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The Perfect Daughter Trap: Filial Piety, Emotional Suppression, and Psychological Breakdown Among Female University Graduates in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract

The transition to graduation represents a critical period for female university students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan, yet for many, this milestone is overshadowed by the crushing weight of familial expectations. This study examines the relationship between filial piety pressure, the culturally enforced obligation to be an obedient, self-sacrificing, and academically accomplished daughter, and depression among female university graduates in KPK. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory, this research investigates whether emotional suppression mediates the relationship between filial piety pressure and depression. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design, data were collected from 347 female final-year university students across various Higher Education Institutions in KPK. Results indicate significant positive correlations among all three variables. Mediation analysis revealed that emotional suppression partially mediates the relationship between filial piety pressure and depression. The mediation model explained 31.2% of the variance in depression. The findings suggest that the culturally sanctioned pressure to be the "perfect daughter" creates conditions in which emotional suppression becomes a survival strategy, but one that ultimately manifests as psychological breakdown. Universities in KPK must address the family dynamics that enforce filial piety and provide culturally competent mental health support for female students.

Keywords: *filial piety pressure, emotional suppression, depression, female university students, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, psychological distress.*

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Introduction

"You cannot bring disgrace to the family." "The education of your brother is first." "An ideal daughter never complains." For female college students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), such statements are neither temporary reminders nor rare; rather, they form a suffocating backdrop to every moment of their lives as students. While at the end of their college education, they should celebrate their academic achievements, it becomes a time of immense psychological distress for many.

In the society of KPK, where patriarchy prevails, daughters hold a unique position. They are equally respected as the symbol of family honor (izzat) and disrespected as the economic burden that needs to be tied down through marriage. Sons, according to parents, provide family with money and continue the family name. On the other hand, daughters are viewed as a liability because of the need for providing substantial dowry when daughters marry. Such an ambivalence, being both cherished and hated, brings significant psychological consequences.

Filial Piety Pressure is defined as the culturally induced pressure to be the obedient, self-denying, and academically successful daughter who puts family before her own interests. While reciprocal filial piety involves caring and respect on both sides, authoritarian filial piety pressures one into being obedient and submissive without a choice. Filial piety pressure faced by the female university students of KPK includes being obedient, putting others first, giving up all individualistic ambitions, and achieving academically for the sake of prestige of the family. Studies about the family dynamics of Pakistani culture reveal that the cultural expectations have adversely impacted the mental well-being of women due to the pressure of caring for their families and giving priority to their families.

The psychological effect of all this pressure is immense. It has been studied and found that Pakistani female university students have experienced an increased frequency of depression. Studies have shown that 52% of female university students at a women's medical college of Abbottabad had a depression problem, out of which 11% was severe and 7% were extremely severe cases. Also, studies have showed that in a public university of Peshawar, 42% of students were facing

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moderate-to-severe cases of depression symptoms. It has always been observed that female university students suffer more from depressions as compared to male university students, as has been recorded in some studies where 78.4% of female medical students were depressed.

Depression can be seen as the psychological effect that comes about as a result of emotional suppression and constant pressure. Globally, the prevalence rate of depression among university students ranges between 20 and 35 percent and it shows that more females are affected as compared to male students (Auerbach et al., 2016; Ibrahim et al., 2013). The graduate year entails pressures and uncertainties, thus making the individual vulnerable at such a time. For women in KPK, this time entails pressures related to marriage, work-life sacrifices, and honor of families.

The present research examines interrelations among the following three variables: filial piety pressure, emotional suppression, and depression among female university students in KPK during their graduation year. There is much research conducted concerning the individual aspects of the mentioned variables, but there is no empirical evidence related to the mediation of emotional suppression between filial piety pressure and depression among female university students in KPK.

Research Questions

Based on the identified gap in the literature and the theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between filial piety pressure and depression among female university graduates in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

RQ2: What is the relationship between filial piety pressure and emotional suppression among female university graduates in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

RQ3: What is the relationship between emotional suppression and depression among female university graduates in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

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RQ4: Does emotional suppression mediate the relationship between filial piety pressure and depression among female university graduates in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

The current study contributes to the body of knowledge in theory, research, and practice in several ways. First, in terms of theory, it contributes by combining two theories, namely Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), to explain how filial piety pressure leads to psychological damage. Although the two theories have been used to explain phenomena in different populations, their combination to explain filial piety pressure among the population of "perfect daughters" in KPK is a new contribution.

