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Exploring Female Students Perspectives On Participation In Extracurricular Activities In Islamabad Pakistan

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Abstract

The participation in Extracurricular Activities (ECAs) is crucial to the development of the students in personal and professional life. Nevertheless, when it comes to the female students in Pakistan, the participation in such activities is usually shaped by the strong cultural and institutional limitations. This paper examines these dynamics within Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU), Islamabad and it aims to find out the motivating factors and obstacles that influence female participation in ECAs. The paper explores social and institutional cultural factors which influence the participation of ECAs as it shows how such practices can assist students to grow both personally and professionally. The study examines the main reasons that prompt female students to enroll in ECAs and determines the barriers and the learning outcomes of such activities. [1]The research utilizes the social role theory as a framework of organizing its research ideas regarding the social aspects that define gender-specific actions and opportunities. The social role theory suggests that traditional gender norms affect the involvement of females in ECAs whereas institutional contexts can modify the norms. The study used qualitative research designs, and semi-structured interviews to examine 16 female Bachelor of Science (BS) students who participated in ECAs by purposively sampling them. To determine the key recurrent themes and patterns, thematic analysis was applied to the data set obtained. The research results indicate that female students engage in ECAs to enhance their skills, acquire leadership, form social networks, and career promotion. Besides that, cultural norms, family control, safety issues and institutional policies limit participation in ECAs activities. ECAs provide platforms for students where they can break the traditional barriers to gain confidence. The research study intensely recommends that the Educational institutions should work on cultural and structural barriers to enable female students to participate in ECAs in inclusive environments.

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1. Introduction

Generally, ECAs are important in the general growth of a student as they allow the student to find a way to enhance them in the personal growth, interpersonal skills and also in academic and social life. Moreover, there are links to other activities of students in practice with positive results like improved academic performance, leadership skills, and increase in confidence (Mahoney et al., 2020).Many places in the world have unique challenges for female students to access ECAs. While progress is being made in use of female equally in developed countries, some of the societal norms, gender stereotypes and inadequate time are still restricting this. For instance, female students are given the chance to participate in ECA in the Western context but there is no comment on the female participation in the activity considered to be male dominated (Shapiro et al, 2021).

However, participation of ECAs makes it very hard for there to be ECAs in different regions because such availability and opportunity for participation in ECAs is constrained. Because of their more funds and facilities, the more rich the country, the more school and university students can participate in the activities of sports, arts and sciences. They were both comfortable with male and female students exploring their interests. In these countries there is less opportunity for leadership, female are not fully part of the process, hidden biases hinder their role. Therefore, the schools should establish the mentorship programs and a fair system of policies where all have the chance to make all within the school (Smith & Wei, 2020).

Less developed areas are female students. Many of them do not have access to extracurricular programs that lack institution support, have high cost or lack of resources. Some students are squeezed out of their lives to attend ECAs because of their school work or because there are household responsibilities. It does not help to solve this problem that safety and 'traditional' views on what female should or would not be doing are the order of the day. It is even harder for female students to participate in ECA's due to culture and society (Perera et al., 2022). In fact, the traditional gender roles that take over to the household do so over personal interest. Findings from India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka suggest that parents and communities view ECAs as a distraction from academics. All these are because there are no facilities, safety and weak institutional support discouraging playing ECAs (Nazneen & Sultan, 2016).

However, local cultural and religious norms in Pakistan combine these regional challenges. But despite being a progressive and diverse university, female students are being prevented from being a part of ECAs of Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU). Such a change might cause a lot of students to have the pressure to study; it might also restrict them from Participation. For example some families are very family oriented making sure that things do not go too far in the event of any level of safety or other and some families are very strict on what they think is proper. Additionally, gender friendly facilities are missing and the timing of activities may stop a female student from participating in such activities (Hussain et al., 2021). For this reason, this study considered the reasons why female students participate in ECAs, the problems they face and how the participation of the ECAs affects female education. It seeks to uncover what makes female students to enroll for ECAs and how the antecedents of participation in ECAs

match with their interest. The study further evaluates the barriers (social, cultural or institutional) that prevent the female students from participation in ECA's. Additionally, the study examines how these experiences influence their whole educational life and how they can utilize these experiences to make the university surroundings more inclusive and friendly.

