refuse to use correct pronouns for transgender women, and in other cases, gay students would be kicked out of catholic schools just because they were gay. This study also touches on discrimination by family and friends, where in many cases students would be kicked out of their homes as mentioned earlier as well. It was also mentioned how people have limited knowledge about HIV, where they thought it was a disease only limited to the LGBT community and this would be

weaponized against them. Lastly, attacks on social media would be made against the community as well and would in turn harm the reputation of the whole community.

It was seen in research that it was common for LGBT students to hear homophobic remarks at school, where the word “gay” was used negatively and there was a general environment of verbal harassment (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2016). Furthermore, it was found in a survey, that out of the total percentage surveyed, 23.4% of students faced homophobic harassment and discrimination, and this consisted of derogatory remarks, as well as direct or indirect verbal threats, and lastly even included threats of physical violence (Ellis, 2009). Another study confirms how LGBT people faced derogatory and negative talk, where the male students would experience stigma and disciplinary oppression in terms of hegemonic performances of masculinity, they would get policed to act that way. On the hand, people who identified as lesbian, bisexual, or transgender felt a lack of acceptance, directly and indirectly, where their relationships and identities weren’t considered as real as their heteronormative counterparts (Kjaraan, 2015).

A study conducted in Nigerian schools and universities looked at homophobia in these institutions and it was seen how it was a common occurrence, that LGBT students would be rejected and bullied due to their gender and sexual orientation. Cases where gender non-conforming individuals were bullied and even people who were in any way perceived as defending or promoting homosexuality were treated in a very stigmatized manner. Again, it was mentioned how these students would be verbally abused and humiliated and they would be outed in campus magazines as well. This was a pattern for most people belonging to the community where they experienced this rejection and bullying throughout their educational life, from kindergarten up to university. There were even cases of closeted LGBT students bullying other LGBT students, which also stemmed from them getting bullied first, so hiding their gender or sexual orientation was a better option for these people (Okanlawon, 2021).

These issues result in mental health problems for the individuals belonging to the LGBTQ community, according to research where that sampled LGBT college students, more than 60% were experiencing mental distress, anxiety, or depression, it was also mentioned how transgender students were likely to experience more mental distress compared to their cisgender counterparts (Gonzales et al., 2020).

Another study talks about the mental distress faced by LGBT students where a generally negative life experience and the fear of coming out to their families can result in added pressure that results in depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Tang et al., 2018).

Mental health issues are prevalent amongst those who are part of the LGBT community, as mentioned in a study, there is overwhelming evidence that LGB persons are at a greater risk for poor mental health across developmental stages, as studies that used adult samples suggested that there were elevated rates of depression and mood disorders present. In comparison to the heterosexual youth, the LGBT youth had higher rates of emotional distress, symptoms related to mood and anxiety disorders, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and lastly suicidal behavior. Another comparison with the heterosexual youth suggested a similar result, where the LGBT youth were more likely to experience major depression, generalized anxiety disorders, depending on the substance, and comorbid diagnosis. It was also found that there were strong associations between sexual orientation and suicide attempts for sexual minority males compared to sexual minority females. Generally, it was found that there were consistent indications of a higher risk for mental health problems among LGBT youth (Russel, 2016).

All these mental health problems can then negatively manifest themselves in the student's academic performance and their general approach to academia (DeSocio, 2004). Stress, depression, and anxiety can have an impact on students' academic success (Wyatt et al., 2017). In a comparison between undergraduate and graduate students, undergraduate students reported how they had poor mental health due to different reasons, which then resulted in poor academic performance and failure to meet the standards of the university (Wyatt et al., 2013).

Studies further indicate that there is a growing correlation between academic success and social-emotional functioning. These studies identify different examples where if students start showing problems in one area of social-emotional functioning, they tend to do that in other areas as well and then it indirectly or directly affects their academic performance and academic success negatively. There are examples of students with clinical levels of mental health problems who end up less likely to even complete high school. Students with low subjective well-being were shown to be at a very high risk of deterioration in GPA.

Moreover, students with mental health problems earlier in their lives end up with various challenges regarding their academic and social competence (Suldo et al., 2014).

A study conducted on the mental health and academic performance of first-year college students showed the effects of adverse mental health on the performance of the students in academia. Students reported that they would end up with a lower grade on an exam or a project due to stress or anxiety, however, it was interesting to see that first-year students were experiencing less stress compared to their seniors, where the impact of anxiety, depression, and stress was reported to be comparatively more (Wyatt et al., 2017).

When faced with all these mental health problems, LGBTQ students develop different coping mechanisms and strategies that may be positive or negative. It was stated in a survey that 53% of LGBTQ homeless youth resort to alcohol and substance abuse (Tierney et al., 2017). Another study pointed out that LGBTQ students also coped by distancing themselves from the school environment as that is where a lot of their stressors were coming from (Grossman et al., 2009). There are also cases of students focusing on their work to try and forget their problems and in other cases, they opt for counseling services to try and replace the help that they didn't get from their family and friends lastly there were organizations that were designed to help the LGBTQ youth, they turned to these organizations, and they ended up becoming a major part of their coping strategies (Khdir, 2021).