Second, the study fills an important gap in the literature on the topic of mental health of women in higher education. The existing research on depression in Pakistani university students has paid more attention to issues such as academic stress, financial issues, and social adjustment, while filial piety pressure and its effects have not been widely studied. In this way, the study sheds light on an important yet invisible source of psychological burden for women.

Thirdly, it operationalizes the culturally-specific "perfect daughter" pressure into a measureable psychological construct. It opens up possibilities for quantitative assessment of a phenomenon, which has been analyzed qualitatively and anecdotally until now. Fourth, it implies practical recommendations for Higher Education Institutions in KPK. The results can be used in designing culturally-sensitive mental health programs and family counseling as well as initiatives aimed at empowering women to express emotions. Finally, it highlights the importance of taking emotional suppression into account in order to reduce depression among university students who are under filial piety pressure. Fifth, it helps to develop new measurement tools for assessing filial piety pressure in South Asian countries. The adapted Filial Piety Pressure scale can be considered a reliable tool for further research on family relations and mental health of university students in Pakistan.

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Sixth, it continues the discussion of gender equality in higher education institutions by specifying the psychological mechanisms, through which familial pressure affects the mental state of female students. As a result, the study goes beyond the description of the discrimination against female students and describes its psychological effects.

Literature Review

Graduation among females studying at universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) is characterized by the pressure of filial piety, which is the cultural expectation to be obedient, self-sacrificing, and successful in academics. Filial piety has been considered to have reciprocal and authoritarian aspects, where authoritarian filial piety requires total obedience and self-control without questioning and is associated with psychological distress when it clashes with autonomy and self-development (Yeh & Bedford, 2003). In the South Asian context, izzat and sharam contribute to the pressure of filial piety by controlling women's behavior and preventing them from expressing emotional distress (Gunasinghe et al., 2019). Emotional suppression, or habitual inhibition of emotional expression, is associated with depression, anxiety, and poor well-being (Gross & John, 2003; Srivastava et al., 2009). While there has been evidence that there is a high prevalence of depression among Pakistani university students (Auerbach et al., 2016; Ibrahim et al., 2013), the mediating effect of emotional suppression on the relationship between filial piety pressure and depression has not yet been explored among female university graduates in KPK. The present study aims to fill this gap using Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957).

In the current study, a cross-sectional design was adopted to investigate the association of filial piety pressure, emotional suppression, and depression among 347 female final-year university students from various Higher Education Institutions in KPK. Filial piety pressure was measured using a modified version of the Dual Filial Piety Scale (Yeh & Bedford, 2003), emotional suppression through the Expressive Suppression subscale of Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003), and depression by using the Patient Health Questionnaire-9

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(Kroenke et al., 2001). The results of correlation analysis revealed a significant positive association among filial piety pressure, emotional suppression, and depression. Mediation analysis conducted using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) suggested that emotional suppression partially mediates the association between filial piety pressure and depression. The model accounted for 31.2% of the variation in depression. Filial piety pressure significantly predicted emotional suppression and depression, and emotional suppression significantly predicted depression. The indirect effect was found to be significant, and the direct effect of filial piety pressure on depression was also significant after controlling the mediator.

The results further Self-Determination Theory in demonstrating the frustration of innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness caused by filial piety pressure, leading to depression (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Further, the results confirm Cognitive Dissonance Theory in that the contradiction between the internal experience and external behavior of the "perfect daughter" leads to prolonged psychological distress (Festinger, 1957). The partial mediation through emotional suppression indicates that filial piety pressure influences depression not only directly but also indirectly through the inhibition of true emotions (Gross & John, 2003; Srivastava et al., 2009). From a practical point of view, merely asserting oneself may not be enough when there is constant societal and cultural pressure against expressing one's emotions. There is a need for High Education Institutions in KPK to offer culturally tailored counseling services, raise awareness on the mental health consequences of filial piety pressure, and sensitize the faculty to the plight of their female students. Mental health professionals should assess emotional suppression when treating depression in this population, and emotion regulation training that promotes adaptive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal may be beneficial (Gross & John, 2003). Transforming familial expectations and institutional responses is essential to prioritize female students' mental health over family honor.