2. Literature Review

According to Mahoney et al. (2020) worldwide, ECAs are considered important in terms of the personal and academic development of young people. Research has also shown that ECAs improve students' academic performance besides developing such important life skills like leadership, communication and problem solving, among others. ECAs provide an organized operating environment for the students to balance their academics with personal interest which is developing their personalities. In cases where countries have done research (like the United States and Canada) in the area of ECAs (or earlier programs like ECAs), there is a definite link between involvement in ECAs and better self-esteem, better mental health, less dropouts, etc.

However, data from studies at the global level show that there is gender inequality in participation in ECA. Many Western countries still allow gendered expectations and stereotypes to continue to exist and shape what some male and female students do. For example, Smith and Wei (2020) demonstrate that a positive correlation between numbers of females in competitive sports and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) clubs versus arts and cultural activities at the community level is a positive correlation with later educational prestige. Access to the ECAs is entirely determinate on some socioeconomics factors. One of the constraints to low income families' students' participation is the high cost of participation, poor transportation and access to the facilities. It is also suggested by Shapiro et al. (2021) that female students must respond to dichotization of knowledge between the online learning and online as they experience cultural norms and family pressure.

Educational frameworks in South Asia have not yet caught up with the trend of integrating educational frameworks via ECA. The region has traditionally overlooked the value of the nonacademic things and has weighted so heavily on academic achievement. Efforts to integrate ECAs in school and university curricula are a recent policy shift when there is an increasing awareness of the importance of ECAs. The current progress can provide a table, but South Asian female students are not included in ECA due to male patriarchal society and other cultural norms that put female inside walls and behind ECA spaces (Nazneen and Sultan 2021).

In India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, studies have proven that society's perceptions dictate what kind of activity is 'appropriate' for female students. This condition further closes the open doors for female students and moreover advances a conviction of gender stereotypes, which limit their interest in taking part in sports and outside works out, yet rather the arts and home economics are better. These challenges are also agitated by safety and infrastructure reasons and it is not easy for the female students to take part in the ECAs on the same footing as their male colleagues (Perera et al., 2022).

Secondly, gender sensitive policy and practice is not supported from an institutional perspective. As stated by Khan and Ali (2023), female students are not provided with a safe and inclusive environment in most of the educational institutions in South Asia, especially in rural areas. Additionally, lack of female mentors, gender isolated programs and flexible scheduling also prevent female participation in ECA. At the same time, however, there are also good examples of initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity in ECAs in South Asia. One

example is that the sport has been a successful tool of mobilisation and empowerment of young female to breach the traditional gender norms and promote social inclusion using community driven programmes with impact on a large number of young female in India and Pakistan.

Therefore, it is extremely important to understand the dynamics of cultural, religious and institutional so as to understand the participation of female students in ECAs in Pakistan. Quaid i Azam University (QAU) in Islamabad may in turn be more progressive than other universities. According to Rehman and Ahmed (2022), female students' nonacademic activities at the universities of Karachi have a great impact of cultural (modesty and family honor) and traditional gender roles. In the conservative areas where girls are seen to have no or little value, ECAs are quite limited in their reach.

Moreover, the logistical problems hinder female participation in ECAs such as problems of travelling due to limited transport to transport female, no facilities and safety. According to Hussain et al (2021) the sports facilities infrastructure is not being noted properly by many universities of Pakistan, such as providing sports facilities and safe place for female to practice and or play sports. They also go a long way to limit opportunities to the female students as well as limiting opportunities to them.

