


# Agency in Transit:
# Social Negotiations of Pakistani Women in International Higher Education

**Faryal Ashfaq**

**MSc. in Education**

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It's the people who love us or hate us—or both—who hold together the thousands of fragments we are made of.
- Elena Ferrante

## Abstract

This study is an exploration of the agencies afforded to Pakistani women who receive international postgraduate higher education. It examines (a) the influence of various social relations on their agency and (b) evaluations of surrounding processes and ultimate outcomes of agentive decisions. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews are conducted with ten globally-situated Pakistani women who completed postgraduate and graduate outside of Pakistan up to six years ago. The work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Saba Mahmood is drawn to contextualise the complex nuances of localised agency of Pakistani women which transcends liberal feminist and Western notions. The research - by examining women's navigations through higher education - uniquely contributes to scholarship surrounding their agency by presenting a process-over-outcome conceptualization that expands traditional/universalised understandings. In doing so, it shows us how little we know about the diversity of women's agency and the pathways through which they conceptualise their power. This work thus highlights the need for deeper engagement with women's lived experiences surrounding agentive decision-making processes.


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## List of Abbreviations

EFA - education for all
EUP - excellent university of Pakistan (pseudonym)
JD - Juris Doctor
JDP - Joint Degree Program
OOSC - out of school children
PAR - participatory action research

## Chapter 1: Introduction

As a young Pakistani woman growing up, movement in certain local spaces, unaccompanied by family, was something I could not fathom. However, the idea of pursuing higher education abroad still seemed less outlandish. It didn't make sense; most of our parents would be hesitant to let us drive ourselves to school, take an Uber to the mall, or even walk in the park alone. Travelling to another city - let alone a country - for recreational activities was also met with strong disapproval. Despite this inaccessibility to our own locality for my friends and I, the allure of university campuses located thousands of miles away from home appeared more attainable. Indeed, for some of us, our parents actively encouraged the pursuit of international higher education, even as they limited our freedom to move around locally.

Though I grew up in this paradox, it remained a legitimate aspiration to taste independence and explore the world. Having remained in the safety net of visiting places in the presence of guardians - from the grocery store to other countries - somehow, I was able to make it alone to Oxford for my postgraduate education at merely 22. As I stepped into the UK for the first time, I quickly realised the relatively increased liberty I had over my choices - be it clothing, travelling, or otherwise - with my family placing their full trust in my abilities. But with this elevated sense of control came an overwhelming sense of belonging to my own culture. I started to love who I was a bit more every day - regardless of my location.

This bubble burst quickly when I attended an award ceremony in London celebrating global trailblazing women changemakers and a fellow listee commented, “Wow, I did not think there would be a Pakistani woman here, and with such good English!” Experiencing this, only then I truly realised the gravity of this conundrum and decided to academically investigate it. This remark had significantly reduced me to a single story, with no agency of my own, defined by my peer’s limited understanding of Pakistan - a ‘deprived’ country. This blindness to others’ agency often comes from a narrow understanding of agency itself, where it is “equivalent to perfect freedom of choice or to the absence of coercion” (Lucas, 2016). It is a tendency of seeing people as “choosers or losers” as opposed to “consistently beset *both* by the capacity to act and a number of factors that compromise this capacity” (Hutchings, 2013, p. 14). Failing to realise that I could be someone like her, despite benign intentions, is

also an exercise of power that fosters an unequal narrative (Lucas, 2016). Each one of us faces and advances this misrecognition, necessitating a nuanced comprehension of agency.

In this endeavour, my study centres around the lives of women such as myself, who have had the privilege of studying outside of Pakistan independently. They are one of the few in the country who had the means to materialise this dream financially and/or with the knowledge of the competitive admissions and scholarships processes. They have all completed these postgraduate degrees abroad and are now either continuing to live as immigrants in their new society, or have returned to their own. In their international experience, their decision-making power and positionality take different forms. To explore this, I converse with them through semi-structured interviews, discussing their aspirations, lived realities, and academic trajectories.

In doing so, I will argue that the educational journeys of these Pakistani women have not only afforded them ‘nomadic’ identities through spatial mobility, but also complex forms of agency. While they exercise significantly greater decision-making power in their new cultural contexts, they do not abandon their past lives, and often forge deeper connections with home - as the research will demonstrate (Stromquist, 2015; Zafar, 2019). Such agentive expressions present a challenge to the traditional understanding of agency as commonly defined through the liberal feminist canon. Developing a literature review with contributions of Global South scholars - where it is understood not only as a geographical region but also a metaphor for vulnerable populations across the world (Santos, 2016) - agency will be contextualised to the case of these Pakistani women who studied abroad. Situated at this juncture, my study examines how social influences produce nuanced embodiments of agency among these individuals.

Following this introduction, the next chapter details the literature surrounding the notion of agency. After that, the methodology chapter describes and rationalises the research design and process. The fourth chapter highlights key findings and analysis, finally leading to the conclusion chapter that provides a discussion and implications pertaining to the results, as well as recommendations for future research.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## 2.1. Contextualising Pakistani Women

Pakistan is a South Asian state founded on 14th August 1947 as a Muslim majority (World Population Review, 2023) marking the end of the British Empire in the Indian subcontinent (Talbot, 1999). It is home to over 116 million women that form 49.5% of the total population (Knoema, 2023). The country exemplifies a collectivist cultural orientation (Evason, 2016) emphasising interdependent human relations (Adamopoulos, 2004). This translates to fulfilling goals of a group, such as the Biradari (brotherhood) system (Chaudhry et al., 2014), based on birth or entry requirements, which sometimes limits autonomous decisions (Zaidi, 2014). This collectivist fabric co-exists with patriarchal underpinnings. Ranking second to last on the 2022 Global Gender Gap Index, Pakistan faces severe gender disparities (UNDP, 2023), where traditional values reinforce gender roles based on sex distinctions (Zaman et al., 2006). The widely held concept of *Chaador aur Chaar Diwari* (veil and four walls) restricts women to the private sphere, limiting their public participation and decision-making power (Syed, 2021; Rabbani, 2008).

Within this cultural backdrop, much like others across the world, Pakistani women aspiring towards independence face challenges in different spheres when expected to be subordinate to men (Hausmann et al., 2009). They represent only a quarter of the workforce which is majorly due to gender disparities within the education system (World Bank, 2022). Many never receive the chance to education as they form 60% of all out out-of-school-children (OOSC), estimating around 13 million girls (UNICEF, 2023; Kamal, 2022). Among those that do, very few reach higher education as their enrollment rates plummet much faster relative to those of boys as they advance through the levels (PAGE, 2017; Trading Economics, 2023-a).

The experiences of the very narrow pool of women enrolled in universities are not devoid of challenges. Their institutions' options within Pakistan are usually limited on account of distance and travel due to family concerns surrounding women's mobility and safety, with objections towards campus accommodation (World Bank, 2007; UNESCO, 2010; Ali et al., 2015). Their choice of field is also curtailed; among households that enable

women's higher education, families usually favour high-value, technological disciplines that promise prestige and advancement (Shaukat & Pell, 2015). Those who pursue other disciplines then report facing greater discrimination and socio-cultural challenges (Shaukat & Pell, 2015). Alongside studies, these women juggle intense marriage pressures (Critelli, 2012; Hussain, 2016; Malik et al., 2022) as well as disproportionate household responsibilities that skyrocket with marriage and most institutions do not offer flexibility with these domestic situations (Ahmad, 2022).

The aforementioned experiences are commonly shared by many Pakistani women, but it is crucial to recognize that their individual realities can still vary significantly. Some families view educating daughters as a religious duty and investment in a better society, where they would make good mothers and wives (Chaudhry & Rahman, 2009; Adeel 2010; Ali et al., 2011) Others see it - especially co-educational settings - as a serious threat to religion that also reduces their marriage prospects (Shah & Shah, 2012; Mehmood et al., 2018). In some instances, these two opposing views come together: women's education is not only seen as fostering their empowerment, personal development and employment opportunities, but also accelerating appreciation for and connection towards their religion through such worldly awareness (Ali et al., 2015; Hussain et al., 2003). Furthermore, how much support they receive also depends on families' educational status and wealth, yet it does not always increase with higher levels of both (Ashraf, 2019). In these ways, their trajectories do not follow homogenous patterns and that complicates our understanding of it.

Some of these Pakistani women pursue postgraduate studies abroad after completing their undergraduate education locally (Trading Economics, 2023-b), and the UK serves as a popular destination for this endeavour (UKCISA, 2019). It must be acknowledged that these women who go to study abroad exercise a dual form of privilege. Firstly, they possess the necessary resources and various forms of capital that enable them to embark on educational journeys abroad. Secondly, they benefit from a social environment that creates a conducive space for them to pursue their aspirations of studying abroad. Despite their privilege, it should be noted how their experiences unfold as they immerse within new societies while stemming from constraints imposed by those contexts.

At the very first step, Pakistani applicants are racially discriminated against in the admissions process, receiving fewer Russell Group universities' offers despite demonstrating similar academic competence as white applicants (Modood, 2006; Boliver, 2015). Those that do make it are stereotyped with the "popular public and political construction of Muslim women as 'pathological victims' of their culture, … [and] the 'oppressed other' in need of 'saving' … to 'uplift' [them] out of [their] plight" (Mirza & Metoo, 2018, pp.2, 19). Consequently, Pakistani women are then problematically positioned as either 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' that solidifies narrow, binary conceptualizations of their autonomy (Ghaffar & Stevenson, 2018, p.11).

While certain aspects of Pakistani society curtail women's movement when within the geographical bounds and international contexts offer greater mobility, the situation is not neatly black and white. Sadia et al., eloquently describe this assimilation process in the new place, "Transition exposes [them] to diverse and opposing cultural realities, which offers a space of opportunity for agency, to merge different discourses and create new ways of being as they self-author … their identities (and sometimes hybrid identities) in practice" (2022, p.40). In this way, the women exemplify hybridity where they "produc[e] new forms of identity as a resolution to a contradiction between two juxtaposed identities. In . . . hybridisation, . . . the "old" forms are not lost, they are simultaneously retained and destroyed in the new form" (Solomon et al., 2015, p.8). In doing so, they "negotiate and bargain their positionality in subtle ways without disrupting the status quo that could otherwise jeopardise their physical safety and social reputation (honour)" in Pakistan (Ahmed, 2020, p.545). These ideas thus deconstruct the stereotypes formed around their trajectories and power, placing them in the greys that exist amidst the binaries.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, I consider how the pursuit of education abroad opens up avenues for Pakistani women to access previously unexplored realms of independence and decision-making authority, while they remain grounded in the social fabric that shapes their lives. It is at this critical juncture where my study is positioned, aiming to illuminate the intricate process and significance of this experience for these women, afforded through international mobility.

The next few sections delve into the existing literature on agency, a pivotal concept directly relevant to this topic, as understood through different feminist standpoints, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

## 2.2. Early Understandings of Agency

Agency is closely related to autonomy. Early liberal definitions of autonomy see it as an individual possessing self-identity and moral authenticity that determine her own tastes, opinions, ideals, goals, values, and preferences, with recognition of social influences that minimally shape her (Christman, 1989). Diana Meyers adds a feminist lens to this, contending that this understanding excludes the 'traditional woman' who 'chooses' a selfless role owing to gendered socialisation, yet still possesses partial autonomy (1989, pp.625-625). Despite her criticism, her reinterpretation too has liberal feminist underpinnings, neglecting deeper insights about the character of women, the "breadth, complexity of contingency" of the socialisation process and the power relations within which it operates (Abrams, 1999, p.817). She also fails to address how this produces inequalities, who it serves, and how it differently affects groups of women, thus sustaining an individualised conception of the term and lacking sufficient stress on social contexts (Abrams, 1999). Such focus on one's powers to act freely is characteristic of liberal theories (Benson, 1990). Contemporary feminist theorists find them inadequate to fully comprehend social and psychological oppressions and instead argue for a reorientation towards their "unfreedom" and agentive power as well as relational concepts of autonomy, agency, and the self (Benson, 1990, p.48; Benhabib, 1999; MacKenzie & Stojlar, 2000; Brison, 2002; Nedeslky, 2012). This necessitates an acknowledgement of social relationships that one is "inescapably *constituted by and through* … at all stages" of her life (Lucas, 2016, p.15).

Even as feminist ideas enable a movement from the self-centred concept of autonomy to the more socially-embedded one of agency, it does not neatly remove all caveats. For example, liberal feminist ideas typically focus on individualised transformations of agency while acknowledging collective action, and receive criticism due to the limited explanations of the modalities of women's struggle, which do not fit non-Western contexts (McNay, 2000; Zerilli, 2005, Mahmood, 2005; Hemmings & Kabesh, 2013). These demonstrate the experiences of a prototype of women who are often "able-bodied, upper-middle class, well

educated, cis-gender, heterosexual white women who conform to generally agreed upon standards of beauty" (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p.8). They also restrict emphasis to outcomes of agency (Chang et al., 2020). Even when there is increasing discourse on the acceptance and contextualization of women's desires, it predominantly motivates women who fit the aforementioned illustration with regards to their consumption, careers, and/or entrepreneurial efforts (McIntyre, 2021), leaving out a complex understanding of those who do not fit that ideal. This sustained dichotomous lens of seeing women as "choosers or losers", consequently invisibilizes the agentive capacity of all other women (Hutchings, 2013, p. 14; Lucas, 2016).

In the context of Pakistani women acquiring higher education abroad, these notions would understand their agency as using their international travel experience to pursue their personal goals, emancipating themselves from the local challenges that curtail their freedom, and staying in the new culture as it would offer greater freedom. If they end up returning after this endeavour or stay in touch with their roots since it can constrain them, it would be regarded as a failed attempt towards empowerment and agency. However, such a trajectory appears oversimplified as it does not account for the sociocultural diversity of non-Western contexts. Thus, forcing a binary view of agentive action where one either breaks the system to emerge conventionally independent, or continues to endure the challenges within their culture would invisibilize these women.

