



Check for updates

A Multidimensional Analysis of the "Degree-to-Domesticity" Paradox: Investigating University Students' Perceptions of Socio-Cultural, Domestic, Workplace, and Psychological Determinants of Female Workforce Opt-Out Behavior

Saima Mumtaz¹ Ghulam Muhammad Malik² Ghazanfar Ali³

Article Information [YY-MM-DD]

Received	2026-05-27	Revised	2026-06-26	Accepted	2026-07-16
----------	------------	---------	------------	----------	------------

Citation (APA):

Mumtaz, S., Malik, G, M & Ali, G (2026). A multidimensional analysis of the "degree-to-domesticity" paradox: Investigating university students' perceptions of socio-cultural, domestic, workplace, and psychological determinants of female workforce opt-out behavior. *Social Sciences Spectrum*, 5(3), 242-261. <https://doi.org/10.71085/sss.05.03.579>

Abstract

This study examined perceptions of undergraduate and graduate students regarding predictors of workforce opt-out behavior among female university students at the University of Sargodha, Pakistan. The objectives of the study were to examine students' perceptions regarding the levels and nature of perceived workforce opt-out behaviour among female university students, including socio-cultural determinants, domestic and family determinants, and psychological and personal determinants in predicting perceived workforce opt-out behaviour among female university students. Data were collected from a stratified sample of 300 students across six academic departments of the University of Sargodha, using a 45-item structured questionnaire. Findings indicated a strong inclination toward workforce opt-out choices, heavily driven by community surveillance, threats to family honor, and anticipated unshared domestic labor. Additionally, anticipated workplace challenges, such as gender-based wage gaps and rigid corporate structures, erode professional self-efficacy, transforming external societal pressures into internal career anxiety. The study concluded that increasing female enrollment in higher education did not guarantee labor market participation unless accompanied by corporate policy reforms. It was recommended that universities may establish targeted career counseling and mentorship programs, while policymakers may mandate flexible working hours and safe transportation to better utilize female human capital.

Keywords: Workforce Opt-Out Behavior, Socio-Cultural Determinants, Domestic and Family Determinants, Workplace Determinants, Psychological & Personal Determinants.

¹ MPhil Scholar, Institute of Education, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan.

² Lecturer, Institute of Education, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan.

³ Lecturer, Institute of Education, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Ghulam Muhammad Malik, **Correspondence through:** ghulam.muhammad@uos.edu.pk



Content from this work may be used under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share-Alike 4.0 International License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgment of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.

1. Introduction

Female university students are now operating in a learning environment that equips them for upper-end professional positions; however, the shift of these students from the higher education world to the world of work is fraught with barriers and conflicts. For the past few decades, several programs and efforts have resulted in the exponential increase in the number of females joining higher education institutes; hence, there has been a presumption that Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) should be rising as well. Nevertheless, a contradiction appears in developing countries such as Pakistan, whereby the increase in graduation rates of women does not reflect any economic participation. In fact, many graduates who possess high levels of education choose to opt out of professional life and enter into the phase of domesticity. (Chaudhry et al., 2021)

The socio-cultural and domestic factors are the structural constraints within which a Pakistani woman can make decisions regarding her career choice. As per Social Role Theory and Gender Role Theory, social structures have different behavioral expectations on the basis of gender, with the man as the main breadwinner and woman being the main caregiver. Being the patriarchal society that it is, Pakistan has very strict norms where the female higher education is seen as a means of making oneself more marketable for marriage rather than a means towards financial independence. The cultural constructs of the “glass ceiling,” limited physical mobility, *ghairat*, and extreme social pressure towards prioritizing one’s marital duties over one’s career goals become serious barriers towards career aspirations. (Javaid, 2023).

Apart from external social and family pressure, organizational barriers play a crucial role in increasing people's intention to opt-out of the labor market. As per the principles of Human Capital Theory, investments in education are made to earn economic benefits; however, in the case of women in emerging economies, such organizational dynamics may alter the scenario completely. Women enrolled in universities expect to face many challenges at workplaces, including gender discrimination, gender pay gap, poor public transportation facilities, lack of day care centers, and poor laws regarding mothers' security. Moreover, threats of workplace harassment and lack of flexibility in work timings contribute towards creating a hostile environment for retaining women. This structural mismatch makes the corporate environment almost incompatible with domestic life, which in turn forces them to choose opt-out of the workforce as the best way to ensure personal safety and family bliss (Khattak et al., 2022).

While sociocultural, familial, and organizational barriers create the environment of constraint externally, psychological factors operate as the key cognitive filter through which these challenges are transformed into definite career decisions. Based on the theories of self-efficacy and agency, cognitive evaluation of an individual becomes a critical element in the process of threat perception. In this regard, psychological factors such as career anxiety before employment, low self-efficacy in the occupational sphere, and a lack of agency have become the major predictors of opt-out behavior. Thus, psychological barriers become a necessary cognitive mediator; external sociological and institutional factors decrease the self-efficacy of a student internally first, and this is what leads to opt-out behavior later (Tariq & Saleem, 2024).

2. Literature Review

This gap can be seen through the "degree-to-domesticity paradox," which reflects the significant economic disparity that exists despite the increase in the number of women enrolled in university education both internationally and in South Asia, but does not convert to an equivalent rate of female labor force participation. The educated women often choose to remain out of the economy

after completing their education because of the systemically entrenched obstacles faced by them. (World Bank, 2024; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2025).

This study is theoretically anchored in a multi-dimensional framework that synthesizes Social Role and Gender Role Theory, Work-Family Conflict Theory, and Human Capital Theory (Gary Becker) to explain the cognitive pathways of opt-out intentions among female university students (Becker, 1993; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Jayachandran, 2021; Khalid & Ahmed, 2024).