Recognizing all these problems, different interventions have helped in dealing with these issues in an educational environment, in one such study it was mentioned how principals and counselors helped LGBTQ students by providing them with safe and inclusive spaces within the educational environment, it is also worth noting that these individuals were part of the LGBTQ community themselves and that helped them approach this issue in a very targeted and effective manner. These individuals further wanted to talk about the community with the future principals as well so the problems faced by the LGBTQ community in the educational environment are fully eliminated as well as they can be. They believed in building strong relationships with the entire student body so that everyone can be educated and there is a strong support system for those who are part of the community (Beck, 2020).

Another study looked at the relationship between school counselors and LGBTQ students and how they connected with the students. In the study, they discuss 4 approaches to this, with the first one being storytelling, where they connected with students based on personal experiences and true stories of LGBT individuals. The second approach was leading by example, as the name suggests, the counselors worked actively to educate people about the topics related to the LGBTQ community. The third approach was developing partnerships with LGBTQ students so they could work together to implement the changes for a better educational environment. Lastly, they directly challenged the educational structures so that a general overhaul in the school climate could be seen (Beck, 2017)

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design was used in this study to analyze and collect data. This type of approach works well in exploring the subjective experiences of individuals. This study used a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of individuals (Byrne, 2001). A purposive sampling technique was used to select individuals who identify as gender nonconforming and are students. (Lewis-Beck et al., 2012).

### **Conceptualization**

#### ***Gender Non-Conforming Individuals***

Individuals who identify as something other than heterosexual or cisgender (Johns et al., 2019)

#### ***Mental Health***

A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to his or her community (Galderisi et al., 2015)

#### ***Coping Strategies***

Coping strategies are defined as the person's constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing (Redhwan et al., 2009)

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data for this study, where in-depth interviews with participants helped in gathering detailed information about their experiences and challenges. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants. Data from secondary resources, such as academic journals, was also used to cover everything and provide proper context.

### **Access and Sampling**

The population of this study were gender nonconforming university students from FCCU. Each participant met the following criteria to participate in the study:

1. The participant must be self-identified as gender nonconforming.
2. The participant must be a university student in FCCU.

As mentioned earlier as well, purposive sampling was used to conduct 8 interviews, over the designated period (Lewis-Beck et al., 2012).

In terms of access, being a student myself, I was able to reach the relevant population through online student groups, personal contacts, and social media. An information sheet (Appendix A) was shared with the participants so they were able to make an informed decision regarding participating in this study.

### **Tools**

The semi-structured interview will follow the themes of gender dysphoria, the definition of gender dysphoria, the experience of gender dysphoria, the challenges that come with it, and different coping

mechanisms. The list of tentative questions to be used for the interview can be found in the interview guide. (Appendix C)

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data and a deductive approach was used to identify themes based on the research objectives. An inductive approach was used as well to understand additional themes that emerged from the data and those were identified and labeled accordingly. Clark & Braun's (2013) reflexive thematic analysis was applied here which is a six-step process:

1. Familiarization
2. Coding
3. Generating themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Writing up

### **Ethical Considerations**

Everything done during this study was done according to the ethical guidelines for research where human subjects are involved. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants and their confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. They were also referred to Mercy Health Center (MHC), in regards to the mental health problems they might be facing and if they need such help. Clearance from the institutional review board (IRB) was also obtained before this study commenced.



## Findings

In this section, findings related to participants' experiences related to gender non-conformity on campus will be discussed in detail. There were 3 major themes identified, which had different subsections, they are as follows:

1. Exclusion on Campus
2. Mental Health Impact of Social Exclusion and Harassment
3. Coping Strategies and Improvement of Staff

The different subsections include themes like exclusion from peer groups, Harassment, campus interaction with faculty, the relationship between gender nonconformity and mental health, impact on academic performance, coping strategies, and improvement of faculty and staff. They are all discussed below.