Scholars that engage with the Global South complicate aforementioned simplistic and snapshot explanations of agency (Abu Lughod, 1991, 2002; Mohanty, 1984, 2003; Mahmood, 2005). In this regard, the work of Abu Lughod (a Palestinian-American anthropologist), Mahmood (a Pakistani-American anthropologist) and Mohanty (an Indian-American sociologist) offer a more profound lens to analyse the diverse experiences of women such as those focused on in this study by (a) challenging the unsophisticated portrayal of women that engage with education in the Global North, and (b) emphasising the intricacies of social contexts within which women operate, to offer more inclusive analyses of agency.

Drawing on this scholarship in the next two subsections of the literature review, the work by Abu Lughod, Mahmood and Mohanty will be put in conversation with each other. The first two focus on gender, Islam and the Middle East, whereas the third one is more

geared towards issues of globalisation and gender from a transnational perspective. All three scholars situate their scholarship within postcolonial contexts in the Global South, adopt feminist perspectives in their analyses while recognizing intersectional experiences, question dominant ideologies, decenter Western-centric perspectives, and engage in ethnographic research. This would then lay a strong theoretical foundation when seeking to understand the complex experiences of Pakistani women in international higher education abroad, who thus take on not only nomadic identities but also agentive identities.

### 2.3. Challenging the 'Western' Gaze on Women's Agency

Various theorists call for a nuanced exploration of women's experiences that challenges the false dichotomy of women being either liberated or subordinated (Mahmood, 2005; Hoyt, 2007; Bauman, 2008; Bilge, 2010). One of them is Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who provides a useful illumination of the context of women who do not conform to the prototype that Yuval-Davis lays out. She posits that 'colonisation' - subjugation from economic and political hierarchies to the appropriation of women of colour's experiences by hegemonic white women's movements - produces a cultural discourse of the 'Third World' (1984). This extends to the concept of the 'Third World Woman', a "singular, monolithic subject in some Western feminist texts", while Mohanty acknowledges that the "West" itself is not assumed to be a monolith (1984). She argues that assuming 'women' as a constituted, coherent category with identical interests implies a universal and cross-cultural notion of gender/sex differences and patriarchy (Mohanty, 1984). This, coupled with a homogenous idea of women's oppression, produces the image of the average Third World Woman, who lives a life based on (a) her feminine gender i.e., sexually constrained, and (b) being from the third world i.e., "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimised, etc." (1984, p.65). Gayatri Spivak's critical essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak* - more relevant to the South Asian context - shows how these dichotomies foster a savior narrative where the "brown woman must be saved from the brown man" (2003, p.296). This strongly contrasts the implicit self-representation of Western women, privileging them as the norm (Mohanty, 1984). The binary extends to women from the Global South in international contexts (Charrad, 2010), and results in narrow perceptions of their agency that is either present or absent (Hutchings, 2013; Lucas, 2016).

Similarly, Lila Abu-Lughod also warns about the dangers of such polarizations that often place feminism on the side of the West, comparing the circumstances of American and Afghan women. She critiques cultural relativism as a tool to impost Western values on non-Western societies, which pushes an artificial divide, “recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burqas”, ignoring complex entanglements in which everyone is implicated (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p.784). These binaries also perpetuate a salvation narrative where the former save the latter, which is deeply hierarchical, patronising and arrogant (Abu-Lughod, 1991, 2002). It results in loss of personal identity for the ‘inferior’, exemplified through the ban on the hijab in French schools, which she considers a form of cultural imperialism undermining women’s agency and choices (2002, p.785). Abu Lughod therefore demonstrates the tendency of Western scholars and feminists to view non-Western cultures in an essentialist light as monolithic and inherently oppressive to women, failing to recognize the complex forms of agency within these societies (1991).

Saba Mahmood is another prominent scholar who studies the experiences of Muslim women within the context of Islamic revival in Egypt, offering compelling critiques of Western assumptions surrounding the discourse on agency. In her book "Politics of Piety," Saba Mahmood challenges the universal applicability of Western models of empowerment by presenting the experiences of Egyptian women who do not conform to conventional Western feminist notions of emancipation (2005). For example, define agency only through acts of resistance “favours a classical liberal notion of freedom” that does not apply to women residing outside a Western context, and “feminist scholars who find gender-traditional religions unpalatable” conveniently depict resisting women as agentic (Qtd. in Burke, 2012, p.6). Sometimes, agentive action also comes in the form of silence, which Western notions of agency tend to dismiss (Hutchings, 2009; Parpart, 2009, 2019; Khalid, 2022). In this way, women who do comply with gender-traditional religions such as those in her research, Mahmood argues, are automatically excluded from being agentive actors (2005). Thus, she highlights the limitations of Western frameworks in capturing the complexity of agency and empowerment within different cultural and religious contexts, by signifying their navigation within social bounds, that the subsequent section further elaborates upon.

## 2.4. Contextually Specific Nature of Women's Agency

The aforementioned criticisms of certain Global North assumptions of agency call for an urgent recognition of and are exemplified through the diversity of experiences and action of women from non-Western contexts.

Firstly, continuing Mahmood's contributions, she contends in her book how agency is beyond simply individual choice and autonomy, being deeply entangled within social structures, cultural norms and religious forces (2005). For her, it is the "capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood, 2001, p.202). She presents examples of the lived realities of Egyptian women for whom empowerment within the Islamic Revival movement is deeply rooted in religious teachings and local traditions (Mahmood, 2005). Their piety and religious engagement is expressed through decisions to wear the veil, active engagement in mosques to shape communal decisions and influence religious discourse, as well as involvement in religious activism to gain respect within the community in the case of one woman (Mahmood, 2005). All these conscious practices within their religious context are reflective of the complexity of their agency within their settings that transcend narrow understandings of resistance and religion, and demonstrate how faith and piety can provide spaces of empowerment and self-determination for women (Mahmood, 2005). Through her analysis, Mahmood thus advocates for a culturally sensitive and nuanced approach to conceptualising empowerment, situated within a range of sociocultural and religious factors.

Secondly, Abu-Lughod too emphasises the importance of cultural contexts in producing various forms of agency within religious frameworks by exploring women's lives in Muslim-majority societies. She uses the example of the veil in the Moroccan context: while it may be seen as an act of resistance against Western cultural imperialism, others see it as a form of religious expression and empowerment (Abu-Lughod, 1991, 2002). This illustrates how even within non-Western societies, several diverse expressions of agency exist that call for nuanced understandings of empowerment (Abu-Lughod, 1991, 2002). Grassroots organisations in Egypt as Abu Lughod notes - cognizant of this plurality - seek to improve their conditions without compromising their cultural and religious identities (2002). Thus, as agency manifests in various forms, understanding and offering support for women's

empowerment needs to be contextually informed, with deep consideration of social, cultural, economic and historical factors.

Thirdly, Mohanty too, advances for feminist solidarity grounded in local knowledge and respecting diverse women's agency and experiences, embedded within broader social landscapes. She coined the concept of "local feminisms" that offers alternative models for understanding non-Western women's struggles and aspirations, emerging from their unique contexts (Mohanty, 2003). She emphasises intersecting social identities such as race, class, and nationality produce diverse lived realities of non-Western women that produce complex forms of agency (Mohanty, 2003). In doing so, Mohanty rejects universalizing struggles and victim narratives, calling for recognition of the heterogeneity of women's experiences (2003).

Therefore, these perspectives reflect how agency can take multiple forms across different domains and settings, from "bargaining and negotiation to subversion and resistance" with no singular expression (Kabeer, 1999, p.436; Donald et al., 2017; Rao et al., 2020; Qureshi & Abid, 2022). In the context of the present study, I explore how Pakistani women receiving higher education abroad too then navigate their journey through diverse embodiments of agency based on their unique experiences and social influences.

### 2.5. Research Questions

The research questions thus stem from the review of the literature above and are described as follows.

Key Research Question:
How do Pakistani women who received higher education abroad (out of Pakistan) experience their agency?

Sub-Research Questions:

1. How do social contexts influence practices of agency of Pakistani women who receive higher education abroad?
2. How do women evaluate the outcomes that follow and processes that surround agentive decisions in the context of international higher education?

These questions are embedded in an analytically sequential design where the second sub-question follows from the first to offer an added layer of insights that are informed by the initial findings addressing sub-question one.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## 3.1. Philosophical overview

My epistemological paradigm aligns with constructionism, emphasising the role of the environment i.e., culture, context, and ongoing interactions among individuals in constructing meaning and understanding (Main, 2023). Simultaneously, I prescribe to a feminist theoretical perspective, examining women's interests and experiences located within social spheres (Crossman, 2020). The branches of feminism that resonate with me and my research are (a) intersectional feminism - focussing on overlapping oppressions that create distinct experiences for women with multiple identity categories (Crenshaw, 1991), and (b) decolonial and Southern feminism - re-centring Global South practices and discourses within the global knowledge economy (Byrne & Imma, 2019).

These viewpoints inevitably colour the lens through which I engage in my research and also allow me to stay true to my commitments towards my participants that are as follows. I accept their narratives of agency without questioning if their actions were truly agentive. This prevents a preconceived notion of agency and values the legitimacy of their experiences, as well as prevents slipping into fetishization of damage-centred accounts of women from geopolitical regions like Pakistan. Furthermore, by valuing their unique insights, no universal accounts of agency are intended to be created, as it runs counter to the aim of highlighting its variability. Finally, given my philosophical underpinnings, I point to the multivocality of the data i.e., they may be interpreted in a multitude of ways dissimilar to my analysis.

## 3.2. Research Design

The research seeks comprehensive insights into participants' life experiences. This involves uncovering their stories of growth, schooling, higher education, personal and professional motivations, and the impact of a collectivist society on their lives, including expectations to conform to gender norms. Since these are subjective narratives of each woman that could be personal, one-to-one conversations that provide a safe space to talk

openly and deeply about them would be beneficial. Thus, a qualitative approach would enable leveraging detailed examples to understand their agency within a broader context.

Qualitative research focuses on understanding, explaining, exploring, discovering, and clarifying the experiences and perceptions of a particular group of people (Kumar, 2011). It allows for unpacking participants' experiences, behaviours, and the meanings they ascribe to them (Tenny, 2022; Sutton & Austin, 2015). Accordingly, I seek in-depth insights into participants' nuanced narratives to generate contextually grounded findings reflecting their agency. This qualitative approach contributes meaningfully to a better understanding of the topic, even without universal application. Regarding researcher bias, it is inevitable but can be addressed through reflexivity and transparency in data generation, analysis, and presentation (Galdas, 2017; Polit & Beck, 2014). This will be further discussed in the *Research Integrity and Ethics* sub-section towards the end of this chapter.

### 3.3. Research Methods

While three key research methods were initially planned to offer greater choice to participants' preferred methods of contributing to the research, all women chose semi-structured interviews. Thus, single-contact interviews with ten participants were conducted, ranging from 63-150 minutes, averaging 77 minutes (with 9 consented recordings) varying based on participants' interest and availability. I ensured to have a free schedule after a designated slot in case the participants had more to share, which was beneficial in almost all cases.

The use of semi-structured interviews enabled having a guiding set of questions that provided a foundational base to explore the research objectives at hand, while also providing the space to pivot and go in depth where participants demonstrated greater interest (See interview guide as Appendix 1). This offered both dependability through the initial structure of themes in the interview guide as well as credibility and confirmability through the open space for participants to elaborate and clarify responses (Johnson et al., 2020). In the context of examining how social factors influence Pakistani women's behaviour without assuming that their responses would be homogenous, semi-structured interviews further ensured that the details and differences could be accounted for richly (Knott et al., 2022).

The interviews were conducted both in-person and online. During the data gathering process, I travelled to Lahore, Pakistan, where I spoke face-to-face with some participants who were present in the city at the time. The decision to choose Lahore was driven by practical considerations, primarily the fact that my family resides there. This arrangement offered logistical and financial advantages, as it allowed me to stay with them throughout the duration of my engagement with the respondents. Furthermore, it also provided a network of support and a sense of familiarity, which proved invaluable during the research process. While three participants were interviewed in person, the remaining seven connected virtually via Teams, two of which were in other cities in Pakistan and five abroad. Thus, the research location was a hybrid one.

While face-to-face interviews are conventionally understood to offer greater insight to participants' personalities, online interviews could be just as valuable. Since the aim of the research was not to generalise or quantify, and rather conduct an interpretive investigation seeking to understand the subjective experiences of women where they exercise agency, these conditions enable online interviews to usefully complement face-to-face ones (Curasi, 2001).

### 3.4. Participant Recruitment

A poster outlining the title, brief purpose and criteria (detailed in this section) for the study alongside a Google form link to indicate interest was circulated within my social circle (See poster as Figure 1). This included online forums such as (a) Instagram stories viewed by friends made at different life stages, (b) Facebook groups of students and alumni of my undergraduate university in Lahore, and (c) WhatsApp groups associated with different networks such as school, university, student societies, and UK-based Pakistanis. Through the interest form, my email address and personal WhatsApp number, sixteen individuals offered to volunteer for the study over time. Three of these did not meet the criteria, and were politely informed of their ineligibility. Those who did were sent the information sheet and consent form through whichever medium of communication they preferred, and given time and space to respond and ask questions. Ten out of thirteen eligible volunteers were able to schedule a time when they were able to contribute to the research, which was conducted over a period of five weeks between March and May 2023.

The means through which the participants were selected for the study is a combination of convenience and purposive techniques, leveraging the advantages of both: seeking women with specific experiences and depending on proximity and networks. I recognize here that the process was certainly partial to my own subjective experience such as biographical details, geography, social class, and ideologies, among others. This also explains why all ten participants completed their postgraduate degrees in the UK, as that is where I am presently situated and have more connections. To maintain rigour and quality in these methodological decisions, the literature review was used to guide this process, recognizing that the questions would be best answered by those that have the specific experience of going abroad (Johnson et al., 2020).

