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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	vii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Statement of the problem	2
1.2 Objectives of the Study:	3
1.3 Significance of the Study:	3
1.4 Research Questions:	4
1.5 Definitions	5
1.5.1 Cultural Norms	5
1.5.2 Societal Norms	5
1.5.3 Career Aspirations	5
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	7
2.1 Career Aspirations and Higher Education	7
2.2 Family Influence on Female Students' Career Aspiration.....	8
2.3 Cultural and Societal Norms Shaping Female Students' Career Aspirations.....	9
2.4 Intersection of Education, Class, and Cultural Capital	10
2.5 Role of Higher Education Institutions in Shaping Female Students' Career Pathways	10
2.6 Barriers and Challenges Faced by Female Students	11
2.7 Female Agency, Negotiation, and Coping Strategies within Sociocultural Constraints	12
2.8 Research and Knowledge Gaps.....	13
CHAPTER 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	15

3.1 Social Role Theory	15
3.2 Bourdieu’s Theory of Habitus and Cultural Capital.....	15
CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	17
4.1 Nature of the Study	17
4.2 Research Design	18
4.3 Research Site	18
4.4 Sampling Design	20
4.4.1 Sampling Technique	20
4.4.2 Inclusion Criteria	21
4.4.3 Exclusion Criteria.....	22
4.4.4 Number of Participants and Sample	23
4.5 Data Collection Method	26
4.5.1 Pilot Testing.....	26
4.5.2 Data collection techniques.....	27
4.5.3 Tool for data collection.....	28
4.5.4 Data Collection Process.....	29
4.6 Data Analysis.....	30
4.6.1 Data Familiarization	30
4.6.2 Data Coding.....	30
4.6.3 Theme Development	31

4.6.4 Interpretation and Analysis.....	31
4.6.5 Triangulation	31
4.6.6 Reflexivity	32
4.6.7 Member Checking	32
4.6.8 Reporting	32
4.6.9 Ethical consideration	33
4.6.10 Trustworthiness and reliability	34
4.7 Fieldwork Experiences	34
CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS	36
1. Respectability over Risk.....	37
5.1.1 Socially Approved Professions.....	41
5.1.2 Job Safety and Stability as Career Motivators	42
5.1.3 Alignment with Socially Constructed Femininity	43
5.2 Breaking the Mold	44
5.2.1 Interest in Digital Technology and Entrepreneurial Fields.....	45
5.2.2 Agency and Resistance to Traditional Norms	46
5.2.3 Influence of Global Trends and Role Models	48
5.3 Gatekeeping Role of Family and Mentors.....	49
5.3.1 Supportive role: Encouragement and Motivation	50
5.3.2 Regulatory roles: restriction and pressure	51

5.3.3 Collective decision-making and negotiation within family	52
5.4 Marriage as a Structuring Force	53
5.4.1 Career flexibility and compatibility with family life.....	53
5.4.2 Timing of education and professional choices	54
5.4.3 Societal expectations post-marriage.....	55
5.5 Patriarchal Norms and Cultural Boundaries	57
5.5.1 Gendered limitations on leadership and male-dominated fields	57
5.5.2 Social sanctions for non-conforming choices	58
5.5.3 Cultural reinforcement of traditional gender roles	59
5.6 Internalized Limits	60
5.6.1 Adjusting ambitions based on societal expectations	61
5.6.2 Avoiding unconventional or high-risk careers.....	62
5.6.3 Internal self-monitoring and social conformity	63
5.7 Double Burden of Barriers – Structural Inequality and Psychological Strain	64
5.7.1 External: financial constraints, limited resources, gender bias	64
5.7.2 Internal: self-doubt, anxiety, fear of failure.....	65
5.7.3 Intersection of structural and psychological pressures.....	66
5.8 Negotiating Survival and Change	67
5.8.1 Strategies to balance personal ambitions and societal expectations.....	67
5.8.2 Role of family, peers, teachers and mentors in support.....	68

5.8.3 Opportunities through education, policies and role models	69
CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	71
6.1 Discussion	71
6.2 Limitations	74
6.3 Conclusion and Recommendations	75
References:	78
APPENDIX.....	83
Appendix A: Information Sheet and Consent Letter for female students	83
Appendix B Questionnaire (Interview guide) for Female Students	85

List of Tables:

- Table 1- Total number of participants in IDIs and FGDs, including number of sessions, and participants per session
- Table 2- Demographic data categorizing IDI participants by age, education level, university type, and area of resistance.
- Table 3- Demographic data categorizing Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants by age, education level, and university type.
- Table 4- Summary of thematic findings for study, showing broad themes, sub-themes, and one relevant quote

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore the impact of cultural and societal norms on the career aspirations of female students in higher education. In this research study it examines the impact of family expectations, social pressures, and gender norms on career and academic decision-making among the female students. It also examines how the career aspirations of female students in Lahore's higher education are influenced by cultural and social norms. A total of 11 female students were selected through a purposive sampling technique who were enrolled in public and private universities in Lahore, Punjab. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect the data while adhering to the research ethics. The thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke was used to analyze the data. The key findings suggest that cultural norms and patriarchal expectations considerably influence career aspirations of female students, commonly leading them towards professions that are socially acceptable. It was further revealed that family, peers, teachers, and mentors are important social agents that often encourage, but sometimes limit, career choices. The social sanctions and fear of being judged by society were highlighted as the obstacles to the women pursuing non-traditional careers. In addition, despite these challenges, majority of participants expressed a strong desire for independence and self-fulfillment, reflecting a moderate shift towards more progressive attitudes. The results of the present research emphasize the multifaceted nature of interplay between societal norms and career aspirations among female students in Pakistan. It can also help policymakers, educational institutions, and other stakeholders prefer gender-sensitive approaches to encourage and support female students in their career development.

Keywords:

Cultural norms, societal norms, career Aspiration, female students, higher education.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The society of Pakistan is patriarchal, and the lives, opportunities, and aspirations of women are largely influenced by deeply held social and cultural norms (Abbas et al., 2021). Being integrated into the traditional systems of values and gendered expectations, these norms are essential in shaping the educational paths of women and their choice of careers (Gregor & O'Brien, 2016; Ullah, Ali & Ahmad, 2018). Since childhood, women are conditioned to believe that only some roles and occupations are socially acceptable, and they should not strive to achieve the ones that are not established by society as the notions of femininity. These expectations can become invisible constraints in the educational system, in which women are steered towards acceptable career choices and implicitly discouraged from pursuing male-dominated or untraditional careers (Llorens et al., 2021; Zaidi, 2022). Consequently, it implies that the traditional gender stereotypes remain fixed in both academic and professional aspirations of young women, suppressing their agency and often causing them to miss out on personal interests and aspirations (Northouse, 2025; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004).

In the context of higher educational institutions in Lahore, female students often have to find their way through the complex world of expectations and choices, where traditional values clash with opportunities of the modern world (Siddique et al., 2024). A sense of conflict arises at the crossroads, since female students strive to keep a balance between individual ambitions as well as societal acceptance. Factors to which female students are contributing to their decision-making processes are the family expectations, peer influence, institutional culture and religious interpretation. Furthermore, self-confidence and the presence of positive academic and career conditions also affect their motivation to engage in various academic and career opportunities. (Khan et al., 2024; Eagly and Wood, 2012).

In this context, the present study examined the influences of social pressures, gender roles, and family expectations on the educational and career aspirations of female students and the barriers to these aspirations that they face. This study is based on the experiences of female students to understand the structural and cultural factors that affect their choices, as well as the conditions that can help them make their way through education, role models and institutional support. By doing this, the research adds to the wider debates on the role of gender equity promotion in education and the importance of more inclusive and supportive settings that allow women to make autonomous and informed career choices.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Although there has been some progress in improving women's access to education in Pakistan, societal and cultural norms continue to play a significant role in shaping the choice of career of college students, especially women. Traditional patterns, patriarchal family relationships, and rigid gender codes often predetermine the types of education and professions considered appropriate for women, thus reducing their chances of undertaking various career roles and occupying high-ranking positions. Consequently, most female students are subjected to limitations that limit their freedom to make autonomous academic and professional choices in line with their individual interests and goals. Additionally, issues associated with professional problems and social perils also make women feel disheartened when joining some areas, particularly those viewed as non-traditional or dominated by men. Not only do these restrictions strengthen the current gender inequalities, but they also impede the personal and professional development of women. Although the problem is increasingly understood, in-depth research, which captures female students' own experiences and opinions on how social and cultural factors impact their career choices, is still lacking. Consequently, there is a need to study these lived experiences in

order to better understand the issues and empowering conditions that influence the aspirations of women. This study explored the views of female students in order to understand the obstacles that students face and what resources and strategies may assist them in overcoming these obstacles, which will eventually result in creating more inclusive and equity-based learning and workplaces.

1.2 Objectives of the Study:

- To explore the impact of social pressures, family expectations, and gender norms on academic and career decision-making amongst the female students.
- To understand the role of cultural and social norms on the career objectives of female students pursuing higher education in Lahore.
- To identify the challenges and the strategies used by female students to overcome the social and cultural barriers to their professional growth.

In addition, this research aims to investigate the influence of social and cultural factors on academic and career aspirations of female students at higher education. It is about the roles that expectations and family influence play in shaping decisions about career directions, and the influence of gender norms on this decision-making process. Moreover, the study aims at understanding the challenges faced by female students and the strategies used by them to cope with these challenges to be successful in their career.

1.3 Significance of the Study:

The significance of this study is that it is one of the studies in the literature to address the issue of social and cultural norms influencing the career aspirations of female students in higher educational institutions in Pakistan. While the literature covers previous debates on the subject of

gender differences in education and occupation, there is a lack of qualitative studies that offer a deeper understanding into the experiences and perceptions women have regarding sociocultural factors as they consider and make decisions about their academic and occupational choices. This study fills this gap by providing an exploratory perspective on the lived experience of female students in terms of career aspirations.

The study highlights the interaction of societal expectations, family expectations and gender expectations in the context of higher education in Lahore. It also examines how those factors can limit as well as, in some situations, encourage the female students when making their decisions. This research study will help the teachers, governments, and higher learning institutions to know how to help female students and how to build the environment where they will be able to make a knowledgeable decision when choosing a career without being restricted.

Moreover, the present research is essential in raising awareness about the obstacles that restrict women in various fields of academia and careers. With the identification of social and cultural limitations that the female students face, the study will be able to give insights that can be used to facilitate the formulation of strategies, counseling support networks, and institutional practices that will empower the women and get them to represent themselves better in the different professions.

1.4 Research Questions:

The research questions to achieve the objective of the study are as follows:

1. How do cultural and societal norms influence the career aspirations of female students in higher education in Lahore?

2. How do cultural and societal norms, including family expectations and social pressures, influence and limit the career aspirations of female students enrolled in higher education institutions in Lahore?

1.5 Definitions

1.5.1 Cultural Norms

Cultural norms are shared values, customs, beliefs, and behaviors of a given community that offer acceptable behavior to women, particularly regarding their roles in family and career (Hofstede, 2011). These norms shape female students' understandings of appropriate or acceptable career paths and will be explored through their narratives about how culture has influenced their ambitions and opportunities.

1.5.2 Societal Norms

Societal norms refer to the greater social expectations and norms that are unwritten and expected in the society that dictate and precondition the manner in which female students are treated on matters that concern education and career orientation (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Among them are the attitude of the community to the career of women, community opposition to women leaders, and social pressure to fit the social roles associated with a particular sex. This study will examine how participants perceive and respond to these expectations in their everyday experiences of planning for a career.

1.5.3 Career Aspirations

Career aspirations refer to the goals, ambitions, and desired achievements of female students in their future professional lives. This includes the willingness to pursue leadership positions, enter male-dominated fields, or seek further education for career advancement (Gregor

& O'Brien 2011). The research will investigate how female students describe and make sense of their aspirations, as well as the cultural, social, and institutional factors that support or hinder their pursuit.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Career Aspirations and Higher Education

Career aspirations are the ambitions, expectations, and long-term professional objectives of the people with regard to their future occupational status (Rojewski, 2005). They are essential in young adulthood because this age is characterized by identity development, decision-making, and economic and social independence plans. Researchers maintain that career goals are not constructed in a vacuum but developed through socialization, opportunities and possible opportunities, when interacting with their social environment (Gottfredson, 2005). In the case of female students, especially in patriarchal societies, the choice of a career is usually predetermined by the gender norms and expectations of what women can or cannot do in their workplace (Eccles, 2011). In the existing literature it has been noted that high career aspirations are related to increased motivation, tenacity in education, and successful careers in the long term, which makes them an important area of research inquiry in higher education (Bargmann et al., 2022).