<i>Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants</i>		
<b>Sociodemographic Characteristic</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Age</b>		
20	3	37.5
21	1	12.5
22	3	37.5
23	1	12.5
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	3	37.5
Gender Fluid	2	25
Gender Fluid Transwoman	1	12.5
Non-Binary	1	12.5
Not sure	1	12.5
<b>Year of Study</b>		
1 <sup>st</sup>	0	0
2 <sup>nd</sup>	0	0
3 <sup>rd</sup>	3	42.9
4 <sup>th</sup>	5	57.1
<b>Provincial Belonging</b>		
Punjab	8	100
<b>Current living Arrangement</b>		
Nuclear Family	6	80
Joint Family	2	20
<b>Relationship Status</b>		
Single	6	80
In a relationship	2	20
<b>Religion</b>		
Islam	4	50
Spiritual	1	12.5
Prefer not to answer	3	37.5

## **Objective 1: Exclusion on Campus**

The themes identified during analysis include experiences of exclusion from peer groups, harassment and bullying, and on-campus interactions with staff and academic faculty. The themes are discussed in detail as follows:

### **1.1. Exclusion from peer groups on campus**

The first objective of this paper focuses on the experiences and challenges with peer interactions in social spaces on campus that arise from the non-normative expression of the gender of these students in social settings on university campuses. The study findings suggest that these social spaces on campus where students experience exclusion from peer groups included university society as explained by a participant,

“a very good example could be society job I wanted to be a part of it but I didn’t go for the interview or to just show myself there because I didn’t know how because I was afraid of being rejected it was just in a thing in my head” (Aleena, 22, Genderfluid Transwoman)

Another participant talked about exclusion from general academic spaces,

“I am a political science major so a lot of people that I’m around are teenagers who are mostly men so the exclusion of women from you know general spaces is annoying and it happens often and its never gotten to a point that it doesn’t register it’s just something that’s always there.” (Arooj, 22, Not Sure)

In both cases, the individuals faced exclusion due to their gender non-conformity and couldn’t properly participate in different experiences provided by the university.

Out of the 8 participants, 7 participants stated that they were excluded from different social settings directly or indirectly, regularly. Direct exclusion was exercised by other cisgender students with students who displayed their gender non-variance through overt behavioral choices e.g. clothing, body language, etc. These students experienced direct exclusion but there were instances where they didn’t feel exclusion and that was rooted in them conforming to traditional gender roles.

For instance, a 21-year-old student from their senior year shared how they don’t feel exclusion

“but I think it is also because I conform more to traditional gender roles than I would like to so it helps me fit in with all sorts of people” (Hamna, 21, Non-Binary)

Some students shared that while they experienced exclusion among peers on campus, they also had similar experiences with their family members.

One of the participants who talked about exclusion by family said,

“I have a lot of piercings and my hair is shorter than you know most girls and I remember my entire family at the end of a birthday event they all made me stand and they all insulted me verbally in front of everyone for looking different” (Asifa, 20, Female)

This was an important part of this theme of exclusion, where it was based on the looks of the individual and nothing else was taken into consideration, everything would be related to how they looked and then anything else would be considered.

While another participant who talked about self-exclusion said

“I don’t go into groups I don’t go out there and that’s where I feel excluded mei jati hi nahi I don’t give it a try and mujhe dar hota hai k to that’s where I feel excluded keh mujhe wo hetero normativity bahut zyada feel hoti hai”. (Aleena, 22, Gender Fluid Transwoman)

This was another interesting side of this theme, where the gender nonconforming individuals would prefer not participating in social settings to avoid any negative behavior towards or generally feeling uncomfortable with heteronormativity in social settings.

Lastly, the participant who talked about exclusion by peers said

“If I would be sitting with like male friends or female friends I wouldn’t feel like I fit in either of those groups plus male friends have this thing where they don’t like including girls in their groups and their conversations so I always felt like an outcast”. (Hareem, 20, Female)

Another example of heteronormativity and gender roles in social settings is where the individual wouldn’t fit in with male or female social settings and a case where male friends specifically wouldn’t include a gender non-conforming person in their social group.

The findings of this section suggest that experiences of social exclusion from peer groups in social settings on campus are widespread among gender non-conforming students. These experiences are

exacerbated by simultaneous experiences of exclusion from family members. The persistent experiences of exclusion were found to lead some of the participants to self-exclusion.

## **1.2. Harassment**

The study findings suggest that harassment was a key mechanism of producing experiences of exclusion among gender non-conforming students on campus.

The second theme was harassment and bullying due to their gender expression, where out of the 8 participants, 3 stated that they had experienced harassment and bullying, while 1 participant stated that they had not experienced any harassment or bullying but it was due to limited expression of their gender. Out of the 3 participants, 1 stated that the harassment was sexual, while for the other 2, it was not physical harassment but rather verbal. The harassment and bullying faced by these individuals were strictly based on how they were presenting themselves. The 4 remaining participants later mentioned that their expression of gender was very limited and mostly they would just conform to gender roles like the 1 participant who stated earlier why they did not experience any harassment or bullying due to their gender non-conformity.

One of the participants narrated the verbal harassment they faced,

“I think I have it was by one of the students I now consider it bullying and yeah it was not that extensive it wasn’t like dragging me around it was just shouting at me for the way I look at things in the way I perceive things and then insulting my opinions out loud in front of everyone that did not feel very good”. (Asifa, 20, Female)

This is a very direct example of how gender-nonconforming individuals face harassment to the point that people disagree with something as basic as their opinions and put them down in a group setting.