The final criteria of participants for the study - stemming from the initial one with the development of the literature review - is listed below. Furthermore, certain characteristics of interested volunteers also played a role in slightly modifying the requirements where reasonable, without altering the focus of the research and maintaining relevance to the theoretical underpinnings. The differences between the initial and final criteria have been illustrated and can be noted by comparing the undermentioned list with the attached volunteer call (Figure 1).

- Identify as a woman (wholly or partially)
- Have been raised in Pakistan for a major part of their life
    - The additional requirement of being born in Pakistan and raised there entirely (up till undergraduate studies) was removed as two interested volunteers offered greater biographical diversity
- Have completed their undergraduate degree in Pakistan
- Have completed their postgraduate degree (Masters or PhD) outside of Pakistan within the last six years (at the time of interviews)
    - This was changed from five years to six as two of the relatively older participants had completed their degree slightly longer than five years, and their age group (over forty) offered diversity of life stage and thus perspectives
- Currently residing in any country, with no specified expectations in their professional and personal lives i.e., of a particular career, if at all, or of family dynamics




*Figure 1: Volunteer Call Poster*

Most participants selected their pseudonym with thought and care - often using the name of someone very special to them - reflecting the vitality of the naming process (Allen & Wiles, 2016). On the other hand, some communicated that they were not particular about what they were called in the research writeup. Furthermore, two participants consented to their own name being used, as that felt most authentic to them. Two key takeaways are important here. Firstly, plurality of choice is demonstrated between participants in this endeavour, based on their varying notions of naming and anonymity. Secondly, the study employs an agentive approach, in line with its topic of exploration, therefore making it fundamental to leave the decision of naming and anonymising to the participants themselves. While it may be affirming for some to share their truths with their identity, it may be more empowering for others to be able to come forward without any repercussions of identification. In either case, as a researcher examining and aiming to foster agency, I would find it unjust to determine what is appropriate on the participants' behalf. Their diversity of

choice in this process has thus been respected and celebrated. The details of this study's participants are illustrated below in Table 1.

*Table 1: Participants Overview*

| # | Name | Age | Self-described socioeconomic status | Broad area of origin | K-12 Education | Undergraduate Degree | Graduate Degree | Years since final degree completion | Present |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Filza | 26 | Higher/Upper socioeconomic status | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan | Scotland (Master's) | 2 | Working at EUP |
| 2 | Fatima | 34 | Middle class | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan | Scotland (Master's), England (ongoing PhD) | 4 | Doing PhD in England |
| 3 | Mahrukh | 35 | Middle class | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan (EUP) | England (Master's), USA (PhD) | >1 | Working in the USA |
| 4 | Noor | 24 | Upper middle class | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan (EUP) | England (Master's) | >1 | Working in England |
| 5 | Ira | 28 | Middle class | Lower-North Pakistan | UAE, (GCSEs and A-levels in Lower-North | Lower-North Pakistan | England (Master's) | >1 | Working in the UK |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Pakistan) | | | | |
| 6 | Bint-e-Hawwa | 42 | 'Employed' | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan | Pakistan (Master's), England (PhD) | 6 | Working in England |
| 7 | Afifa | 29 | High/elite | South Pakistan | South Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan (EUP) | England (Master's) | 3 | Working in Pakistan |
| 8 | Soufia | 37 | Middle class | Lower-North Pakistan | Saudi Arabia (A-levels in Lower-North Pakistan) | Lower-North Pakistan | England (Master's + PhD) | 6 | Working at EUP |
| 9 | Aizah | 23 | Upper middle class | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan (EUP) | England (Master's) | >1 | Working in Pakistan |
| 10 | Zainab | 27 | Upper-Middle/ Middle | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan | Lower-North Pakistan | Europe - Erasmus JDP (Master's) | 1.5 | Working in Scotland |

### 3.5. Data Analysis Methods

I reviewed and categorised the data using thematic analysis, involving a 6-step process as outlined by Braun and Clarke: "(1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating codes, (3) generating themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) locating exemplars" (Qtd. in Mihas, 2023, p.305). To evaluate the data to reach conclusions, I employed narrative analysis, "uncovering the underlying ideologies embedded in stories and the larger culture that creates the narratives" with a focus on "everyday lived experiences" (Rodriguez, 2016, p.128). Thus, this dual approach enabled comparisons between women to formulate broad ideas of how agency is practised in their context while simultaneously retaining the structures of their unique stories when doing so to highlight its complexity.

To enhance rigour, certain measures were taken. Firstly, an audit trail i.e., documenting the decision-making process step-by-step throughout the period of working with the data, was conducted prior to manuscript writing to enhance confirmability (Creswell & Clarke, 2007). Secondly, transcripts were refined through the consented audio recordings and sent to participants for approval, ensuring that their words and intentions have been accurately captured in the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Creswell & Clarke, 2007; Whittemore et al., 2001). The women were given sufficient time to go through the transcripts in detail and flag any inconsistencies and errors, which were then edited and shown to gain final permission.

The aforementioned methods were applied to the data both inductively i.e., "moving from the specific to the general" and deductively i.e., "beginning with the general and ending with the specific" making them bottom-up and top-down respectively (Trochim, 2006, p.1; Creswell & Clark, 2007; p.23). These approaches are not mutually exclusive and are often used "collaboratively to form a more complete picture" (Soiferman, 2010, p.2). The first cycle of coding - open coding - involved both predetermined codes and newly generated codes in the process (Charmaz, 2014; Saldana, 2009). The former were drawn from the interview guide (See Appendix 1). For example, since educational histories were traced with participants, pre-made codes relevant to this included the different levels of education. Alongside these, new codes emerged e.g., special education (summer schools, exchanges etc.). Due to this, each transcript was coded for a second time to incorporate new codes

created after they had initially been coded. After this, the codes were then observed and reconfigured i.e., some were broken down further into separate codes, and others merged as deemed appropriate. Furthermore, qualitative descriptions were given to each code for clearer conceptualization of what they represented. (See Appendices 3 and 4).

Once an elaborate list of bottom-level codes was prepared, the codes were looked at jointly to determine relationships between one another. They were then sorted into higher-level topics using mind maps, tables, and clusters to create themes (Mihas, 2023). Agency appeared as a central theme with others arranged around it to facilitate connections between them. In a separate document, I bulleted the key points from each theme. After this was done once, I took a step back from the data briefly and then returned to the document with a fresh perspective. The themes were reviewed by interrogating the data coded to the component codes, seeking variation levels and adequate support collectively (Mihas, 2023). This was done personally as well as through discussions with my supervisor and colleagues, earning greater accuracy. A quality over quantity approach was taken, meaning that themes reflected prominent aspects that addressed the research question, instead of most frequent ones with majority experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This again aligned with the commitment to focus on women's individual agencies that are diversely experienced.

To maintain a thematic as well as narrative analysis, I read data both within coded windows and original transcripts with highlighted codes. This facilitated identification, refinement, and affirmation of themes drawn (Mihas, 2023). This information was placed against the backdrop of initially gathered literature to draw connections between the two and additional scholarship was tied in. This followed with the creation of an outline for the dissertation. When the writing began, the analysis did not come to a halt. Throughout the dissertation drafting process, new observations, connections, and ideas surfaced that were incorporated along the way and continued to shape the structure and argument of the research. The research questions were also polished while doing so. Towards the end, it was rearranged in the way that appeared most appropriate and in line with the topic of study (See Appendix 1).

### 3.6. Research Integrity and Ethics

This study received approval by the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) with reference to BERA Ethical Framework 2018. Table 2 below details how key concerns were addressed.

*Table 2: Integrity and Ethics*

| **Concern** | **Description** |
|---|---|
| Privacy | While the default option was to follow complete privacy protocols as per the information sheet, participants were optionally asked in the consent forms if they wished to be identified with their own names. For those who did not consent to it, I ensured that they would select their own pseudonym as opposed to assigning them one myself. It was a deliberate and conscientious act on my part as it is an act of research, affected by issues of power and voice, methodology, and research outputs (Allen & Wiles, 2016). |
| Safety and Confidentiality | All women signed a consent form to confirm participation in the study, fully understanding - through the information sheet - procedures of confidentiality and understanding the nature of questions asked and minimal risks (emotional - if recalling difficult experiences). They were permitted to stop the interview at any point or retract any information shared during or after the interview up until their final transcript review. |
| Positionality | My philosophical views shape my research practice, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. They enable me to take the stance of a sensitive, empathetic, and ethical listener.<br>Furthermore, I am like my participants in many ways: a woman from Pakistan within postgraduate higher education in the UK, received similar-quality private local education, often from the same institutions and/or in the same regions of the country, and in some cases, of corresponding socioeconomic status. These biographical details allowed me to occupy an ‘insider’ status with my participants’ group. I utilised these connections by introducing myself and briefly sharing my own |

| | |
|---|---|
| | experiences and what that led me towards my research, that swiftly enabled a mutual understanding with my participants, who then eagerly offered rich insights. My Urdu language proficiency also supported the process, as bilingual Pakistanis such as my participants and I often extensively mix both English and Urdu amidst conversation. This enabled them to share their thoughts more comfortably.<br>I also acknowledge here that my relationship with my supervisor - a fellow Pakistani woman who had undertaken postgraduate higher education abroad - deeply facilitated our countless discussions on the research. This understanding of language as well as local contexts enriched my analysis in ways it otherwise may not have.<br>Additionally, interesting power differential paradoxes sometimes arised: although all women were older than me and had already completed their international degrees, I was given prestige and respect due to my affiliation with the University of Oxford, particularly from those who hadn't attended a comparable university in the UK.<br>Finally, it is common practice for student researchers to illustrate their female supervisors with their last names to make them appear gender-neutral and thus more legitimate when seeking participants. I actively steered away from this strategy as it felt counterproductive to the feminist stances I encapsulate within this research. |

### 3.7. Rigour

Best practices to maintain rigour were employed at all stages of the research process and in the various sections that the dissertation outlines. The informed development of the research questions concurrently with a systematic literature review has been discussed in the respective sections. The methodology chapter also demonstrates how tools of inquiry were selected with care and thought, ensuring that the qualitative method and semi-structured interviews were not only appropriate choices lending to their own merit and use, but also in conjunction with the research topic. Thus, a coherent logical case is built with the research objectives and measures clearly stated and justified to facilitate quality and rigour of the

study (Durning & Carline, 2015). The articulate decision-making process involving conceptual underpinnings also minimises inherent biases in qualitative study and improves the trustworthiness of the results (Glassick et al., 1997).

Credibility is also built by consciously reflecting on my role and influence on my work as the researcher - discussed in the previous subsection - as well as extensively using evidence through examples and detailed narratives that surfaced within the data (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Additionally, participants were asked to verify the accuracy of the transcripts - a process referred to as member checking (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Their accepted requests to read the dissertation once complete also reflects that sincere effort is made in reporting their voices truthfully in the writing (Stige et al., 2009), further ensuring rigour. Thoroughness within the analysis process has previously been discussed in subsection 3.5. Finally, the research discussion in the last chapter offers a thorough examination of how different insights relate to each other, contributing to answering the research questions, achieving the primary endeavour, and offering a "parsimonious narrative that … enhances understanding of the targeted phenomena" (Johnson et al., 2020, p.143). All these efforts thus contribute towards rigorous research.

# Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

## 4.1. Research Question 1: Social Influences on Agency

How do social contexts influence practices of agency of Pakistani women who receive higher education abroad?

This chapter first delves into the various social and cultural aspects surrounding the women that impact their actions. These contextual factors influence their agentive expressions both in Pakistan and when abroad for their postgraduate degrees. While they sometimes hindered their choices, other times they facilitated them. Thus, these various factors are discussed under the upcoming subsections. Towards the end, summarised reflections are offered to demonstrate how women's agency is deeply socially embedded and manifests in complex forms that do not fit traditional understandings of it.

### *4.1.a. Societal Regulations*

The impact of wider society on women's agency was broadly negative, as the community in Pakistan was not very keen on seeing these young women go abroad independently to pursue higher education. This refers to the broader kinship networks, family friends, neighbours, and people beyond the women's inner circle. Parents of most women received disapproval from these various groups. Many warned them that it was the perfect recipe that enables women to become "too educated and independent" which was perceived as a social evil. Others even tried pointing out that by sending their daughters abroad alone, they were exposing them to "men, drugs, and other nuisances" (Noor). They made active efforts to regulate what the women would wear, what they would do, and what life trajectories they would embark upon. While some would directly pass these unsolicited comments to the participants, others indirectly did so by spreading gossip and approaching their inner circle, hoping it would be more effective. The encompassing aim of these efforts was to ensure that women stay within the cultural bounds that fosters collectivism but often upholds patriarchal traditions and reinforces the *Chaador aur Chaar Diwari* concept (Evason, 2016; Syed, 2021; Rabbani, 2008).

### *4.1.b. Parental Support*

In response to the criticism and unsolicited precautions from wider society that participants were subject to, their parents either blocked these out themselves immediately or slowly learnt to ignore them. This enabled a layer of protection for the women from broader society as what they were able to do was not the norm. Sheltered with the support of their parents, coupled with fighting for their right to make their own decisions, the women exercised localised forms of agency that fit their social landscapes. They made major strides by defying the odds, yet in subtle ways ensured they would always remain in the bounds of their cultural context to the extent they found reasonable, to sustain their parents' trust. This is reflective of Mohanty's idea of local feminisms, where complex forms of agency emerge from their unique contexts (2003).

For all participants, their parents were a key pillar of support for them, who believed in their abilities and pushed them to chase their aspirations. All participants had at least one parent who had acquired higher education, with over half of them having both parents educated to that level. Some parents had completed multiple master's degrees as well as their PhDs, including mothers. Being parents of the Pakistani women in this study, they naturally had considerable influence over their daughters' decisions and trajectories, typical of South Asian culture (Evason, 2016; Zaman et al., 2006). However, participants navigated their agencies within the social spheres that they were a part of (Ahmed, 2020; Donald et al., 2017).