Higher education is very important in influencing the professional aspirations of the students in life through academic exposure, development of skills, and self-exploration. Universities are not only a place of knowledge transfer but also a place where students are able to form professional identities, build self-confidence, and refine their career goals (Tomlinson, 2017). Research has also established that positive environments of learning can greatly boost confidence and clarity among students on matters of career choices. Gracia et al. (2015) discovered that contextual support in educational settings has a positive effect on career decision-making self-efficacy and career optimism of the young adults, implying that higher learning experiences a significant impact in defining career aspirations and professional self-efficacy in students. In the case of the female students, higher education can also be a source of empowerment where they can

defy their gender status and be able to contemplate their career lives without being bound to a specific career definition (Fitzgerald and Betz, 1994). However, the magnitude of such outcomes largely hinges on institutional reinforcement and the socio-cultural context, in which female students find themselves in general.

2.2 Family Influence on Female Students' Career Aspiration

Family is at the forefront in determining the career aspirations of female students, especially in collectivistic and patriarchal communities where making key life decisions tends to be undertaken by the family. According to the existing literature, parents and close relatives are considered the key agents of socialization who pass the gendered expectations about the correct roles, duties, and further development paths that women should follow (Eccles, 2011). Among female students, career choice is often bargained within the family expectations of marriage, family care, and family honor that can either support or limit career ambitions (Fouad et al., 2010). Research indicates that attitudes of parents to women's education and work contribute greatly to whether female students want to pursue professional life, focus on acceptable jobs, or restrain their life goals to suit family expectations (Leung et al., 2011).

In contexts such as Pakistani and other South Asian societies, family influence often cuts across cultural norms and gendered expectations that define the career interests of female students. The literature on Pakistani students shows that the education level, occupation level, and expectations of parents are major predictors of the career choices of their children, with daughters frequently being more affected by their families since they have to live up to specific cultural expectations regarding women's roles and duties (Humayon et al., 2018). The career aspirations are also influenced by sibling experiences, particularly the older sisters or brothers, as they offer role models or negative examples to the family structure (Basit, 2012). Therefore, career expectations of female students are not just personal choices but representations of continual

bargaining with family pressures, affective duties, and cultural practices, which has prompted the need to look into the influence of family as a decisive factor of career development in higher education among women.

2.3 Cultural and Societal Norms Shaping Female Students' Career Aspirations

The cultural and societal values also contribute significantly to shaping the career goals of female students as they determine the gender-specific roles, behavior, and choice of occupation. There are gender norms ingrained in society that tend to assign the major role of women as housewives, nurses, and family respect, which consequently affects the career opportunities of women as perceived by the female students (Eccles, 2011). It has been argued that social constructs about female femininity and respectability influence educational and professional aspirations among women; in many situations, these aspirations lead to a profession that is perceived to be socially acceptable, stable, and family friendly (England, 2010). Consequently, female students might take internal cultural messages that advance modesty, obedience, and social acceptance and restrict their ambitions or choose careers that conform to social conventions instead of interests and skills. The cultural norms concerning movement, security, and social esteem in a setting like Pakistan and other South Asian cultures further restrict the ambition of female students in their careers.

Research shows that most issues that affect the occupations that women can carry out are related to the concern of publicity working side by side with men and social disapproval (Roomi & Harrison, 2010; Syed, 2010). The fact that females are limited in their mobility and afraid of being socially disliked can make them unwilling to work in a profession that might demand traveling extensively, working late, or interacting with people, despite having the needed qualifications (Syed, 2010). Thus, the career goals of women are not only influenced by personal motivation but also by the necessity to preserve social respect and be acceptable in the family.

These results are informative to the nature of how cultural and social norms are effective structural forces that influence the career choices of female students in the higher education institute.

2.4 Intersection of Education, Class, and Cultural Capital

The relationship between education, social status, and cultural capital is core to the appreciation of the process through which female students create and bargain for their career goals. Higher education is not a place that is neutral or an equalizing space, but instead it is highly organized around the social class and the background of the students influences their access to the knowledge of the institution, their academic confidence, and future expectations (Archer, Hutchings, and Ross, 2002). The empirical studies indicate that cultural capital can affect the attitude of students toward academic institutions and their trust in further academic education, where those with more privileged backgrounds tend to be more aware of the career options (Qonitatin et al., 2023). Particularly with regard to female students, the qualitative study of the Chinese female students by Zhang and Tang (2021) shows that cultural capital interacts with gender and family factors to determine educational and career choices, and students in middleincome families were more likely to engage in advantaged academic opportunities in addition to negotiating the cultural expectations regarding what they should and should not study. Within the framework of developing nations such as Pakistan, where lines between socio-economic classes are drawn, educational performance and career choices are also most likely to be influenced by cultural capital inequalities. The level of parental education, knowledge on how to navigate the processes in an institution, and exposure to professional advice are some of the factors that can shape the way female students think about their future professions and follow them.

2.5 Role of Higher Education Institutions in Shaping Female Students' Career Pathways

Institutions of higher learning have a central role in influencing the career pathways of the students not only in terms of academic knowledge but also in terms of provision of systematic

support systems, professional learning environments, and resources that increase career clarity, confidence, and career preparedness. Career advising, curricular integration of career development activities, mentoring, workplace learning, and career services have all been identified as institutional practices that influence the understanding of career options, the development of career self-efficacy, and employment outcome preparation in a positive manner. The studies on institutional roles highlight that it is mandatory that universities prepare students with competencies, awareness, and confidence that are required of them in the changing world of work through providing employability-oriented programs and resources that bridge academic learning with career expectations in the real world (Pandya et al., 2023). It is also demonstrated by empirical evidence that learning career development in an institutional context has a positive impact on perceived employability by enhancing human capital (Ho, 2023), and career support provided in a higher education setting can lead to the development of career resources such as job market knowledge, social support networks, and career exploration behaviors (Monteiro et al., 2023).

Such institutional influences are particularly important to female students since they are able to overcome external societal and family restrictions, extend career perspectives, and develop professional identity and confidence in educational institutions. Consequently, institutions of higher learning come out as central platforms through which career desires are developed, fostered, and matched with career trajectories.

2.6 Barriers and Challenges Faced by Female Students

There are numerous structural and sociocultural challenges to female students in higher education in the form of restriction of their education and career goals in higher education. Gendered social norms, the lack of mobility, and the still existing societal requirements about the role of women in Pakistan are the factors that prevent the access of female students to any professional opportunities, despite having acquired higher education (Mehmood et al., 2018; Rana

et al., 2024). Rana et al. (2024) emphasize that Pakistani women face severe challenges in the process of higher education to professional life, including the discrimination at work, the absence of institutional support, the scarcity of professional networks, and the pressure to have family commitments instead of career building in society. These obstacles prove that a higher education level does not ensure empowerment and easy access to the professional environment among women, as the structural inequalities and cultural limitations remain to influence the posteducational achievements (Shaukat and Pell, 2015; Penezai et al., 2024).

However, in addition to these external obstacles, female learners have internal psychological obstacles that also impact their career decisions and goals. The Stereotype Inoculation Model by Dasgupta (2011) describes the negative consequences of repeated gender stereotypes on the self-concept of women, their confidence, and their sense of belonging in academic and professional spheres. Lack of supportive peer groups, mentors, or visible role models in the upper education and professional setting may exacerbate feelings of self-doubt and fear of failure in female students, resulting in self-limitation of their career aspirations (Dasgupta, 2011). Empirical studies also indicate that such internal barriers tend to overlap with external constraints, i.e., judgment about women by society and institutional support, and as such, it is especially hard when women attempt to follow ambitious or non-traditional career routes (Tanveer et al., 2025). The findings collectively suggest that structural, cultural, and psychological factors are interconnected determinants of career aspirations of female students.

2.7 Female Agency, Negotiation, and Coping Strategies within Sociocultural Constraints

Although female students have to work in rather repressive sociocultural contexts, the agency they apply is a multifaceted one as they resort to some forms of negotiation, resistance, and coping whenever attaining their educational and career goals. According to research, women usually strive at strategic negotiation with relatives by balancing compliance with cultural demands

and, at the same time, push and pull objectives of further education or career orientation (Kabeer, 1999). Instead of agency that is expressed by open confrontation, education itself turns out to be a resource that makes women able to make informed choices about their lives and negotiate social demands; a systematic review by Sheikh and Loney (2018) shows that female education in South Asia is closely linked to higher degrees of autonomy, power to make decisions, and long-term empowerment. Research also notes that the agency is not necessarily expressed in the open form of defiance, but women often use tactical compliance, i.e., temporarily living up to the standards of society to gain access to education, the support of institutions, or even the approval of their families (Johnson et al., 2017). Such negotiated agency in South Asian and Pakistani settings enables women students to overcome gendered constraints and expand their professional opportunities in stages (Rana et al., 2024). These results refute the simplistic images of women as passive agents of the culture and focus on the active process of redefining norms by female students, constrained choice, and reinventing career goals within the framework of current social orders.

2.8 Research and Knowledge Gaps

Even though the literature on female education and career development is expanding, there are still a lot of unanswered questions about the career goals of female students in higher education, especially in Pakistan. Instead of focusing on how female students conceptualize and negotiate their career aspirations within academic settings, the majority of available research has focused on socioeconomic and cultural barriers to women's participation in higher education with particular attention to access, gender inequality, and structural challenges (Mehmood, Chong, & Hussain, 2018; Rana et al., 2024). Most of this literature adopts quantitative approaches or a general structural analysis that offers little knowledge of the subjective meaning, lived experience, and decision-making of female students. Also, the existing research on the topic is largely quantitative

and fails to explore how institutions, individual agency, family aspirations, and cultural interact to shape career aspirations of women in universities with a focus on local context. Disparities in social class and exposure to institutions and urban environments like Lahore are also hidden by their tendency to treat female students as a homogeneous group. These differences contribute to the lack of coherent and often outdated perspectives of female students' career aspirations and highlight the importance of in-depth qualitative research that incorporates women's voices and explore how sociocultural barriers and opportunities operate in contemporary higher education settings in Pakistan.

CHAPTER 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Social Role Theory

This study is based on social role theory as developed by Alice Eagly (1987) which proposes that the social expectations of women influence their role in society, and that these directly influence their career aspirations. In several cultures, men and women should be different, thus affecting their view of their professional lives. Leadership fields and technical jobs are perceived as more appropriate for men, whereas in many societies such as Pakistan, women are encouraged to take up jobs in child care or education. Cultural norms are applicable to the job choice of female students and in some instances, the aspirations are limited based on the existing cultural ideas and barriers. Family expectations and peer influence as well as the traditions of institutions thereby making it difficult to step out of conventional career interests of women. However, organizations and universities can seek to challenge these norms through providing assistance, guidance, and inclusive policies. The social role theory is applied in this study to explore the influence of cultural and societal expectations of female students and what can be done to make their surroundings more welcoming and supportive.

3.2 Bourdieu's Theory of Habitus and Cultural Capital

Theory of Habitus and Cultural Capital (Pierre Bourdieu, 1984) is also used to inform research as it relates to how social and cultural structures influence the perceptions and actions of people. Habitus is a way of thinking, feeling, and acting acquired from socialization in the family, community, and educational setting. These internalized norms affect how the female students interpret what jobs are appropriate, desirable, and attainable. Access to educational and professional environments is also mediated by their cultural capital, skills, knowledge, and social

competencies. In the context of Pakistani society and culture, female students' habitus is generally shaped by the norms of men and family values and they are not given the chance to take up leadership roles or even opting for a major that is mostly taken up by men although they have the qualifications. This approach helps explain how societal inequalities can be reproduced through everyday practices and perceptions, and how this limits women's career aspirations and opportunities for women to advance their careers.

These are theoretical perspectives that provide a comprehensive perspective on the role of external social institutions and internalized beliefs in the academic and career aspirations of female students. The study has highlighted the complex interplay between social expectations and the agency of the individual and suggested informed policy and intervention strategies for promoting gender equality and enhancing opportunities for women in education and employment, through these frameworks.

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Nature of the Study

The study used a qualitative research method to discuss the cultural and societal influences on career choices of female students in higher education of Lahore, Pakistan. The overall methodology adopted was a phenomenological research design, where there was emphasis on understanding and interpretation of the experiences of the participants related to a phenomenon. Phenomenology enables the researcher to interpret the social experiences of others and what meaning they give their experiences (Creswell, 2014). This methodology was suitable for the current study because it was used in order to gain an understanding of the perception, navigation, and reconciling of cultural and societal expectations of female students in relation to their career aspirations.