While another participant talked about sexual harassment

“Yeah, there have been multiple sexual harassment instances from just men on campus sometimes random men who were intoxicated”. (Arooj, 22, Not Sure)

Related to the first example of harassment, this narrates the experience of someone who faced sexual harassment from different men, who happened to be intoxicated as well. It can also be noted that in both cases of harassment and before that exclusion, men were pointed out as the common factor who

imposed all these things on gender-nonconforming individuals, however, it doesn't mean women are not involved but just that they are involved to a much lesser degree.

The findings of this study show us how harassment was related to exclusion and was a major driving force in excluding gender non-conforming students, either verbally or physically, by whatever means it was possible.

### **1.3. On-campus Interactions with Faculty and Staff**

The third theme related to the first objective was the interactions with academic staff and professors, where out of the 8 participants, only 1 participant had a positive interaction, 2 participants had negative interactions and 5 participants had a neutral interaction where their gender identity did not affect how professors interacted with them. However, one participant did state that despite the interaction being neutral, they were subconsciously being considered part of gender roles, they didn't want to be part of which is why they were considered an overlap between neutral interaction and negative interaction.

The participant who talked about their positive experience said

“Positive experience is that there are some instructors who understand that I am different, although it hasn't happened with most instructors and I am a guy in front of them, but with the few instructors where I am myself, I do get this extra care factor. This one instructor felt a bit sorry for me being a trans person due to the transphobia.”. (Aleena, 22, Gender Fluid Transwoman)

The experience of this participant highlights everything that has emerged from this theme, where the positive experience is how some instructors do care for their gender-nonconforming students, but the negative part is how much students wouldn't be comfortable enough to be themselves in front of most instructors, which is something that constantly effects these students but they cannot do anything about.

One of the participants who talked about their neutral and negative experiences said

“not if I think too deeply about it no I think it hasn't I get treated like any other student perhaps more in a feminine way than I would like but it is there it's not like I'm being given preferential treatment or discriminatory treatment in any way because of what I present as but it's also that I get to put more into the box of a woman even though like that is not something that I would want to be put into”. (Hamna, 21, Non-Binary)

This shows the lighter side of how a neutral experience with instructors is like, subconsciously, instructors would put students in the gender roles, and this specific participant states how they are treated in a feminine manner but would rather not be if that was an option.

The findings suggest that most students have a neutral experience with the academic staff, the negative experiences are usually rooted in how the academic staff perceive the students and then apply those perceived gender roles to the students.

## **Objective 2: Mental health impact of social exclusion and harassment on campus**

The second objective builds on the findings of the first objective and shifts the narrative to how all the experiences that came from being gender nonconforming impacted the mental health of the individuals who went through these experiences. The themes of the relationship between gender nonconformity and mental health and the impact of this academic performance emerged from this objective and are discussed as follows:

### **2.1. Relationship between Gender Non-Conformity and Mental health**

The relationship between gender nonconformity and mental health emerged as the first major theme of this objective. It had 2 subcategories, positive correlation and negative correlation between gender nonconformity and mental health. Amongst the 8 participants, 4 participants had both a positive and negative relationship with their mental health, while 2 participants had a negative relationship, and 2 participants had a positive relationship. Lastly, out of the 2 participants who had a positive relationship, 1 had a negative relationship that turned into a positive relationship.

As one participant stated their experience,

“I mean there is a correlation there because ever since I’ve been you know realize who I am and what I presented as and everything like that everything has started making more sense to me mentally and the issues that I face andar se jo bhi masala hota uska i tried i understand where it comes from like it it has helped me understand my mental workings better”. (Hamna, 21, Non-Binary)

This participant talked about how it was a positive experience for them because when they learned and understood their gender nonconformity, they had a clearer understanding of their mental state which in turn developed a positive relationship between their gender nonconformity and mental health.

Another participant with a similar experience stated,

“I think it’s positive um the more that I can feel empowered in being a woman I think the more that I’m able to feel the more mentally fit and stable I feel naturally because then I don’t have to make an effort to not be who I am so I think it’s positive.” (Erum, 23, Female)

This highlights how when they became comfortable with their gender identity, they felt empowered, and that improved their mental health in a very significant manner, similar to the participants above.

The participant with the negative experience said

“I am just very dissociated from my body in general and I have no body awareness whatsoever so it is pretty bad I guess like it does impact my mental health quite badly.” (Arooj, 22, Not Sure)

which shows how their mental health is related to how they perceive themselves and in this case, the only way to make any sense of it is to completely disassociate from their body, this is in complete contrast to the first two participants.