Most parents were products of their time, with the generational gap being more distinguished for relatively older participants. This meant that while they grew up in contexts not as liberating as the ones they wanted to raise their daughters, coloured by patriarchy and other restrictive social norms (Hausmann et al., 2009), they nonetheless tried to actively break those cycles for the future generations by being open to listening to what their daughters had to say. All thoughts, however random, could be voiced by the women, and as Filza puts, "given merit". She also highlighted how her parents - like those of other participants, were "one of those few people who got to break that cycle where they wanted their kids to talk to them and feel comfortable sharing things with them". This behaviour was fundamental to activating the agentic potential of the women. Even if they did not share

exactly the same views or goals as their parents, they had the room to engage with them critically, and garner their involvement and support in their aspirations.

To illustrate this, some examples will be shared. Aizah, Fatima, Filza, and Ira all had parents who held strong beliefs in their potential, but had to be actively convinced to let them go abroad for their studies. This happened at age 22 for Aizah, and age 27 for Ira. This meant that letting a daughter live independently much farther away from home was not on account of their maturity and life stage, but rather due to their gender, especially since this was not a problem for their brothers. Literature has observed that in Pakistani culture, women usually occupy little public space, so going abroad to pursue academic goals is not always encouraged (Zaman et al., 2006; Syed, 2021; Rabbani, 2008). Despite the initial hesitation, the women were able to rationalise with their parents and prove that they could be trusted to take care of themselves while remaining within the social boundaries that they grew up learning, both promises which they would later maintain. Once again, they were bargaining to be agentive (Rao et al., 2020; Qureshi & Abid, 2022; Abu-Lughod, 1991).

Elaborating on Ira's example, she quoted when she got accepted into her program, "[Initially], my dad was like, no, you cannot go. But then Alhamdulillah, obviously, when they saw that this is something that I really want, Alhamdulillah MashaAllah, they really opened up their minds to it". Later, she also discussed their response to external pressures:

> But [when] *rishtaydars* (relatives) who asked him about my marriage, and what do you want to do with that now, he just gives them a shut-up call, which I didn't expect my dad would do. I thought he would get influenced by those kinds of conversations. But it's the opposite now, which I feel like is very new to me, and it liberates me a lot. And I didn't expect any of this. …[and] I didn't think that I would, but ever since I've come here, I have become very vocal about the things that I feel. And I feel like they provide that safe space where I can be more, you know, um, emotionally reliant on them. That's also quite something that's new to me, but it really helps me that I have that space with them.

This shows how parents slowly accepted their daughters' wishes, and eventually became very proud that not only would they happily share their daughters' successes, but actively speak back against sceptical relatives and broader social circles.

For other participants, studying abroad symbolised not only a personal achievement, but also a means of realising their parents' unrealized aspirations. For example, Bint-e-Hawwa's father always dreamed of studying at Oxford, which she fulfilled by getting her PhD from another university in the UK. Mahrukh's mother performed very well in her

local undergraduate program, and received a scholarship to MIT. However, Mahrukh's grandparents responded by getting her mother married instead. Mahrukh later ended up getting her PhD from a top college in the USA. She said, "I was my mother's pride and joy because [of what happened] many many years earlier", so when she got accepted, she quoted, "She was like, no matter what, you are going to go. And so, it was like it was *her* dream that happened". Fatima's mother, while having completed three master's degrees, was unable to finish her PhD due to her concurrent work responsibilities. Fatima was now working towards her doctorate in the UK, also living her mother's ambitions. Thus, pursuing their academic goals was an agentive decision not only for themselves, but for their loved ones too. This challenges liberal notions of agency that exclusively focus on individual freedom and personal-welfare maximisation (Benson, 1990; Brison, 2002; Nedeslky, 2012), and depicts how agency is deeply embedded in social relations that are a fundamental determinant and part of it (Mahmood, 2005).

Apart from that, most parents adhered to conventional gender norms, with fathers often embodying reserved and distant traits, while mothers assumed more nurturing roles, displaying caring, affectionate, and emotionally available qualities, reflective of the culture (Hausmann et al., 2009). Interestingly, while this was the case, the fathers would champion their daughters' desires, often in a covert manner, while carefully preserving their masculine image publicly. In doing so, they were sometimes even more supportive than the mothers, who were openly more intimately invested in their children.

An example of this is Soufia's resistance towards the pathway of local medicine everyone set out for her. Her father made a deal with her to support her in her decision to not write anything in her medical college entrance tests, and go to the university she wanted to instead, without her mother's cognizance. Similarly, although Bint-e-Hawwa's father was concerned about her unconventional academic plans alongside his wife and mother, he would often share words of encouragement with her. For example, he gave her a plaque that said, "The future belongs to those who believe in their dreams" and at another time told her, "If only one person can do something in the world, then anyone can!" These words had a profound and long-lasting impact on Bint-e-Hawwa, serving as a consistent motivation. When her father asked her how come she was leaving her well-paid corporate job to help create awareness in her local area for women's potential in STEM, she told him that he was

her inspiration all along. Mahrukh's father too, although always claiming he would have her happily married to one of the neighbours and build her a house close to his own so she was always nearby, was the one who had active one-to-one conversations with her when she was considering marrying her now-husband who was based in the US.

In these sometimes subtle yet intentional ways, fathers would transcend gender stereotypes they otherwise confined to, to prioritise their daughters' wishes. This practice breaks down Western assumptions of brown men from the Global South that brown women need to be saved from, as Spivak highlights (2003).

### *4.1.c. Relationships with Siblings*

For all women, their siblings were another supportive strand they had within their social circle, shaping and being shaped by their trajectories. For example, Noor's elder brother secured a full scholarship for his undergraduate studies so the family finances could be contributed towards her undergraduate studies. Consequently, as a perceived responsibility, Noor was pertinent that for their postgraduate studies, her brother would be supported by the family more. Upon not getting a full scholarship, Noor worked multiple part-time jobs alongside her master's degree and cut down costs excessively, to the point where she compromised on having regular and healthy meals, without her parents ever finding out. She ensured despite the odds that she would return the favour to her brother so the pressure to academically excel for a postgraduate scholarship was relieved off of her brother.

Apart from that, Fatima was the youngest of three siblings who went off to different cities and countries to study, which greatly shaped her own goals of studying outside the small city she grew up in. Unfortunately for her, as the last child still in the family home, her parents were reluctant to let her fly out of the nest too. But since the ambitions were ingrained in her mind throughout childhood witnessing her siblings, she pushed to be able to study outside her city for undergraduate studies, and abroad for her postgraduate degrees. Similarly, Bint-e-Hawwa also had elder siblings studying in good colleges outside her small village. Her sister went to Europe for her postgraduate studies which enabled her to be granted permission to join her there for some time. Mahrukh, on the other hand, was the star in her family, having

held scholarships for her entire education since she reached grade 4, which enabled her government officer father to be able to afford education for her brothers. She took pride in that fact as it made her feel more in control of her educational needs without financially burdening her parents. Aizah was the eldest so she felt more protective of her younger siblings despite having gone through the stages of wanting to study away from home and living in a dorm, but accustomed to their needs over time. In many ways, she paved their paths for their studies.

These close ties with siblings are part of the collectivist culture that Pakistan exemplifies (Evason, 2016; Adamopoulos, 2004) that distances the identities of these women from the individualistic prototypes that practise agency (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Lucas, 2016). Despite that, these social realities positively support their agentive endeavours (Mohanty, 2003; Saba, 2005; Sadia et al., 2022), and deconstruct narrow Western perspectives of agency (Abu-Lughod, 2002).

### *4.1.d. Dynamics with In-Laws*

In-laws served as both social barriers and support systems. To exemplify this, responses of in-laws to their daughter-in-laws' higher education pursuits is illustrated, in the cases of Fatima and Mahrukh. These women were married at the time they were to begin their programs, thus faced with the prospect of relocating to pursue this ambition. While Fatima faced serious dissent, as this section shows, Mahrukh received unwavering support.

Fatima had initially endeavoured to attend a nine-month master's program abroad before her PhD, which her in-laws were disinclined towards. However, she argued that the program's brevity left little room to decline the opportunity. Furthermore, since her husband would be frequently travelling as a consultant without any objections, the same should apply to her. She used this strategy first to carefully demand something that was observed in her own household, so as to not suggest something too outlandish (Qureshi & Abid, 2022). But when told that as the wife, her job was to learn to make bread, she put her food down and went to the UK to make the most of her experience - expressing resistance this time (Rao et al., 2020). This way, her actions did not follow a predictive pathway and agency took various forms (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty, 2003).

Inspired during her master's degree, she began her PhD applications. Once again, she was reminded of her domestic duties as a wife and told her endeavour is pointless since her husband earns well enough. Contending that this ambition is for her own happiness, she was "superficially" supported by her partner to apply and see if she would even secure an admission and funding. When these did come through, there was a pronounced, collective response of alarm and agitation by everyone. Feeling extremely neglected five years into marriage, during which she had tried softer tactics but in vain, Fatima realised that this is not how a relationship should be, and became apathetic towards the potential dissolution of her relationship. This was the eventual outcome that transpired, leading her to embark on her pursuit of a PhD. She reflected:

> If you think of a relationship ending because one person wants to do a PhD, it's a really sad scenario. Lots of people don't even consider it because of that, … compelled to think, do I "need" that degree enough to sacrifice [a few months or years] once in my lifetime? That is societal norms.

Inevitably, she endured substantial gender-driven criticism as a divorced female PhD. student, yet maintained a strong conviction that it was a worthy pursuit and adeptly manoeuvred through the obstacles. Her agency thus evolved as she navigated through persisting challenges, not immediately resulting in resistive protest, but incrementally adjusting the force and nature of her response over time, a nuance that Western understandings of agency would overlook (Mahmood, 2005; Burke, 2012).

On the other hand, Mahrukh and her husband were both aspiring academics, so they decided to apply for PhD programs in the US together. Two of the programs they were each admitted to were located in the same states. Together, they chose to attend their programs in one state, and for the first four years, the situation was smooth sailing. Despite her in-laws migrating to the US during the degree and having her first child, there was tremendous family support that encouraged her to continue fuelling her progress. However, in the fourth year of her PhD, she was unfairly and without warning removed from her program driven by racial bias and inadequate consideration of her personal circumstances. While her husband went on to finish his PhD, Mahrukh found herself at a juncture in life characterised by profound confusion, a sense of being adrift, and entirely disillusioned. Amidst a barrage of relentless criticism from the world on her major failure, her husband and in-laws exhibited sincere solidarity, firmly supporting her. Mahrukh quoted her husband:

> I'm not going to raise a daughter who was going to find out that my CGPA in undergrad was 3.1 and yours was 3.98 and you ended up not doing your PhD. And I did. She is not going to grow up with this story of discrimination. She's going to grow up to a story where her mother tried and was resilient and came back and got what she deserved.

She channelled their encouragement into empowerment, rebuilding herself and rising from adversity. In the next admissions cycle, she secured eight distinct seats at various top schools and ended up attending one even better than the institution that had expelled her. This served as a testament to her indomitable resilience and agentive expression fuelled from a supportive family, a narrative she would always impart to her daughter.

As a result, Mahrukh was presented with an enticing job offer located very far away from where her husband worked. Having lost her father recently at the time, she wondered who would now advocate for her the way he did. She feared she might be told to give up the placement. Fortunately, her father-in-law was just as supportive, urging her to seize the opportunity and even frame the offer letter. Soon after my interview with Mahrukh, she followed up to inform me that she and her husband had both received tenured positions at the onset of their academic career at that distant location, an excellent liberal arts college that aligned with their values and was very accommodating towards staff with families. They would both be in one place where they mutually wanted to work and not have to worry about finances and stability for their daughter as most emerging academics have to. In essence, there was nothing better that Mahrukh could have hoped for. Had it not been for her in-laws, she may not have channelled the agentive capacity she always had and felt in control of her own journey. This demonstrates how the support of family - especially of men - can be pivotal to positively reinforcing the agentive potential of women. It defies simplistic notions of agency that do not integrate the role of others in influencing women's actions, which varies from context to context (Mohanty, 2003; Mahmood, 2005).

### *4.1.e. Varied Friendships*

Friendships of the participants sometimes posed challenges to the women's agencies and other times fostered them. I first highlight how they hindered them, and later discuss how they supported them. Geographical proximity and time spent together did not neatly determine the nature or influence of friendship i.e., it varied greatly both abroad and locally.

In some cases, Pakistani friendships of the women had drifted apart, or been stuck exactly where they left off when they left, feeling that they had intellectually grown exponentially more than those who stayed there. Otherwise, they felt that their old friends had known them from a completely different life, one that they did not live or belong to anymore. In other cases, some friendships felt like a weight pulling the participants down, such as creating unnecessary pressure to get married, from married friends (for Mahrukh, Zainab and Afifa) or exhibiting bitterness and jealousy towards the participants' academic and professional success, from friends who never got the opportunities these women did (for Fatima). This reflects how international mobility complicates these women's agencies, which others may not comprehend or be sympathetic towards (Sadia et al., 2022). Their old identities are simultaneously retained and destroyed in their new form, which may not resonate with friends from home or abroad (Solomon et al., 2015). In these ways, friendships in some circumstances adversely affected how the women felt about themselves and their contexts whether at home or abroad.

Despite some friendships bringing the women down, others were more concrete and offered greater support. This was both from Pakistani friendships - as sustaining through time strengthened them - as well as companionships of those they met in their higher studies abroad. These meaningful bonds helped participants recognize their potential to aim higher (for Ira), offered communal support with the graduate school applications (for Aizah and Noor), and illustrated their own value that made them feel like an equal in the path to igniting positive social change. In these ways, friendships enabled unlocking agency and doing good for themselves and the world. Participants actively acknowledged the role that some of their friends had played in realising their ambitions and being where they were. As we have seen in much of the earlier sections, the role of others in the lives of women experiencing international mobility through higher education is culturally specific and uniquely pivotal to their journey and actions (Abu-lughod, 2002; Mohanty 2003; Mahmood, 2005).