Sociocultural aspects act as important structural obstacles that determine the movement of females in careers according to the strongly established patriarchal values, honor-based societal codes, and limited public mobility. University female students find themselves under close community scrutiny and honor-based expectations that tend to favor marriage compatibility over career continuity, as well as a scarcity of proper public transportation that limits mobility and access to workspaces. (Anwar et al., 2023; Asim, 2022).

Family structures, marriage duties, and domestic obligations on a local level have a strong influence on the future career decisions of female students. The prospect of having to deal with domestic chores, the complex nature of the joint family system, and the non-supportive institution that does not provide any assistance to working women makes them want to opt out in advance. (Aslam & Tariq, 2024; Mustafa, 2023).

The hostility perceived within the structure of the local organization makes female university students feel reluctant to enter the organized labor market due to elements such as the absence of flexible working hours, lack of childcare services, gender discrimination or the "glass ceiling" during promotion processes, and safety and harassment issues. (Ali & Bukhari, 2025; Zahra et al., 2023).

Individual psychological variables can be considered the last cognitive motivator when all the external socio-cultural, family and work barriers are internalized within an individual, thus directly inhibiting the professional motivation of the student. The continuous presence of structural barriers results in the gradual reduction in career self-efficacy (one's own professional efficacy beliefs), lowering career ambitions and reducing the student's intrinsic motivation for achievement. (Bandura, 1997; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2020; Shah & Khan, 2026).

3. Research Methodology

The study's objective was to undertake research on the perception of university students on workforce opt-out behavior, socio-cultural predictors, domestic and family predictors, workforce and psychological and personal predictors. This section tells us about research design, population and sampling techniques, the instrumentation, the validity and reliability, the data collection techniques, as well as the data analysis techniques.

3.1 Research Design

The study was quantitative research. This design enabled the collection of numerical data from a large sample of female students to explore socio-cultural, domestic/family, workplace and psychological factors, and perceived workforce opt-out behavior.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target group under study was constituted of female undergraduates and graduates from the University of Sargodha, Pakistan. At the first stage, three major faculties (Social Sciences,

Sciences, and Arts & Humanities) were conveniently chosen among the total number of eight faculties of the institution. At the second stage, two accessible departments per faculty were randomly picked. As a result, there were six departments included in the study (Education, Psychology, English, Islamic Studies, Chemistry, and Zoology). At the third stage, non-proportional stratified sampling was used to distribute the surveys among them. Out of 360 questionnaires that were originally distributed, 36 questionnaires were returned uncompleted, while 24 of them contained partially completed or random answers. There were finally 300 filled questionnaires left for further statistical analysis.

3.3 Research Instrument

The instrument consisted of a 45-item structured questionnaire measured on a five-point Likert scale. It comprised five constructs: Perceived Workforce Opt-Out Behaviour (9 items), Socio-Cultural Determinants (9 items), Domestic and Family Determinants (9 items), Workplace Determinants (9 items), and Psychological and Personal Determinants (9 items).

3.4 Validity and Reliability

For the determination of content validity, clarity, and cultural appropriateness, the questionnaires used were reviewed and revised by an expert panel consisting of professionals from the Institute of Education and those specialized in educational research from the University of Sargodha. In accordance with their recommendations, the items were carefully improved and made consistent with the constructs under consideration, such as: Perceived Workforce Opt-Out Behaviour, Socio-Cultural Determinants, Domestic and Family Determinants, Workplace Determinants and Psychological and Personal Determinants. Participants' responses were recorded by means of a well-balanced 5-point Likert scale varying from 'Strongly Disagree' (1) to 'Strongly Agree' (5). Such a measurement approach was useful for quantification of respondents' perceptions and attitudes.

After the validation process, a pilot study was undertaken to determine the internal consistency and clarity of the scales in terms of structural soundness using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient in relation to the reliability criteria ($\text{Alpha} \geq 0.70$) as outlined by Nunnally (1978). In particular, the 9-item scales were highly reliable, where the reliability of WOOB was 0.951, WD was 0.943, and PPD was 0.930. Moreover, the rest of the 9-item scales were found to be very reliable since SCD had a reliability of 0.893 while DFD had 0.889. Overall, the whole 45-item research tool was extremely highly reliable with a total Cronbach's alpha of 0.978.

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection was carried out in February-March 2026 through six departments at the University of Sargodha using a mixed-method strategy including a physical survey and Google Forms. Quantitative data analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) by first conducting the data screening, followed by the measure of scale dependability using Cronbach's Alpha. The descriptive data were analyzed by frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviations.

3.6 Results and Findings

The following were the results and conclusions of the study:

3.6.1 Demographics

This involved the demographic characteristics of the female students through distribution of frequencies and percentages. Central tendencies of primary variables under study were analyzed through their means and standard deviation. Based on the demographic characteristics of the respondents (N=300), there is a perfect distribution in the six academic departments (Education, Psychology, English, Islamic studies, Zoology, and Chemistry), as each department contributes exactly n=50 (16.7%) female students. Based on the residential background, it is worth noting that a majority of the respondents (51%) come from the rural area as compared to the urban areas (49%). The marital status among the respondents shows that a majority of the respondents are not married (79%), while 21% are married. Among the academic characteristics, a majority of the respondents (70%) are currently undertaking undergraduate programs, and 30% have already completed their undergraduate studies and are pursuing their master's. The majority of the students are in the 7th and 8th semesters (70%). When it comes to the socio-economic characteristics, a majority of the students (59.7%) belong to the nuclear family as compared to the joint family or extended family (40.3%). When it comes to parental occupation, a major difference exists since a majority of fathers are involved in professional/white-collar work (35.3%) and blue-collar work (29.3%). Finally, the estimated monthly family income distribution reveals that the highest number of respondents earn between 50,001-100,000 PKR (38.3%) and between 100,001-200,000 PKR (26.7%).

