

Case Study

A Case Study on the Challenges and Coping Strategies of Female Ph.D. Scholars: Perspectives from Social Work

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ABSTRACT

The participation of females in higher education is important to promote equal opportunity and empowerment in diverse fields. The Indian higher education system has seen considerable progress in the enrolment of females in Ph.D. programmes. However, challenges exist in their doctoral journey and hinder their academic progress and well-being. The present study explored the challenges and coping strategies of six female Ph.D. scholars in Delhi. The study employed a qualitative descriptive case study design, involving face-to-face interviews with participants. The interviews were conducted with six females pursuing doctoral education in social work from two central universities in Delhi. The findings revealed academic challenges such as supervision, research resources, time management, and personal challenges such as family responsibilities, stress, self-doubt, and financial resources. Coping strategies included self-motivation, family support, peer support, and support from supervisors. The study recommends inclusive approaches to enhance the well-being and academic productivity within the doctoral experience.

Keywords: *Female, Doctoral student, Challenges, Coping, Social work*

PhD is the highest and the most prestigious academic qualification that a knowledge seeker pursues to attain the peak of intellectual growth and acquire expertise in distinct fields. Knowledge creation motivates the researchers to use their skills and build novel ideas that can be scaled from micro-level innovations to macro-level engagements, contributing to the nation's economic, social, and educational development. Higher education institutions are the base for transforming current researchers into tomorrow's policymakers and global leaders. The Indian higher education system is diverse, comprising various institutions that cultivate students engaged in research-intensive programmes. According to the All India Survey of Higher Education 2021-2022, India has 1,168 registered universities, of which 685 are government-managed, 10 are Private Deemed (Aided) universities, and 473 are Private (Unaided) universities. This ecosystem supports nearly 4.33 crore students, with approximately 2.13 lakh enrolled in Ph.D. programmes.

The journey of social work in Indian higher education began in 1936 with the establishment of the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work (now Tata Institute of Social Sciences,

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Mumbai) to offer professional education, advanced learning for social workers, promoting social research, and establishing a scientific foundation for social work (Desai, 1985). Following the rapid need for social work education, the first post-graduate social work department was opened in 1947 in Kashi Vidyapeeth, Varanasi. Soon after, the University of Lucknow introduced the first Ph.D. programme in social work in 1960. There are 526 higher education institutions currently offering degrees in social work at the Bachelor's, Master's, M.Phil., and Doctoral level programmes in India (Bhatt, 2021).

Pursuing a Ph.D. in Social Work represents a commitment to research aimed at contributing to society's betterment (University of South Carolina, n.d.). PhD scholars in every field are recognised as stewards of their disciplines. These highly skilled individuals generate new knowledge through research, serve as social work educators, engage in social work administration, and contribute to the professional field as independent researchers (Anastas and Kuerbis, 2009). As they embark on this doctoral journey, scholars transition from their previous roles to embrace their identities as researchers. Along the path they encounter numerous challenges at various stages, each requiring persistence and adaptability until the completion of their degree (Pyhältö et al., 2012). Female PhD scholars among all face unique challenges intertwined with traditional gender roles, complicating their academic pursuits. This interplay between aspirations and societal expectations forces them to strive and balance their academic and personal lives. Therefore, examining their challenges and coping strategies in the Indian context reveals the complexities and resilience they exhibit in social work.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Female Ph.D. scholars face multi-layered academic challenges that are more prominent than those of male Ph.D. scholars. These challenges are connected to academic and personal environments, where scholars tackle numerous difficulties derailing their academic progress. Research shows that female scholars entering doctoral programmes, despite their capabilities, encounter significant challenges, particularly in forming a reliable supervisor-supervisee relationship. A lack of supervision, constructive feedback, and necessary support presents substantial obstacles that impede their advancement toward attaining a Ph.D. According to a study by Lee et al. (2022), faculty in social work doctoral programmes reported constraints on their time, which limited their ability to provide mentorship. The survey further indicated that supervisors did not offer adequate support for non-academic issues, particularly concerning mental health and financial struggles. Likewise, Bireda (2015) observed that female doctoral students expressed concerns about not receiving timely feedback and quality guidance from their supervisors, which hindered their progress in doctoral programmes.