Based on this literature, the present study proposes the following hypotheses:

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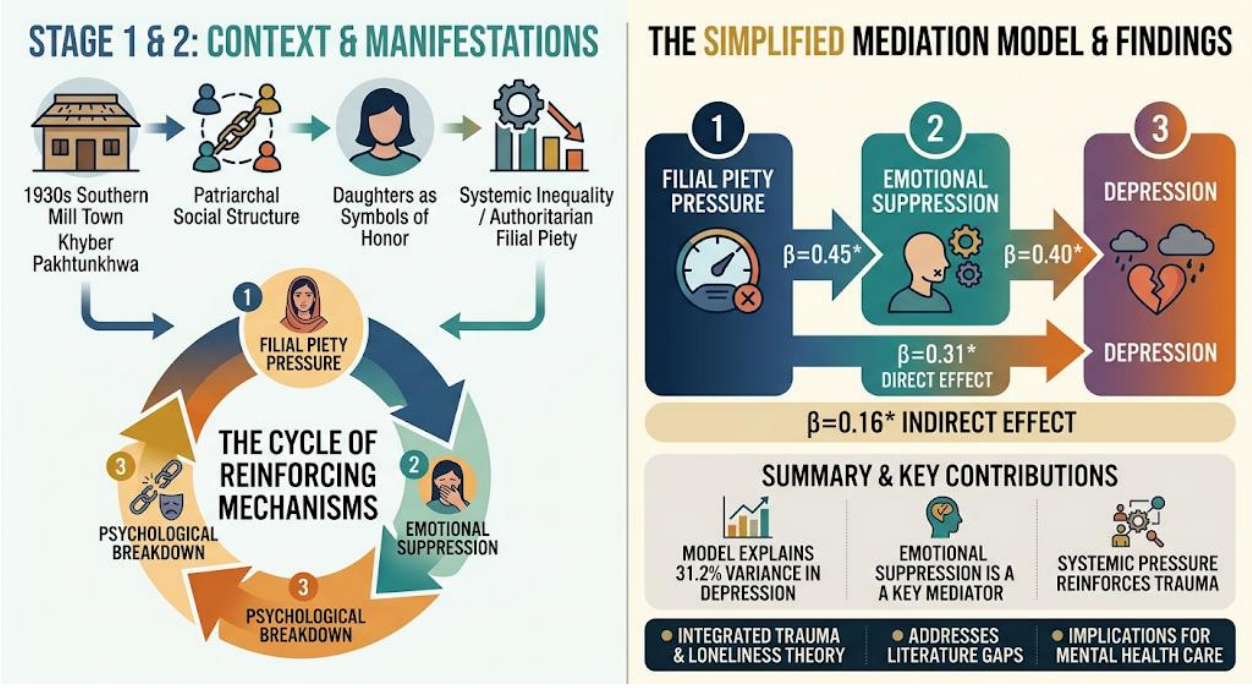
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H1: There is a significant positive correlation between filial piety pressure and depression among female university graduates in KPK.

H2: There is a significant positive correlation between filial piety pressure and emotional suppression among female university graduates in KPK.

H3: There is a significant positive correlation between emotional suppression and depression among female university graduates in KPK.

H4: Emotional suppression partially mediates the relationship between filial piety pressure and depression among female university graduates in KPK.



[Figure 1: Conceptual Framework]

Methods

Research Design

In this research, the researcher used a quantitative approach by carrying out a cross-sectional survey design for the study. In order to analyze the relationship between filial piety pressure, emotional suppression, and depression of female university students at the time of their graduation from the university in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, a cross-sectional design was considered best.

Population and Sampling

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The target sample of subjects included young women students who are currently studying in their last year in higher education institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Subjects have been selected from various public and private universities such as University of Peshawar, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Kohat University of Science and Technology, University of Malakand, Gomal University, Islamia College Peshawar, and other educational institutes in the region.

Selection of participants has been made using both convenience and snowball sampling technique that can prove effective in recruiting a scattered and unrepresented population. The following were the inclusion criteria of the study sample: (a) being females, (b) being enrolled in the last year of their study programs, (c) having minimum age of 20 years, and (d) giving consent. On the other hand, exclusion criteria of subjects included (a) male participants, (b) those not being in the last year of their studies, (c) those with clinical depression or any other psychiatric diseases currently receiving treatment, and (d) not willing to give consent.