### *4.1.f. Romantic Partnerships and Agency*

Four of the ten participants had partners that they shared insights on, of which three felt very positively about (Fatima's case was discussed in section *1.1.b. In-laws*). Irrespective of partners' support, the women felt agentive. Through their stories, they reflected that having

a loving, caring relationship with a healthy level of reliance on the other does not have to be mutually exclusive with exercising personal independence and being self-sufficient, as conventionally perceived. They actively wanted to grow and develop with their partners while unambiguously knowing that they were perfectly capable enough to cultivate their advancement alone. This was an active, agentive decision on their part, situated within their sociocultural fabric, and beyond restrictive, dichotomous decisions between their careers and domestic lives (Lucas, 2016). They chose both loving companionships and family life alongside their academic and professional pursuits.

For example, Bint-e-Hawwa and Mahrukh felt that they were a part of very egalitarian marriages where their husbands would value and cherish them through their words and actions. They would serve as a pillar of support for one another during challenging times and the women never felt constrained by them. At times when they would receive criticism about their partners on aspects that did not matter to the women, such as looks or geographical location, they would stand by their husbands, ignoring others' dissent. At the same time, Mahrukh proudly remarked that while her favourite part of her marriage is to have brilliant conversations every single night with her husband and maintain his unwavering support, she feels extremely relieved and calm knowing that she could walk out of it at any moment in case of an adverse turn of events. Bint-e-Hawwa too, found her one of her biggest accomplishments to be able to present her work at the same conference where her most admired researcher did. This fueled her confidence in her professional and personal achievement, fostering feelings of independence.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Bint-e-Hawwa and Mahrukh chose to have a child during their PhD. degrees, when their husbands were also amidst their own PhD. degrees. In both relationships, their husbands would switch shifts of taking care of the newborn, accepted the childraising task as a joint responsibility without skewing expectations on their wives, and cooperated so both partners could continue pursuing their academics and careers while bringing up a child.

Aizah too, was in a healthy relationship but at the stage where both families were deliberating on their marriage. When studying in the UK and feeling disenchanted with the culture, Aizah turned to her partner, who was her motivation to return home. Even if she did

not acquire the traditional success that many of her peers did when they went to study abroad with her - in the form of extended visas and stable jobs there - Aizah did not feel tethered. To her, the definition of success came from having somebody who she could trust and spend the rest of her life with, contending, "*Chalo kuch nahi hoga Pakistan me, toh ye cheez to hogi na wahan pe. This is my future waiting for me"* (Even if I don't have anything in Pakistan (i.e., in terms of a job), I would have this, him." Furthermore, she saw this alliance as a way to exercise greater freedom and agency, in the form of investing in her business with high risks of failure. But with a well-earning to-be husband, she would not have to worry about maintaining an income stream and could play with greater risk. Her biggest goal and achievement, she hoped, would be to marry that person and build an 'empire' with him, living a good life together. She outlined these ambitions as *gharelu* (concerned with the home and family - carrying a negative connotation) but that was who she was and she was confident in what she wanted. In this way, a loving partner who could support her financially while she embarked on her career dreams, was how Aizah saw success. She knew she could have easily stayed in the UK, found a job, and been entirely independent both financially and socially, but she made the conscious decision to return to Pakistan to pursue it differently instead. Her story strongly challenges binary conceptualization of successful and unsuccessful women's agency (Ghaffar & Stevenson, 2018) and urges a reorientation towards relational agencies (MacKenzie & Stojlar, 2000; Brison, 2002).

Finally, for Fatima, as seen in sub-section *4.1.d. Dynamics with In-Laws*, pursuing a PhD turned out to be her biggest dream as she figured out what she wanted in life through different experiences and professional engagements. Despite that, her partner did not support her moving away from home for an extended period of time despite his own job involving significant travel. Although Fatima wished that things would not pan out this way resulting in divorce, she knew she had to take matters into her own hands and prioritise her personal goals above everything else. It was a serious emotional impediment for her, realising that that was probably the saddest way a relationship broke off, where one partner could not support the other's dreams. Nonetheless, Fatima made that decision against not just her husband, but the entire society as divorce is extremely stigmatised in Pakistan, finding her agentive power in it regardless of the circumstances.

In these ways, although the women recognised and transparently expressed the need to have a loving relationship where they could count on their partner and experience life stages with them, they also knew that it coincided with being fiercely independent and content with their own being. They were aware that this was an active choice that could be changed at any point, as it did in Fatima's case. Their narratives show that wanting romantic companionship with reliance does not mean they lack agency or are anti-feminist, as often understood from the Western lens. Their agency is legitimised through these lived realities and their expressed emotions that demonstrate their independence without compromising their intersectional identities and cultural norms (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty, 2003; Mahmood, 2005), where marriage is seen as a fundamental pillar of support in women's lives (Hussain et al., 2003; Zaman et al., 2006; Chaudhry & Rahman, 2009; Adeel 2010; Ali et al., 2011; Ali et al., 2015). Moreover, assumptions about the controlling nature and cruelty of men over women from these contexts are also questioned through illustration of their supportive partnerships (Spivak, 2003).

### *4.1.g. Challenges within the International Academic Community*

Outside Pakistan, academic peers and professors also played a role in the lives of the women in various ways. Though Filza had very good relations with her teachers growing up that provided her with the confidence to continue excelling at school and later pursue postgraduate education abroad, interactions of other women were not as pleasant. Soufia and Mahrukh endured racism from their professors when studying abroad, demonstrating how Pakistani women's Third World identities extend in international contexts (Mohanty, 1984; Charrad, 2010) . Soufia's thesis supervisor in the UK refused to believe that she had managed to acquire a substantial amount of rich data from her participants - young boys in Pakistan - arguing that such frank cross-gender interaction just does not happen in the country. He further gaslit her about her vocal disability that worsened during the harsh winters, for which she requested time in an oral assessment; only upon demanding her to speak and witnessing her struggle, he offered to accommodate her.

Meanwhile, Mahrukh received unrelenting condemnation from her peers and professors in the US for choosing to have a baby during her PhD. program. She heard all sorts of hateful remarks from "These brown people come and have kids because they just

want to get a green card (residency)" to "Have you Pakistani people not heard of condoms?" and "Your daughter is the kind of mistake that happens in the *East* when people don't know of contraceptive options". She analysed, "There was this widespread notion that women could not have it all. And so, if you had given birth and you were brown and you were living with your in-laws, and you were a certain kind of *desi* (South Asian) who could not become an academic, this image was so deeply kind of embedded in their minds". All of these insulting comments again reflected how women from the Global South are viewed as singular, monolithic subjects who are ignorant, sexually constrained, domesticated, uneducated, tradition-bound and lack agency (Mohanty, 1984). They failed to even consider that having a child at that stage in life might have been Mahrukh's active choice, and took away her agency with their assumptions (Hutchings, 2013; Lucas, 2016).

Thus, despite being agentive in their decisions to start a family or conduct research in Pakistan, Mahrukh and Soufia thus felt that the academic atmosphere within these Global North contexts was sometimes severely dismissive of their choices, sustaining narrow notions of agency that arise from there (Mahmood, 2005; Abu Lughod, 2002).

#### *4.1.h Chapter Summary*

These socially embedded experiences of Pakistani women demonstrate agency that is very different from liberal feminist ideas yet neither are their actions entirely constrained in a conservative way as per the imagination of the Third World Woman and relations with brown men (Mohanty, 1984; Spivak, 2003). These agentive practices are culturally relative, illustrating the diversity of ways through which it is practised. Like Mahmood shows through Egyptian women's lives and Abu-Lughod through Moroccan women's, these Pakistani women too exist within their own unique context, and social influences in all these societies are intricately tied with their experiences, producing complex and plural forms of agency that shatter universalizing tendencies from its Western notions (Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 1991; Mohanty, 1984). Social relations sometimes supplement their agency (parents, siblings) while other times limit them (society, academic community) as support systems or barriers, and sometimes they do both (in-laws, friends, partners). This complicates how these relations are understood and emphasises the grey areas within them.

Furthermore, each social group's impact varies for these Pakistani women not only in comparison to those in Western contexts, but also among themselves. Each woman's truth and reality is unique to her own life. This correlates with my philosophical underpinnings that avoid universalistic portrayals of agency. Amidst these cultural facets, they negotiate their positions, curating a plurality of experiences as they go abroad for higher education and beyond. These trajectories also produce hybrid identities that neither strip off their original identities nor fully embrace them, creating a nuanced new form that encapsulates experiences within both local and international contexts (Sadia et al., 2022; Solomon et al., 2015).

## 4.2. Research Question 2: Agency as a Pluralistic and Experiential Process

How do women evaluate the outcomes that follow and processes that surround agentive decisions in the context of international higher education?

This section first demonstrates how agency of the Pakistani women in the study is different not only in comparison with traditional liberal feminist and/or Western notions of it, but is also unique to each woman and her circumstances i.e., pluralistic agency. This will employ their own spoken evaluations and comparable experiences of two women where they held differing views. Following that, the section will then illustrate how the processes surrounding agency are valued more than the outcomes attached to those decisions by using the examples of three women's varied navigations. Finally, a summary of the findings and analysis of the second research question will be provided.

### *4.2.a. Pluralistic Agency*

#### *4.2.a.i. Spoken Evaluation*

To understand how women weigh outcomes of and processes around agency, I will provide an overview of their uttered experiences of decision-making. The most agreed-upon understanding between several participants was possession of the ability and autonomy to make decisions, do things right, with one's own mind to advance one's own goals. This did not have to come about at grand levels as the perception of agency in practice was illustrated through the "little things" such as the freedom to move within spaces as well as life

trajectories (Zainab). Whereas this is the foundational conceptualization of agency, the women shared on how they see it as a holistic experience, valuing the process of being agentive more than the direct outcomes; sub-section 4.2.b. further elaborates on this point.

"The definition is personal for everyone" (Zainab), where one chooses for themselves with independent thinking, and finding comfort in the fact that they have the tools to be able to do something they want to (Filza). This agency must be afforded to oneself, as Soufia argues what she believes counts as agentic behaviour: "It's not somebody else giving you that chance. It's you who gives yourself that chance, space and time to reflect and then take a step". Therefore, the emotion of empowerment and confidence come with the knowledge of their agency that they ignite themselves.

Agency varies from person to person, owing to their surroundings, context, family, and relationships (Aizah), i.e., external factors. How this transpires in practice is that one works towards their "common" goals while keeping in mind obstacles or support that different institutions can pose (Noor). Being influenced by these aspects is inevitable as one is a product of several things around them, but the critical distinction is the point of reflection where one questions why they are doing what they are doing; agentive expression comes about where one can rationalise with their own mind - situated within and impacted by the wider context - their behaviour and decisions (Soufia). These ideas continue to align with the socially embedded nature of agency as highlighted under the first research question (Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2002), and further show how this is different between women in this geopolitical region as well.

Several identity markers also affect one's agency, such as gender, socioeconomic class, age, but also interestingly, one's passport or right to work (Afifa) and work experience (Ira). In a global political hierarchy, one's geographic location and how it enables them to polish their abilities and thus confidence, affords them agency. Agentive expression also shifts with personality (Bint-e-Hawwa) where some are more persistent in the face of challenges and resilient with obstacles. But it goes beyond that and is relative, yielded by privilege: "I have more agency than the lady who works in my house, but Maryam Nawaz (a female political leader in Pakistan) has more agency than I do" (Afifa). Similarly, earning power and potential is also important according to Mahrukh, as women who have a stable

income stream and know how to spend it, feel deeply empowered knowing they own wealth produced independently with their hard work that they can spend as they like. This changes many life decisions for them. It is not the material things they can buy with that money, but the awareness of their ability to do so in the process. These perceptions of agency thus show that empowerment stems from different aspects for women, and often lies in the experience of choosing for themselves rather than what they achieve by making that decision.

Not only does agency differ between people, it is also inconsistent within the same individual. It has to be constantly worked towards to be produced (Soufia). And it is always changing: "Agency is not just autonomy to make decisions but ALSO how it comes out in play in different scenarios. You are constantly tweaking your agency in your own life if not in others. One part of me could have agency at one point in one situation but when I leave here, I may have control over one thing and not over others. How much over what also matters" (Fatima). Intriguingly, Aizah contends that agency is so immersed within the social sphere that it can also be actively given to others i.e., choosing to give someone else (e.g., parents, partner) the power to make one's decisions, and that action itself is thus agentive. Thus, the experience that ensues with making a choice plays a factor in the decision-making process arguably arguably takes precedence over the outcome itself.

While independence of thought expressed through the smallest of decisions is extremely valuable and comforting, it does not exist in a vacuum as previously discussed. Several social factors influence the decision, which by extension impact the experience of the woman after making the decision in addition to the results. For example, deciding what and where to receive education abroad would not only determine the degree acquired at the end, but also heavily shape the year(s) during which they study there. This focus on the process then is valued and deeply considered by the women, often more than the outcomes themselves (Afifa, Fatima, Soufia). In these different ways, we observe the importance of seeing agency as more than just making a decision towards an outcome, but also something that is considered with the experience that surrounds that decision, situated within the social sphere (Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 1991).

#### *4.2.a.ii. Experience as a Gender Minority*

This sub-section depicts how agency varies from person to person by contrasting the choices made by two other participants. Bint-e-Hawwa and Fatima, when faced with analogous challenges of being a gender minority at their workplace, made different decisions. When choosing whether to persevere until more women were included or exit the imbalance environment, these women valued what felt agentive personally to them, and how it shaped their experiences beyond the decision. This demonstrated how their vocalised understandings of agency matched their practice of it.