Nevertheless, QAU has put in a lot of effort towards encouraging female participation in ECAs. The university has many things to offer female, such as leadership programs, debate clubs, sports teams, all of which ensure safe and useful spaces for skills' development and expansion of interests of female students. Moreover, Ali and Khan (2023) also pointed out that these programs have been proven to be an excellent empowerment of female students with the capacity to combat the traditional norms and their forms of female roles in a society. However, institutional policy and cultural attitude are more thoroughly and comprehensively solutions to neutralize the systemic barriers to the participation of females in ECAs. Moreover, there are gaps in literature on the benefits and barriers to ECAs by female participants. In addition, most of these studies are based on general trends of the entire region or country and have no particular mention of the condition of female students in particular institutions such as QAU. Therefore, it becomes more necessary to carry out more localized research based on the cultural and institutional dynamics of female involvement in ECAs.

3. Theoretical framework

Social Role Theory was presented by Alice H. Eagly in 1987 to clarify how society and culture develops male-female roles through patriarchy (male governance and feminine care). The theory states that social role expectations determine how female and male approach situations instead of biological factors driving their actions. Through Social Role Theory society instructs people about interacting with both men and women, while schools along with families enable and promote these roles. Society directs female into home-based caregiving and household work but demands professional leadership roles from men. The final structure specifies actions for men and female along with their revealed and concealed identities. The delivery of additional activity options by these norms benefits female students whose roles extend beyond traditional boundaries. This theory is applied to investigate the barriers female student confronts in ECAs participation by analyzing societal beliefs about appropriate female behavior. The study employs Social Role Theory to determine how extensively female students of Quaid-i-Azam University QAU (Pakistan) take part in extracurricular activities. The theory

helps to provides an explanation about female students' motivations for ECAs which also includes their experiences alongside identified challenges. Female students view extracurricular activities as a method to defy traditional gender norms because participating in them enables females to develop their abilities and self-assurance and interact with others while maintaining the potential benefit of building their future. Society's traditional values and family limitations together with doubts about comments from others act as frequent unjust barriers. Multiple barriers exist which reduce the potential areas for ECAs and deny them complete participation in these programs. Some students manage to break through barriers which prevent them from leading in fields that usually belong to men and from reaching high levels of achievement. The experience allows students to develop in two ways simultaneously while enhancing their confidence levels and performance results. Social Role Theory shows how female students modify their self-perception together with their view of social roles following these experiences.

4. Methodology

The research is qualitative in nature to examine to what extent female students of Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU) participate in extracurricular activities (ECAs). In order to understand the students' personal experiences, motivations and their challenges, qualitative approach was taken. Unlike other methods that relied on numbers only, this method permitted researcher to explore social and cultural aspects of students' participation. Purposive sampling was used for selecting the participants. Sixteen female students of BS program, who were already active in ECAs, were decided to include in the data collection process. Data collection was stopped when neither new information nor themes emerged (saturation), and the 16 sample size was enough to provide different perspectives.

Data collection was done through interviews. The researcher used an interview guide to keep track of what students thought and allow them to freely express. The topic in the interviews with students was about motivations, challenges, and what sort of effect ECA's have on education. The analysis was conducted by thematic analysis to find pattern and themes of data (e.g., motivation: (skill development, leadership) and barriers: (cultural norms, family restriction). Moreover, the selected participants strictly volunteered and they knew the purpose of the study, their role in the study as well as their right to withdraw from the study any moment. Data was safely stored and they were given anonymous identities.

5. Themes and Discussion

5.1 : Motivations for Participation

In addition to extrinsic motivation, the majority of the students who participate in extracurricular activities are motivated intrinsically. According to the research worldwide, ECAs assist to equip essential skills for growth including the leadership abilities and teamwork and communication skills that are needed both by the individual and by the professional (Mahoney et al., 2020). The ECAs help in building better self confidence in students as it is a special process of forming an identity in adolescents (Shapiro, et al. 2021). The opportunities for social interaction are able to help the students to make friends while expanding their social networks and working together with peers with diverse backgrounds (Nazneen & Sultan, 2021). ECAs build students' academic curriculum by enhancing skills aimed at the job a student intends to do after graduating.