The participant with both a positive and negative experience said

“I would say it’s pretty strained because when you learn to get to know your gender expression and decide who you are this can lead to a lot of problems in your mental health overall and then you will start discovering that this actual prejudice in society so I think it was pretty strained for few years and so yeah but you were saying something in a way it was bad yeah and like would you say that it has changed then like recently like improved in some way the more I learn to accept myself and learn to be myself the better it got the mental health.” (Anna, 20, Gender Fluid)

This shows an interesting and evolving relationship between mental health and gender nonconformity, where the relationship is negative for the most part, but does slowly improve to become a positive experience and the positive side of this experience is similar to the first participant where understanding of self, results in better mental health.

Similar to this, one participant said

“Like I would say that it brings me a lot of body dysmorphia like I don’t like the way that I look a lot of the time and no matter what I do I can’t change it so it brings me sometimes a lot of distress but at the same time you know it also is the source of joy for me when I am able when I like the way that I look when I feel like oh what I’m feeling inside is showing outside so it’s both a source of pain and it’s a source of sadness and joy for me”, (Amna, 22, Genderfluid)

In this scenario we see the mention of body again, specifically body dysmorphia and how not looking like how they feel inside causes them great distress but understanding that it is a problem, helps them look the way they want, thus developing a positive relationship between their mental health and gender nonconformity.

The participant with a somewhat neutral relationship said

“um I think that like you know the mental strain or anything roots from the fact of like me feeling like an outcast in situations but apart from that there hasn’t been like any other reason to you know it affecting my mental health or anything”, (Hareem, 20, Female)

This also relates to the theme of exclusion from social settings but they do also state how this is not something that affects their mental health in any way, positive or negative.

The findings suggest that there is a possibility of both a negative and positive relationship developing between gender non-conformity and mental health depending on how one experiences it and how one deals with it.

## **2.2. Impact of exclusion and discrimination on academic performance**

The second theme is rooted in the negative impacts of exclusion and discrimination on academic performance, where these two things are related to mental health. Out of the 8 participants, 4 stated that exclusion hurt their mental health, while the other 4 didn’t mention anything regarding this. In terms of academic performance, 7 participants stated that this negatively impacted their academic performance, while only 1 participant stated that this had no impact on their academic performance.

One participant explained how exactly this impacted their academic performance

“I think yes, because um my academic performance does depend a lot on like kind of day-to-day performance right and I think things that would happen at the moment would affect me throughout



the day and then I wouldn't be able to perform well on my assignments and that would eventually affect my academic life in general and then overall performance.”, (Erum, 23, Female)

It showcases very specifically how even a small discriminatory experience can start a domino effect and affect the overall academic performance and as we saw earlier as well, these students do face such behavior regularly, thus making it very easy for their academic performance to have a negative impact.

One participant said

“It has now yeah because it has gotten to height to the point where it's something I have that's actively on my mind so yeah.” (Arooj, 22, Not Sure)

This is slightly different from the first experience where the issues regarding their gender nonconformity are constantly on their mind thus making it difficult to focus on their education.

Again, similar to the first experience, another participant said

“I mention that you know when I get triggered by things like that I get and I don't do well as academically when I'm in one of those moods so I would say it has in a way affected me academically but not directly kind of just like ye uske baad jo hota hai it affects me” (Amna, 22, Genderfluid)

Here the distinction is how the issues regarding their gender nonconformity don't affect their academic performance directly but rather affect their mood and the after-effects that have an impact on their academic performance. But all of these have the similarity of negative experiences regarding gender nonconformity and bad mental state resulting in a negative academic performance.

This suggests that depending on what kind of mental state an individual might be in due to their gender non-conformity, that affects how they perform academically.

### **Objective 3: Coping Strategies and Improving Academic Staff**

The third objective binds the first and second objectives with the notion of coping strategies, which emerged as the common theme in this part as well as how academic staff can be improved and they are discussed as follows:

#### **3.1. Coping Strategies**

All the participants had different combinations of strategies that were used by them to cope with these challenges and experiences. Out of the 8 participants, 2 used forcefully fitting in with the gender norms to cope. Therapy was used by 2 participants as well. 2 participants found distancing themselves from unsupportive people helpful, while 2 had no proper coping strategy. The most common way of coping among the participants was having a strong support system of friends, where 5 participants stated that they used this form of coping.

The coping strategies narrated by different participants showcase how they are similar at their core but how they were implemented was distinct to each other. As stated by a participant,

“um I think in like early adolescence when I felt this I just started to fit in instead of expressing what I felt like I was in regards to gender but now I just I just feel like even if I get some sort of you to know people question me for what I am or they argue about my beliefs about my gender I just like to ignore it and I disassociate with those opinions and I just do what I feel like doing” (Hareem, 20, Female)

This coping strategy highlights how they would try to fit in by conforming to gender roles, while simultaneously disassociating with negative opinions regarding their gender. This also relates to the earlier theme of the relation between mental health and gender nonconformity, where having to conform to gender roles is something that negatively affects mental health but this shows how despite being something negative, it is used as a coping strategy.