Bint-e-Hawwa and Fatima both navigated professions where they were in a minority as women. While the former was in Computer Science and from a small town where at the time it was not a field considered to be stable in Pakistan, the latter was immersed in architecture. Bint-e-Hawwa's family members were reluctant to see her pursue this field, where her grandmother once asked her sarcastically if she would actually fix computer parts when she should just learn how to be a good homemaker instead. Despite that, she was the first of all her siblings to receive a job offer, that too in a very well-reputed company, where she was the very first woman. Within the broader industry too, women were scarce and Bint-e-Hawwa was one of only twenty-five women of a team of 3000 to China for a business trip. Seeing this, she took up the challenge of being in a male-oriented place with the confidence she had nurtured at home, and took the lead and leverage of her position, resulting in a wonderful learning experience. Following this, she decided to later work within South Pakistan, her regional hometown, to encourage more women to pursue Computer Science. At an underdeveloped university, she joined as the first woman, and after a while, left with a 70% women majority. This drastic shift was the result of active awareness campaigns conducted in the surrounding small cities to demonstrate the potential that lay in the field for women. Thus, the experience of being a minority was perceived as an opportunity to excel to inspire others by Bint-e-Hawwa, which she succeeded in. Continuing within the field to change its demographic landscape was how she felt uniquely agentive, that did not prescribe to a set expression of agency, as we note next how a similar situation resulted in a very different response from another participant.

For Fatima, architecture was a field in Pakistan not commonly inhabited by many women, and she was considered lucky to have a role among 22 men at the office she worked. Spending her time on a desk in that space, despite having the best boss one could want, made

her feel unhappy about the gendered experience. There was only one shared bathroom, which made her particularly uncomfortable while she was on her period due to the stigmatised nature of menstruation in the country. The company's culture itself was very traditionally masculine, and she strongly felt how the ambiance changed between her colleagues once she stepped in the room, making her feel left out. Unlike Bint-e-Hawwa, Fatima decided to see these issues colouring her experience negatively. They pushed her away from a job that heavily involved working behind a screen, and approaching opportunities that were more people-centred, which is something she realised she enjoyed more. Knowing that her present job was the best she could have in the field in terms of her salary and relationship with her boss, she still decided to leave and move on to something fresh. Even though she valued a gender balance, for her, finding what she loved doing and pursuing that was her expression of agency, different from that of Bint-e-Hawwa's despite also being a gender minority at her workplace (Abu-Lughod, 1991).

Reacting differently in situations where they were the only or one of few women, the two participants validated their own approaches and found contentment in their decisions. Thus, they perceived agency as what felt appropriate within their own experiences and empowering to them, as they navigated the social atmosphere. There is no singular way to practise agency then, as similar circumstances still produce different responses from different women within their unique positions (Mohanty, 2003; Mahmood, 2005).

#### *4.2.c.iii. Convictions on Child-rearing*

Another comparison of Bint-e-Hawwa and Fatima's thoughts on the ideal location to raise children further reflects the plurality of agency between women. It shows how agency varies with contexts and experiences, from one woman to another, despite their common geographical and cultural positionality.

To illustrate this, it is important to note a relevant distinction about affluent Pakistani households - where a majority of the participants come from - is having the typically afforded luxury of live-in housekeeping. Fatima argued that this means that when living independently abroad, she would be asked how challenging it is to cook and clean while doing her PhD. She reflected that not only is this one advantage of raising a family that she might want in ten

years, but also the presence of a kinship network to rely on so the children may have their grandparents and other relatives when the parents are not around. Fatima admitted that it does take a village, which one doesn't have abroad, and raising kids without that support would be a shame. But she valued being able to choose for herself - where she wanted to be and what she wanted to do - irrespective of her career. And for her, having the freedom of her own life where she wouldn't feel constantly controlled was more valuable, which she experienced outside of Pakistan despite loving her home country. She argued that her agency was lost in many ways when she visited on holidays. Thus, she said she wanted to be proud of not wavering so that someone else could look after her, at the cost of her own decision-making power.

On the contrary, the situation was different for Bint-e-Hawwa. She wanted to go back to Pakistan as soon as she completed her PhD, to raise her children there, but her health restrained her. She was diagnosed with an illness not treatable back home, hence forcing her to stay in the UK indefinitely. But her priority remained to have her children feel strongly associated with their home country the way she was. She aspired for them to speak the language well, be aware of the traditions and culture, and identify with Pakistan more than the UK. Evidently, this was an enormous challenge when her children were so far away from the place Bint-e-Hawwa called home. While she would make it a point to celebrate each Pakistani holiday with the same zeal as she would when in the country, and communicate with them in Urdu, the goal was only modestly achieved. This was something she had to therefore accept as undeniable reality. To make peace with it, she told herself that God had made her stay abroad for a reason. One of those reasons, she believed, was that she had narrowly endured three different near-death experiences with her health issue. Had she remained in Pakistan, it was unlikely that she would have survived. To Bint-e-Hawwa then, despite having to mould her decisions, she affirmed them by redefining her agentive choices.

This is reflected in Bint-e-Hawwa's further thoughts on the topic. She perceived that despite her initial reservations and ideal choice of country for having and raising her children, doing so outside of Pakistan was more comfortable for her. She exemplified this by expressing little hope with the professional atmosphere in her country, where pregnant women and mothers were frowned upon and not given the same opportunities. This contrasted Mahrukh's views, who thought that it would have been easier to raise her daughter in Pakistan. She shared that

colleagues and bosses would be more sensitive to cultural contexts of dealing with childcare alongside dealing with in-laws, enabling occasional half-days and having more leeway. This stems from her experience of discrimination and racism when doing so amidst her PhD. in the USA. Regardless of how they both perceived contexts of child rearing, they both were very confident that despite challenges faced in the process, they would not have it any other way and stayed resolute with their decisions.

This comparison demonstrates that agency is perceived differently by women, being shaped by social contexts and relations. Their unique experiences significantly define the pathways they take and how they affirm their decisions, located within influences around them. Again, agency is not practised singularly, and may even be affirmed by surrounding circumstances - as we specifically see in the case of Bint-e-Hawwa. Mohanty, Mahmood, and Abu-Lughod's theorizations surrounding agencies' contextually-specific nature are reinforced through these insights, and an additional focus on individual agencies within similar contexts is emphasised.

### *4.2.b. Agency as a Process*

In this subsection, I will discuss how experiences of higher education abroad reflect that agency for the participants is more about the process that results from their decision-making than the final outcome that they receive from it. Three participants' narratives are discussed, situating them within different types of limitations that they faced in their circumstances, that the women navigate. Aizah's attended to expectations of gender and religion; Afifa confronted financial constraints after her father's death; and Soufia grappled with a new educational culture after migration. In these circumstances, although the women encountered constraints on the range of choices, they exhibited their agency through tactful negotiations.

#### *4.2.b.i. Navigations through Gender and Religion*

Aizah always dreamt of tasting independence through living alone, which was only possible through higher education. However, coming from a religiously observant family, she could not fathom the option of studying abroad for her undergraduate degree as a young

woman. Since that was an inconceivable dream, she set her mind to going to one of Pakistan's top universities in a different city from her own, to which I assign the pseudonym 'Excellent University of Pakistan' (EUP). Here, she faced an added layer of challenge: it was not only a co-educational institution which she had only studied for a brief part of her schooling, but also had a reputation of encouraging very left-wing perspectives. Hesitant towards this big leap, Aizah's mother set a condition where she had to complete a year-long Quran course before she could venture off to EUP. Seeing it as a challenge to overcome rather than a permanent impediment in the way of her independence, Aizah was determined and pushed through it to prove herself to her mother. Finally, when it was time to go to EUP upon admission, her enthusiasm towards living in the college dorms also became an apprehension for her mother. However, at this point, her father intervened and argued that she could be now trusted to be on her own. Hence, Aizah got to live her dreams by tailoring her plans towards EUP.

During her final year, she prepared for consulting cases and interviews for the best consulting agencies and corporate firms, all headquartered in another metropolitan city. But when her father found out, he refused to let her work in the city due to safety concerns, even if it meant that he would have to financially support her indefinitely. In response to this, Aizah impulsively decided to apply to graduate programs in the UK at the last minute as the independence that she had acquired was at risk. She managed to secure admissions, and soon left. This was a point that she wanted to prove to her father: if he would not let her work a few hundred miles away in the country, she would go to study thousands of miles away abroad. Aizah had negotiated through this paradoxical situation, valuing her experience of independent living above all, irrespective of the shape it took or outcomes from it i.e., a well-paying job or an international degree (Donald et al., 2017; Rao et al., 2020; Qureshi & Abid, 2022).

#### *4.2.b.ii. Navigations through Financial Challenges*

Afifa was always passionate about pursuing something that enabled her to help other people. At a young age, she decided that a Juris Doctor (JD) degree abroad would be best suited to her to realise that aspiration. When her father passed away in her early teen years, this goal was crystallised but also came with a significant financial setback for her family.

While she still saw an international JD as the best way to be in a capacity to help others, it could not be acquired with undergraduate and graduate studies abroad. Here, Afifa reinforced that it was not the degrees that mattered, but the path towards them that did. She pivoted her plans to situate them, given her family's economic standing, within spaces where she would not only learn but also thoroughly enjoy the experience. This materialised for her when she locally completed her undergraduate degree from EUP which was much more affordable than studying abroad, and then received a full scholarship to go to one of the UK's top universities. Neither of these degrees were in law, but they paved an excellent path towards a JD as the universities offered flexibility, essential skills, tremendous support as well as credibility towards her aptitude and potential. Following this, she then began working full-time at a legal clinic in Pakistan, that was her way of developing her profile further towards a JD and also actively fulfilling her goal of supporting people.

Through this trajectory, Afifa demonstrated that her agentive decisions were more about the processes that led her to her desired outcome than the outcome itself. More than the degree, she wanted an educational experience that was conducive to her growth and remained within the parameters of her family's financial abilities.

#### *4.2.b.iii. Navigations and Endurance through Cultural Shocks*

Soufia's higher education experience also drives an understanding of agency where the processes that ensue after decision-making are more valuable than the final outcomes. She grew up in Saudi Arabia and moved with her family to Pakistan for high school and undergraduate studies. Within the local education system, she felt dissatisfied with the teaching and learning styles employed, and decided to enrol in an institution that aligned with her values for a more enriching postgraduate experience. In this quest, she chose and applied for a master's program at a local university that she deemed to meet her expectations of quality. However, she was rejected without reason despite having met all the required criteria and expressing a sincere interest in learning. Untethered, Soufia protested outside the vice chancellor's office, demanding an explanation for this decision. Forced to address her concerns, he stepped out and informed her that broader power structures had enforced a policy to count four-year undergraduate degrees - which were newly introduced at the time in

the country - as a joint master's degree (3+1) that was grounds to reject second master's degrees to all students.

Although Soufia could not bend those rules despite actively disagreeing with the limitations posed on educational advancement, her priority remained to be within a learning climate that she resonated with, that fostered deeper critical thinking. Not seeing institutional options as compelling as the one that had denied her entry, she then went on to study at a top university in the UK on full scholarship, where she was in agreement with the pedagogies used. There, she felt that her internal dormant agency was further invigorated into active agency, as she could now do "everything and anything" that she wanted to do. It was not about the name, location, or ranking of the university that would determine the global value of her degree; instead, Soufia granted importance to the time that she would spend within that program. In doing so, she stated feeling in control of her trajectory and exercising greater agency, which too, reflects how agency goes beyond just the decision that is made, and actors prioritise the entire process surrounding that and the way that social factors influence its practice (Abu-Lughod, 1991).

### *4.2.c. Chapter Summary*

The perceptions of agency and examples of exercising it within the context of international higher education as described in this section demonstrate some key aspects about agency. Firstly, in line with the first research question, agency is contextually relative that rejects Western assumptions about the lives of women in the Global South (Mohanty, 1984; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2005), but also shows that agentive practices vary among the women in the same context as well, illustrating deeper plurality of agencies. Additionally, the participants value the process surrounding their agency more than the chosen outcome of the decision, expanding its understanding to be more inclusive of their experiences. The struggles that are a part of that higher educational trajectory are actively considered when choosing the degree or 'final result' from program completion. While the end-goal is an important determinant impacting the path, the path itself is more strongly prioritised by the actors when making these conscious decisions. Thus, these insights further expand the concept of agency that is complex, socially-embedded, varied between and across regions, and process-focussed rather than simply outcome-focused.

# Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter provides a summary of the research, followed by its discussion, as well as implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

## 5.1. Summary and Discussion

This study aimed to explore the experiences of Pakistani women who received postgraduate higher education abroad to better understand their agency. Specifically, the influence of social factors on agency and evaluation of processes surrounding and outcomes of agentive decisions was examined. Through qualitative, semi-structured interviews, ten women shared their insights on how various social relations produced agencies that challenged conventional notions of it. Results affirmed the work of intersectional, decolonial and Southern theorists, while offering the unique contribution of a process-focussed model of agency. This is expanded upon in the next sub-section.

As the analysis demonstrates in the previous chapter, the context of Pakistani women who received international higher education abroad reflects complex embodiments of agency that are socially embedded and individually produced. These reject traditional conceptualizations of agency where it is individual-centric and plays out in defined ways that only fit the experiences of women in the Global North. By highlighting the nuances of agency that women from the Global South exercise, their hybridised identities are also revealed, where they take new forms that retain and destroy their original identities in the new sociocultural context. These Pakistani women do not abandon their roots when adapting into international higher education contexts. Their experiences demonstrate active, mindful practices of living where they are conscious actors shaping their decisions that do not fit conventional ideals, thus presenting alternative expressions of agency. The aforementioned reflections are heavily substantiated by the literature review, specifically with the works of Mohanty, Abu-Lughod and Mahmood, who observed intricacies of agency in various Global South concepts, employing intersectional, decolonial and Southern feminist lenses.

The present study, however, also goes beyond what has been previously examined to offer a fresh perspective of agency. Pakistani women illustrate how feeling agentive is not

only about rationalising the final results of their decision, but the process around it that involves engaging with the context and how it lends them strength or creates impediments. This is observed through the cases of Aizah, Afifa, and Soufia who place value on the higher education experience i.e., if that would offer independent living, flexibility, skills, support and impactful pedagogies, when negotiating their trajectories amidst social influences. Their focus was not on the end goal i.e., the degree attained at the end of the program, as observed when Aizah changed her intended final location throughout (from undergraduate university to postgraduate life), Afifa redirected her pathway towards her JD, and Soufia sought a learning environment that resonated with her both locally and abroad.