Reasons for participating in ECA activities were the same as for other universities as indicated by participants from Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU). Before taking up leadership roles, the students from QAU debate club participate to learn public speaking. Since then, it's given me the experience to present my thoughts in class, or other situations. Survey respondent reported that ECAs were useful in bringing students to meet friends from other departments, and interact with people from different background. It's been an enriching experience." Students knew some recreational and creative ways to pursue their interests other than taking part in ECAs. Participation in art, in society functions is my primary means of controlling academic stress as well as my primary strategy. ECAs also bring relaxations as well as the opportunities for creativity. Educational activities provided to the students of QAU also gave them useful experiences that they viewed beneficial in their future career paths. From the perspective of the organizational competencies, the participant used cultural society event management to grow his professional potential.

5.2 : Barriers to Participation

Some hindrances prevail and prevent generic educational activities for female students, while there are also many advantages. As such, the female shy away from public roles and leadership positions and keep the conventional maternal responsibilities due to the dominant social perspective of the two cultures and of society (Ali & Khan 2023). Moreover, the periods of family limitations caused due to the community anxiety over attendance and time dedication that restrict educational or extracurricular opportunities for female students are to blame. The movements between activities and the restriction of the activities for evening hours are fundamental barriers to the safety needs (Perera et al., 2022). Additionally, there are existing institutional barriers; these are barriers due to the absence of gender sensitive structures, and male dominating buildings, which further worsen these barriers (Hussain et al., 2021).

Cultural norms are the main barrier which hinders QAU respondent's participation. Another participant reported that in our society, girls should not go out in public place in a manner other than a specified one. Society considers most female involvement in ECAs as excessive and inappropriate for their gender. Students had commented that there were family rules about what extracurricular activities are unproductive ways for them to spend their time. They are left thinking only about academics. Safety worries were an important reason why many students did not engage in certain activities. One survey participant said they wished to sign up with the sports society, but the tournaments take place in the evening. The situation in the campus after dark is actually posing serious safety risks on me, and it is not safe for me to be on campus late.

Institutional barriers were also discussed. According to the result of the interview, we discovered that students are still not able to have enough female only spaces to meet their student safety needs. Female students can find it a challenge to participate on an issue where there are no spaces created for female only. However, there were many activities that went against the needs of commuting female students, parents and students pointed out. Because of the collection of social and environmental elements that form a complex system, female are not allowed to take part in different extracurricular.

5.3 : Experiences of Empowerment

ECAs, whether they like it or not, seem to empower the female students with an active battle against the societal gender roles. A study indicates that female can develop skills to dismantle

gender stereotypes because when there is a woman taking leadership roles in men's space, society becomes convinced that a woman can do some things (Shapiro et al., 2021). In order to successfully meet challenges, female students find peer connections with the mentorship valuable for their resilience and independence (Faiz et al., 2024).

In their experiences, the power of the QAU students was reflected. By becoming president of the literature society, gave the students new abilities. In the more male centric working environments I took residence in, I learnt I could lead teams well though I was president of the literature organization. The sports club membership has taught me that I defend myself from those stereotypes that want to limit my movement and defend my rights. It's been a liberating experience." Most of the students had walked in the path of motivation through the feeling that mentorship was the way. "Our club advisor is always providing advice to students," stated a source. Finally, our advisor is able to show to the latter that female can achieve their potential if they have the right backup structures. However, some ECAs who overcame the assumptions of the community and built leadership positions, and the skills they used in these positions helped them to build self-confidence for some female students.

5.4 : Role of Institutional Environment

It is significantly concerned with how female participate in ECAs. Supportive infrastructure such as female focused initiatives and gender segregated areas can be one form of these and raise such participation. Moreover, inclusive scheduling and faculty encouragement of female students also provides a supportive environment (Ali & Khan, 2023).