Another participant explained that,

“yes, by distancing myself from these people and surrounding myself more with people who are accepting and who respect my identity” (Hamna, 21, Non-Binary)

They talked about how distancing from negative people and having a proper support group of people helped them cope with this, which was a common theme among participants, above anything else, having supportive peers was the most helpful element in their coping strategies.

Like this experience, a participant explained how coping works for them,

“Um, so the places that I know that I can empower myself in I think I try to utilize them more for example if I can’t express myself outside more I would try to express myself better on campus better when I go out with friends than with people who I think would judge me and then like even

if for example I am feminine inherently if I know that people are going to like to hype me up for doing feminine things like wearing pink and all I am more likely to do that and I do it with those people who are like more like they acknowledge me for it and they encourage me to do it I would do it more often with them and that helps me and then I just avoid it with people who I know are not encouraging or they would demotivate me or they would just make a joke about it without realizing how it would make me feel so I don't do it in front of them to like to protect my mental health." (Erum, 23, Female)

This experience makes the mention of safe spaces and how they use those spaces to empower themselves and effectively cope with these issues, giving examples of wanting to act a certain way, thus relying on the group of people who would encourage that. While also avoiding people who would discourage them from being themselves, very similar to the participants above.

Another type of coping strategy was explained by a participant,

"Well, um I do go to therapy on campus, and I have a pretty strong social support structure of course it doesn't always help with coping but okay it helps with regulating in general yeah." (Arooj, 22, Not Sure)

While not the most common coping strategy, therapy was usually mentioned in conjunction with having a strong support system, which as stated earlier was the most common coping strategy amongst the participants.

The findings suggest that a strong social support system is the most impactful way of coping and dealing with one's gender nonconformity, but other methods such as therapy work too usually in combination with having a strong social support system.

### **3.2. Improvement of Academic Staff**

The other theme in the third objective was regarding the improvement of academic staff and instructors, where all 8 participants suggested educating the academic staff through different methods which can improve the overall academic experience for a lot of gender nonconforming students.

One participant suggested,

"I think the therapy thing they have going on is pretty good it is pretty inclusive for general not confirming folks and within classrooms as well I think that in some disciplines such as in humanities, the teachers are very accepting and you know there is now dialogue and discourse

about this stuff going on within classroom so I think that is pretty nice I think that more open discussions about this would also be nice” (Hamna, 21, Non-Binary)

This was an interesting suggestion as it didn't talk about directly intervening with the academic staff but rather through discourse and discussion, while also mentioning the therapy, which is also something used as a coping mechanism by these students.

Another participant mentioned a specific classroom experience,

“Well in a lot of places, students are singled out because of the way they look especially for general education courses, and if not that because of their opinions and the singling out of course makes you stand out and makes you more visible in everyone's eyes so for them to not do that which is the bare minimum would be pretty great.” (Arooj, 22, Not Sure)

Related to how students present themselves and how the academic staff could develop a healthier classroom environment for such students.

One participant also talked about having more awareness

“I think they should be less prejudiced and I think that first, they should start with using more gender-neutral language because that will include everybody and I think they should first educate themselves and increase their awareness before approaching students, and yeah awareness part is very important.” (Anna, 20, Gender Fluid)

More awareness regarding gender identities would result in them using more gender-neutral terms in classrooms which would foster a healthy classroom experience while also giving some idea on how to approach and teach gender nonconforming students.

As suggested by different participants, the university staff needs to be educated about gender nonconformity, so they can create a more positive learning environment for all their students.

## Discussion

The findings of this study show that gender non-conforming individuals face discrimination and exclusion in university settings by their peers and outside of university settings by their families. The participants shared their diverse experiences of the discrimination and exclusion that was faced, including situations where they ended up excluding themselves from social settings to avoid facing any further exclusion and discrimination.

The findings of this study further supported the literature, as shown in the study by Gonzales et al., (2020), which looked at LGBT students during the COVID-19 pandemic and they found some very interesting results. They conducted an online survey amongst 477 LGBT-identifying college students aged between 18-25 years and nearly half of them had family members who were not supportive of them or in some cases weren't even aware of their LGBT identity. This is a staggering number and sheds light on how unique and difficult it is for LGBTQ students to exist in the society around them, and even more so during a global pandemic. A similar pattern was noticed in the study where the participants shared different instances of having unsupportive family members.

It was found in a survey, that out of the total percentage surveyed, 23.4% of students faced homophobic harassment and discrimination, and this consisted of derogatory remarks, as well as direct or indirect verbal threats, and lastly even included threats of physical violence (Ellis, 2009). Similar behavior was noticed in the findings, where some participants narrated different instances of facing harassment and discrimination from their peers.

The findings of this study also revealed the effects of exclusion and discrimination on the mental health of gender-nonconforming students. As suggested by the literature as well, these issues result in mental health problems for the individuals belonging to the LGBTQ community, according to research where they sampled LGBT college students, more than 60% were experiencing mental distress, anxiety, or depression, it was also mentioned how transgender students were likely to experience more mental distress

compared to their cisgender counterparts (Gonzales et al., 2020). This is in line with how some participants explained the relationship between their gender non-conformity and mental health, while also explaining how exclusion and discrimination had led to a negative impact on their mental health.