Phenomenological approach is the approach that deals with the subjective experiences of the participants. The approach used in this study was descriptive phenomenology that focuses on describing and interpreting participants' lived experiences as they self-perceived and self-understood (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). The researcher gathered all the information related to the narratives of female's students with respect to their family expectations, social norms, mobility restrictions and consequences on the career aspirations of females. The qualitative data was obtained by the researcher using two methods which are known as In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with the selected female participants. These approaches enabled participants to freely articulate their thoughts and experiences, resulting in rich and meaningful data that met the research goals.

The founder of phenomenology Husserl made it a point to stress that the essence of the lived experiences is to be understood from direct contact between the researcher and participants

(Husserl, 1970). This study relied on an intimate and personal relationship with the women subjects, so as to gain insight into the societal, cultural and gender norms that influence women's choices about their careers. The phenomenological design was apt for the present study because it allowed a detailed investigation and interpretation of the meaning, perception and reality developed by female students in their particular social and cultural setting.

4.2 Research Design

Qualitative research was employed in the study to gain insight into the impacts of cultural and societal norms on career aspirations of female students at higher education institutes in Lahore, Pakistan. Social dynamics were examined in terms of participants' perceptions, personal narratives, and lived experiences that impact their career aspirations in order to provide deep insights into the social dynamics. Information was gathered on the common experiences and points of view through focus group discussions. The common themes and patterns were identified and analyzed in a qualitative way, using the thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The qualitative approach was deemed to be suitable for this study because it allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, perceptions and meanings of the participants regarding their career choices and how they are shaped within a particular social and cultural context.

4.3 Research Site

The study was performed in Lahore, Pakistan with the study population being all the female students of public and private higher education institutions. Lahore was selected as a suitable study location, as it has a varied educational environment with a prominent number of educational institutions where the traditional cultural values are coexisting with the modern education opportunities. Lahore is one of the biggest metropolitan cities of Pakistan and is credited with a large number of well-established public and private universities and colleges. Students come from

all over the country with a consistently growing number of women in higher education, due to the concentration of varied educational institutions. The number of women enrolled in higher education institutions in Pakistan has increased substantially; in fact, the proportion of female students is approximately 48-50% of the total enrolment in Universities and major cities like Lahore have a high proportion of female students due to their high concentration of Universities (Higher Education Commission Pakistan 2021). This emphasizes the importance of Lahore as a focal point in the study of career aspirations of female students.

The city is a unique mix of modern and traditional horizons related to job and educational opportunities. This coexistence makes Lahore the perfect place to look into how these two very different influences affect the career goals of female students. Lahore also shows cultural diversity because the students usually come from different ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds that offer an ideal opportunity for the social researcher to understand a wider range of experiences and points of view.

Moreover, the researcher has chosen the universities which were located in Lahore only, keeping feasibility and diversity of the universities in mind. The criteria used for the selection of universities included in this study was to include a broad range of experiences of female students in different institutional settings. The private sector institutions were selected as Forman Christian College and Minhaj University, and public sector university was selected as Punjab University to represent both types of higher education institutions. It was significant because the socio-economic background, academic environments, opportunities available to students, and institutional culture of public and private universities in Lahore vary, and can have an impact on girls' career aspirations. Both sectors enabled the researcher to examine relationships and differences between cultural and societal norms in the educational context. Also, these universities were chosen because of the researcher's ability to recruit people and the ease of conducting in-depth interviews and focus

group discussions. Thus, the sample of these institutions was suitable and balanced in accordance with the study goals and purposes.

The presence of various educational institutions and the accessibility of participants facilitated data collection via In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with the female students enrolled in public and private universities of Lahore. Therefore, the cultural and social effects on the career aspirations of female students in an urban environment of Pakistan is relevant and significant in the context of Lahore.

4.4 Sampling Design

4.4.1 Sampling Technique

The study's purpose was to obtain in-depth insights; therefore, a non-probability sampling technique was used. “Non-probability sampling is a sampling method that uses non-random criteria like availability, geographical proximity, or expert knowledge of the individuals you want to research in order to answer a research question.” (Nikolopoulou, K., 2022). This method best fitted the current research study, as it aimed at getting insights into the lived experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of the female students on the cultural and societal factors that affect their career aspirations.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling in order to ensure the participation of only those female students who met the inclusion criteria. As the study was intended to explore the subjective experiences of participants related to career choices, the focus of the researcher revolved around selecting those participants who would give rich, detailed, and meaningful information as opposed to a statistically representative sample.

Additionally, the non-probability sampling enabled the researcher to access the participants enrolled in different educational institutions (public and private) and belonging to different

socioeconomic backgrounds while currently residing in the city of Lahore. Such diversity allowed making the data deeper because it represented a broad spectrum of opinions on the role of the cultural and societal factors in career aspirations. This sampling method was also feasible and practical because it allowed the researcher to recruit easily willing and available participants to take part in In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

This is why the non-probability sampling method was suitable for the phenomenological approach used by the researcher because instead of generalizability, the method focuses on depth, context, and richness of information, which are in line with the overall research objectives.

4.4.2 Inclusion Criteria

A total of 31 participants (11 for in-depth interviews and 20 for FGDs) were selected through a mix of purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods, and they were selected based on certain criteria that are pertinent to research objectives. The study included female students pursuing undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate studies aged between 18 and 30 years who were willing to share their experiences of how their career aspirations are shaped by cultural and societal factors. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of educational level, type of university (public and private), and socio-economic background.

For the In-Depth Interviews (IDIs), 11 participants were selected. Out of these, 8 participants were sampled using purposive sampling, and the rest of the 3 participants were sampled using snowball sampling. The snowball sampling was useful in reaching out to the participants with the use of referrals, especially those who could not be directly approached but possessed the knowledge and experience that was relevant to the study.

For the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), a total of 3 FGDs were conducted with a total of 20 participants included in the study. For the first FGD, 7 participants were chosen through

purposive sampling. A combination of the two sampling techniques was, however, used in the second and third FGDs, including 6-7 participants in each. In both these FGDs, 1 interviewee was picked using purposive sampling, and the other 3 interviewees were picked using snowball sampling. This method enabled the researcher to incorporate participants with varied backgrounds and social networks.

Table 1

Total number of participants in IDIs and FGDs, including number of sessions and participants per session

Method of Data Collection	Number of Participants	Number of sessions	Participants per session
In-Depth Interviews (IDIs)	11	11	1
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	20	3	6-7
Total	31	14	—

Snowball sampling was especially effective in helping to access the participants outside the circle of the researcher to get a broader array of experiences. The purposive and snowball sampling combination not only increased the richness and diversity of the information but also was in line with the phenomenological nature of the study, where the focus was on depth of comprehension rather than generalizability.

4.4.3 Exclusion Criteria

The exclusion criteria were male students and female students who were incapable and unwilling of giving informed consent or meaningful responses relevant to the study. To insure

relevance and richness of data, those female students who did not have enough exposure to the career decision making processes were also excluded.

4.4.4 Number of Participants and Sample

The population of this study is the female students who are studying in postgraduate and undergraduate programs in Lahore's public and private sector universities of Pakistan. Eleven female students were purposefully and snow ball sampled from the population for in-depth interviews based on their availability and willingness to contribute. In addition, three focus group discussions were held involving 6-8 female students to enable a wider range of views to be expressed through group discussion. Care was taken to ensure that the participants were carefully selected to ensure that they are comfortable in the FGD and are not prone to hesitation when speaking.

Considering the different sampling strategies, it was decided that this one would be appropriate as it allowed direct contact with those who had personal experiences relating to the study. A sample size of 31 was sufficient to provide depth of data and was manageable for detailed qualitative analysis.

Table 2

Demographic data categorizing IDI participants by age, education level, university type, and area of residence.

Participants	Age (18-30 years)	Education Level Undergraduate/Graduate/ Postgraduate	University Type Public/Private	Area of Residence Urban/Rural
P1	23	Graduate	Public	Urban
P2	26	Postgraduate	Private	Urban
P3	23	Graduate	Public	Rural
P4	25	Postgraduate	Public	Rural
P5	27	Postgraduate	Private	Urban
P6	25	Postgraduate	Public	Urban
P7	26	Postgraduate	Private	Urban
P8	23	Undergraduate	Public	Urban
P9	22	Undergraduate	Private	Urban
P10	27	Postgraduate	Public	Rural
P11	28	Postgraduate	Private	Urban

Table 2 represents the socio-demographic characteristics of the IDI participants. A total of 11 participants were interviewed. Their age ranges from 18 years to 30 years. 2 participants were undergraduates, 2 were graduates, and 7 were postgraduate students. 6 participants belonged to public universities and 7 belonged to private universities. 8 participants belonged to urban areas and 3 belonged to rural areas.

Table 3

Demographic data categorizing Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants by age, education level, and university type.

Focus Groups	Participant's ID	Age	Education Level	University Type
FGD-1	P1	23	Undergraduate	Public
	P2	24	Postgraduate	Private
	P3	24	Postgraduate	Private
	P4	25	Graduate	Public
	P5	26	Postgraduate	Private
	P6	27	Postgraduate	Public
FGD-2	P1	28	Postgraduate	Private
	P2	26	Postgraduate	Private
	P3	21	Undergraduate	Public
	P4	22	Undergraduate	Public
	P5	23	Undergraduate	Private
	P6	26	Postgraduate	Public
	P7	22	Undergraduate	Public
FGD-3	P1	24	Postgraduate	Public
	P2	24	Postgraduate	Public
	P3	20	Undergraduate	Public
	P4	22	Undergraduate	Private
	P5	23	Graduate	Public
	P6	26	Postgraduate	Private
	P7	27	Postgraduate	Private

Table 2 represents the socio-demographic characteristics of the FGD participants; each FGD consists of 6 to 7 participants. A total of 20 participants were interviewed. Their age ranges from

18 years to 30 years. 7 participants were undergraduates, 2 were graduates and 11 were postgraduate students. 11 participants belonged to public universities and 9 belonged to private universities.

4.5 Data Collection Method

4.5.1 Pilot Testing

Before the actual data collection, a pilot test was done to determine the clarity, relevance, and effectiveness of the interview guide and focus group guide. Two participants for the In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and six participants for one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were selected for the pilot testing. This process was meant to understand the clarity of open-ended questions and if they were aligned with the objectives of the research.

In the pilot stage, participants were found to have some trouble understanding certain questions, which highlighted the need to simplify and clarify the questions in the interview guide. In response, the researcher created some more probing questions in a bullet form to improve their understanding for the participants. It also provided them with a better opportunity to extensively reflect on their lived experiences. The researcher also realized that before starting the interviews, giving a short introduction of the research topic also enabled the participants to better understand the aim of the research and answer in a better way.

The pilot test results were used to make some refinements in the interview and FGD guides, hence enhancing the reliability and validity of the tools of the data collection. Consequently, the process of data collection became more organized, coherent, and efficient. Pilot testing thus played an important role in enhancing the overall quality and rigor of the study.

4.5.2 Data collection techniques

The methods used in this study included In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), as these techniques allowed for the collection of rich, detailed, and context specific data. A total of 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with female students enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate programs in both the government and privately-owned universities in Lahore. The in-depth interviews allowed participants to share their own experiences, challenges, and desires in terms of education and career planning. According to Fotana and Frey (2002), open-ended interviews are effective in understanding complex social behaviors without applying pre-defined categories that may limit the responses of the participants. Since cultural expectations, gender roles and family pressures are sensitive in nature, one-to-one interviews were considered the most suitable approach for conducting meaningful discussions and building trust to express their experiences openly and truthfully.

Besides the individual interviews, three Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions were carried out, each involving 6-7 female students. The FGDs were used to explore shared experiences, group opinions, and group dynamics related to career aspirations and social expectations. This approach also helped in understanding how participants influenced each other's perspectives within a group setting. The IDIs and FGDs were conducted together because they offered both individual and group-level data on the cultural and societal factors affecting career decisions of female students, which, overall, made the study more rigorous. In general, the qualitative techniques were selected for their ability to provide rich, in-depth knowledge of how the participants thought, felt and experienced the study, and for the congruence of these findings with the research aims and questions.

4.5.3 Tool for data collection

In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were the primary methods for data collection in the study, which used a semi-structured interview guide and FGD guide respectively, as data collection tools. The tools were aimed at researching the cultural and societal impacts on career aspirations of female students in higher education in Lahore, Pakistan. The use of both IDIs and FGDs allowed the researcher to collect individual experiences in a detailed manner and observe the group patterns and group dynamics.

The interview guide was formulated according to the research objectives and the major deductive themes derived from the literature review that included family expectations, societal norms, gender roles, mobility restrictions and career decision-making processes. The open-ended questions were formulated to help participants express themselves freely in terms of thoughts, experiences and perceptions. The guide was semi-structured which was flexible in probing and follow-up questions to provide more information.