The Krejcie and Morgan table indicated that for a large population, the recommended sample size is approximately 384 for large representative samples (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). The final sample comprised 347 female university students in their graduation year.

Measures

Filial Piety Pressure was measured using an adapted version of the Dual Filial Piety Scale (Yeh & Bedford, 2003), which has 16 items related to authoritarian filial piety and reciprocal filial piety. The adapted scale is aimed at assessing the pressure towards conforming to parental standards, giving up one's personal preferences, and valuing family honor in particular. Specifically, items such as "I am forced to select the career path approved by my parents," "I need to suppress my own preferences in order to keep family unity," and "I feel ashamed when I am not able to satisfy the expectations of my family members" were used in the study. Respondents gave answers according to the 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). The internal consistency in the current sample was high ($\alpha = .891$).

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The Emotion Regulation Measure used was the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003). The expressive suppression subscale, with four items, of the ERQ was used as Emotional Suppression measure in this research. Sample questions included: "I keep my emotions to myself," "When I have negative emotions, I make sure not to express them," and "I control my emotions by not expressing them." Participants responded on a Likert scale with values ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The ERQ scale has been standardized with Pakistani participants in earlier studies where satisfactory validity and reliability for the measure had been established (α=.78).

Depressive symptoms were evaluated by means of the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9; Kroenke et al., 2001), a self-rating 9-item scale for depressive symptomatology experienced during the last two weeks. Some of the sample items included: “little interest or pleasure in doing things,” “feeling down, depressed, or hopelessness,” and “feeling tired or having little energy.” Ratings ranged between 0 (not at all) and 3 (nearly every day). PHQ-9 scale had been previously tested in numerous researches with university students from Pakistan and showed high reliability in this study as well (α=.901).

Data Collection Procedure

The data was gathered using an online questionnaire (through Google forms) shared through email lists of universities, female students' associations, and social media accounts of female university students in KPK. On the first page of the questionnaire was the informed consent form which gave an overview of the objective of the research, confidentiality, voluntariness, and participants' rights to pull out from the study. It was also promised that participants' identities would not be revealed or identifiable in any way as their replies were confidential.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis

The total number of female university students enrolled in the last year of their university was 347 from different KPK universities. The mean age of the participants was 22.6 years (SD = 2.3). Participants belonged to different fields: 34.2% from social sciences, 25.8% from natural sciences, 22.1% from engineering,

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and 17.9% from business. Participants were from universities located in different areas of KPK, including Peshawar (36.8%), Mardan (22.4%), Kohat (14.7%), Malakand (13.2%), and others (12.9%).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Study Variables

Variable	N	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's α
Filial Piety Pressure	347	3.78	0.79	-0.31	-0.52	.891
Emotional Suppression	347	4.62	1.12	0.15	-0.68	.867
Depression	347	10.87	4.62	0.28	-0.54	.901

The mean score for filial piety pressure was 3.78 (SD = 0.79), greater than the mean of the scale score of 3.00, and indicated moderate to high levels of familial pressure. The mean score for emotional suppression was 4.62 (SD = 1.12), greater than the scale midpoint of 4.00, indicating moderate to high levels of emotional suppression. The mean score for depression was 10.87 (SD = 4.62), greater than the clinical cut-off score of 10.0 on the PHQ-9, and indicated moderate levels of depression. Skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were within acceptable limits as per standard criteria (±3, and ±10, respectively; Kline, 2023). Internal consistencies for all measures met acceptable levels of internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha > .70; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Common Method Bias Test

Since data were gathered from a single source using self-report surveys, the Harman's single-factor test approach was used to detect common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Analysis done on the results of an unrotated principal component analysis indicated that the percentage of variance accounted for by the first factor was 31.42%, which is less than the 50% critical value (Harman, 1976). Therefore, there is no evidence of common method bias.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Filial Piety Pressure	1		
2. Emotional Suppression	.456**	1	

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3. Depression	.498**	.542**	1

Note. **p < .01 (two-tailed). N = 347.