3.6.2 Item-wise Frequency Analysis of Workforce Opt-Out Behavior

The following is the item-wise frequency analysis of workforce opt-out behavior:

Table 1: *Analysis of Students' Responses about Workforce Opt-Out Behaviour*

Sr#	Statements	Disagreement Zone		Total Disagreement	N	Agreement Zone		Total Agreement	Result
		SDA	DA			A	SA		
Current non-participation									
1	I feel that applying for paid jobs is not necessary for me at this stage.	34 11.3%	66 22.0%	100 33.3%	21 7.0%	160 53.3%	19 6.4%	179 59.7%	Agreement
2	I do not see the need to actively search for a paid job at the moment.	17 5.7%	71 23.7%	88 29.4%	17 5.6%	165 55%	30 10%	195 65%	Agreement
3	Currently, I prefer to focus on household responsibilities rather than pursuing a career.	27 9.0%	68 22.6%	95 31.6%	23 7.7%	135 45.0%	47 15.7%	182 60.7%	Agreement
Future Intention to Stay Out									

4.	I do not plan to seek paid employment in the next few years.	22 7.3%	83 27.7%	105 35%	18 6.0%	136 45.3%	41 13.7%	177 59%	Agreement
5.	My long-term plans focus on family and home responsibilities rather than a professional career.	23 7.7	83 29.0%	106 36.7%	20 6.7%	118 39.3%	52 17.3%	170 56.6%	Agreement
6.	Even if opportunities arise, I am likely to choose not to engage in paid employment.	30 10.0%	79 26.3%	109 36.3%	17 5.7%	126 42.0%	48 16.0%	174 58%	Agreement
Acceptance of Domestic Role as Primary									
7.	For me, fulfilling domestic and family roles is more important than having a career.	27 9.0%	68 22.7%	95 31.7%	23 7.7%	135 45.0%	47 15.6%	182 60.6%	Agreement
8.	I feel more fulfilled by my role at home than by paid work.	19 6.3%	61 20.4%	80 26.7%	26 8.7%	139 46.3%	55 18.3%	194 64.6%	Agreement
9.	I believe a woman's most significant contribution is to her family, not the economy.	22 7.3%	53 17.7%	75 25%	26 8.7%	135 45.0%	64 21.3%	199 66.3%	Agreement

In regard to the Current Non-Participation dimension, it can be noticed that the majority of female students agree that the search for or application to paid work is not needed or not active right now. This tendency is shown, for example, in Item 2, where 65% of people agree with this statement and in Item 3, where 60.7% of people now prefer household activities to having a career. when 59% of respondents do not intend to look for a paid job in the next few years (Item 4), and 58% of people will definitely choose domestic life even if they get some paid job opportunity (Item 6). This change in people's perception is also supported by the Acceptance of Domestic Role as Primary dimension, which has the highest structural convergence in the dataset. More specifically, Item 8 states that 64.6% of female students find themselves more satisfied with a domestic career than a paid one, whereas Item 9 contains the highest agreement rate in the whole table, 66.3%, according to which a woman's greatest achievement should be made for the sake of her family and not for the economic prosperity of the country.

3.6.3 Item-wise Frequency Analysis of Socio-Cultural Determinants

The following is the item-wise frequency analysis of socio-cultural determinants:

Table 2: *Analysis of Students' Responses about socio-cultural determinants*

Sr#	Statements	Disagreement Zone		Total Disagreement	N	Agreement Zone		Total Agreement	Result
		SDA	DA			A	SA		
Traditional Gender Norms									
1.	In my social circle, it is generally believed that a woman’s primary place is within the home	19 6.3%	55 18.3%	74 24.6%	28 9.3%	161 53.7%	37 12.4%	198 66.1%	Agreement
2.	Educated women from ‘good families’ are expected not to work outside the home.	17 5.7%	64 21.4%	81 27.1%	22 7.3%	160 53.3%	37 12.3%	197 65.6%	Agreement
3.	Many people think women should not work with men.	10 3.3%	49 16.3%	59 19.3%	29 9.7%	166 55.3%	46 15.0%	212 70.0%	Agreement
Family and Social Pressure									
4.	In my community, women who work outside the home often face negative comments from people.	7 2.3%	45 15.0%	52 17.3%	27 9.0%	160 53.3%	61 20.4%	221 73.7%	Agreement
5.	People in my social circle view women's employment as going against traditional family honor.	10 3.3%	50 16.7%	60 20%	21 7.0%	146 48.7%	73 24.3%	219 73%	Agreement
6.	People commonly believe that a woman's place is primarily at home, regardless of her education.	12 4.0%	43 14.3%	55 18.3%	24 8.0%	157 52.3%	64 21.4%	221 73.7%	Agreement
Cultural Interpretations									
7.	The culture commonly shared in my community emphasize that women should limit interactions with non-related men.	12 4.0%	45 15.0%	57 19.0%	27 9.0%	166 53.3%	50 16.7%	216 70%	Agreement
8.	Observing purdah or modesty norms in my cultural context makes mixed-gender work environments feel inappropriate.	14 4.7%	42 14.0%	56 18.7%	48 16.0%	145 48.3%	51 17.0%	196 65.3%	Agreement

9.	Cultural values in my surroundings prioritize women's protection over participation in public economic activities.	7 2.3%	43 14.3%	50 16.6%	44 14.7%	150 50.0%	56 18.7%	206 68.7%	Agreement
----	--	-----------	-------------	-------------	-------------	--------------	-------------	--------------	-----------

From the Sub-Dimension of Traditional Gender Norms, a large number of respondents understood that women belong to the domestic arena. For example, Item 3 shows that 70% agreed that society expects women to stay away from mixed gender workplaces, and Item 1 shows that 66.1% think that society considers a woman's place as the domestic arena. Both items 4 and 6 indicate that 73.7% of female students believe that working women are criticized heavily in society and that, irrespective of education level, society always holds a domestic role for women, while 73% believed that women's working is against their family tradition (Item 5). In a similar vein, normative containment is evident in the Cultural Interpretations sub-dimension, where 70% of the respondents report that community norms stress little interaction with unrelated males (Item 7), while 68.7% claim that local culture systematically prefers protection over economic activity (Item 9).

