



## **Understanding Domestic Violence's Impact on Academic Experiences of Pakistani Public Sector University Students**

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### **Abstract**

Stress is a rampantly prevailing issue among undergraduate students, affecting both students' academic performance and general well-being. There is ample research available on the various sources of stress faced by students in campus life, including academic pressure, financial constraints, social expectations and cultural factors. Not sufficient research is found explicitly on the extrinsic factor of domestic violence and its impact on student's on-campus experiences at public sector universities in Pakistan. This study aims to investigate the stressful repercussions of domestic violence on undergraduate students' academic experiences at public sector universities in Pakistan. Through qualitative interviews and a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, this research intends to explore the effects of domestic violence on students' mental health and academic success. The study will also examine coping mechanisms employed by students to manage stress and suggest strategies for universities to create a supportive environment that promotes student well-being and academic achievement. By shedding light on the challenges faced by students in public sector universities in Pakistan, this research will contribute to the development of effective interventions and support systems to address stress and enhance the overall student experience.

**Keywords:** Domestic violence, stress, academic experiences, coping mechanisms and constructivism.

### **Introduction**

The pursuit of higher education is a thrilling experience which provides students opportunities for both academic and personal development. However, this journey is frequently intertwined with significant stressors that impact students' mental well-being and academic performance as they navigate campus life at Pakistani public sector universities. Undergraduate students encounter a multitude of stressors on a regular basis as they traverse the shift from secondary to tertiary education, in addition to the unique challenges of the university setting. Among these stressors are some extrinsic factors which arise from student's surrounding environment and negatively reflect in their academic experience. In some cases, domestic violence experiences are one of them. While research has extensively documented various stressors encountered by students, such as academic pressure, financial constraints, social expectations, and cultural factors, limited attention has been paid to the extrinsic factor of domestic violence and its effects on students' on-campus experiences, particularly in public sector universities in Pakistan.

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Domestic violence is the threat of exercise of physical, psychological and/or emotional violence; i.e., any type of force against another person with the intent of inflicting harm or exercising power and control over them (Flury et al., 2010). Domestic violence results in death, serious injury, and chronic medical and mental health issues for victims, their children, the perpetrators, and others. (Ganley, 1995) Domestic violence, characterized by physical, emotional, or psychological abuse within intimate relationships, can have profound consequences on individuals, extending beyond the confines of the home environment. Therefore, understanding its implications for undergraduate students in public sector universities in Pakistan is essential for developing targeted interventions and support systems to mitigate its adverse effects.

The American Sociologist Lisa Hajjar delineated domestic violence in Pakistan as an "endemic in all social spheres" (Hajjar, 2004). Comprehending the nature stress faced by these students due to domestic violence experiences is essential for developing targeted interventions and support services to foster a favorable learning environment and promote their holistic development. While academic stress is a global phenomenon, the unique cultural, social, and economic contexts of Pakistan's public sector universities require a nuanced understanding of domestic violence endured by students and the strategies they employ to cope with them.

### **Research Statement**

The main problem this research intends to inspect is the multifaceted nature of academic stress effectuated due to domestic violence or abuse among undergraduate students in public sector universities in Pakistan. This research aims to accommodate insights into the multifaceted interaction of students with domestic violence and how it induces academic stress, ultimately influencing students' performance. Moreover, the results of this study may initiate and assist in establishing policies to eradicate these academic stressors in order to ensure a stress-free campus environment for the students.

### **Significance of the study**

The study on the stress faced by students due to external factors at campus life in public sector universities in Pakistan is significant for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the study will fill the research gap and provide insights to understand the impact of the domestic violence that contributes in stressing undergraduate students academically in public sector universities in Pakistan. Additionally, the study will scrutinize and explore the coping mechanisms employed by students to manage stress resulting from external factors and will assess the effectiveness of current support systems and interventions in public sector universities for addressing stress due to external factors. This assessment is vitally crucial in order to create support networks and interventions that are more successful in helping students manage their stress and enhance their mental health.