Female Ph.D. scholars face challenges in allocating their time between academic responsibilities, including teaching and administrative tasks, and their primary research role. This time management issue can create significant obstacles, potentially hindering their ability to fully engage in their research projects (Appel and Dahlgren, 2003; Carter et al., 2013). The struggle to balance commitments extends beyond academic duties, including personal and family obligations. The scholars grapple with societal gender expectations in their domestic sphere. They face difficulty in prioritising research and scholarly activities over family responsibilities, such as child care, elder care & household management. With less time dedicated to research work, the rate of progress slows, disrupting the timely completion of their doctoral studies in a specific timeframe (Brown and Watson, 2010; Warpade et al., 2024).

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Scholars progress in their doctoral journey when they have financial resources to support their academic and personal needs. However, many lack access to grants and fellowships, which makes it challenging to advance in their Ph.D. programmes, a long-term commitment of at least five years. Financial insecurities accumulate due to insufficient funds, leading female scholars to take on additional jobs to cover their living expenses and provide for their children and families (Mboniyivuze et al., 2023). Therefore, the tensions and financial pressures negatively impact their well-being and hinder their academic performance. The well-being of female scholars is also affected by emotional challenges such as stress, anxiety, and a sense of isolation, which emerge from the interplay of academic and personal stressors (Haynes et al., 2012). Maintaining well-being becomes increasingly difficult when tight schedules, demanding academic expectations, and personal responsibilities converge, creating a cycle of pressure and emotional strain. These challenges often leave scholars feeling overwhelmed, emphasising the critical need for strategies that prioritise their mental health and overall quality of life (Hazell et al., 2020).

Despite the unforeseen challenges, doctoral students employ strategies such as planning their daily work, acquiring new skills, and seeking support from formal and informal networks to navigate obstacles and maintain progress. Formal support from supervisors, through advice and guidance, plays a critical role in ensuring steady academic advancement, while informal support from peers and family fosters resilience and determination, enabling scholars to persist through their demanding doctoral journeys (Byers et al., 2014; Davis et al., 2017). The importance of social support from both the researcher community and supervisors has been widely acknowledged in doctoral education. Pyhältö (2018) introduced the researcher community and supervisory support model, explaining the social support available to doctoral students through: i) sources of support, including supervisors, peers (researcher community), non-academic communities, and individuals such as family members. ii) The forms of support include informational, emotional, instrumental, and co-instructional, emphasising the role of social support through these forms. iii) The support fit refers to the match or mismatch between the support needed and that received by doctoral students, indicating their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the support provided to overcome the challenges in their Ph.D. program. Although these strategies exist, pursuing and completing a Ph.D. involves significant milestones and persistent challenges.

Much of the existing research explored challenges women face in other academic fields, leaving Indian female doctoral students' unique struggles and strategies in social work underexamined. Addressing this gap, the present study focuses on the doctoral experiences of female Ph.D. scholars in social work in India, offering valuable insights into their distinctive challenges and coping strategies.

Research Questions

1. What are the challenges faced by female Ph.D. scholars in social work during their doctoral education?
2. What coping strategies do female Ph.D. scholars in social work adopt to overcome these challenges?

MATERIALS & METHODS

Design

The present study uses a qualitative descriptive case study design. A case study design is suitable for exploring an individual, a specific issue at a location, a group of people, or a

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particular situation, event, or belief within a real-life context (Yin, 2012). The research study describes the real-life challenges and coping strategies available to female Ph.D. scholars pursuing social work in Delhi. As a setting, Delhi is home to renowned central universities of social work, where Ph.D. scholars across India travel to enroll in doctoral programmes and immerse themselves in a rich academic environment that fosters intellectual growth and professional development.

Participants

The participants were female Ph.D. scholars pursuing doctoral education in social work from two central universities in Delhi. A purposive non-probability sampling technique was used to recruit the participants, and interviews were conducted with six participants until data saturation was reached. The participants were selected based on the following criteria: a) The participant should be a female Ph.D. scholar living in Delhi NCT. b) The participant pursued a full-time Ph.D. programme in social work from a central university in Delhi. c) The participant has completed the coursework and her topic and proposal have been finalised.

Participant One was 31, married, third-year scholar who availed of the UGC Non-Net fellowship and was in the data collection phase. Participant Two was 30, unmarried, fourth-year scholar who availed of the UGC Net-Srf fellowship and was in the data analysis phase. Participant Three was 29, unmarried, third-year scholar who availed of the UGC Non-Net fellowship and was in the data collection phase. Participant Four was 32, unmarried, fifth-year scholar who availed of the UGC Net-Srf fellowship and was in the thesis writing phase. Participant Five was 31, unmarried, fourth-year scholar who received the UGC Non-Net fellowship and was in the thesis writing phase. Participant Six was 34, married, fifth-year scholar who availed of the UGC Non-Net fellowship and was in the thesis writing phase.