3.6.4 Item-wise Frequency Analysis of Domestic and Family Determinants

The following is the item-wise frequency analysis of domestic and family determinants:

Table 3: *Analysis of Students' Responses about domestic and family determinants*

Sr#	Statements	Disagreement Zone		Total Disagreement	N	Agreement Zone		Total Agreement	Result
		SDA	DA			A	SA		
Marriage & Motherhood Expectations									
1.	After marriage, people usually expect the wife to care for the husband’s family first.	9 3.0%	43 14.3%	52 17.3%	28 9.3%	164 54.7%	56 18.7%	220 73.4%	Agreement
2.	Childcare is mainly the mother’s job.	15 5.0%	40 13.3%	55 18.3%	37 12.4%	157 52.3%	51 17.0%	208 69.3%	Agreement
3.	Housework is mostly the woman’s responsibility.	10 3.3%	47 15.7%	57 19%	28 9.3%	161 53.7%	54 18.0%	215 71.7%	Agreement
Lack of Logistical & Emotional Support									
4.	If I worked, my family would not help with household chores.	14 4.7%	69 23.0%	83 27.7%	37 12.3%	134 44.7%	46 15.3%	180 60%	Agreement
5.	My family cannot provide or arrange safe and reliable transportation for me to commute to a workplace.	20 6.7%	79 26.3%	99 33%	31 10.3%	117 39.0%	53 17.7%	170 56.7%	Agreement
6.	My parents or in-laws are opposed to the idea	23 7.7%	68 22.7%	91 30.4%	35 11.7%	123 41.0%	51 17.0%	174 58%	Agreement

	of me being employed outside the home.								
Community Norms Regarding Men's Attitudes									
7.	In my community, most men prefer that their women not engage in paid work outside the home.	16 5.3%	44 14.7%	60 20%	31 10.3%	169 56.3%	40 13.4%	209 69.7%	Agreement
8.	I expect that having a working woman would cause discomfort for a man's social image in my surroundings.	14 4.7%	55 18.3%	69 23%	26 8.7%	155 51.7%	50 16.6%	205 68.3%	Agreement
9.	Around me, men often discourage or oppose their women pursuing careers, even if the women are educated.	13 4.3%	54 18.0%	67 22.3%	29 9.7%	153 51.0%	51 17.0%	204 68%	Agreement

In the dimension of Marriage & Motherhood Expectations, Item 1 depicts the strongest consensus, with 73.4% of the respondents showing agreement that a wife is supposed to look after her husband's family once married, along with the widespread belief that house chores (71.7%) and childcare (69.3%) are gendered tasks. In the dimension of Lack of Logistical & Emotional Support, 60% of the respondents expect lack of assistance from their families if they get employed; 58% have parental/ in-law objections towards outside jobs, and 56.7% talk about logistics of safe transportation to the workplace. Finally, the Community Norms Concerning the Attitude of Men dimension is highly structurally congruent, with 69.7% of survey respondents saying that the majority of local men believe women should not engage in wage employment, 68.3% saying that a working woman makes a man socially vulnerable, and 68% stating that men constantly discourage women from pursuing careers regardless of their level of education.

3.6.5 Item-wise Frequency Analysis of Workplace Determinants

The following is the item-wise frequency analysis of workplace determinants:

Table 4: Analysis of Students' Responses about Workforce Determinants

Sr#	Statements	Disagreement Zone		Total Disagreement	N	Agreement Zone		Total Agreement	Result
		SDA	DA			A	SA		
		Safety & Harassment Concerns							
1.	Commuting to and from work is perceived as unsafe for women.	17 5.7%	50 16.6%	67 22.3%	53 17.7%	145 48.3	35 11.7%	180 60%	Agreement
2.	Workplaces are perceived as having a high risk of harassment for women.	13 4.3%	49 16.3%	62 20.6%	47 15.7%	157 52.3%	34 11.4%	191 63.7%	Agreement
3.	The fear of inappropriate behavior from male	9	36	45	43	178	34	212	Agreement

	colleagues or superiors is a major concern.	3.0%	12.0%	15%	14.4%	59.3%	11.3%	70.6%	
Inflexible Work Arrangements									
4.	Most organizations lack suitable flexible work options for women.	8 2.7%	31 10.3%	39 13%	47 15.7%	157 52.3%	57 19.0%	214 71.3%	Agreement
5.	Workplace policies do not provide adequate leave for family or childcare needs.	11 3.7%	40 13.3%	51 17%	55 18.3%	136 45.3%	58 19.4%	194 64.7%	Agreement
6.	The absence of workplace childcare (creche) facilities is a significant barrier.	6 2.0%	39 13.0%	45 15%	58 19.3%	143 47.7%	54 18.0%	197 65.7%	Agreement
Perceived Gender Discrimination									
7.	Employers are generally biased towards hiring men over equally qualified women.	10 3.3%	34 11.4%	44 14.7%	45 15.0%	165 55.0%	46 15.3%	211 70.3%	Agreement
8.	Women are often not given significant responsibilities or leadership roles at work.	7 2.3%	50 16.7%	57 19%	41 13.6%	152 50.7%	50 16.7%	202 67.4%	Agreement
9.	Gender-based wage gaps are believed to be common and significant.	10 3.4%	27 9.0%	37 12.4%	34 11.3%	172 57.3%	57 19.0%	229 76.3%	Agreement

The issue of fear of sexual harassment at work by male co-workers or managers was one of the most common barriers in the Safety & Harassment Concerns dimension and accounted for 70.6% agreement (Item 3), while workplace harassment (63.7%) and dangers on the way to work (60%) also showed high prevalence rates. In relation to Inflexible Work Arrangements, lack of suitable work flexibility proved to be a key barrier, with 71.3% agreement (Item 4), with a substantial concern about the absence of childcare facilities in the workplace (65.7%) and leave policies for family reasons (64.7%). Finally, in relation to the Perceived Gender Discrimination sub-dimension, some of the highest levels of agreement on the whole table were achieved; 76.3% of the respondents perceive gender discrimination as being frequent and considerable when it comes to salary (Question 9). In addition, an overwhelming proportion agreed that employers favor men in the recruitment process in comparison with women who have similar qualifications (70.3%) and limit women from holding leadership positions (67.4%).