### **Delimitations:**

This research is explicitly concerned with undergraduate students attending Pakistani public sector universities. Therefore, the findings may not be

generalizable to students in private universities or institutions outside of Pakistan. The language medium chosen to conduct the interviews was English which may have been a linguistic bias, excluding pupils who are not fluent in the language. Moreover, this inquiry is limited to the constructivist paradigm, debarring alternative theoretical frameworks or viewpoints. The research sample was purposefully chosen using maximum variation sampling, which might have added bias to the participant selection process.

The individual interviews were conducted at COMSATS University, Islamabad campus. Due to resource constraints and the qualitative nature of the study, the sample size for interviews and data collection is delimited to five undergraduate students, which may not be representative of all students studying at Pakistani public sector institutes, potentially impacting the breadth and depth of the findings. The composition of the sample may also not fully represent the diversity of undergraduate students in public sector universities in Pakistan. While the research aims to explore sensitive topics such as domestic violence and mental health, ethical considerations may limit the depth of inquiry or participants' willingness to disclose personal experiences. Ensuring ethical protocols and participant confidentiality is paramount but may constrain the study's scope.

### **Literature Review**

Stress is a mental condition, in which stressors (or demands) cause an attempt at adaptation or resolution that, if the organism cannot live up to the expectations, causes individual misery (Linden, 2005). More specifically, stress is a syndrome of negative reactions to persistent demands that continue to grow and are intractable by a person's coping mechanisms (Ursin & Eriksen 2004). Stress can be induced because of anything and each person responds to stressful events in different ways. Environmental demands, as per Shapero & Hankin (2009), are the most frequent causes of stress.

First ever study that discussed academic stress in Pakistan was to investigate the challenges Pakistani students faced adapting into the university culture (Javed, 2019). In the study, a quantitative questionnaire was distributed to 180 undergraduate students at a Pakistani public university. The results deduced that many adaption difficulties faced by Pakistani university students were comparable to those in other international Western environments. Exam stress is also common and natural phenomenon in many students worldwide. A team of researchers explored the perspectives of university graduates on exam stress, its significant reasons and its effects on their academic performance to which Students self-reported on their exam stress and anxiety and how it affected their academic output (Ahmed et al, 2022).

There are numerous other factors responsible for causing abruptions in student's academic performance. Domestic violence leaves grave effects on mental health whether it is verbal, physical, emotional or sexual (Malik et al., 2021). University students with childhood domestic violence were researched upon their utilization of campus resources. The study included 368 students from a public university in the Southeast of America and Allen et al.,(2023) were able to conclude that majority of students utilized at least one health-related campus resource, with the most popular and beneficial being the student health and counseling centers.

### **Research Gap**

Although stress is a common problem in Pakistan, it still is not recognized as a crucial concern due to lack of awareness. A considerable amount of research has been conducted upon academic stress in Pakistan. There still exists a noticeable gap in existing literature. External factors such as domestic violence experiences are yet to be explored for their role in inducing stress in graduate and undergraduate students, affecting their campus life experience. Much research has been done on this variable and how it causes stress in students globally (Allen et al., 2023). Not sufficient research is found on how domestic violence experiences cause academic stress in university students in Pakistan, affecting their academic performance.

### **Research Objectives**

- 1) To explore the psychological factors effectuated by domestic violence causing academic stress in students of Pakistani public sector universities.
- 2) To observe the coping mechanisms employed by students to cope with the academic stress.

### **Research Questions:**

- 1) How domestic violence experiences cause academic stress in students of Pakistani public sector universities, affecting their academic performance?
- 2) What coping mechanisms are employed by students to cope with the academic stress?

### **Research Methodology:**

Qualitative research is a methodological approach used to gain an in-depth understanding of social phenomena, behaviors, or attitudes through non-numerical data collection techniques such as interviews, observations, or content analysis. (Creswell, 2017) The primary focus is to examine the various and multifaceted human experiences, viewpoints, and interpretations using techniques like in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. This research will administer qualitative method to scrutinize domestic violence experiences of university students and its impact on their academic performance. The qualitative research tool of in-depth interviews is ideal to address the problem of how domestic violence experiences are responsible for effectuating academic stress in students.