There were three major sections in the interview guide. The initial part was focused on demographic data and education of the participants. The next part explored individuals' career ambitions and inspirations of participants. The third part consists of the cultural and societal determinations on their career choices, such as family expectations, social norms, and perceived barriers.

Similarly, a guide was prepared to be used in the Focus Group Discussions which were in a similar format but were adapted to promote interaction and discussion between members. The FGD guide had questions that were aimed at generating group perceptions, experiences, and disparities in beliefs among the participants about career ambitions and societal factors.

Both the data collection tools were perfected in pilot testing to provide clarity, relevance, and effectiveness. These data collection tools were appropriate for the qualitative and

phenomenological nature of the research since they gave the researcher the opportunity to collect rich, detailed, and context-specific data.

4.5.4 Data Collection Process

Data collection was done in a systematic manner to guarantee that rich and relevant qualitative data were collected. Purposive and snowball methods of accessing participants were used. The researcher used personal contacts and academic networks with female students to reach the desired sample. This was followed by a snowball sampling method where the initial participants requested other possible participants who fit the study parameters. There was no official gatekeeper but informal networks like classmates and acquaintances helped to reach participants.

The first 4 In Depth Interviews and one Focus Group Discussion were held online on Zoom due to the war-like situation in our country, and the remaining 7 In Depth Interviews and 2 Focus Group Discussions were held in hostels because it was convenient and comfortable for the participants. To promote free and frank answers, a comfortable and distortion-free atmosphere was provided.

Each IDI took about 45-60 minutes allowing participants to reflect on their experiences in detail. The FGDs were comparatively longer, and each session took about 60 minutes to one and a half hours, as they involved group interaction and discussion among the participants.

The interviews and discussions were conducted in both Urdu and English depending on the participants' comfort level. This flexibility helped participants to convey their ideas better and in a more natural way. The data were verbally recorded to be precise with the permission of the participants. In addition to recording, field notes were also taken while conducting interviews and discussions to document nonverbal aspects, important observations and points.

Overall, the process of data collection was flexible and friendly to the participants, which helped to gather in-depth and meaningful information that is pertinent to the research objectives.

4.6 Data Analysis

In this study, thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method, was applied in the analysis, and it is a common technique that is used to identify, analyze, and interpret the patterns (themes) present in the textual data. Thematic analysis was deemed suitable to the current research due to its capacity to enable a comprehensive and an adaptable exploration of the lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings of participants. As the objective of the research is to investigate the effect of cultural and societal norms on female students in their career choices, thematic analysis was an appropriate methodology to record common concepts, experiences, and social trends in both the in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs).

Thematic analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. However, to make the study more precise and rigorous, it was expanded into several interrelated stages, such as the familiarization of the data, coding, theme development, and interpretation as well as validation methods including triangulation, reflexivity, and member checking. These detailed stages of the data analysis are presented below:

4.6.1 Data Familiarization

The first step was to familiarize oneself with the data collected; this included transcriptions of 11 in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 3 focus group discussions (FGDs) held with a group of female students. Every interview and discussion was transcribed and checked several times to be precise. Field notes documented in the process of data collection were also analyzed by taking into consideration the transcript.

4.6.2 Data Coding

Coding involves the process of structuring and naming data through the identification of recurring patterns, concepts, and ideas in the transcripts. The inductive and deductive code methods

were applied. The theoretical framework (Social Role Theory and Bourdieu's ideas of habitus and cultural capital) led to deductive coding, where inductive coding enabled new knowledge to be generated directly out of data. Such codes as family pressures, career compromise, marriage influence, social expectations and non-traditional careers were developed. This step enabled the classification of huge sums of qualitative data into sensible units to be subjected to analysis.

4.6.3 Theme Development

After coding, themes were made by grouping related similar codes. The process assisted in determining gender trends and hidden meaning in the data. The themes were never premised on the interview questions but on the results of the responses and experiences of the participants. Gender preferences for jobs, the role of family, social rules, self-imposed restrictions and structural constraints were key themes. The themes highlight the complex relationship between personalities and the impact of socio-cultural aspects of women students' career decision making.

4.6.4 Interpretation and Analysis

The identified themes were found and talked about in the context of research goals and theoretical framework. The discussion focused on the analysis of how society, culture and families influence the career choices of girls. Results were analyzed in terms of social role theory, which elucidates gendered expectations in society and Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which emphasizes on internalized social norms. The experiences of the participants were correlated to the large concepts of sociology to give more analytical insights into the information.

4.6.5 Triangulation

The credibility and validity of the findings were improved through triangulation, which compared data provided by various sources. The research involved 11 in-depth interviews and 3 focus group discussions involving female students. Through the individual and group discussions,

differences and similarities in the responses were determined. This strategy assisted in validating major trends, minimizing bias and enhancing the trustworthiness of the results. It was also able to give a deeper insight into the role of shared and individual experiences in career aspirations.

4.6.6 Reflexivity

Reflexivity was of great critical importance during the research procedure. The researcher also constantly pondered on her assumptions, biases, and positionality as a female student carrying out research on similar participants. This consciousness made the subjective influence on data interpretation down to a minimum. The researcher was critically involved with the data by being objective, thus ensuring that the voices of the participants took center stage during the analysis as opposed to individualistic views.

4.6.7 Member Checking

Member checking was done to make the findings accurate and credible by sharing the initial interpretations and summaries with selected people. This enabled the participants to know that their views were correctly presented. Participant feedback allowed them to improve the analysis and made sure that the results were based on what they had to live with in real life. This procedure increased the credibility and validity of the research.

4.6.8 Reporting

The results of the qualitative analysis were packaged and displayed in a concise and well-structured way. Both the IDIs and the FGDs assisted in explaining the themes and sub-themes by giving supporting quotes that proved the validity of each finding. In the report, the career aspirations of female students have been detailed in a narrative format with social, culture, and structural factors having a bearing on such aspirations. The results also add to the existing

knowledge through providing experience in the problems and opportunities that women in higher education experience.

4.6.9 Ethical consideration

Ethical considerations were also given significant importance throughout the research process to ensure the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants. Ethical approval was first gained by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the actual data collection, and all participants received a clear consent form stating the purpose of the study, the study objectives, and their involvement in the study. Each participant gave an informed consent and was guaranteed that participation in the in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) was completely voluntary. The participants were informed well that they can drop out from the study at any time without any consequences. To guarantee confidentiality and anonymity, the transcripts of the final report did not include any personal information such as names or institutional affiliations instead codes were used. Interviews and discussions were all done in a respectful and non-judgmental way where it was ensured that the participants were free to share their experiences and opinions. This was done with the consent of the participants before recording the audio, and participants were also allowed to refuse recording if they wanted to. Data were stored in password protected files to protect the data that can only be accessed by the researcher. Furthermore, sensitivity was observed when addressing the issues related to cultural norms, gender roles, and personal aspirations, understanding that those areas might be personal and situation-dependent. In general, the research followed ethical standards of voluntary participation, confidentiality, informed consent, and respect for the participants in the whole research process.

4.6.10 Trustworthiness and reliability

Credibility, dependability, and transparency were some of the trustworthiness elements that the study maintained. The reliability of the findings was enhanced by the use of various data (IDIs and FGDs) triangulation, and member checking. Since the researcher was also conversant with the social and cultural backgrounds of female students, this helped in ensuring easy communication and understanding during the information collection process. This familiarity contributed to the creation of trust among the participants who were able to express themselves freely. All these strategies made the research more valid and rigorous.

4.7 Fieldwork Experiences

- During the data collection there was a war-like situation in the country due to which most students went back to their hometown because their classes became online. This developed a delay in the research process, where the researcher would wait until the participants were available and take even more time in re-arranging them to conduct interviews and discussions.
- During the initial stages, certain participants were not willing to join the process because they felt the subject matter was personal and sensitive. Nevertheless, the researcher managed to conquer these barriers with the help of the promise of confidentiality and the development of trust and encouraged open communication.
- During in-depth interviews (IDIs), it was also noted that the respondents did not explain the descriptive or critical elements of their experiences in one-to-one interactions. In comparison, the focus group discussions (FGDs) gave more detailed and better information since the participants felt free to express and elaborate to the answers of the other members in a group setting.

- The arrangement of focus group discussions was not easy because it was not easy for the researcher to gather all the participants simultaneously. Some were busy with academic matters, and some were taking examination tests. The limitations created challenges; however, the researcher managed to overcome these challenges by having flexible schedules and constant coordination.
- Overall, the fieldwork experience was intertwined with the process of coping with a variety of practical and social challenges, yet it was insightful and contributed significantly to understanding the research problem in-depth.

CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS

The respondents in this study told that the career aspirations of girls and women are shaped by complex social, cultural and structural factors. The findings are based on the experiences and impressions of female students from a range of academic disciplines. While many of those involved are motivated by their own desire for self-reliance and financial independence and have aspirations for a career, the choices they make are influenced by a strong emphasis on what it means to have a "good life" and a "stable life" within society and what is considered gender appropriate work. Professions like teaching, medicine, and government jobs are highly in favor as they are considered to be socially acceptable and can be adapted to family life. Simultaneously, it is also evident that there is a shift in the fact that some female students are beginning to consider non-traditional areas, which include digital marketing, artificial intelligence, entrepreneurship, and freelancing. Nonetheless, with this new development, family pressures remain the key determinant when it comes to decision-making processes, as it is likely to motivate daughters to look at safe and more flexible career paths rather than their own interests.

The findings of the study also emphasize that cultural norms and patriarchal values still affect the educational and career paths of women, especially in terms of marriage and family obligation demands. Several respondents stated that career choices are usually influenced by future marital life, causing compromise, postponements, or changes in desires. The limited choice of career due to structural issues like finances, restricted access to opportunities, gender bias and safety issues further limits the career choices of women in circumstances where families are likely to ensure that sons are educated in resource-constrained surroundings. In addition to these external influences there are internal challenges for female students such as low self-confidence, fear of failure and conforming to pressure from the society. While these are constraints, the other part of the story, told by the participants, is the part played by the support system, parental encouragement,

peer motivations and teacher guidance in helping the participants to reach their goals. The overall results are a dynamic process, where female students continue to negotiate between their aspirations and society's expectations, and the traditional norm still exists; although it changes slowly.

The entire findings of this research revolve around the following main themes;

1. Respectability over Risk
2. Breaking the Mold
3. Gatekeeping Role of Family and Mentors
4. Marriage as a Structuring Force
5. Patriarchal Norms and Cultural Boundaries
6. Internalized Limits
7. Double Burden of Barriers - Structural Inequality and Psychological Strain
8. Negotiating Survival and Change

Summary of thematic findings

Table 4

Summary of thematic findings for the study, showing broad themes, sub-themes, and supporting quotes.

Theme	Subthemes	Supporting Quote
Respectability over Risk	Socially approved professions (teaching, medicine, pharmacy, government jobs) - Job safety and stability as career motivators - Alignment with socially constructed femininity	“Many girls prefer careers like teaching, medicine, and psychology because they are considered stable and respectable.” (FGD 1, P1)
Breaking the Mold	Interest in digital, technology, and entrepreneurial fields - Agency and resistance to traditional norms - Influence of global trends and role models	“Many girls now want to pursue careers they are passionate about.” (FGD 2, P4)
Gatekeeping Role of Family and Mentors	Supportive roles such as encouragement and mentoring - Regulatory roles: restrictions, pressure and expectation management - Collective decision-making and negotiation within family	“Parental support builds confidence and helps women follow their goals.” (FGD 1, P1)
Marriage as a Structuring Force	Career flexibility and compatibility with family life - Timing of education and professional choices - Societal expectations post-marriage	“Many girls delay higher education because of marriage pressure.” (FGD 2, P2)
Patriarchal Norms and Cultural Boundaries	Gendered limitations on toward leadership and male-dominated fields - Social	“Sons are encouraged ambition, daughters stability.”

sanctions for
nonconforming choices -
Cultural reinforcement of
traditional gender roles

Internalized Limits

Adjusting ambitions
based on societal
expectations - Avoiding
unconventional or high-
risk careers - Internal self-
monitoring and social
conformity

“Even if a girl has a clear
passion, she may compromise
to meet her family’s
expectations.

(IDI 4)

Double Burden of Barriers –
Structural Inequality and
Psychological Strain

External: financial
constraints, limited
resources, gender bias -
Internal: self-doubt,
anxiety, fear of failure -
Intersection of structural
and psychological
pressures

“Women often hesitate to
pursue ambitions because
they fear judgment.”

(IDI 3)

Negotiating Survival and
Change

Strategies to balance
personal ambitions and
societal expectations -
Role of family, peers,
teachers, and mentors in
support - Opportunities
through education,
policies, and role models

“I handle pressure through
communication and time
management.”