3.6.6 Item-wise Frequency Analysis of Psychological & Personal Determinants

The following is the item-wise frequency analysis of psychological & personal determinants:

Table 5: Analysis of Students' Responses about psychological & personal determinants

Sr#	Statements	Disagreement Zone		Total Disagreement	N	Agreement Zone		Total Agreement	Result
		SDA	DA			A	SA		
Low Self-Efficacy / Confidence									
1.	I lack confidence in my ability to perform well in a competitive professional environment.	26 8.7%	87 29.0%	113 37.7%	18 6.0%	138 46.0%	31 10.3%	169 56.3%	Agreement
2.	I doubt my capability to successfully balance the demands of a job and domestic responsibilities.	13 4.3%	81 27.0%	94 31.3%	27 9.0%	155 51.7%	24 8.0%	179 59.7%	Agreement
3.	The prospect of job interviews and interacting in professional settings makes me anxious.	11 3.7%	49 16.3%	60 20%	35 11.7%	168 56.0%	37 12.3%	205 68.3%	Agreement
Preference for Domestic Life & Balance									
4.	I consciously choose to avoid the stress and pressure associated with paid employment.	17 5.7%	56 18.7%	73 24.4%	27 9.0%	145 48.3%	55 18.3%	200 66.6%	Agreement
5.	I value a peaceful life at home more than a professional career.	21 7.0%	63 21.0%	84 28%	22 7.3%	125 41.7%	69 23.0%	194 64.7%	Agreement
6.	I believe pursuing a career would negatively impact my mental peace and family harmony.	19 6.3%	80 26.7%	99 33%	23 7.7%	122 40.7%	56 18.6%	178 59.3%	Agreement
Low Career Aspiration									
7.	I do not have strong ambitions for a long-term professional career.	17 5.7%	64 21.3%	81 27%	33 11.0%	132 44.0%	54 18.0%	186 62%	Agreement
8.	I pursued my degree more for social or family respect than for career preparation.	15 5.0%	70 23.3%	85 28.3%	24 8.0%	131 43.7%	60 20.0%	191 63.7%	Agreement
9.	I am happy even without clear career goals.	29 9.6%	63 21.0%	92 30.6%	27 9.0%	107 35.7%	74 24.7%	181 60.4%	Agreement

In the case of the sub-dimension of Low Self-Efficacy / Confidence, there is a remarkable percentage of 68.3 respondents expressing their concern over job interviews and professional meetings (Item 3). Also, there is a large percentage of respondents doubting their ability to manage the work-life balance (59.7%) and lack confidence in performing in a professional competition environment (56.3%). Coming to the sub-dimension of Preference for Domestic Life & Balance, 66.6% of respondents agree that they consciously try to avoid corporate stress (Item 4), as strongly supported by 64.7% of respondents valuing peace at home over career and 59.3% of respondents fearing disturbance to mental peace and family harmony with career. Moreover, the Low Career Aspiration sub-dimension reflects a significant change in attitude; 63.7% of the form participants agreed that they enrolled in higher learning institutions more for social and family prestige rather than career preparation (Item 8). Additionally, 62% do not have career aspirations in the long run, while 60.4% are happy without having any career aspirations at all.

3.6.7 Descriptive Statistics of Workforce Opt-Out Behaviour

The following are the descriptive statistics of workforce opt-out behavior:

Table 6: *Descriptive Statistics of workforce opt-out behavior*

Statement(s)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking	Interpretation
I believe a woman's most significant contribution is to her family, not the economy.	300	3.553	1.213	1st	Moderately High
I feel more fulfilled by my role at home than by paid work	300	3.500	1.186	2nd	Moderately High
I do not see the need to actively search for a paid job at the moment.	300	3.400	1.121	3rd	Moderately High
Currently, I prefer to focus on household responsibilities rather than pursuing a career.	300	3.390	1.141	4th	Moderately High
For me, fulfilling domestic and family roles is more important than having a career.	300	3.356	1.241	5th	Moderately High
I do not plan to seek paid employment in the next few years.	300	3.303	1.217	6th	Moderately High
My long-term plans focus on family and home responsibilities rather than a professional career.	300	3.296	1.265	7th	Moderately High
Even if opportunities arise, I am likely to choose not to engage in paid employment.	300	3.276	1.285	8th	Moderately High
I feel that applying for paid jobs is not necessary for me at this stage.	300	3.213	1.191	9th	Moderately High

Descriptive statistics on Perceived Workforce Opt-Out Behavior reveal a consistent trend, as all nine statements fall under the "Moderately High" category of interpretations (N = 300). The structural hierarchy reveals that beliefs that are fundamental and value-based exert the greatest influence on the respondents; the statement "I believe a woman's most important contribution is to her family and not the economy" earned 1st place with the highest mean value (M = 3.553, SD = 1.213), with the second place being occupied by the search for personal satisfaction through domestic life rather than paid employment (M = 3.500, SD = 1.186). Immediate behavior choices and intentions are placed in the intermediate level of the hierarchy, including choosing family obligations to the detriment of career (4th place, M = 3.390) and having no long-term plans

regarding profession (7th place, $M = 3.296$). Practical reasons for delaying are found in the lowest level of the index, starting with the feeling that the application for paid jobs is not needed right now (9th place, $M = 3.213$, $SD = 1.191$). It can be seen that the stable standard deviation values of all the questions (varying between 1.121 and 1.285) show that there is a common perception shared by all the female university students, thus proving that ideological belief in domestic responsibilities is the first catalyst.