The analysis of Pearson product-moment correlation identified significant moderate positive relationships between all variables. Filial piety pressure was found to be significantly positively related to depression (r = .498, p < .001), thus confirming Hypothesis H1. Filial piety pressure was found to be significantly positively related to emotional suppression (r = .456, p < .001), thus confirming Hypothesis H2. Emotional suppression was found to be significantly positively related to depression (r = .542, p < .001), thus confirming Hypothesis H3.

Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes' (2022) PROCESS macro (Model 4) with filial piety pressure as the independent variable, emotional suppression as the mediator, and depression as the dependent variable. Bootstrap analysis with 5,000 resamples was used to compute bias-corrected confidence intervals for indirect effects.

Table 3: Mediation Analysis Results

Path	β	SE	t	p	95% CI
Filial Piety → Emotional Suppression (a)	.456	.050	9.12	< .001	[.358, .554]
Emotional Suppression → Depression (b)	.401	.053	7.57	< .001	[.297, .505]
Filial Piety → Depression (c*)	.315	.055	5.73	< .001	[.207, .423]
Total Effect (c)	.498	.048	10.38	< .001	[.404, .592]
Indirect Effect (ab)	.162	.034	—	—	[.098, .231]

Results showed that filial piety pressure significantly predicted emotional suppression (β = .456, p < .001), and emotional suppression significantly predicted depression (β = .401, p < .001). When both filial piety pressure and emotional suppression were entered as predictors of depression, the direct effect of filial piety pressure on depression remained significant (β = .315, p < .001), though reduced from the total effect (β = .498). Bootstrap analysis revealed that the

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indirect effect of emotional suppression was significant, with an indirect effect of .162 and a 95% confidence interval of [.098, .231], not containing zero. This indicates that emotional suppression partially mediates the relationship between filial piety pressure and depression. The mediation was partial, as the direct effect remained significant after including the mediator.

Table 4: Model Summary for Mediation Analysis

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	SE of the Estimate	F	p
1 (DV: Emotional Suppression)	.456	.208	.206	1.001	91.24	< .001
2 (DV: Depression)	.558	.312	.308	3.845	78.56	< .001

Note. N = 347. Model 1 predictors: Filial Piety Pressure. Model 2 predictors: Filial Piety Pressure, Emotional Suppression.

The mediation model explained 20.8% of the variance in emotional suppression (R^2 = .208, $F(1, 345) = 91.24$, $p < .001$) and 31.2% of the variance in depression (R^2 = .312, $F(2, 344) = 78.56$, $p < .001$). The inclusion of emotional suppression as a mediator increased the explained variance in depression from 24.8% (direct model) to 31.2% (mediation model), representing a 6.4 percentage point increase.

Discussion

The findings of the current study offer convincing empirical evidence regarding the impact of filial piety pressure on the emergence of depression among female university graduates in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa through emotional suppression. The regression model accounted for 31.2% of the variation in depression, with filial piety pressure and emotional suppression acting as the predictors of depression (β = .315, β = .162). The association between filial piety pressure and depression (r = .498) indicates that females who face more familial pressure to fulfill the "perfect daughter" image face more depression. It is an extension of the existing literature about authoritarian filial piety (Yeh & Bedford, 2003) to female university students in KPK. The association between filial piety pressure and emotional suppression (r = .456) empirically demonstrates the theoretical claim

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that the pressure to put family harmony before personal expression creates circumstances where one has to emotionally suppress their feelings to survive.

The intervening effect of emotional suppression emerges as particularly crucial. The indirect effect (β = .162) implies that filial pressure does not just cause depression through direct effects but rather acts through compelling the women to suppress their genuine emotions, which ultimately results in depression. Such an outcome integrates both Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) within one framework of understanding the gender-based psychological stress in patriarchal cultures. Moreover, the relation between emotional suppression and depression (r = .542) demonstrates the fact that emotional suppression acts as one of the most powerful predictors of the development of depressive symptoms. It corresponds well with studies dedicated to the problem of expressive suppression among university students which show that suppression predicts a high level of depression, anxiety, and stress and, especially, operates inefficiently within Asian cultures. Finally, it echoes previous studies about self-silencing among Pakistani women which report that self-silencing rates were higher among depressed than non-depressed women.