Furthermore, it was also shown in the findings how the mental health issues that root from exclusion and discrimination end up manifesting themselves in the form of negative academic performance, as supported by the literature as well, mental health problems can then negatively manifest themselves in the student's academic performance and their general approach to academia (DeSocio, 2004). Stress, depression, and anxiety can have an impact on students' academic success (Wyatt et al., 2017).

It is further discussed in the literature that there is a growing correlation between academic success and social-emotional functioning. These studies identify different examples where if students start showing problems in one area of social-emotional functioning, they tend to do that in other areas as well and then it indirectly or directly affects their academic performance and academic success negatively. There are examples of students with clinical levels of mental health problems who end up less likely to even complete high school. Students with low subjective well-being were shown to be at a very high risk of deterioration in GPA. Moreover, students with mental health problems earlier in their lives end up with various challenges regarding their academic and social competence (Suldo et al., 2014).

The theoretical framework used in this study is based on 2 theories. The theory of multiple masculinities was first introduced in the book "Masculinities" (2005), where it was theorized that gender nonconforming masculinities and femininities as "subordinate" where they don't fit the construction of hegemonic masculinity and are treated as lower on the gender hierarchy. This theory also talks about emphasized femininity where it is less marginalized than other femininities due to it fitting the traditional gender roles. Therefore, young men who fail to meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity and young women who are unable to perform "emphasized femininity" are subjected to discrimination and marginalization within the heteronormative Pakistani society. As the findings suggest, subordinate masculinities were treated lower on the gender hierarchy, where they faced different forms of exclusion,

harassment, and discrimination. They also show that individuals who fit the traditional roles of hegemonic masculinity and performed emphasized femininity didn't face exclusion, harassment, or discrimination.

The resilience theory explains that individuals possess the ability to adapt and cope with stress and adversity and that this ability develops over time to be stronger. (Robinson et al., 2021), which is the second theory in the theoretical framework of this study. The findings of this study regarding coping strategies work in conjunction with this theory where some participants reported that over time, they developed their ability to cope with the mental stress that comes from all the discrimination and exclusion they face as a gender non-conforming individual.

The current literature regarding this topic is very limited in terms of Pakistan, this study fills that gap and shows the experiences and challenges of gender non-conforming individuals in the context of Pakistan and how they deal with these different experiences in these social settings.

However, the sample size of this study could be increased for an even more diverse look into the experiences and challenges of gender non-conforming individuals, as it was already seen from the findings that these experiences can vary from person to person, and they all deal with it in their unique way.

## **Recommendations**

The findings of this study suggest that gender non-conforming individuals facing mental health issues can deal with it using various methods, such as taking therapy or trying to focus on their academic work, which is also supported by the literature, there are cases of students focusing on their work to try and forget their problems and in other cases they opt for counseling services to try and replace the help that they didn't get from their family and friends and lastly there were organizations that were designed to help the LGBTQ youth, they turned to these organizations, and they ended up becoming a major part of their coping strategies (Khdir, 2021).

Furthermore, it was suggested by the participants that the academic staff and instructors should be educated and informed about gender non-conformity, which is something the literature supports as well, different interventions have helped in dealing with these issues in an educational environment, in one such study it was mentioned how principals and counselors helped LGBTQ students by providing them with safe and inclusive spaces within the educational environment, it is also worth noting that these individuals were part of the LGBTQ community themselves and that helped them approach this issue in a very targeted and effective manner. These individuals further wanted to talk about the community with the future principals as well so the problems faced by the LGBTQ community in the educational environment are fully eliminated as well as they can be. They believed in building strong relationships with the entire student body so that everyone can be educated and there is a strong support system for those who are part of the community (Beck, 2020). A localized version of these interventions could be implemented for the Pakistani society and in the Pakistani educational system.



## **Conclusion**

The goal of this study is to shed light on the experiences and challenges of gender non-conforming individuals in educational settings in the context of Pakistan, since the literature on that is very limited, while also showing how these individuals deal with this and how the situation for them can be improved. The theoretical framework in the context of this study shows the dominating hegemonic masculinity in the context of Pakistan and how subordinate masculinities suffer under them. Lastly, this topic is not something that is openly discussed in Pakistan, this study hopes to change that in some capacity.

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## **Appendix A: Information Sheet and Consent Form**

### **Information Sheet**

Title of Research: Exploring the experiences and challenges of gender non-conforming individuals in an educational setting

Researcher: Muhammad Arham Imtiaz

Institution: Forman Christian College (A Chartered University)

Researcher Contact: 231521545@formanite.fccollege.edu.pk

Supervisor: Shermeen Bano

Supervisor Contact: shermeenbano@fccollege.edu.pk

You are invited to take part in a research project, exploring the experiences and challenges of gender non-conforming individuals in an educational setting. You must understand the purpose of this research and what is expected from you before you decide to participate. Read this information sheet carefully and feel free to ask any questions.