3.6.8 Descriptive Statistics of Socio-Cultural Determinants

The following are the descriptive statistics of socio-cultural determinants:

Table 7: *Descriptive Statistics of socio-cultural determinants*

Statement(s)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking	Interpretation
In my community, women who work outside the home often face negative comments from people.	300	3.743	1.020	1st	Moderately High
People in my social circle view women's employment as going against traditional family honor.	300	3.740	1.102	2nd	Moderately High
People commonly believe that a woman's place is primarily at home, regardless of her education	300	3.726	1.075	3rd	Moderately High
Cultural values in my surroundings prioritize women's protection over participation in public economic activities.	300	3.683	1.009	4th	Moderately High
The culture commonly shared in my community emphasize that women should limit interactions with non-related men.	300	3.656	1.049	5th	Moderately High
Many people think women should not work with men.	300	3.630	1.034	6th	Moderately High
Observing purdah or modesty norms in my cultural context makes mixed-gender work environments feel inappropriate.	300	3.590	1.070	7th	Moderately High
In my social circle, it is generally believed that a woman's primary place is within the home	300	3.473	1.116	8th	Moderately High
Educated women from 'good families' are expected not to work outside the home.	300	3.453	1.124	9th	Moderately High

Description of the socio-cultural determinants (SCD) variable presents a consistently positive consensus where mean values of all the nine variables are clearly in the "Moderately High" category interpretation ($N = 300$). The ranking order shows that community monitoring is the highest intensity of external pressures while the structural view of family reputation is the second one; the phrase "In my community, women who work outside the home receive negative remarks from people" obtained the 1st rank ($M = 3.743$, $SD = 1.020$) while violation of family tradition as a result of women's employment was the 2nd rank ($M = 3.740$, $SD = 1.102$). Medium-level systemic forces include protective and interaction structures like local culture that emphasizes more on the protection of women than their economic engagement in public places (4th rank, $M = 3.683$) and restrictions related to mixed-sex settings (6th rank, $M = 3.630$). In contrast, entrenched

domestic stereotypes form the lower end of this scale, where the particular stereotype holding that educated females from “good families” must not engage in paid work ranks ninth on this scale ($M = 3.453$, $SD = 1.124$). The closeness of the standard deviation values, which range from 1.009 to 1.124, further underscores the homogeneity of the perceptions held by the respondents, proving that fear of societal criticism and direct threats to the family’s reputation form the most potent socio-cultural inhibitors to the employment of female graduates.

3.6.9 Descriptive Statistics of Domestic and Family Determinants

The following are the descriptive statistics of domestic and family determinants:

Table 8: *Descriptive Statistics of domestic and family determinants*

Statement(s)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking	Interpretation
After marriage, people usually expect the wife to care for the husband’s family first.	300	3.716	1.023	1st	Moderately High
Housework is mostly the woman’s responsibility.	300	3.673	1.047	2nd	Moderately High
Childcare is mainly the mother’s job.	300	3.630	1.069	3rd	Moderately High
Around me, men often discourage or oppose their women pursuing careers, even if the women are educated.	300	3.583	1.098	4th	Moderately High
In my community, most men prefer that their women not engage in paid work outside the home.	300	3.576	1.062	5th	Moderately High
I expect that having a working woman would cause discomfort for a man's social image in my surroundings.	300	3.573	1.108	6th	Moderately High
If I worked, my family would not help with household chores.	300	3.430	1.138	7th	Moderately High
My parents or in-laws are opposed to the idea of me being employed outside the home.	300	3.370	1.221	8th	Moderately High
My family cannot provide or arrange safe and reliable transportation for me to commute to a workplace.	300	3.346	1.229	9th	Moderately High

From the descriptive statistics on the DFD, there is a clear hierarchy, with all nine factors belonging to the “Moderately High” category of interpretation ($N = 300$). As per the rank order, the imposition of marital roles is seen to be the greatest force of oppression among female university students. To be specific, the role of being expected to take care of one’s husband’s family after marriage came first (Rank 1st; Mean= 3.716, $SD = 1.023$), while the traditional perception that housework should be carried out by women ranked second (Rank 2nd; Mean = 3.673) and child care should be done by mothers (Rank 3rd; Mean = 3.630). Among the moderate institutional constraints is the patriarchal attitude in communities, where men are opposed to careers for educated women (Rank 4th; Mean = 3.583) and are afraid of the impact a career woman could have on a man’s reputation (Rank 6th; Mean = 3.573). Alternatively, immediate logistical or personal obstacles exist at the lowest end of the spectrum, with the absence of dependable family-assured transport facilities being at the 9th position ($M=3.346$, $SD=1.229$).

3.6.10 Descriptive Statistics of Workplace Determinants

The following are the descriptive statistics for workplace determinants:

Table 9: *Descriptive Statistics of Workforce Determinants*

Statement(s)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking	Interpretation
Gender-based wage gaps are believed to be common and significant.	300	3.796	.961	1st	Moderately High
Most organizations lack suitable flexible work options for women.	300	3.746	.969	2nd	Moderately High
Employers are generally biased towards hiring men over equally qualified women.	300	3.676	.977	3rd	Moderately High
Women are often not given significant responsibilities or leadership roles at work.	300	3.676	.977	3rd	Moderately High
The absence of workplace childcare (creche) facilities is a significant barrier.	300	3.666	.982	4th	Moderately High
The fear of inappropriate behavior from male colleagues or superiors is a major concern.	300	3.640	.938	5th	Moderately High
Workplace policies do not provide adequate leave for family or childcare needs.	300	3.633	1.053	6th	Moderately High
Workplaces are perceived as having a high risk of harassment for women.	300	3.500	1.032	7th	Moderately High
Commuting to and from work is perceived as unsafe for women.	300	3.436	1.075	8th	Moderately High