In essence, participants value the path towards the outcome that is aspired towards when a decision is made, rather than the outcome itself. Their agentive navigation when aspiring towards international higher education is thus less about the qualification received at the end and more about their experience within the program. Feelings of self-sufficiency, empowerment and success for them arise not from the ranking of the university where they received their postgraduate degree, but from every single day that they experienced the program. As a result, I offer the original contribution that women's agency is not as simple as a choice they make towards an end, but more about the pathway towards achieving that end.

The research then uniquely contributes to scholarship surrounding women's agency by presenting a process-over-outcome focused conceptualization that expands traditional/universalised understandings. In doing so, it shows us how little we know about the diversity of women's agency and the pathways through which they conceptualise their power. This work thus highlights the need for deeper engagement with women's lived experiences surrounding agentive decision-making processes.

## 5.2. Implications

### *5.2.a. Implications for Policy and Development Programs*

Simplistic theoretical conceptualizations of women's agency have real-world impact as they shape the vantage points of policy makers and thus the programs they design. Cultural sensitivity must be at the heart of these initiatives targeted towards women in the Global

South to ensure their diverse experiences are recognized. Considering their social dimensions in a holistic, contextually-specific way when designing gender equality policies is fundamental in positively supporting their agentive expression. Actively addressing power dynamics, social norms and institutional barriers that women face and how they are differentially affected due to their intersectional identities. Adopting such approaches is crucial when formulating policies and programs to ensure more representation and inclusive participation for agentive women.

### *5.2.b. Empowerment Initiatives Reimagined*

Empowerment and development initiatives are carried out by various companies and international organisations. These usually originate from the Global North and are targeted towards the Global South, fostered by global power and political economies. Some, like the United Nations' Girl Up campaign, have been criticised for ignoring these intricacies and using universalizing, depoliticised approaches and narrowly focusing on outcomes (Walters, 2018). These program developers should then move beyond traditional frameworks of women's experiences and agency, and consciously work on co-creating initiatives with local communities to accommodate the complexities of agency in Global South contexts. Family and community support are also crucial in shaping agency, and these should be kept in mind to be more receptive towards community input. Programs in Egypt could serve as a benchmark in terms of their approach, that could be modelled in the context of Pakistan and other Global South countries to be more cognizant of local realities and feminisms (Mahmood, 2005; Mohanty, 2003).

### *5.2.c. Educational and Awareness Campaigns*

How agency is understood can be tailored greatly within educational settings and through awareness campaigns. Recognition of the profound impact of scholarship generated in the Global North on different regions and discourses on decolonizing conceptualizations of agency and other ideas surrounding women is necessitated. Despite growing efforts on diversity and inclusion efforts, a narrow lens of how things are predominantly defined is employed that needs to be reshaped. Such efforts could be incorporated within gender sensitivity trainings within schools and workplaces, challenging stereotypes and

misconceptions of diverse experiences. Seeing women as more than a singular monolith is at the core of this effort to prevent their universal homogenization. This would enable greater awareness about the impact of social relations on women's choices, and how they are not exclusively limiting or liberating. These changes would greatly foster more equitable social environments for women within both public and private spheres.

#### *5.2.d. A Holistic Approach*

In conclusion, the research findings underscore the need for context-specific, socially aware, and holistic approaches to understanding and promoting agency of women in Pakistan and other Global South countries. Local collaborations within communities and awareness about the fluidity and diversity of agency would result in better policies, programs, and strategies that support them more effectively, inclusive of women's unique forms of empowerment.

### 5.3. Limitations

The present research, being conducted as a part of my masters dissertation, encountered certain limitations due to the constraints of time and funding. With only one year to complete the study and no assigned funding, the scope for participant recruitment, data generation, analysis, and interpretation was somewhat restricted. Despite these challenges, the research endeavour aimed to provide valuable insights into agency experiences of women in the global South within the available resources and timeframe. However, future research with more extended timeframes and financial support - as highlighted in the recommendations above - could expand on these findings and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of agency in diverse cultural contexts.

### 5.4. Recommendations for Future Research

#### *5.4.a. Longitudinal Case Studies*

In-depth, longitudinal case studies with a more extended timeframe and smaller samples would offer more comprehensive insights into how agency evolves and is

experienced by women in the Global South over time. This would help further capture the dynamic nature of women's agency and its changes in response to various social and contextual factors. Thus, scholars with the opportunity for extended research would significantly foster richer analyses through longitudinal case studies on the topic.

### *5.4.b. Cross-Cultural Comparative Studies*

Comparing experiences across diverse cultural settings would provide a more comprehensive understanding of agency and highlight the impact of specific cultural influences. This can be enabled through cross-cultural comparative studies to explore agency in different Global South contexts, and facilitate understandings of diverse agentive expressions within different countries in the region, in addition to learning how they differ from Western societies.

### *5.4.c. Participatory Action Research (PAR)*

Adopting a participatory action research (PAR) approach, involving participants in the research process as co-researchers was something I considered in the middle of my fieldwork, however, it would have been inappropriate to significantly modify the methods chosen initially for the study. However, at the interview stage, I was able to gather from the participants an interest in actively contributing to the research process and potential implications after the interviews. While this was greatly appreciated and acknowledged, it posed a logistical challenge within the bounds of the dissertation timeline. PAR in the future on the topic would thus empower participants to actively shape the research and ensure the findings are more relevant and applicable to their lived experiences.

### *5.4.d. Funded Research*

The amount of funding input for research greatly determines its extent and potential impact. Thus, greater funding should be offered by educational institutions, organisations and other donors for studies that explore women's agentive practices and issues within the Global South. It would greatly advance knowledge production within the field and consequently foster more nuanced academic and practical endeavours.

By addressing these recommendations in future research, scholars can further deepen the understanding of agency in the Global South and contribute to the development of context-specific strategies and policies that empower women in diverse cultural and social contexts, as observed in the case of Pakistani women who receive higher education abroad.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Questions List

- Semi-structured and open-ended
- Applicable via interviews and focus groups
- After getting participants' informed written consent
- Approximate time: 30 minutes to 1 hour

Introduction:

- Greetings, my name is …. I was born in Karachi, Pakistan, and raised in Lahore, Pakistan. I did my undergraduate studies at LUMS in sociology and anthropology and am currently pursuing my master's in Education at the University of Oxford. These experiences in higher education inspired this present research project I am undertaking.
- As you may know, this study aims to examine Pakistani women's experiences of receiving their postgraduate higher education abroad. I want to understand how they define and navigate their aspirations and agency in the process.
- Thank you for being willing to take part in this interview. You might find aspects of this interview overwhelming if there are instances in your journey that were challenging. I will be asking you to share experiences about your trajectory from before, during and after your postgraduate education. Let me remind you that you can choose not to answer any questions you don't want to, pause for a break or stop the interview altogether.
- Furthermore, keep in mind that the interviews are only very broad guides. Feel free to take the conversation in any direction you wish to, or share insights that you think of along the way even if they are entirely different from the topic. This is meant to be a semi-structured conversation with as much room for unstructured, open dialogue as possible. Do not worry about your words being irrelevant as everything you share is important and matter.

- You are also permitted to share something today and retract it later at any point until I ask you for the approval of the final transcript, which you will be able to review before it is used as data.
- Feel perfectly free to interrupt, ask for clarification or criticise a line of questioning.
- With your approval, I would like to start the audio recording.

| Section 1<br>Biographical Details | |
|---|---|
| Tell me a little bit about yourself. (Intentionally giving them the space to choose what parts of their identity they consider important to describe themselves with.) | |
| Gender and pronouns | |
| Age / birthday | |
| Socio-economic status (describe as you deem fit) | |
| Place of birth (city in Pakistan) | |
| Place you were raised (city/cities in Pakistan) | |
| Undergraduate university and location (city in Pakistan)<br>Year of completion | |
| Postgraduate university and location (city, country)<br>Year of completion | |
| Time difference between undergraduate and postgraduate studies | |
| Time elapsed since completion of postgraduate studies (at present) | |

| Section 2<br>Getting to know the participant: The present |
|---|
| 1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. What was your educational journey? If you closed your eyes and thought back to your life since your time in school what was this journey like? I guess I would like to hear your story of education.<br>2. What are you presently doing? (Professionally and personally) |

3. Tell me about your family life if you are comfortable?

Section 3

Social context

1. Where were you living before your post graduate studies? Can you describe that space to me please?
2. What about during and after? Please describe the spaces, I want to have a visual of where you were.
3. What was your family, school, and community life like?
4. Do you think your relationships with your family and community change in any way when you were away and after you came back?

Prompts: (These would not be read out to participants – they serve as researcher notes.)

a. Family (mother, father, siblings, other household members or significant roles)
b. Friends
c. Academic peers and professors
d. Wider community

Section 4

Wishes and dreams (Aspirations)

- As you know I want to learn about your experiences of education in Pakistan and abroad and understand how your aspirations for the future were impacted. I want to know this especially from the perspective of your aspirations for the future.
- Again, reflect on your life and tell me what aspirations you have had since you were little. How did your journey lead you to an education abroad?
- What happened when you were there and after you returned? Any interesting things you remember, please do tell?
- How do you think your aspirations for the future are now? Do you think your education abroad has had an impact?
- Do you think that your school, friends, family or community relationships have any impact on your aspirations?
- Were there any obstacles in your life when you were trying to achieve your aspirations? How? Why? Can you tell me a story from a time in your life to explain?

Section 5

Obstacles and opportunities (Agency)

- I will now turn to the various ways in which you would have worked towards your aspirations. It does not matter whether you were able to achieve your aspirations, what is important is that you tell me about how you worked (or did not/could not) work towards your dream? Tell me, what was it like?
- Generally, people would describe the ability (which could be hindered by various factors) to act on their dreams as ‘agency’. I would like to ask you how you would define it and whether you had any experience with it?

Section 6

Closing

- Imagine that we are in the year 2033. You are looking back at the last 10 years, proudly reflecting on your achievements. What are some of those things?
    - This question will also be proposed as the prompt for a letter to write in the perspective of their future selves to their past selves (at the end of the conversation).
- Would you want to change anything at all in your life trajectory or experiences looking back broadly, as you went through your postgraduate education?
    - Why or why not?
- Any final thoughts or feelings you might have and would like to share?
- Do you have any questions for me?

Next steps:

Thank you very much for your time and thoughtful answers! I deeply appreciate it. As outlined in the information documents provided to you previously, there are two optional follow-up activities after this interview / survey. You may choose to decline participation entirely and it would have no impact on anything whatsoever. They are:

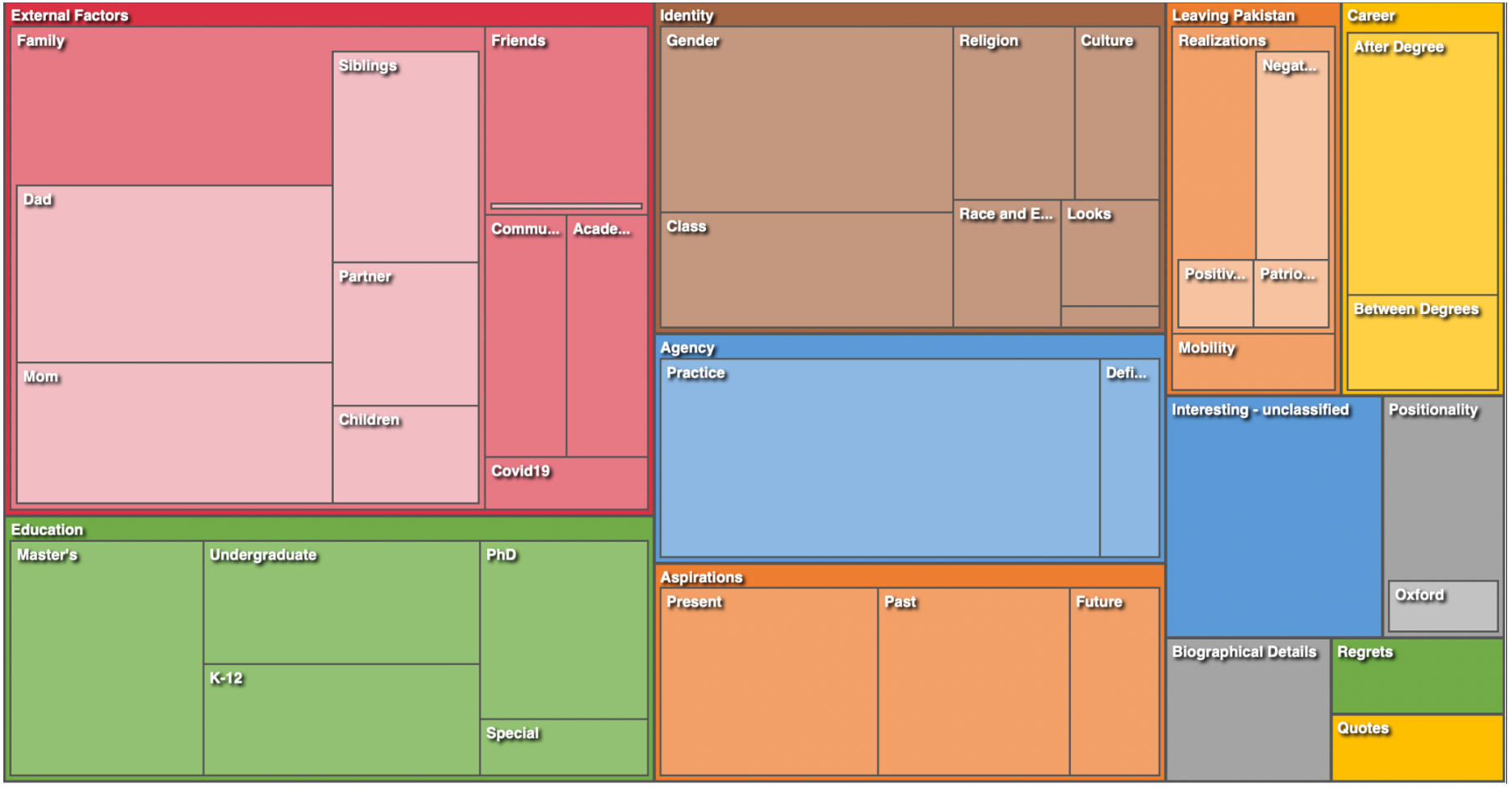
1. A focus group with other participants discussing your experiences collectively.
2. Writing a letter with the perspective of your future self to your past self.
    a. Prompt: Imagine that we are in the year 2033. You are looking back at the last 10 years, proudly reflecting on your achievements. What are some of those things?
    b. You can do this at your own time upon reflection and return to be used as data.