(IDI 10)

Thematic Analysis

The qualitative data analysis approach based on 11 in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 3 focus group discussions (FGDs) with female students reveals that gender norms, family structures, and societal expectations are interacting factors with a strong influence on career aspirations. These findings suggest that even though female students are becoming more proactive in their pursuit of higher education and other career opportunities, the decision-making process is still embedded in patriarchal cultural contexts that value responsibility, the role of family, and social acceptance.

Across all the interviews, the findings also indicate that women are the ones who balance personal ambitions and external demands, and in most cases, they balance the ambition with expectations associated with marriage, family, and social expectations and demands. Meanwhile, current trends show that there is a slow movement towards unconventional and independent career paths, which is facilitated by education, peer networks, and the shifting societal views. These trends are a continuity as well as a change in gender relations shaped by social role expectations (Eagly, 1987), which explains how socially constructed gender roles shape occupational preferences, and Bourdieu's concept of habitus and cultural capital, which highlights how individuals internalize social structures and reproduce them in their choices.

5.1 Respectability over Risk

This theme describes how the gender role of the female students as determined by career choices is much influenced by seeking social respectability, stability, and security over risk-taking and unconventional career choices. Professions like teaching, medicine, pharmacy, and government jobs are very popular, as they are socially acceptable and also fit the cultural expectations associated with the role of women. This is an indication of gendered construction of ideal careers in which women are not supposed to be ambitious or experiment with their careers

anymore, as this might jeopardize their safety, modesty, and family compatibility. Professions that are not traditionally acceptable to women, like teaching, medicine, etc., are usually viewed as being dangerous to women because of issues of safety, privacy, and social exposure. Careers that involve a lot of traveling, fieldwork, late hours of work, or interaction in a male-dominated setting are considered to be a threat to the security and modesty of women. As participants emphasized, these careers can put women at risk of harassment, social stigma, and reputational damage, which can eventually not only impact their personal health but the social status of their family. Consequently, families and society are more likely to dishearten female students who want to engage in these career choices, supporting the safe and socially acceptable occupations.

5.1.1 Socially Approved Professions

In both IDIs and FGDs, participants raised issues like teaching, healthcare, and jobs in the public sector being the most frequent and desired careers among female students. These are respectable jobs that fit in with the expectations of the society. Participant 1 in FGD defined it as:

“In our society, mostly girls are encouraged to choose careers like teaching, medicine, or psychology because they are considered safe, respectable, and suitable for women. My family also believes that these professions are better, as they allow women to manage both work and home responsibilities easily.”

Participant 10 in IDI said:

“Careers such as teaching, nursing, and medicine are generally considered more suitable for women because they are seen as secure and socially acceptable. Other professions are often discouraged as they involve more exposure, interaction, or risk, which families usually do not prefer for girls.”

These results suggest that the career decisions of female students are not just influenced by their personal interests or personal ambitions but are also shaped heavily by the socially acceptable ideas of what women should do as their careers. Participants' responses showed how careers such as teaching and medicine are socially accepted as respectable, safe, and fitting into traditional gender roles, while any other career is seen as dangerous or inappropriate. This is a cultural reality in wider Pakistani society where a woman's choice of career is closely bound up with family expectations, social acceptance, and issues of modesty, safety, and reputation. Therefore, the tendency to choose socially acceptable careers evidences the extent to which traditional cultural norms still govern and restrict the career ambitions of women.

5.1.2 Job Safety and Stability as Career Motivators

Participants also pointed out that job security, fixed working hours, and long-term stability are also significant considerations when making career choices. These considerations indicate the anxiety over the possibility of reconciling work with the prospective family commitments. Several participants emphasized that the nature of some professions in which long working hours, night shifts, or irregular shifts are common is not encouraged by families since they are felt to interfere with work-life balance and influence the capability of women to deliver the expected domestic roles. Parents, in reflecting on long-term implications, would choose careers that provide stability and routine since they are perceived to take care of the marital life and family burdening in the future. This shows that career decision-making is tightly connected with socially constructed expectations of the role of women in the work and family worlds. In the words of participant 2 in FGD:

“Careers that have fixed timings and stability are usually preferred in our families because they make it easier for girls to manage their future home responsibilities. Jobs with long hours or

night duties are not encouraged, as they can disturb family life later.”

According to participant 7 in IDI parents have impact on career choice of female students:

“My parents always emphasize choosing a career that is safe not just in terms of job security but also physical safety and social respect. They believe that jobs involving late hours, travel, or interaction in male-dominated environments are not suitable for girls, so they guide us towards more secure and stable professions.”

These results show that safety and stability are not personal values but are social constructs as priorities created by culture and family issues. The stories of the participants show that families contribute a lot in influencing female students towards careers that not only guarantee physical security but also a balanced life that can be incorporated into marriage life. Careers that have a challenging work schedule or unpredictable conditions are usually seen as having an impact that could hinder women from being able to perform their social and family roles, hence discouragement. This is in line with the larger cultural truth in Pakistani society whereby the career decisions of women are carefully considered in the context of their future roles as wives and caregivers. Thus, the focus on safety and stability strengthens the conventional career trajectories and constrains the involvement of women in various and non-traditional careers.

5.1.3 Alignment with Socially Constructed Femininity

The career choice in relation to the female students is tightly tied with the socially constructed concepts of femininity, with women supposed to follow the career paths that would correspond to taking care of them, their children, and surrounding them. Modesty, obedience, emotional sensitivity, and a sense of responsibility to the household and to a care provider are some of the features of femininity that define femininity in Pakistani culture. These expectations are then

applied to the professional world, where professions such as teaching and the nursing field are thought to be the best jobs a woman can have, as they are also stereotyped as feminine. These careers are seen as extensions of the natural roles of women as mothers and nurturers and support the notion that women must be kept within the confines of the socially acceptable and morally right. Consequently, career choices are not only personal but also influenced by rigidly ingrained gender norms that inhibit women from penetrating various and non-conventional careers. In 1st FGD participant 2 said:

“Families feel these careers are safe for women and socially acceptable.”

In the words of participant 2 in FGD 2:

“Teaching is preferred because it allows women to manage family responsibilities.”

This demonstrates how gender norms are shaping occupational hierarchies by linking some jobs to feminine traits like care, patience, and nurturing. Occupations such as teaching and nursing are constructed as social norms, as they are suitable to women since they fit the norms of what women should do in the family. This is indicative of the overall gendered division of labor in which the reproduction disparities between men and women are exploited to sanction unequal access to various career opportunities. This means that women tend to be restricted to a few types of careers that are socially acceptable. This can be explained by the social role theory (Eagly and Wood, 2012) that proposes that societal expectations are regarded as appropriate to both males and females. Here, women are directed to careers that uphold their caregiver roles, hence restricting their involvement in leadership and male-dominated careers.

5.2 Breaking the Mold

This theme reflects a transition in the female student dream of the non-traditional and innovative careers which signify an increase in agency and a defiance of the old gender standards.

Although traditional careers are still prevailing and parents are still focused on traditional roles like teaching and medicine, a significant number of participants noted a growing popularity of the digital technology field, entrepreneurship, artificial intelligence and freelancing. This change is indicative of a slow erosion of strict gender conventions and the development of female agency in the framework. The results coincide with the Social Role Theory proposed by Eagly, in which transformed social roles may result in alteration of career preferences. Simultaneously, this reorientation can also be regarded as an indication of the concept of shifting habitus by Bourdieu since new experiences and exposures remake aspirations.

5.2.1 Interest in Digital Technology and Entrepreneurial Fields

The participants in the FGDs and also IDIs observed that there is an increasing trend of women joining digital and technology-related fields. These professions are viewed to be flexible and financially independent as well as globally exposed and therefore are widely considered as alternatives to the usual professions. The emergence of online positions and remote work has also lowered the barrier to entry even more, as women can engage without experiencing some of the restrictions in mobility that are inherent to traditional working environments. This transformation also shows how the economic restructuring is creating new opportunities for female participants. Nevertheless, these are still new areas and have not yet been fully normalized for women in society. In such a way, the access of women to these spheres is an expression of the possibility and continued bargaining with the status quo. According to participant 2 in 3rd FGD:

“Nowadays, many girls are showing interest in fields like digital marketing and data science because they see more opportunities for growth and independence. These fields are also flexible, and through online work, they feel they can manage their careers without facing the same

restrictions as traditional jobs.”

However, as per participant 4 in 2nd FGD girls are choosing modern fields:

“Girls are now becoming more interested in areas like artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and digital content creation. Social media and online platforms have exposed them to new career paths, and they feel more confident exploring options that were not traditionally considered for women before.”

Such results are indicative of the increased power of globalization and digitalization to transform the career goals of female students. The availability of technology, social media, and online services has increased awareness of the diverse and non-traditional career opportunities, and women have been encouraged to consider other career fields as opposed to the socially acceptable jobs. Digital and entrepreneurial professions provide more flexibility and independence along with alternative working formats compared to traditional ones, thus being more attractive in constraining cultural frames. This change denotes a slow change in gender conventions in which female students are starting to push the limits and demand their interests in new areas. But even though these shifts are an indication of progress, they do so in the presence of deep cultural requirements underlining a complicated bargaining between contemporary possibilities and the ancient limitations in forming the careers of women.

5.2.2 Agency and Resistance to Traditional Norms

Some participants were active in making decisions depending on their own interest rather than societal expectations. Participants reported examples of women making active choices of nontraditional areas, despite the fact that these choices did not necessarily comply with those of the family or culture. This portrays that women are not just passive receivers of social norms but

can challenge and go against them. But this opposition is usually not complete and negotiable since most of them still require a certain degree of family acceptance. This indicates the notion that agency is able to act within the structural confines and not beyond. These trends depict a period of transition as old norms are being questioned but not completely being substituted. In FGD 2 participant 4 said:

“I always wanted to pursue a career in a field that genuinely interests me, but my family initially preferred more traditional options. I had to explain my goals to them again and again and show them that this field also has scope and respect. Slowly, they agreed, and I was able to choose what I wanted.”

However, in IDI participant 10 said she chose her field by herself it was her decision:

“Choosing biotechnology was mainly my own decision even though my family was not fully convinced at first. I developed a strong interest in the field and tried to make them understand its importance and future opportunities. After a lot of discussion and reassurance, they eventually supported my choice.” (IDI 10)

These findings highlight the newfound agency among the female students who are negotiating and, in some cases, challenging conventional expectations to follow the career choices they want. In contrast to passive acceptance of socially accepted roles, the participants expressed minor types of resistance by discussing their decisions with their families and reasoning through their decisions and slowly received support. This suggests that cultural and familial constraints are still present but do not fully constrain female students; instead, they have agency within these limits. This negotiated resistance can be seen as a change in the old order of gender relations as women are starting to claim their uniqueness and professional ambitions but at the same time preserve family unity. Nevertheless, this agency can be conditional and restricted as it exists in the

wider context of cultural expectations, and this is where the tension between tradition and change continues in the formation of career choices of women.

5.2.3 Influence of Global Trends and Role Models

The contact with successful women and opportunities in other parts of the world has encouraged female students to seek out different career choices. The respondents remarked that when women are seen to excel in various and traditionally male-dominated areas, the confidence level is boosted and the scope of possibilities expands. In particular, social media platforms serve as the environments where women can get information, acquire new skills, and become linked to the opportunities in the whole world. The exposure also helps in building the cultural capital, which allows women to envision other career opportunities than the traditional ones. Also, role models can be great icons of achievement and break stereotypes, making young women strive to achieve ambitious targets. These factors however, have varying effects depending on access to resources and social background. Participant 2 in 3rd FGD shared her opinion:

“Seeing successful women on social media and in international platforms has really changed how girls think about careers. When we see women working in fields like technology, business, or media, it makes us feel that we can also explore these options, even if they are not traditionally encouraged in our society.”

In FGD 2 participant 2 also shared her opinion she said:

“Social media and global exposure have influenced my thinking a lot. I follow many female professionals online who are working independently and pursuing diverse careers, and that motivates me to think beyond the limited options usually suggested for girls in our society.”

These findings highlight the significant role of global exposure and role models in reshaping the career aspirations of female students. Through social media and digital platforms, participants are increasingly exposed to diverse representations of successful women across various professional fields, which challenges traditional notions of appropriate careers for women. This exposure not only broadens their awareness but also fosters confidence and aspiration to pursue non-conventional career paths. The presence of relatable role models enables female students to reimagine their potential and question existing cultural limitations. However, while global influences create new possibilities and encourage personal agency, their impact is often mediated by local cultural and familial expectations. As a result, female students navigate a complex space where global ideas of empowerment intersect with traditional norms, reflecting a gradual yet constrained transformation in career decision-making. This implies a transformation to personal agency within structural possibilities.