### **Epistemology**

Constructivism is a philosophical perspective that posits and emphasizes the active role of individuals in constructing their own understanding and knowledge of the world (Crotty, 1998). It is a learning theory which holds that knowledge is best gained through a process of reflection and active construction in the mind (Mascolo & Fischer, 2005). Constructivism can be applied and used to analyze how students' experiences of campus life at Pakistani public sector universities are being affected and becoming stressful due to the external factor

domestic violence experiences. This epistemological stance will assist the research and enrich it with different perspectives regarding determining the academic stress. When undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds will be interviewed, their feedbacks will provide varying academically stressful experiences. This will eventually help in determining how academic stress is induced in students due to their domestic violence experiences and what different coping mechanisms do they employ to cope with the stress. Additionally, constructivism will assist in recommending various suggestions to the universities authoritarians in developing stress mitigating policies and in ensuring a thriving academic environment.

### **Research Design**

The purpose of in-depth, individual interviews is to obtain comprehensive understanding of participants' viewpoints, experiences, and interpretations of a particular concept or phenomenon. Conducting individual interviews with a targeted sample of students with domestic violence experiences will provide an in-depth contemplation of its effects on their academic performance, unearthing rich and nuanced data from the interviewees by delving deeper into their responses.

### **Sampling Method**

Purposive and theoretical sampling will be used to recruit and select participants who have experienced a domestic violence environment and are currently enrolled Pakistani in public sector universities.

### **Preparatory Parameters:**

Before conducting an individual interview, there are certain responsibilities on a researcher which he/she must pertain to. In order to conduct an efficient individual interview, the researcher;

- Chose volunteers according to pertinent standards, i.e chose students who have actually seen or experienced domestic violence.
- Provided a comprehensive background of the study and specified their objectives precisely to the participants.
- Ensured that the participant's involvement and participation is completely voluntary.
- Establishing a positive relationship with participants and following ethical standards are essential components of the procedure. The researcher provided a positive environment in order to make the participant feel at ease and comfortable.

### **Data Collection tools**

Proper data collection is ensured by recording interviews and taking thorough notes. Informed permission forms, open-ended interview questions, and appropriate interview settings were ensured by the researcher for a pristine individual interview.

### **Research Limitations**

#### **Sample Size**

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The study's reliance on a relatively small sample size may limit the generalizability of findings beyond the specific context of the research population (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

### **Self-Reporting Bias**

Self-reporting bias or the subjective nature of qualitative research might become a research constraint. Triangulation of the data sources shall be carried out to omit these limitations.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis is ideal for developing a framework in order to understand how various patterns, codes and themes emerge from the data. Themes and patterns relating to the effects of domestic violence on students' mental health, academic experiences, and coping strategies will be identified and analyzed.

### **Sampling**

The researcher has collected data by conducting individual interviews from 5 participants, out of which, 2 interviews were selected according to the criteria and objectives of the research. The interview questions were designed within the theme of domestic violence using the lens of constructivism and analyzed using grounded theory. Both the participants are undergraduate students, pursuing their bachelor's degree at the same Pakistani public sector university. Participant 1 is studying BS Psychology and has reported that they reside in a domestically violent environment. Participant 2 is studying Bachelors in English Literature and Linguistics. Interviewee 2's parents are divorced. Both the interviews included same questions. A total of thirteen questions were asked in both the interviews. The analysis will entail only those question which directly address the research issue.