Instruments

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule containing open-ended questions. These questions were developed based on existing literature addressing various dimensions of challenges and coping strategies. Follow-up questions were also posed whenever necessary. Furthermore, a pilot interview was carried out with one of the potential participants (not included in the main study), and based on the feedback, the questions were modified.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection took place in September 2024, during which the authors leveraged their professional network to recruit participants via social media. Potential participants were contacted through WhatsApp with a message inviting them to participate in the study. After one week, the first and second authors followed up with ten participants, six of whom agreed to in-person interviews. The participants were interviewed until saturation was reached. They were thoroughly informed about the ethical guidelines regarding their voluntary participation, and a signed consent form was obtained before audio recording their interview. This process ensured the confidentiality of their information. After each interview, participants were invited to ask questions of the authors if needed. The data was analysed thematically through an iterative process. The primary author developed initial codes and themes grounded in the research questions. The second and third authors then reviewed and refined these codes and themes using data from the first four interviews. After collaborative discussions, two more interviews were conducted and analysed by all the authors to refine the final themes of the study. To ensure credibility, investigator triangulation was used, with authors independently

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coding and analysing the data at different stages for consistency and accuracy. Further, through reflexivity, the authors minimised biases and ensured transparency in explaining the findings.

RESULTS

The following section highlights the challenges experienced by female Ph.D. scholars and the strategies utilised to cope with these challenges in the academic and personal spheres.

Academic Challenges

Supervision

The participants shared a cordial relationship with their male and female supervisors but faced difficulties in seeking academic input on their research work. A common issue of lack of time and unclear feedback/guidance hovered over the supervision in the middle. A participant expressed: “My supervisor is an expert in his field, but my research area is unrelated to his area of expertise. From time to time, he had tried giving his feedback, but it was always more general than insightful, leaving me uncertain about how to proceed with my topic.” (Participant, Two)

Research resources

The participants could access a database containing journals, articles, books, and theses from their departmental libraries. Despite the availability of research materials, they did not meet the current demands of social work disciplines. Furthermore, the participants expressed frustration with limited access to paid journals that imposed high fees per article. Without the financial means to obtain these articles, they devoted considerable time to finding alternatives. These challenges affected the quality of the literature review, limiting scholars to the restricted resources available in both online and print formats.

Time management

The participants had been engaged in academic duties such as teaching, documentation tasks and handling logistics during departmental activities. Most of them felt overwhelmed with the responsibilities assigned to them repeatedly. Participant Six shared an instance: “Once, I faced a crucial deadline, and my co-guide tasked me with making the report. I had prepared several reports for her before, so I did the same this time. I completed her work and then my own. In the end, I felt overworked, and she didn’t recognise my contribution during the progress presentation.”

Participants also reflected on transitioning from coursework to the next doctoral phase. Some faced challenges returning to academia while balancing classes, research preparation, and adapting to a new environment. This experience highlighted the difficulties of managing time and responsibilities while progressing towards independent work.

Personal Challenges

Family responsibilities

The participants reflected on the duties and responsibilities in their personal lives. Those who were married felt bound with household duties and the expectations of their in-laws to prioritise their wants over the Ph.D. Participant One shared, “At times, I believe I should have pursued a PhD before my marriage. My husband is supportive, but my in-laws insist on giving more time to household and family responsibilities. On many occasions, I couldn’t attend the conferences and research workshops because I was occupied with household work.” However,

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those who were unmarried were more apprehensive for shorter periods when their families needed their immediate attention. This created temporal disruptions in their research timeline.

Stress and Anxiety

The participants commonly experienced emotional impediments, with stress and anxiety being the most frequently reported. Some of the symptoms were loss of appetite, overeating, and insomnia. For example, a participant was very tense as she could not go on data collection because of permission issues. Another shared about relationship issues causing perpetual worrying and emotional outbursts, resulting in the inability to complete the research tasks.

Self-doubt

Another major challenge experienced by participants was self-doubt at various stages of their Ph.D. Some initially questioned whether pursuing a PhD was the right decision, as it meant leaving their careers behind to commit to a full-time study programme. As they progressed in their PhD journey, they became uncertain about their future, particularly expressing concerns about employment and career prospects.

Financial resources

The majority of the participants received UGC Non-Net fellowships, which were insufficient to cover their monthly expenses. Participant Three shared, "I have been living in Delhi for the past few years. As the years have passed, the cost of living has increased. Staying near the university saves on travel costs, but I still have to cover rent, food, and stationery expenses. The non-net fellowship wasn't enough to cover these expenses, so I depended on funds from my father's pension to support myself. "Further, several of them suffered financially during COVID-19 because the fellowships were not disbursed, and the exhaustion of their savings left them indebted to their family and friends.