Descriptive statistics concerning Workplace Determinants (WD) reveal a hierarchical order of the institutional obstacles, where all nine items belong to the "Moderately High" category (N = 300). The ranking reveals that financial inequality and organizational flexibility are the two biggest issues faced by women in universities. First of all, the fact that gender wage differences exist was ranked first (M = 3.796, SD = .961), while the structural problem of the lack of flexible workplaces in organizations took the 2nd place (M = 3.746). At the same time, the issue of biases is ranked third (M = 3.676), which means that people agree that companies prefer to hire men and exclude women from managerial positions. On the other hand, the unavailability of on-site childcare and the threat of sexual misconduct from male colleagues find their place in the middle ranks (4th and 5th rank). On the contrary, the question of personal security takes the last position in the hierarchy, with unsafe transportation conditions ranked at the 9th rank (M = 3.436, SD = 1.075).

3.6.11 Descriptive Statistics of Psychological & Personal Determinants

The following are the descriptive statistics of psychological & personal determinants:

Table 10: *Descriptive Statistics of psychological & personal determinants*

Statement(s)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking	Interpretation
The prospect of job interviews and interacting in professional settings makes me anxious	300	3.570	1.020	1st	Moderately High
I consciously choose to avoid the stress and pressure associated with paid employment.	300	3.550	1.154	2nd	Moderately High
I value a peaceful life at home more than a professional career	300	3.526	1.246	3rd	Moderately High
I pursued my degree more for social or family respect than for career preparation.	300	3.503	1.192	4 th	Moderately High
I do not have strong ambitions for a long-term professional career.	300	3.473	1.174	5 th	Moderately High
I am happy even without clear career goals.	300	3.446	1.321	6 th	Moderately High
I believe pursuing a career would negatively impact my mental peace and family harmony.	300	3.386	1.236	7 th	Moderately High
I doubt my capability to successfully balance the demands of a job and domestic responsibilities	300	3.320	1.086	8 th	Moderately High
I lack confidence in my ability to perform well in a competitive professional environment.	300	3.203	1.213	9 th	Moderately High

The descriptive statistics for the psychological and personal determinants (PPD) reveal a very well-defined pattern of internalization as all nine parameters fit into the "Moderately High" range of interpretation (N = 300). The ranking hierarchy shows that the two most important internal obstacles for female university students are immediate evaluation anxiety and stress aversion. In particular, job interviews and interaction in professional settings caused the highest level of anxiety and ranked first (M = 3.570, SD = 1.020), and an active decision to stay away from work-related stress ranked second (M = 3.550). The mid-ranking items include both cultural and directional orientations as the students acknowledge that they have obtained their degrees in order to receive respect in society (rank 4, M = 3.503) and are quite happy with the absence of clear career goals (rank 6, M = 3.446). Direct self-efficacy deficiencies are found in the lowest range of the scale and lack of confidence in professional competition ranks last (rank 9, M = 3.203, SD = 1.213).

3.7 Discussion

The descriptive findings show how patriarchy, community oversight, and strong gender norms dictate the socio-cultural environment of the respondents. The top two factors as rated by the respondents include the threat that female work represents to their family pride, and the fear of negative community reaction. This finding is very consistent with the Social Role Theory, which suggests that society creates gender-segregated public and private spheres, imposing heavy social sanctions for women crossing these boundaries. (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020; Jayachandran, 2021).

Moreover, it is evident from the data that university education fails to break down conventional thought; the majority of the sample believes that “educated women from good families are expected to remain outside the workforce.” It is a trend seen in today’s socio-economic scenario

of Pakistan, where families maintain their status through the “domesticity” of women and their strong sense of modesty, resulting in an “income effect” that negates the power of their education. (Klasen & Pieters, 2018).

In the context of the family unit, the prevailing norms of work allocation continue to be very stringent. A huge percentage of the learners agreed that a wife traditionally has a cultural obligation to prioritize the welfare of her husband’s relatives, while majority of them admitted that housework belongs solely to a woman. Using Work Family Conflict Theory, the described values reveal that the students expect high levels of conflict between household obligations and career expectations, forcing them to favor the home front. (Miller & Hayward, 2021).

In terms of economics, the descriptive portraits challenge the conventional Human Capital Theory by arguing that education is largely taken up as an investment strategy for earning high returns from the labor market (Aslam & Kingdon, 2020). Rather, there is a notable shift in the motivation behind pursuing education, as majority of the respondents cited that their motivation for pursuing a college degree was social prestige, family respect, and/or improved marriage prospects, and not for job training. This shift breaks the relationship between human capital acquisition and employment, thereby accounting for the lack of growth in the participation of women in the labor force due to increased education levels. (World Bank, 2023).

3.8 Conclusion

In sum, perceived withdrawal from the labor force is a strong and very common practice for female university students. Under the influence of female domesticity through generations and absence of professional career role models in their immediate environment, most female university graduates consciously prefer to stay outside of the formal labor force in order to become homemakers.

The socio-cultural and domestic contexts act as a constant, powerful and external factor forcing educated women to avoid a professional career path. Continuous social control, fear of gossip and association of family honor with female domesticity imply a very high social cost for women in case they try to join the mixed-sex environment.

Moreover, the structural workplace barriers such as wage disparity, rigid policies, safety issues, and lack of childcare infrastructure do not work alone. Rather, they set off the process of psychological erosion. Women students internalize the structural barriers of organizations, which results in professional anxiety and makes them doubt their ability to juggle their careers and family responsibilities. In essence, the internalization of such structural barriers makes them perceive the physical barriers as a preference to live stress-free at home. Thus, the process of female college graduates joining the workforce is basically a difficult psychological process where low career self-efficacy and professional aspirations play the last decisive role.