5.3 Gatekeeping Role of Family and Mentors

In this theme, the key constituent is the dominant role of the family as a supportive institution and a regulatory authority in the career aspirations of female students. The results indicate that the concept of career decision-making is not a personal experience; rather, it is deeply rooted in family, cultural expectations, and power relations. The families not only determine the career people pick but also how confident women can be to follow that career. This is an implication of reproducing gender roles in primary socialization processes, which is consistent with the theoretical contribution of Bourdieu, with family being one of the essential locations of creating a habitus.

5.3.1 Supportive role: Encouragement and Motivation

Most of the participants pointed out that family support is a very essential aspect that empowers women to work towards education and career objectives. Emotional support, money, and parental trust were determined to be some of the important factors that fostered confidence and encouragement among the female students. The active support of daughters by families would mean that they are allowed to explore more and have more distinctive self-belief. The fear of being judged by society is also lessened by this support, which helps a woman to reach higher goals in the job. But this is commonly conditional and has to operate within the socially acceptable boundaries. Thus, on the one hand, empowering women by their families is possible, but the motivation is not always unconditional or completely liberating. In 1st FGD participant 1 said:

“Parental support plays a very important role in building confidence among girls. When families encourage their daughters and trust their abilities, it becomes easier for them to pursue their goals and make decisions about their careers without fear.”

However, in IDI participant 10 shared her views:

“My parents, especially my mother, have been my greatest supporters. She always motivates me to continue my education and pursue a career of my choice, even when there are societal pressures. Her encouragement has given me the confidence to believe in myself”

This finding reflects the importance of family support in the development of the career goals of female students. Parental support and encouragement, especially by mothers, contribute towards building confidence and empowering women to achieve their goals even in the face of societal forces. This support is a safeguarding element to the limiting cultural standards and enables

female students to work with a feeling of self-faith. Here, families do not only affect career choices but also significantly help to empower women to overcome social constraints.

5.3.2 Regulatory roles: restriction and pressure

Families also become overseers in addition to supporting them by throwing expectations and restrictions towards the career choices of women. Associated with a number of interviews were the concerns noted by parents who determine the safe, good, and appropriate career paths such as teaching or medicine for the girls. This teaching can be performed through subtle pressure as opposed to direct pressure and therefore is more normalized and harder to resist. Family cannot support professions with excessive work hours, travelling, and male-dominated jobs because of safety and social status. This is a replica of the patriarchal structures of power with the family influencing decision-making among women in conformity with social values. Consequently, women do not exercise their independence but bargain over it. In FGD 2 participant 3 said:

“Parents often guide their daughters toward careers they consider safe and respectable. In many cases, they clearly discourage options that involve too much exposure or uncertainty and instead encourage professions that align with societal expectations for women.”

As per participant 9 in IDI she shared her parent’s opinion:

“My parents suggested that I should choose traditional professions like teaching or medicine because they believe these are more suitable for girls. They were concerned about other careers as they might involve long hours, travel, or environments that are not considered appropriate for women.”

These findings illustrate the regulation of career choices of female students by families in terms of advice, expectations, and implicit coercion. Parents tend to control the goals of their daughters by guiding them towards acceptable and safe careers in society, which shows an overall

cultural conformity to gender roles. This kind of control restrains the career choices of women and supports the traditional occupational patterns. Through this, the family influence not only provides a mode of guidance but also a control mechanism within the cultural setting.

5.3.3 Collective decision-making and negotiation within family

The statistics indicate that career choices are hardly unilateral with regard to female students and are instead influenced by the family discussion. The participants indicated that parents and occasionally extended family members are actively involved in career choices, judgement, and approval. This brings about a negotiation process where women have to consider their personal interests and other options with the family expectations to come up with a decision that will be accepted. In most instances, proper decisions do not represent individual agency in the context of the group cultural constructs that need legitimization through the family. These trends affirm that the choice of careers by women is constructed by society and not entirely predetermined by themselves. In 3rd FGD participant 3 said:

“In my family, career decisions are not made individually. We usually discuss everything together, and everyone gives their opinions before a final decision is made. Even if I have a personal preference, I have to consider what my parents think is suitable for me”

This shows that the career decision-making process in female students is rather a group than an individual activity, as family members are central in formulating final decisions. Experiences of the participants indicate that personal aspirations are bargained under the family expectations, and this means that there is a need to compromise and agree. This is a cultural truth of collectivist cultures such as Pakistan, where individual decisions are deeply rooted in the family systems and social conventions. These patterns can be explained by Bourdieu in terms of habitus

when internalized cultural values and social expectations have an impact on the process of making decisions and often restrict the autonomy of a person, although they serve to hold the society together.

5.4 Marriage as a Structuring Force

This theme identifies the role of marriage as a strong institution that influences career dreams of female students even prior to engaging in professional life. The results indicate that women do not make career choices in solitude but have in mind their future goals of becoming wives and mothers as they strategize their careers. This is just a manifestation of the ingrained patriarchal norms when females are supposed to put family needs first before their careers. The effect of marriage on occupation choices is consistent with the social role theory proposed by Eagly, which specifies that women have the role of taking care of their children. At the same time, it also describes the habitus of Bourdieu in which the expectations are incorporated and are used to make decisions.

5.4.1 Career flexibility and compatibility with family life

Often participants pointed out that female students favor a career with flexibility and could be managed comfortably with the responsibilities of family. Other occupations like teaching, health care, and office work are regarded as the best as they enable a woman to juggle between home and office. This is not necessarily a choice made due to personal interest, but it is a choice that is made with the view of future tasks after marriage. The concept of manageable careers expresses the way the professional life of women is influenced by demands on housework obligations. This forms a gendered division of labor, with women supposed to adapt to their professions instead of confronting structural inequalities. Thus, flexibility is an important factor in the career choice of

women. In the words of participant 8 in IDI she shared that choosing a career is not just her decision but also her parents:

“When I chose my field, it was not just my decision. I discussed it with my parents and had to explain my interests to them. There was a lot of back-and-forth conversation before we reached a decision that was acceptable to both me and my family.”

These results underscore the role of marriage as a force that structures career aspirations of female students. The participants provided a lot of relevance to the need to choose a career that will be flexible and compatible with their future family needs, especially in marriage. This is indicative of the cultural norm, which places the woman with her responsibilities as a wife and a nurturer above her working life. Consequently, career options are frequently made with future marriage commitments in mind, restricting the use of challenging or unconventional careers. Therefore, having a work-life balance is not just a desire, as it goes very deep into the societal norms and expectations of the roles of women in the family.

5.4.2 Timing of education and professional choices

Marriage also affects the education and career path. In most cases marriage is the reason for postponing or changing the ambitions of the women. Many participants said that female students delay their higher education, career growth, and employment because they are pressured to get married at a specific age. This leads to a non-linear or corrupted career path with constrained professional development in the long run. The societal control of the life courses of women can be seen in the assumption that women should reach particular milestones in life within a certain timeframe. These kinds of pressures may narrow career and skill growth. This proves the influence of structural factors not just on career choice but also the timing and track of career choice. In FGD

2 participant 2 shared her opinion about choosing education over marriage but families prioritize marriage first:

“Many girls are unable to continue or pursue higher education on time because of constant pressure related to marriage. Families often prioritize marriage over education, which leads to delays or even changes in their academic and career plans.”

According to participant 4 in 1st FGD:

“Once girls reach their mid-twenties, marriage becomes the main concern in most families. At that stage, their education and career choices are often adjusted according to marriage expectations rather than personal goals.”

These results mean that the expectations towards marriage play a huge role in determining the time and path of educational and professional decisions among the female students. Respondents pointed out that societal expectations to marry at a particular age usually influence higher education and career planning decisions. Consequently, women can postpone, change, or reduce their ambitions so as to match these expectations. This is an expression of the cultural reality where women are course-organized in life, in which marriage takes precedence over personal and professional growth. This means that education and career advancement are not quite a matter of self-determination but highly controlled by social and family standards.

5.4.3 Societal expectations post-marriage

The participants noticed that when women are married, some professions are not preferable to women, particularly those that demand traveling, working late hours, or going to the field. Such professions are rarely encouraged in families because of security, family issues, and status. This is a sign that marriage makes gender roles stronger and discourages the mobility of women in their

professions. Women are aware of these restrictions and make compromises even before they start these professions. This is evidence of the active nature of societal expectations that dominate decisions ahead of time. Therefore, women's career goals are designed around what is acceptable in married life. In 3rd FGD:

“After marriage, some careers are considered unsuitable for women because they are seen as difficult to manage alongside household responsibilities. Families often expect women to prioritize their marital and domestic roles, which limits their ability to continue certain professions.”

However, participant 2 in 2nd FGD said that after marriage women gets discouraged for doing certain jobs:

“Careers that require frequent travel, long working hours, or working in mixed environments are usually discouraged after marriage. It is believed that such jobs can create problems in managing family life and may not be acceptable within societal expectations.”

These results indicate that women are constrained and confined in their career paths by societal expectations within the post-marriage period. Participants pointed out that some careers are not encouraged because they are considered to be incompatible with marriage and household duties. This is an indication of the strong patriarchal values that women are supposed to put their families first before career development. This leads to a situation where career continuity and progression of women are usually affected upon marriage. In this way, the post-marital expectations are a structural constraint that supports traditional gender roles and constrains the involvement of women in various professional areas.

5.5 Patriarchal Norms and Cultural Boundaries

In this theme it explains how larger societal and cultural ideals determine the scope of acceptable action and career pathways of women. As the results indicate, the idea of patriarchal values still influences the opportunities of women by preserving the conventional gender roles and restricting women in regard to the access to some professions. These norms work on both visible and invisible levels and they affect decision-making on the basis of expectation, socialization, and judgment. Eagly describes these patterns as the result of socially constructed gender roles, whereas Bourdieu describes the reproduction of these norms by means of habitus.

5.5.1 Gendered limitations on leadership and male-dominated fields

It was reported that women are usually not encouraged to join male-dominated or leading careers. Enterprises like engineering, aviation, and corporate leadership are seen to not be appropriate or difficult for women based on societal demands. This poses structural obstacles that restrict the role of women in various career opportunities. These restrictions are not founded on ability but rather on socially constructed beliefs regarding the role of gender. Consequently, the opportunities of women are limited prior to their decision-making. This strengthens the segregation and inequality of the labor market. According to participant 4 in 3rd FGD she shared her opinion about women not getting into male-dominated fields:

“Women are often discouraged from pursuing highly ambitious or leadership-oriented careers because these roles are considered more suitable for men. Families and society tend to believe that such careers demand qualities and commitments that are not expected from women.”

Participant 10 in IDI shared her views for different fields:

“Fields like politics, industrial research, and other leadership positions are mostly male dominated. Girls are usually not encouraged to enter these areas because they are seen as challenging, competitive, and not suitable for women in our society.”

These results suggest that women students are under heavy gendered restrictions in regard to accessing leadership positions and male-dominated professions. The participants emphasized that ambition, authority, and competitiveness are usually associated with masculinity in the society, and this factor deters women from applying to such professions. This is an indication of highly patriarchal cultures that constitute and confine the role of women in both the social and professional realms. This has led to the systematic exclusion of women in the sphere of influence and power. Therefore, gender expectations still support occupational segregation and restrict the access of women to various and high-status occupational opportunities.

5.5.2 Social sanctions for non-conforming choices

Women who do not conform to the traditional roles are highly criticized and judged, and society places social pressure on them. Respondents emphasized that employees in their professional careers, particularly the demanding ones, are occasionally considered to neglect the role of family. This imposes a moral obligation on women where they have to defend their careers. These social sanctions are considered to be very effective tools of control that deter deviant behavior. Women may be afraid of criticism and hence may fit in even when they have other aspirations. This illustrates how social pressures control behavior in an informal way. In views of participant 1 in 1st FGD women gets judged for choosing careers that are not socially accepted:

“Working women are often judged by society, especially when they choose careers that are not traditionally accepted. People tend to question their priorities and criticize them for not fulfilling

expected roles within the family.”

However, in 2nd FGD participant 1 said:

“Working women are sometimes judged for neglecting family responsibilities, particularly if their jobs require more time and commitment. Society often assumes that they are not giving enough attention to their household duties, which creates pressure on them.”

These findings indicate that women who do not conform to the societal standards are subjected to social punishment of criticism, judgment, and negative attitudes. The respondents emphasized that employed females, especially in challenging or non-conventional jobs, are often judged by the expectations placed on them by the society as ideal wives and nurturers. This is indicative of the larger patriarchal system where gender roles are socially imposed by informatics influences and evaluations. These social sanctions not only do not encourage women to enter into various career paths but also do not challenge the current gender norms. Thus, social stigma is a very strong tool in controlling the behavior of women and preserving cultural boundaries.