Coping strategies

Self-motivation

The participants motivated themselves in adverse challenges by setting realistic and achievable goals. They acknowledged that a Ph.D. is a long journey, and therefore, they prepared a timeline of their research process, which helped in achieving small tasks in the stipulated time. A participant shared, "I like to prepare small deadlines for every task that I have to complete. Breaking down bigger goals into small tasks has helped in completing and moving to the next tasks smoothly. This practice keeps me motivated when I can see the productivity of my work." (Participant Six)

Family support

Participants majorly received support during the COVID-19 lockdown period when their parents supported their financial needs and motivated them to focus on their Ph.D. For several of them, their mothers gave them emotional strength to cope with stress and anxiety.

Peer support

The peers played a crucial role in the scholars' lives. They were actively involved in helping the scholars through academic, financial and emotional difficulties. These close-knit connections eased the scholars' venting of their emotions and allowed for constructive discussions during academic hardships. The peers, especially the seniors, were more empathetic because they had faced similar circumstances in their doctoral journey.

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Support from Supervisors

The participants did face certain difficulties with their supervisors, but the overall support of their supervisors was instrumental. The supervisors guided the participants toward appropriate resources for their research, i.e., information about fellowships and publications. They also encouraged the participants to prioritize the tasks assigned to them when loaded with research work and family needs.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the diverse challenges female Ph.D. scholars encounter in their academic and personal lives throughout their doctoral journey. The results indicate critical academic issues, particularly in supervision, where limited time availability and vague feedback contribute to negative mentorship experiences (Welton et al., 2014). Moreover, scholars face significant obstacles related to essential research resources and time management. Several of them balance academic duties with teaching responsibilities, which often hampers their research efforts.

On a personal level, participants dealt with considerable pressures from family responsibilities, forcing them to juggle various roles and often leading to prioritisation of family over academic deadlines. This situation adversely affected their well-being, as stress, anxiety, and self-doubt surged, fueled by both academic demands and personal challenges. Financial issues, particularly insufficient fellowships and high living costs in Delhi, further exacerbated their stress levels. Similar experiences were noted by Barry et al. (2018), where female doctoral candidates at an Australian university reported struggles with self-doubt and financial constraints.

To cope with these difficulties, the Ph.D. students adopted various strategies, relying on both internal and external resources. Self-motivation and support from family, peers, and mentors were instrumental in providing emotional, informational, and practical assistance, which enabled them to address their challenges effectively. These perspectives can be viewed in line with the researcher community and supervisory support model, as female Ph.D. scholars sought valuable social support from supervisors, peers within the research community, and family members, which partially met their needs. For example, a married female scholar received emotional support from her husband regarding her doctoral studies, but not from her in-laws, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction. This array of coping strategies was vital for scholars to manage difficulties and progress through their doctoral studies.

The findings of the study suggest that female scholars generally feel safe in an academic environment devoid of overt gender discrimination. However, implicit gender norms continue to exist within their home. It also emphasizes the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown, which presented additional research challenges during that time. These external disruptions highlight how historical contexts, like the pandemic, influence the Ph.D. experience.

The study proposes recommendations to assist scholars at both individual and institutional levels. At the individual level, scholars can create milestone maps to track their progress, engage in creative activities and take small work breaks to maintain their well-being. On the institutional front, connecting with previous Ph.D. graduates and organizations within the social sector will help in exploring career opportunities. Moreover, the departments can organise well-being sessions to support the emotional and mental health of female scholars throughout the doctoral journey. These suggestions aim to foster a more supportive and

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comprehensive environment that aids female Ph.D. scholars in navigating through the difficulties of their Ph.D.

Limitations

This study is limited to Delhi, affecting the generalization of findings to female PhD scholars in other regions or disciplines outside social work. It focused only on full-time Ph.D. scholars, leaving out part-time scholars whose challenges may differ.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that female PhD scholars in social work face a variety of academic and personal challenges. However, both individual and external strategies in the form of support networks have played a crucial role in helping them overcome these obstacles. A holistic approach, fostering strong reciprocal relationships between individuals and institutions, can streamline efforts to enhance academic progress and research quality among Ph.D. scholars in social work. Future studies can expand on these findings by examining challenges across different types of institutions and focus on the experiences of part-time female Ph.D. scholars and those with children to gain further insights into their unique contexts within the field of social work.

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Conflict of Interest

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