3.9 Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings and formal conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are offered to help bridge the gap between higher education and labor market participation for women:

- Institutions of higher learning, such as the University of Sargodha, must move beyond merely imparting technical academic knowledge. Universities should implement mandatory career counseling modules, mock interviews, and confidence-building workshops. To directly mitigate the high levels of professional anxiety (68.3%) identified in this study, these interventions should specifically target final-year undergraduate and graduate students.

- Universities should actively collaborate with accomplished professional women, corporate leaders, and female entrepreneurs to establish formal mentorship frameworks. Given that 80% of the respondents do not have a working mother as a role model within their households, providing access to visible, successful career professionals will bridge a critical structural guidance gap.
- Flexible policies that assist women in juggling work and home responsibilities should be implemented by the corporate sector. Legislators ought to grant tax breaks to businesses that provide flexible scheduling, on-site childcare facilities, and hybrid work arrangements. The expected work-family conflict that causes many educated women to drop out can be reduced by addressing these factors.

3.10 Suggestions for Future Researchers

The following suggestions for future researchers are offered to help bridge the gap between higher education and labor market participation for women:

- Mixed-methods approaches, which combine surveys with qualitative deep-interview designs, should be used by future researchers. This will enable a more thorough investigation of the complex familial pressures that students experience, especially in joint and extended family arrangements.
- In order to evaluate several regional universities in various Pakistani regions, future research needs to broaden its geographic focus. This would make it easier to ascertain if the high rate of opt-out intents observed at the University of Sargodha is consistent across the country or if it changes according to regional subcultures.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

References

- Chaudhry, I. S., Paweenawat, S. W., & Farooq, F. (2021). The paradox of female labor force participation in Pakistan: The role of higher education and socio-cultural barriers. *International Journal of Social Economics*, 48(12), 1713–1732. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSE-04-2021-0241>
- Javaid, N. (2023). Negotiating the "marriage market" and career aspirations: The lived experiences of educated young women in urban Pakistan. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 30(4), 1254–1272. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12965>
- Khattak, J., Khan, M. A., & Amin, A. (2022). Institutional barriers to female human capital utilization: Examining public transit safety and workplace hostility for female graduates in Pakistan. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 92, 102591. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2022.102591>
- Tariq, S., & Saleem, S. (2024). From external barriers to internal anxiety: Modeling the cognitive mediation of occupational self-efficacy among prospective female graduates. *Journal of Career Development*, 51(2), 189–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08948453231211048>
- Ali, S., & Bukhari, S. H. (2025). Corporate glass ceilings and workplace hostility: Anticipated workplace determinants of career withdrawal among female graduates. *Journal of Business and Organizational Studies*, 13(1), 45–58.
- Anwar, M., Khan, A., & Ahmad, R. (2023). Socio-cultural barriers and public mobility: Examining career intentions of female university students in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 43(2), 112–126.
- Asim, M. (2022). Patriarchal norms, community surveillance, and female labor force participation in South Asia. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 29(4), 1201–1218.
- Aslam, N., & Tariq, S. (2024). Navigating the joint family system and marital expectations: Domestic determinants of the degree-to-domesticity paradox. *South Asian Journal of Gender Studies*, 8(1), 19–34.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W. H. Freeman and Company.
- Becker, G. S. (1993). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education* (3rd ed.). The University of Chicago Press.
- Eagly, A. H., & Wood, W. (2012). Social role theory. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology* (pp. 458–476). SAGE Publications.
- Greenhaus, J. H., & Beutell, N. J. (1985). Sources of conflict between work and family roles. *Academy of Management Review*, 10(1), 76–88.
- International Labour Organization. (2025). *World employment and social outlook: Trends for women 2025*. ILO Employment Reports.
- Khalid, A., & Ahmed, Z. (2024). Theoretical perspectives on female career opt-out intentions in higher education institutions. *Educational Review of Pakistan*, 19(2), 89–104.

- Mustafa, G. (2023). Family support and female career choices: An empirical investigation into post-graduation domestic choices. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 44(3), 411–425.
- Schoon, I., & Lyons-Amos, M. (2020). Shifting aspirations: Agency and structure in shaping female career trajectories. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 119, Article 103414.
- Shah, T., & Khan, M. I. (2026). Career self-efficacy as a psychological mediator of workforce opt-out behavior among female university students. *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research*, 41(1), 67–83.
- World Bank. (2024). *Pakistan development update: Maximizing female labor force participation*. World Bank Group.
- Zahra, F., Fatima, N., & Hassan, S. (2023). Perceptions of structural unsupportiveness in organizational environments among future female work entrants. *International Journal of Gender and Management*, 15(2), 134–149. voluntary psychological preference for domesticity.
- Aslam, M., & Kingdon, G. G. (2020). Human capital investment and labor market returns in Pakistan: A gendered perspective. *Journal of Development Studies*, 56(4), 712–731.
- Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2020). From expectancy-value theory to situated expectancy-value theory: A developmental, social, and psychological perspective on motivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 61, Article 101859. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101859>
- Jayachandran, S. (2021). Social norms as a barrier to women's employment in developing countries. *IMF Economic Review*, 69(3), 576–595. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41302-021-00242-4>
- Klasen, S., & Pieters, J. (2018). What explains the stagnation of female labor force participation in urban India/Pakistan? The role of asset growth, income effects, and social norms. *World Development*, 105, 145–158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.01.003>
- Miller, S., & Hayward, K. (2021). Navigating the professional and the domestic: Work-family conflict among educated women in South Asia. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(5), 1845–1863.
- World Bank. (2023). *Pakistan development update: Restoring fiscal sustainability* (Special Focus: Women's economic empowerment and labor force participation). World Bank Group. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/40125>