5.5.3 Cultural reinforcement of traditional gender roles

The statistics reveal some distinct differences in expectations between sons and daughters, with men being pushed to take ambitious careers and women being directed towards stability. This is an indication of gender hierarchies in society. Boys are considered to be the main breadwinners, whereas girls have to combine work and family life. This is reinforced by socialization at an early age. This demands inequality and develops different goals among men and women. These trends underscore the process of patriarchy as a structure of life choices. Participant 1 in 1st FGD shared that sons are encouraged to choose any career but daughters are guided toward choosing stable careers:

“Sons are often encouraged by families and society to be ambitious, pursue higher goals, and focus on building successful careers, whereas daughters are guided more toward choosing stable paths that align with family expectations.”

However, in 3rd FGD participant 1 said:

“Women are generally expected to prioritize family responsibilities, such as caregiving and household duties, even if it means compromising or limiting their personal and professional ambitions.” (FGD 3, P1)

The quotations suggest that sons are urged to achieve ambition and success in their careers, whereas daughters are guided on the path of stability and a job that is in line with family expectations. Simultaneously, women are supposed to be more concerned with domestic and caregiving issues, which more frequently results in a lack of professional development. These trends are indicators that cultural expectations give women more requirements for domestic roles rather than their career goals. As a result, this type of reinforcement constrains the opportunities of women and perpetuates the current gender disparities within the personal and political spectrums that cultural expectations prioritize family over career.

5.6 Internalized Limits

This theme describes how women internalize the expectations of the society, and this aspect determines their thinking, actions, and career desires. Women do not always have to be subjected to our control but usually govern their own options on what they consider to be acceptable. This fits well with the idea of habitus proposed by Bourdieu in which social norms get established in individuals.

5.6.1 Adjusting ambitions based on societal expectations

The participants have specified that most women realign their career objectives to their family and social needs. They may opt to take other options that are more acceptable even when they have strong interests in certain fields. This is a sign of self-adjustment and not enforcement. Women are trained to value a secure and acceptable position over self-ambition. This change will guarantee social acceptance but can restrict the fulfillment of a person. It makes a point of emphasis on the role of internalized norms in the process of decision-making. In 2nd FGD participant 2 shared that girls tend to choose safer career paths:

“Many girls tend to choose safer and more socially acceptable career paths instead of pursuing their true passion, as they feel pressured to align their choices with societal expectations of stability and respectability.”

However, in IDI participant 4 said:

“Even if a girl has a clear sense of passion or career interest, she may still feel compelled to compromise her aspirations in order to meet her family’s expectations and maintain social approval.”

It shows that instead of freely pursuing their passions, many girls adjust their ambitions toward safer and more socially acceptable options. Family and societal pressure often leads them to compromise their true interests in order to gain approval and avoid criticism. As a result, internalized expectations restrict their personal and professional growth. Overall, this reflects how deeply social norms shape and limit women’s career aspirations from within.

5.6.2 Avoiding unconventional or high-risk careers

Careers that are uncertain and require traveling or working in non-traditional setups are career areas that women tend to avoid. Such avoidance is affected by fear of being judged socially, safety, and family expectations. These kinds of decisions are taken in advance without being told explicitly. This is an expression of the degree of influence of norms on risk and suitable perceptions. Women are socialized to be cautious and secure as opposed to exploratory. This leads to the fact that numerous opportunities are not exploited. In 1st FGD participant 3 said that: “Many female students tend to avoid careers that involve frequent travel, night shifts, or demanding work schedules, as these factors are often seen as unsafe or socially inappropriate for women in their cultural context.”

However, in IDI participant 2 said that female gets a fear of being judged in choosing a nontraditional career:

“Girls may hesitate or feel uncertain about pursuing unconventional or non-traditional careers because they fear being judged by society and worry about how their choices will be perceived by others.”

It demonstrates that the issues of safety, mobility, and social approval greatly influence their choices. Most young women limit their ambition to prevent criticisms and ensure that they are accepted in society. This has caused them to be alienated from career paths that may challenge their gender expectations. In general, this shows how the fear of social judgement restricts women in their professional opportunities and supports traditional career patterns.

5.6.3 Internal self-monitoring and social conformity

Being interviewed, the participants emphasized that women usually feel guilty or selfish when they follow their own ambitions. This shows that there is good internalization of societal expectations. Women are always checking their conduct to make sure that it does not go against social norms. Such self-regulation decreases the necessity of norms being imposed externally. It also brings about psychological pressure, which restricts the freedom of choice. These patterns portray the way power is internal and the manner in which it functions within individuals. In 1st FGD participant 4 shared her views about girl's experience feelings of guilt:

“Many girls experience feelings of guilt or consider themselves selfish when they prioritize their own personal goals and career ambitions over family expectations and responsibilities.”

However participant 2 in IDI said:

“Women often engage in constant self-monitoring, where they first think about whether their parents, relatives, and wider social circles will approve of their career choices before making any final decision.”

The results show that internal self-monitoring causes women to change their decisions based on perceived social approval. It reveals that guilt is a common feeling among girls who are pursuing personal purposes due to the connection of self-fulfillment to selfishness. Family and societal acceptance is a filter through which their career decisions are made. This constant assessment inhibits their autonomy in decision-making. All in all, it is the internalization of social conformity and a reflection of the shaping of female aspirations and the constriction of their own agency.

5.7 Double Burden of Barriers – Structural Inequality and Psychological Strain

This theme brings out the dualism in women. First is the challenge, which is both structural and psychological. Secondly, women not merely have to deal with external constraints but they also have internal effects of these pressures.

5.7.1 External: financial constraints, limited resources, gender bias

Financial constraints, resource shortage and inequitable opportunities were noted by the participants. In some cases, families give more emphasis to their son's education particularly when the resources are scarce. This provides unequal access to career and education. Women are not allowed to engage in higher education or specialization due to structural inequalities. These obstacles lie in more socio-economic and gendered structures. Consequently, the women are disadvantaged even prior to joining the workforce. In 1st FGD participant 2 said:

“Due to financial constraints and limited resources, many families tend to prioritize the education and career development of sons over daughters, believing that investing in males brings greater long-term economic return and stability for the household.”

In 1st IDI participant shared that:

“In some families, when resources are limited, there is a clear tendency to prioritize the educational needs and opportunities of sons, while daughters' education is often considered less essential or secondary.”

The findings emphasize the role of structural inequalities as obstacles to the women as far as they are concerned with getting equal educational and career opportunities. It demonstrates that due to their financial constraints and lack of resources, families tend to favor sons more than daughters. Gender-biased beliefs on future returns and responsibilities are driving such decisions. Consequently, female children are less likely to be offered educational and professional

opportunities. This, generally, portrays the way in which the economic limitations mixed with gender discrimination influence continuous inequality within the society.

5.7.2 Internal: self-doubt, anxiety, fear of failure

The psychological challenges caused by social expectations and pressure compelled to include doubts in oneself, anxiety and fear of loss. Women can doubt their capacities and are reluctant to take up competitive careers. The lack of confidence and motivation is caused by continuous scrutiny of society. These are psychologically based effects that are not given much attention yet have a huge effect on the outcome of careers. The threat of being judged will deter risk-taking and innovativeness. This is an indication of the way outside forces are converted into interior conflict. In 1st FGD participant 2 shared her views:

“Social expectations and cultural pressures often create a constant fear of failure among young women, making them feel that any mistake in their career or life choices will lead to judgment, criticism, or loss of respect in society.”

However, in IDI participant 3 said that:

“Even highly capable and academically strong students sometimes begin to doubt their own abilities, as continuous pressure from family, society, and future expectations makes them question whether they are truly good enough.”

It indicates that the fear of failure is not an individual issue but a socially constructed phenomenon due to constant pressure and criticism. Even those students who are good start to doubt themselves because of unrealistic expectations and comparison to others. This self-deprecation makes them less confident about what they can achieve. In general, it represents the

way in which social pressure gets converted into psychological stress and the way in which women view themselves and their potential.

5.7.3 Intersection of structural and psychological pressures

Inequality and psychological issues are interrelated and complementary. Self-doubt is brought about by limited opportunities and inability to overcome barriers by lack of confidence. This serves as a vicious cycle in which women are bound to already existing structures. The combination of these overlapping barriers complicated the process of women realizing their potential. This intersection is a necessity to have structural and psychological support systems. In 1st FGD participant 3 said that while women doing highly competitive fields they still feel less capable:

“Women often begin to doubt their abilities when considering entry into highly competitive or male-dominated fields, as structural barriers and societal expectations make them feel less capable or less deserving of success in such environments.”

In IDI participant 3 mentioned that:

“Women frequently hesitate to fully pursue their ambitions because they fear being judged, criticized, or socially evaluated, which creates uncertainty and discourages them from taking bold or unconventional career steps.”

These findings show that both external and internal fears, like self-doubt and fear of judgement, are compounded by external obstacles, including gender discrimination and low chances of success. Consequently, women are reluctant to venture in competitive or non-traditional areas. This dynamic further strengthens a loop in which psychological insecurities are exacerbated

by structural constraints. On the whole, it emphasizes how the external and internal factors combine their efforts to restrain the confidence of women and their career progress.

5.8 Negotiating Survival and Change

This theme brings out the participation of women in difficult situations as they struggle to find a solution to how to juggle between societal demands and their aspirations. Women are resilient and adaptable despite the limiting conditions.

5.8.1 Strategies to balance personal ambitions and societal expectations

The respondents outlined some measures that women implement to weigh between their goals and the demands of society. These involve making flexible career choices, bargaining with the family and formulating attainable objectives. The compromise strategy is the survival tool that women use instead of straightforward opposition. This balancing game is indicative of a complicated process of managing several positions. It reveals the constrained operation of agency. These measures enable women to be socially accepted and at the same time provide personal development. In 2nd FGD participant 1 said:

“Many girls try to carefully balance both family responsibilities and career aspirations by managing their time and priorities in a way that allows them to fulfill expectations at home while still pursuing their personal and professional goals.”

According to participant 10 in IDI she manages pressure through communication:

“I manage social and academic pressure through effective communication with my family and by using proper time management strategies, which helps me cope with expectations while staying focused on my ambitions.”

These findings show that under pressure, there are a number of girls who make a proactive attempt to balance between family and career objectives. They strive to minimize conflict among conflicting demands through communication, planning, and time management. But this balancing act, however, tends to be more of a process of negotiation and not always a matter of free choice. Altogether, it shows how women can adjust to the limitations of society and, nevertheless, pursue their dreams.

5.8.2 Role of family, peers, teachers and mentors in support

Family, peer, teacher and mentor support is quite important in helping women to achieve their objectives. Motivation and support are useful to develop confidence and give instructions. Institutions of learning also play their part in career counseling and mentorship programs. Nonetheless, the participants reported that these support systems are usually scarce or not woman specific. With good support networks, there would be a lot of reduction in the barriers. This points to the value of teamwork in the realization of success. According to participant 2 in 3rd FGD teachers and mentors play an important part to pursue educational and career goals of their choice: “Teachers and mentors play an important role in guiding and encouraging women to pursue their educational and career goals by providing motivation, direction, and confidence to overcome challenges.”

In IDI 11 participant shared the same views:

“Support from teachers, friends, and peers significantly increases women’s confidence, as positive encouragement from their social circle helps them believe in their abilities and stay focused on their ambitions.”

It shows that positive relationships give one impetus, self-confidence, and support to pursue objectives in spite of social constraints. The support of the people they trust can encourage women to get out of self-doubt and pressure. These support systems are important in enhancing their decision making and ambition. Generally, it resonates with the way social support systems can empower women to overcome situations and advance towards their goals.

5.8.3 Opportunities through education, policies and role models

Women are perceived to be empowered by the use of education, awareness, role models and supportive policies. The respondents stressed on the significance of scholarships, safe working conditions and equality. Heroes are the ones who are motivating and do not follow the rules. Mindset can also be changed through social media and awareness. Such avenues will lead to social transformation in the long run. This is an aspect of Bourdieu cultural capital where resources can be used to acquire upward mobility. In 2nd FGD participant 1 said that:

“Positive role models play an important role in inspiring confidence among girls, as seeing successful women in different fields motivates them to believe in their own potential and pursue their ambitions.”

In the words of participant 11 in IDI women give her hope to achieve success in their chosen careers:

“The increasing number of women in higher education gives me hope and motivation, as it reflects growing opportunities for women to learn, progress, and achieve success in their chosen careers.”

These findings show that the exposure of successful women contributes to confidence and increases career goals among girls. Their belief in personal and professional development is further

reinforced by increased access to higher education. These changes help in transforming the traditional views on the roles of women in society. In general, it indicates that structural changes and inspirational role models can be used to positively shape the goals and career trajectories of women.

CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Discussion

The results of the study indicate the strong interplay between cultural and social factors and the career dream of female students in tertiary education in Lahore, Pakistan. The research shows that even with the growing access to education, female students have to cope with a set of complicated social expectations, gender roles and family pressure affecting their career paths. These forces exist in a wider patriarchal system in which the old stereotypical roles of women are still stressed heavily and do not give them the freedom to choose their careers freely. These findings can be attributed to the existing research (Mehmood, Chong, & Hussain, 2018; Zaidi, 2022), which emphasizes the idea that sociocultural norms in Pakistan still do not allow women to have independence in their educational and professional choices.

The key variables affecting career desires are family pressures, social view of what women should do professionally and issues to do with safety and mobility. Most respondents indicated that they preferred some professions like teaching and medicine, which are not viewed as something that women should not do. And the findings revealed that these professions were considered more suitable for women due to alignment with socially constructed gender roles. This supports the argument by Ridgeway and Correll (2004) who point out that gender constructs influence expectations of what can be considered a male or female occupation. These are also backed up by Social Role Theory (Eagly and Wood, 2012), which states that societal expectations lead individuals towards roles that are considered appropriate to their gender. Yet, these inclinations are not necessarily formed under the influence of personal interest but are usually influenced by parental education and the approval of the society. This coincides with a study by Khan et al. (2024), who claims that the family structure and patriarchal values play a significant role on women

in their professional paths. Other researchers, Mehmood et al. (2018), also discovered that the decision-making process concerning women's education and career is usually dominated by male family members which confirms the traditional gender roles.

The other significant conclusion of this research is how safety issues and mobility restrictions influence career choice. The participants emphasized that jobs that require traveling, working in the field or in a male dominated workplace were frequently discouraged because of safety issues. This observation aligns with the study by Ullah, Ali and Ahmad (2018), which has concluded that women mobility is limited in societies that are patriarchal and as such they are not able to engage in various working sectors. Likewise, researchers have found that women are deterred by issues of safety and social stigma to engage in non-traditional careers (Raza et al., 2023).

The family support became a facilitating factor as well as restrictive factor. Supportive families also promoted higher education and professional development in certain situations and cultural norms about marriage and household duties restricted long-term career planning in other situations. This dual role of family influence complements prior results (Khan et al., 2024; Bridges et al., 2021) that indicate that family structure can both empower women and restrain them based on the situation.

The participants indicated that the role of peer pressure and exposure to social media played a role in aspirations formation by offering alternative role models and career opportunities. Nevertheless, these forces could not be enough to break the traditional norms in most cases. This observation reflects the views of Albert and Luzzo (1999), who observe that perceived barriers may constrain the action of people on their aspirations despite their knowledge of opportunities.

Since women are enrolling in tertiary education which is a good move towards empowerment but there are still many challenges in the realization of the education into employment. Despite being enrolled in higher education, participants reported problems like absence of skill development opportunities, discrimination by gender in workplaces, inaccessibility to professional networking, among others further into the career development. These issues indicate the disparity between educational achievement and real career achievement among female students. These results align with Bishu and Headley (2020) and Galea et al., (2020), who discovered that structural barriers and workplace inequalities are still challenges to the career growth of women.

Even though a few of the participants could exhibit agency and resistance to conventional norms, their freedom to choose was often restricted by a powerful culture and a lack of opportunities. This observation can be attributed to Bourdieu notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) which posits that people internalize social norms that define their perceptions and behaviors which in most instances restrict their options even where they have options.

This study also finds that there is a great necessity of structural and institutional support that would allow female students to make independent career choices. Students highlighted the value of career guidance, education and risk-free education and working conditions in their vocations. Even though there were participants who proved to exercise agency and defiance to traditional norms, their success to pursue their desires was usually limited by the intense cultural expectation and lack of opportunities. This implication of this observation is that individual motivation cannot work effectively in the absence of positive institutional structures. Schools thus can play a vital part in closing this divide by offering guidance, exposure to a wide range of career opportunities and an enabling environment to female students. Nabi and Bagley (1998) have put

forward similar arguments underlining the importance of Institutional support in career development and decision-making.

Overall, results show that female students in Lahore are becoming more ambitious and motivated but their career choices are constantly negotiated within the frames of cultural and social values. The study highlights why a holistic policy intervention, gender sensitive educational practices and community level awareness is necessary in order to ensure that women have an enabling environment within which they can follow the careers that they are interested and able to do. Other researchers have also given the same recommendations (Nabi and Bagley, 1998; Zaidi, 2022) and asserted that changes in the policies should be given priority gender equality in education and employment.

6.2 Limitations

There were several limitations in this research that may lead to a potential impact on the generalizability and interpretation of the findings. The research was based on a relatively small sample of female students of higher education institutions in Lahore, which could limit the range of opinions on the subject of career aspirations. Despite the attempts to cover the participants representing various backgrounds, the sample was not the most representative of all socioeconomic and cultural groups which could have an effect on the generalizability of the findings.

Also there were some difficulties with the application of qualitative research methods including In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). In the face-to-face interview, there were a few participants who were reluctant to give sensitive information which could have restricted the richness of the individual responses. However, FGDs were more informative and detailed because of group interaction but they also associated the danger of dominant voices that may have influenced other members which may not have been as authentic as personal opinion.

The external circumstances also influenced the data collection process. During the time of data collection, a war-like situation was experienced which led to academic schedule disruption since most students went back to their homes because of switching to online classes. This created delays and the need to put extra effort to coordinate and involve participants thus influencing the outline of the research.

In addition, arranging Focus Group Discussions was challenging because students had different academic duties such as exams and coursework which made it difficult to find common time to gather participants. Selection bias could also have been caused by the use of nonprobability sampling methods, since the respondents were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate.

Finally, the limited time and resources constrained the study and it was impossible to consider a larger sample size or a longitudinal analysis. Even with such limitations, the study provides good qualitative information on the cultural and societal factors that determine the career aspirations of female students and can be used as a basis of future studies in the same setting.

6.3 Conclusion and Recommendations

In Lahore Pakistan, female students in higher education are still under the strong cultural and societal pressures that dictate their careers and in most instances, limit them. This research points to the difficulties these students experience in the process of achieving personal goals and meeting the demands of society, family members and gender stereotypes. Access to higher education has increased but translation of education into independent career decisions is still low because of structural and cultural barriers that have remained.

The educational institutions, policymakers and the society in general have a great need to provide opportunities to female students by creating a conducive environment. Gender sensitive

policies, career counseling services, safer mobility and workplace environments are some of the areas that can be greatly invested in order to make women in various professional fields more active. By solving these problems, the gender balance will be increased and women will be empowered to make independent career choices.

Based on this research, it is possible to make a number of significant recommendations. Universities must have systematic career counseling schemes that make the female students aware of possibilities of career other than the conventional ones and introduce them to a broad spectrum of careers. There should also be workplaces, seminars and mentorship programs that involve successful female professionals to give role models as well as practical guidance in the universities. The family members should be involved in the awareness programs to promote positive attitudes towards career building in women and reduce restrictive cultural expectations about young marriage and domestic roles. Also, measures need to be taken to make the public transport and workplace safer and this will contribute to alleviating mobility-related disadvantages of female students.

Skill development programs must be initiated by empowering female students with relevant skills that are practical and market oriented so that they work with enhanced confidence and employability. Bridging the gap between education and professional life should be done by strengthening internship opportunities and industry linkages. Moreover, the issue of discrimination at the workplace should be tackled and women should be offered equal opportunities in all fields. Media influence and use of social platforms should also be employed to confront stereotypical gender roles and support women to pursue different careers. On a community level, these programs can contribute to the change of attitudes and make society's environment more supportive to female empowerment.

In general, these recommendations are expected to reduce the cultural and societal limitations of female students and help them to reach their potential. Through these issues, it can be said that a more inclusive and equitable society can be established in which the women will be able to actively participate in economic and social development.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Information Sheet and Consent Letter for female students

Information Sheet

Study Title: “Cultural and Societal Influences on Female Students’ Career Aspiration in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study from Lahore, Pakistan.”

Researcher: Aliyya Zainab

Institution: Forman Christian College University (FCCU)

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Research on Career Aspirations of Female Students

Dear Participant,

Thank you for considering participation in our study cultural and societal norms affecting the career aspirations of female students in higher education on among university students in Lahore, Pakistan. Below is an overview of the study and what your participation will involve.

I am a student from the Department of Sociology at Forman Christian College University, Lahore, conducting a study on *Cultural and societal norms influences on female students’ Career Aspirations in Higher Education*. This research aims to explore how cultural expectations and societal influences shape the career choices of female students.

You are invited to take part in a research study exploring how cultural and societal norms shape the career aspirations of female students in higher education in Lahore, Pakistan. The purpose of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of student's experiences and viewpoints regarding the influence of family expectations, gender roles and social pressures on their career choices.

This study aims to explore how cultural and societal expectations affect the professional goals of female students and to identify the barriers and supports they encounter as they pursue higher education and plan their future careers.

If you agree to participate you will be invited to a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will focus on your experiences, opinions and challenges related to how cultural and societal norms have influenced your career aspirations. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed for research purposes.

Participation in this study carries no direct risks. Nonetheless, your observations will advance knowledge of the obstacles and possibilities faced by female students as they pursue their careers. You are free to skip any question or leave the study at any moment without facing any repercussions.

If it makes you uncomfortable and if you require further clarification, please feel free to contact me at 263176407@formanite.fcollege.edu.pk .

Informed Consent Form

I have read the information sheet provided for the study titled "Cultural and Societal Influences on

Female Students' Career Aspiration in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study from Lahore, Pakistan." I am aware of the goals, methods, possible risks and advantages of the study. I consent to taking part in this study voluntarily.

Principal Investigator: Aliyya Zainab, Forman Christian College University (FCCU)

By ticking the box at the end of this section you confirm that you have read and comprehended the information supplied, voluntarily consent to participate in this study and understand that you have the right to revoke your consent at any moment.

I agree to take part in this study by checking the box.

Participant's Signature: -----

Date: -----

Appendix B Questionnaire (Interview guide) for Female Students

Demographic Data

- Age:
- Education level: Undergraduate / Graduate / Postgraduate
- University Type: Public / Private
- Residence: Urban / Rural

Research Questions

1. Can you describe your career aspirations and future professional goals?
2. How have your family's expectations influenced your choice of study or career path?
3. In what ways do cultural and societal norms in your community affect your career decisions?
4. Have you ever faced challenges or resistance (from family, relatives or society) regarding your career goals?

5. How do traditional gender roles in your family or community influence your academic and career ambitions?
6. What kind of support (from family, teachers, peers or institutions) has encouraged you to pursue your career goals?
7. Do you think societal pressures discourage female students from entering leadership positions or male-dominated fields? Why?
8. Can you share any strategies you have used to balance societal expectations with your own ambitions?
9. In your view, what changes are needed in society or education to better support female students in pursuing their desired careers?
10. Do you feel optimistic about achieving your career goals despite cultural and societal barriers? Why or why not?

Appendix C Focus Group Discussion Consent Form and Questionnaire

Title of Study:

“Cultural and Societal Influences on Female Students’ Career Aspirations in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study from Lahore, Pakistan”

Purpose of the Study:

This discussion aims to explore how cultural and societal expectations influence the career goals, choices, and experiences of female university students.

Participation Details:

You are invited to take part in a group discussion with other female students lasting approximately 60–75 minutes. The discussion will focus on shared experiences, perceptions, and challenges regarding education, family expectations, and career aspirations.

With your permission, the session will be audio-recorded for research purposes only. Your name and identity will be kept confidential in all written and oral reports.

Participation is voluntary, and you may skip any question or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Contact:

For any clarification, please contact:

Aliyya Zainab

Department of Sociology, Forman Christian College University (FCCU), Lahore

Email: 263176407@formanite.fccollege.edu.pk

Consent Statement:

I have read and understood the information above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this focus group discussion. I understand that my participation is confidential and that I may withdraw at any time.

I agree to take part in this study by checking the box.

Participant's Signature: -----

Date: -----

Questionnaire

Demographic Data

- Age:
- Education level: Undergraduate / Graduate / Postgraduate
- University Type: Public / Private
- Residence: Rural/Urban

Questions

1. What kinds of careers do female students at your university usually aspire to pursue?

2. How do family expectations or values influence your career choices?
3. In what ways do cultural or societal norms affect women's education and career decisions?
 4. What challenges do female students face when choosing or pursuing their desired careers?
5. How do female students balance societal expectations with their personal ambitions?
6. What kind of support from family, peers, or institutions helps women pursue their goals?
7. What changes in society or education would better support women in achieving their career aspirations?