### **Campus Experience:**

The participants were first and foremost asked to describe their overall experience at their university. To this, participant 1 responded *"It's been a mixed experience. From the academic point of view, the university is challenging. However, managing my studies alongside my personal life has always been tough, given my background of a turbulent family. The workload is quite hectic. We have regular assignments, midterms, finals, and then there are presentations and projects. The rules and deadlines are very strict and rigid. The expectations are high, and the competition is fierce, which adds a lot of pressure."*

Participant 2 answered the same question as *"Umm, academically, the university is very demanding, but it has also been a great learning experience. However, balancing my studies with my personal life has been extremely challenging due to my family situation. The workload is intense. We have numerous assignments, projects, quizzes, midterms, and finals. There's a constant pressure to perform well and stay ahead, which adds to the stress, especially in a competitive field like Computer Arts."*

The similar codes in both the participants' responses are having a tough, stressful academic routine which they found difficult to manoeuvre with their personal lives. They both experienced difficulties in keeping up with their academic tasks and their deadlines because of the turbulent domestic atmospheres at their homes. Both the participants reported enduring academic stress and pressure to perform well, with an embedded fear of failure

### **Domestic violence's impact on mental health:**

Next, they were asked *"Without going into specifics if you're uncomfortable, can you share how your experience with domestic violence has impacted your daily life and mental well-being?"* P1 (participant 1) responded *"It's been a significant impact. The stress and anxiety from*

*my home situation often follow me to university. There are days when I find it hard to focus or even get out of bed. It feels like carrying a heavy weight all the time. I often find myself zoning out during my lectures. Studying requires a peaceful mind, which I just, lack on some days. My grades have always suffered, especially during periods of intense conflict at home. I find it hard to concentrate during lectures, and my mind often drifts when I'm trying to study. I've missed deadlines and performed poorly on exams because of this mental strain. Concentration is a huge issue. Motivation comes and goes. When things are particularly bad at home, I sometimes question whether I should continue with my studies at all."*

P2 (Participant 2) responded *"After my parents' divorce, there was a lot of conflict and tension. My father was physically abusive, and even after the divorce, the emotional and psychological impact remains. The instability at home makes it difficult to find a peaceful environment to study or even relax. I guess he didn't mean any of it. He just let his anger and frustration out on me. But still, it hasn't done any good to me. When I'm at my mother's, it's a whole other level of pain and torment. She too, lets her anger get the best of me. She scolds me for the tiniest things like, not keeping the glass back in the kitchen after drinking water, stuff like that. I know they do love me in their own ways, but it gets harder when they're only inflecting hurt and pain on me. My grades have suffered at times, especially during periods of high conflict. The stress from home follows me to university, affecting my concentration and motivation. There have been semesters where my performance dropped significantly due to these issues. Sometimes, I leave for the university from my father's house and then I'm told that I have to return back to my mother's. This constant back and forth routine makes it very difficult to build a studying rhythm or a schedule."*

Both the participants have stated the issue of lack of help centers. The codes in these responses are crucial in highlighting the dilemma of lack of awareness for domestic violence in Pakistani public sector universities. Both the undergraduates reported that they attempted to seek mental counseling and found a complete dearth of any help center, eventually receiving no sort of help from their institute at all. Also, both the pupils reported distinctive self-

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employing coping mechanisms, such as developing a writing habit or developing social bonds, which they found worthy enough to combat the academic stress they had. This excerpt directly targets the need of guidance or support systems with skilled therapists and technicians, who would spread awareness regarding domestic violence and would help such students out in a completely anonymous manner.

### **Findings**

The findings reveal that there is a definite and flagrant impact of domestic violence experiences on students' academic performance. Students with domestic violence backgrounds and experiences face more challenges navigating their academic journey while studying at Pakistani public sector universities in comparison to other students. This difficulty in navigation leads to incomplete tasks, assignments and eventually causes undergraduate students to bare tons of academic stress. The research also concludes that undergraduate students self-employ various types of coping mechanisms in order to tackle the academic stress they are bearing due to domestic violence experiences. Lastly, on the basis of the analysis, the study posits that typically, Pakistani public sector universities are unaware of the problem and have done no effort to establish well developed counseling centers for such critical and sensitive matters.

### **Recommendations**

There are numerous variables that are responsible for inducing stress or anxiety in young university students that eventually steers students to a negative campus life experience. It is essential to acknowledge and address these problematic components in order to ensure that a warm, inclusive and affable learning environment is established for the students to thrive. University authoritarians and legislators ought to address these factors and implement stress free awareness in the campus. It is essential that the youth is looked after as Pakistan's majority of population comprises of youth who are the future architect of the society.

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