- You do not need to decide now and can correspond with me later over email regarding these follow-up participation activities.
- I will send over the transcript for you to review and confirm that I have understood you correctly. You may highlight anything you do not wish to share anymore, and I will remove that from the raw data as explained earlier.
- Thank you once again for your contribution. Have a great rest of your day!

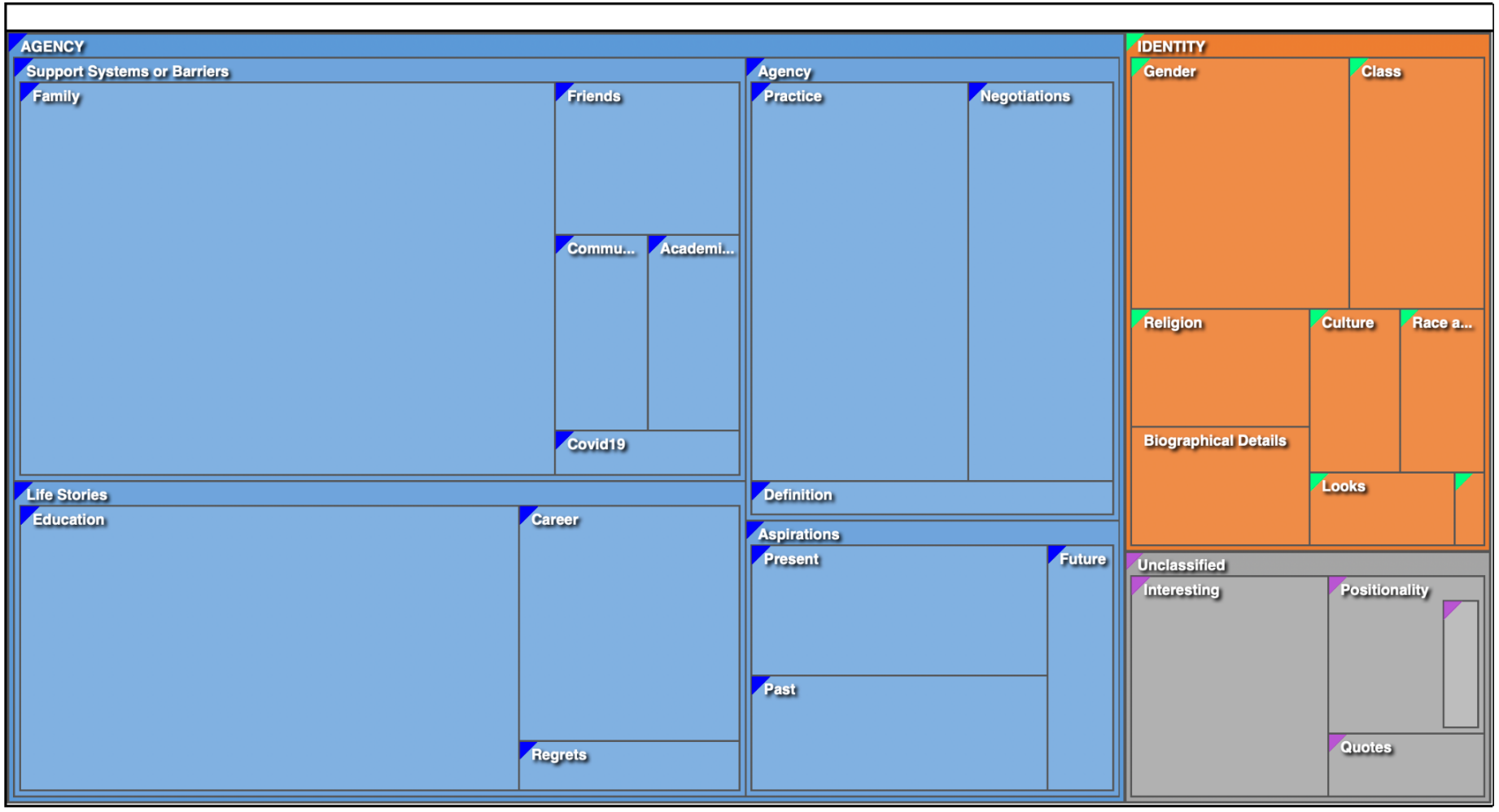
**Appendix 2: Analysis Table**

| Main analysis | Relevant Findings | Literature | Research Questions |
|---|---|---|---|
| -Social barriers and support systems exist simultaneously<br>-They are not always neatly demarcated<br>-Women actively seek this support while facing barriers<br>-They still exercise agency: wanting support does not mean they are not independent / these are not mutually exclusive<br>-Plus, they face these Western bias when they go abroad also due to narrow perceptions | Barriers = society, academic community<br><br>Support systems = family, siblings, partners, children, in-laws, some friends<br><br>Barriers + support systems = friends, in-laws, partners<br><br>Wanting support but not needing it = agentive | 1. Challenging Global North assumptions / local feminisms concept<br>2. Agency as nuanced and complex THROUGH social context influences<br><br>(both points under the works of Mohanty, Mahmood, and Abu-Lughod) | 1: How do social contexts influence practices of agency of Pakistani women who receive higher education abroad? |
| The process of agency is more valued than the outcome of the decision / the experience that results from the active decision is more important to the women than what they end up getting in the end out of it | Participants uttered experiences of agency<br><br>Examples of contrasting views and experiences<br><br>Religion (Aizah), Finances (Afifa), Culture shocks (Soufia) | | 2: How do women evaluate the outcomes that follow and processes that surround agentive decisions in the context of international higher education? |

## Appendix 3: Coding Tree Map Level 1



## Appendix 4: Coding Tree Map Level 2



## Appendix 5: CUREC Approval

**Research ethics approval**

**Research title:**
'My Aspirations, My Agency': Exploring Pakistani Women's Experiences of Postgraduate Higher Education Abroad

**Research ethics reference:**
**EDUC_C1A_23_059**

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

**Personal data**: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's guidance and legal requirements.

**In-person activities**: Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's website.

**Amendments**: Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the SSH IDREC webpage.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk / student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk or ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk.

**Appendix 6: Information Sheet**

Department of Education
University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY, UK
+44 (0) 1865 274024
general.enquiries@education.ox.ac.uk

# Participant Information Sheet

University of Oxford: Central University Research Ethics Committee (Ethics reference: **BERA Ethical Framework 2018)**

*My Aspirations, My Agency: Exploring Pakistani Women's Experiences of Postgraduate Higher Education Abroad*

Dear Participant,

Thank you for showing interest in this project examining Pakistani women's trajectories of receiving their postgraduate higher education abroad. I want to understand your experiences of aspiring for your future – academically, professionally and/or personally - and your navigation of your circumstances to achieve your goals.

In this letter I have written important information about this project and have explained what you would need to do should you choose to take part in our project. Remember that your participation is entirely voluntary.

1. *What is this project about?*
   *Through this project I want to qualitatively understand the experiences of Pakistani women through the stages of doing their undergrad locally, going to a new country for their master's or PhD, and then beyond completion – wherever it may have taken them next. In doing so, I aim to uncover how they conceptualise the concepts of aspirations and agency, what it means to them personally, and how they evolve over time and through space.*

2. *Who are the people involved in this project and how can I contact them if I have questions?*

   *Post-graduate student researcher [my name] and Dr. [supervisor's name] from the Department of Education, University of Oxford are the research team. Dr [supervisor's name] works in an advisory capacity, only I will be involved in conducting the activities related with the research project. We are happy to answer any questions you may have. Please reach out to us at [email addresses].*

3. *If I participate, what will I need to do?*
   a. I will seek an online or face-to-face meeting – whatever is feasible for you – no longer than 1 hour during which you will be asked questions relating to your background, life trajectory, education, and career objectives/outcomes. You may choose to answer these questions via email as well. I may also reach out to you again at a later date with follow-up questions, which you could respond to in an online or face-to-face meeting as well as via email – again, in whatever way that works best for you.
   b. You may be requested to participate in a focus group with other participants of the research to discuss similar topics as the interview in a collective format. This is entirely optional.
   c. You may be requested to write a letter to yourself and will be provided with a prompt. You would then submit this to the researcher to become part of the collected data. This is entirely optional.
   d. You may be requested to share photographs of contexts, spaces, people and any other aspects of your life that you feel illustrate significant parts of your higher education journey. This is entirely optional.

4. *What information will be collected?*
   - *Consent records*
   - *Contact details (for the purposes of this study only)*
   - *Audio recordings and their transcripts (of consented interview and focus group)*
   - *Written or typed answers (if information shared through email where explicit consent*

     *has been given for exact portion of email body to be used as data)*
   - *Letter to self (if consented to write and share)*

- *Photographs (if consented to share and submitted)*
- *List of participant names linking to the numbers until the completion of my dissertation in order to approach people if clarity is needed*

5. *Will my personal information (my name, my address and other information) be used in the research?*

   *Your real name will not be used for any purpose at any point in the dissemination of the project. After I speak with you, I will save the recordings by giving it a made-up name and store it in a locked file which can only be accessed by me. Based on my discussions with various participants I will collate ideas and draw findings, and this may include exact quotes of your talk as well as interpretations of your ideas. If you wish, I can share short summaries/transcripts with you in due course.*
6. *For how long will my recordings be stored?*

   *As a standard policy I will delete all the recordings collected for this project after 3 years of its collection. During this time the data (recordings) is strictly used only for research purposes and is not shared with anyone other than the people involved in the research.*
7. *What data protection protocols will be followed?*
   - *The raw data will be encrypted and stored safely in my personal computing device until it is uploaded to my university-provided Nexus 365 Drive where it would be password protected and safe.*
   - *The raw data collected from you will only be available to me and my research associates for analysis purposes.*
   - *Some of your quotes from the interview may be used in the final report.*

- I am happy to share a preliminary transcript of your conversation if you wish to review it.
- It can be difficult/impossible to fully anonymise data. Because of this we will use pseudonyms that you will choose for yourself.
- The findings from the research will be written up into a dissertation. The reports and academic articles produced as a result of this study may be published publicly. It is possible that these are also present in academic publications or conference presentations.

- A copy of my dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the Oxford University Research Archive where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.
- Identification evidence will be contained in the university OneDrive folder and will be destroyed 3 years after the research ends.

8. *What if I agree to take part but after some time no longer want to participate?*
   *You have a right to refuse your participation at any point before, during and after the study. You may withdraw from the study up until you give your final approval on the cleaned-up transcripts – if you reach that last stage. I will not be offended at all and will delete all your information if that happens.*
9. *Will I be given anything at the end of the research?*
   *Your discussions will help me understand how Pakistani women are utilising postgraduate higher education for various reasons, how it impacts different aspects of their lives, as well as how it shapes their perceptions of their aspirations and agency through time and space. At the same time, in sharing your story, you might become better aware of ways in which you experienced receiving higher education from the undergraduate to postgraduate level, and how you previously felt and currently feel about your journey. Although this does not have direct extrinsic benefits for you, it would hopefully inform future policy and research in the field.*

*10. Who has reviewed this research?*

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: BERA Ethical Framework 2018).

*11. Who can I reach out to if I have to raise concerns?*

You may reach out to the aforementioned researchers or alternatively contact the following for specific ethics-related concerns.
The Chair, Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee; Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk;
Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB.

**Appendix 7: Consent Form**

Department of Education
University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY, UK
+44 (0) 1865 274024
general.enquiries@education.ox.ac.uk

# Consent to take part in "My Aspirations, My Agency: Exploring Pakistani Women's Experiences of Postgraduate Higher Education Abroad"

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference:
BERA Ethical Framework 2018

Purpose of Study: The research aims to qualitatively understand Pakistani women's experiences of receiving their postgraduate higher education abroad. It shall explore how they define and navigate their ambitions and decision-making efforts in the process, through time and space, by cross-examining the stages of doing their undergrad locally, going to a new country for their master's or PhD, and then beyond completion – wherever it may have taken them next.

| | **Please initial each box if you agree with the statement** |
|---|---|
| I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. | ☐ |

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point *until I provide my final approval for the cleaned transcript of my data*, without giving any reason. ☐

I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project. ☐

I understand that I will not be identifiable from any publications, reports, presentations, photos, videos, or websites, unless I explicitly choose to be identified (through the next checkbox). ☐

**Optional:** I wish to be identified with my own name. ☐

**Optional**: I consent to being audio recorded. ☐

I understand how audio recordings and photos (if provided) will be used in research outputs. ☐

Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option):

a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or** ☐
b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable. **or** ☐
c) I agree to the use of direct quotations, attributed to my name, in research outputs. ☐

I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

I agree to take part through an interview.

**Optional:** I agree to take part through a focus group.

**Optional:** I agree to take part through a written letter.

**Optional:** I agree to take part through submission of photographs.

I hereby assign to the researcher all copyright in my contribution for use in all work stemming from this project and future projects.

| _____ | dd / mm / yyyy | _____ |
|---|---|---|
| Name of participant | Date | Signature |

| _____ | dd / mm / yyyy | _____ |
|---|---|---|

| Name of person taking consent | Date[1] | Signature |
| --- | --- | --- |

---

[1] To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant. Once this has been signed by both parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form. The original signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents, which must be kept in a secure location.