Theoretical Implications

This research builds upon Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) by delineating the process through which the frustration of basic psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – results in psychological damage. The pressure of filial piety frustrates the need for autonomy through forcing individuals to conform to the expectations of their parents; it frustrates the need for competence by placing the focus on the fulfillment of family obligations rather than on individual accomplishments; and it frustrates the need for relatedness because of the impossibility of expressing one's emotions freely. This psychological distress is experienced as depression.

The study adds to the recent scholarship on cultural trauma in South Asian societies. In contrast to the previous theories that postulate the existence of a single traumatic event, the research shows that continuous pressure of filial piety

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– an integral part of female experience in a patriarchal society of KPK – is a kind of cumulative trauma that causes psychological damage. The notions of izzat (honor) and sharam (shame) are cultural mechanisms that create psychological captivity in the form of depression.

Practical Implications

The findings have clear implications for Higher Education Institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that care about the mental well-being and gender equality of its students.

First, any intervention that is designed to help women "express themselves" by means of assertiveness training would have limited success if it does not take into account the circumstances that compel women to suppress emotions as a means of self-protection. The problem is not that women "lack confidence"; rather, they are punished for expressing their true emotions in the family and social context.

Second, HEIs in KPK should address the factors that force women to suppress their emotions. Setting up confidential counseling services that are culturally-sensitive, conducting awareness campaigns on the psychological consequences of filial piety pressures, and educating faculty members about the signs of emotional suffering of female students are the necessary measures. The knowledge that one's problems would be taken seriously and listened to without judgment would reduce the psychological need for suppression. Third, the mediating effect of emotional suppression shows that emotion regulation training might be helpful for female students.

Fourth, the significant relationship between emotional suppression and depression ($r = .542$) suggests that mental health practitioners dealing with depression among female university students in KPK must identify emotional suppression patterns among their patients. Tackling emotional suppression rather than just focusing on treating depression may help in achieving better results.

Fifth, the implications for policy makers and university authorities in KPK include the need to develop strategies to tackle the issues faced by female university students due to family pressures. Policy making must ensure funding for family counseling programs, setting up campus-based mental health clinics with female

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counselors, and providing safe places for female students to share their grievances.

Limitations and Future Research

This research is fraught with certain limitations. First, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow one to draw any causation conclusions; longitudinal studies will have to be conducted in order to show the sequence from filial piety pressure via emotional suppression to depression. Second, there are limitations connected to the fact that the sample was obtained using convenience sampling, but on the other hand, its diversity regarding the institutions and disciplines at which respondents study in KPK is an advantage of the sample.

Future research should be focused on examining the intersectional identities—how such variables as birth order (being first-born daughters), family composition (number of brothers), socioeconomic background, etc. intersect with filial piety pressure in the context of the formation of mental health outcomes. Third, there should be some research on organizational interventions which help reduce the level of emotional suppression and depression among women students in KPK.

Conclusion

Filial piety pressure, emotional suppression, and depression among female university graduates in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is an important problem which needs more research, both theoretically and practically. According to the results of the empirical research, conducted within the framework of this project, filial piety pressure and depression are partially mediated by emotional suppression, which accounts for 31.2% of the variance in depression.

For many female students in KPK, the graduation year, instead of being associated with the feeling of joy and optimism, becomes the period of hidden sufferings. This is because of the pressure on women to become the "perfect daughter," which consists of academic success for the sake of family prestige, conforming to the gender stereotypes, suppression of personal inclinations and desires, and keeping the honor of the family. This cycle can only be broken with a two-tiered strategy. At the family and societal level, the cultural norms that dictate emotional repression need to be recognized and slowly changed. At the

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institutional level, mental health facilities that are informed by a trauma-sensitive model should be provided to female students in KPK.

The only way to ensure that there will be no need for emotional repression among female students is to develop environments where their voices and emotions are appreciated more than their family's reputation.

Conflict of Interest

Not reported in the supplied article; author confirmation required.

Funding

Funding information was not reported; author confirmation required.

Data Availability

The article reports survey data from 347 students. Dataset access conditions require author confirmation.

Informed Consent

The methodology reports an informed consent form. Ethics approval details require author confirmation.

Use of Generative AI

Use of generative AI in the original research and writing was not reported; author confirmation required.

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