However, QAU respondents praised the progressively held atmosphere of the university while they noted shortcomings. However, senior student voiced infrastructure deficiencies but one student said QAU offers several extracurricular activities and the administration, at least in his opinion, seems to have a positive attitude towards encouraging female participation. "We want separate sports facilities, but we also want more specific areas reserved for female", he stated. 'It would make it easier for us to participate." Another said that "we are often facing timing problems with our schedules." More flexibility is needed for female students, especially female commuters. Further, the function of faculty was also put forth. 'Moreover, 'our instructors are very actively pressing us to join ECAs and are also doing their best to find room for these activities in our academic workload,' observed one. However, these revelations indicate that female students need institutional support in order to be involved in ECAs.

5.5 : Cultural Dynamics and Their Influence

Participation of female students in extracurricular activities (ECAs) is dictated by the cultural and societal standards. In countries with traditional gender norms and patriarchy, female's role in public events is restricted to picking up home duties as well as scholastic achievement over another activity and personal development (Nawaz et al., 2024). This once again confirms that female belong in the home, doing their duties there, and that their 'home life' is valued more so, she is not permitted to have 'unnecessary behavior' or 'inappropriate behavior.' However, female still cannot fully exercise its temporary freedom to take up new hobbies or training new skills in the classroom due to the restrictive environment. Slowly, but rather, attitudes are changing in cities like Islamabad. Factors that have lured the female student to get involved in ECA and to be part of it include educational improvement and gaining greater exposure to global trends and progressive institutions.

In relation to how cultural dynamics affect their involvement in ECAs, QAU students are also interested in it. ‘My mother is particularly afraid that those will think if I will spend too much time outside the house,’ said one respondent, who remembered that one of the students in a family things are like that: girls should go to school, grow fruits in a garden and go food at home,’ one of the respondents mentioned. A student told me a similar thing, ‘My parents weren’t exposed to these things, so they always don’t really get it, that why I want to join’.” However, they told me that it is a distraction from my academics.

But these obstacles shifted the norms of society in a certain way. One individual said: 'Girls are still being encouraged to turn up for activities more than they did three or four years ago' but another pupil commented: Two things happen. Change isn't instant but things are moving.' Another respondent stated, “The rural milieu also suits the culture of the urban set up in Islamabad more than the rural areas.” “The girls in a typical rural area would never think of joining a debate club or a sports team,” one of the respondents said. And yet, at QAU we are much freer and we have the freedom to use it." The fact that the change is slow is indicative of the importance of educational support as an important key when going against the norm to construct an inclusive environment, particularly for girls.

5.6 : Perceived Benefits of Participation

There are many advantages of participating in ECA beyond skill development. According to research, participation in ECAs has been indicated to have an important role in career development, mental health and holistic development (Rasool et al., 2024). These ECAs are for students to develop their talents in some way of balancing academic issues with other pleasures. It is also required to have real life experience that one will require in one’s future job. They also develop to become more resilient, good at time management, problem solver which are all the necessary ingredients of long term success.

ECA participation has a transforming effect according to QAU respondents. As a student, I feel that this has improved my working under pressure and stress management safely. This provides an opportunity to catch up with your rest and stay productive at the same time. 'Another said that being a part of the debate society has given me more confidence with her articulation.' This has led me to being able to express myself much clearer than I normally would, and that has even helped me out with my presentations in class. However, a lot of participants were especially interested in the professional advantages of ECAs. The other respondent, however, says that the skills and abilities I have acquired in the cultural society in organizing events will come in handy during interviews; it is like doing practical while still in school.

They were also considered personal development and emotional support. ‘When I participate in extracurricular activities, I feel happier and more confident,’ which was said by one of the participants. It’s a way to get away from doing something worthwhile and schoolwork. From their advantages, ECAs reveal how ECAs can help students in some personal and professional aspects.