What is the project's purpose?

This project aims to understand and explore the experiences of gender non-conforming individuals in an educational setting and how these individuals cope with the experiences that they may go through being gender non-conforming.

Selection Criteria

You have been selected because you fit the participant criteria.

Voluntary participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and if you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You will also have the right to withdraw at any given moment without giving a reason.

### Study Procedure

You will be interviewed once, where you will be asked a series of questions related to your experiences and challenges regarding expression of gender non-conformity. It will take between 30 minutes and an hour.

### Confidentiality

All this information will be kept strictly confidential, and you will not be identified in any reports or publications.

### Who is organizing the research?

This research is organized by the department of sociology, Forman Christian College.

### **Consent Form**

1. I have read and understood the information sheet explaining the purpose of the research. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research project, and all my questions have been answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any given point without specifying any reason. I am free to decline or not respond to questions I do not wish to answer.
3. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential, and my name will not be used in the research materials. I will not be identifiable in any information in the research report.
4. I give permission to the researcher to access my anonymized responses.

5. I agree that the data collected from me may be used in future studies after identifiable information has been removed.
6. I agree to take part in the above research.
7. I understand that a copy of all signed sheets, including the consent form and the information sheet, will be provided to me, and will also be kept in the researcher's main project record.

Name:

Signature:

Email:

Date:



**Appendix B: Sociodemographic Survey Instrument****Exploring the Experiences and Challenges of Gender Non-Conforming Individuals in Pakistan**

1)	<b>Age (in years):</b>	5)	<b>Current Living Arrangement:</b>
2)	<b>Gender:</b>	6)	<b>Relationship Status:</b>
3)	<b>Year of Study:</b>	7)	<b>Religion</b>
4)	<b>Provincial Belonging:</b>		

## **Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

### **Exploring the Experiences and Challenges of Gender Non-Conforming Individuals in Pakistan**

#### **Section 1: Experiences and Challenges resulting from non-normative expression of gender.**

1. Has there been instances where you were discriminated against or excluded from social groups due to your gender expression?
2. Has your gender expression impacted your interactions with professors and academic staff on campus?
3. Have you ever experienced any form of harassment or bullying due to your gender expression on campus?
4. How different have your experiences been regarding gender expression outside the campus compared to being on the campus?

#### **Section 2: Impact of these experiences and challenges on the mental health**

1. How would you describe the relationship between your gender nonconformity and mental health?
2. In what ways did discrimination and exclusion effect your mental health?
3. How has this effected your academic performance?

#### **Section 3: Coping strategies**

1. How have you dealt with all these experiences?
2. What kind of coping strategies have you used?

3. In what ways can the university staff and administrators support you in terms of mental health and coping strategies?

### Appendix D: Face sheet Information

Alias	Age	Gender	Year of Study	Provincial Belonging	Current Living Arrangement	Relationship Status	Religion
Hareem	20	Female	4 <sup>th</sup>	Punjab	Nuclear Family	Single	Islam
Hamna	21	Non-Binary	4 <sup>th</sup>	Punjab	Nuclear Family	Single	<u>Spiritual</u>
Anna	20	Gender Fluid	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Punjab	Nuclear Family	Single	Islam
Aleena	22	Gender Fluid Trans Woman	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Punjab	Nuclear Family	Single	-
Arooj	22	Not Sure	4 <sup>th</sup>	Punjab	Joint Family	In a relationship	-
Amna	22	Gender Fluid	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Punjab	Nuclear Family	In a relationship	-
Asifa	20	Female	4 <sup>th</sup>	Punjab	Nuclear Family	Single	Islam
Erum	23	Female	4 <sup>th</sup>	Punjab	Joint Family	Single	Islam

## Appendix E: IRB Form



**FORMAN CHRISTIAN COLLEGE**  
(A CHARTERED UNIVERSITY)

### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

IRB Ref: IRB-456/6-2023

Date: 22-06-2023

**Project Title:** Exploring the Experiences and Challenges of Gender Non-Conforming Individuals in FCCU, Lahore

**Principal Investigator:** Muhammad Arhan imtiaz

**Supervisor:** Ms. Sharmeen Bano

The Institutional Review Board has examined your project in the IRB meeting held on 22-06-2023 and has approved the proposed study. If during the conduct of your research, any changes occur related to participant risk, study design, confidentiality or consent, or any other change then IRB must be notified immediately.

Please be sure to include the IRB reference number in all correspondence.

Dr. Sharoon Hanook  
Convener + IRB  
Chairperson, Department of Statistics  
Forman Christian College  
(A Chartered University)  
Lahore

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