5.7 : Strategies to Overcome Barriers

Therefore, female students respond creatively to the barriers that hinder their involvement in ECAs. Moreover, some strategies were requested from parents and support from peers and

faculty (Rasool et al., 2024). As such, by allowing the students a chance to pass over cultural and institutional hurdles, they can best develop themselves as people and professionals.

QAU respondents gave reasons as to how they had been able to achieve success in the midst of challenges. So when I was in school, I was more open minded about what ECAs can do; I was able to convince my parents that participating in the ECAs will take me far in my resume and find a nice job. As they saw that the benefit, they became more supportive. One respondent also said 'it is important to have peer support for example my friends who are already doing ECA'. It taught me what they proved to me that it is very possible to juggle between academics and activities.

The faculty, too, was another recurrent element with encouragement. I feel that with their support I can do things. “I just feel that those societies with the majority of female members are safer and more comfortable to me”.

5.8 : Recommendations for Institutional Improvement

The participants gave recommendations for making ECA more accessible and inclusive to female students. Some of the key spectrums included raising awareness on the advantage of engagement, passing legislation that is gender sensitive and upgrade of infrastructure. That was supposed to be respected as something that was institutional because it was supposed to bring in a more inclusive environment. There is a need for one of the respondents to convince parents of the academic and vocational benefits of ECA on their part. Another of them said 'I believe we need more female only spaces. Thus, separate sports facilities and club rooms.' In this instance, we would know we were safer, and more included. As for recommendations, one of the very important recommendations was for better transportation. "The activities for the students, we would be able to stay late if there are shuttle services provided."

The participants also stressed the need to sensitize the female students themselves. ‘Many girls do not join ECA’s because they don’t understand how ECA’s can help girls and the school’, one of girls answered. The institution should orient us towards what is to be accessed. The offers would enable QAU to make an environment for female students to accomplish in ECAs more encouraging and fair.

6: Conclusion

This study is conducted to explore the factors that plays part in the participation of ECA’s of female students at Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU), The study delves into motivations and potential barriers to their involvement in ECAs. Furthermore, the study strives to determine the reasons which are as varied according to the each female student experiences in ECAs participation. They said communication, cooperation and leadership, skills are the most important to be developed both on your professional and personal life when it comes to us. But it is also good to have good sense of community belonging, social cohesion, and good relationship with peers. Finally in this discussion, ECAs are considered as a way to relieve stress to students from academic reasons, and as a tool which gives students a method to express themselves creatively as well as obtain a more complete experience at the university. However, the study also pointed out some negative connotations that decreased the level of female students’ involvement in ECAs. Issue number one was the expectations a cultural and social society held. Patriarchal society shows biasness that female should prove their excellence in academics and house hold duties but not in extracurricular activities. Some of the participants stopped participating in ECAs on the basis of having been constrained in ECAs due to family

constraints because of parents and relatives telling them not to do the ECAs. Since females are not safe and immobile, their involvement is restricted by the unavailability of safe transport and late schedule events. It was also found that major challenges were the institutional impediment such as male domination in some communities as well as absence of gender sensitive facilities. However, for most of female students participation in ECAs can be a life changing experience. Additionally, the study was concerned with the part that institutional settings played in students' participation in the ECA. In general, QAU has received praise for being a progressive, welcoming type of environment, but areas for development were also identified. Some demanded the creation of separate delineated areas for female to ensure that a friendlier and safer setup was created. Cultural dynamics was another part of the study which was necessary for the explanation of attitudes and conventional norms that affect females in participation in ECAs. This study also demonstrates how those female students can overcome those obstacles. Most of the participants spoke to their parents to ask for permission and to sell to their family on the academic and professional benefits of ECAs. Additionally, it's the responsibility of universities to have communities and parents in the know about such initiatives that they are in the favor of shifting perceptions that are tied to the cultural basis. Such studies can then be used as a basis for further study and programs that will encourage female students to participate in ECAs.

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